

**Exploring student nurses' first assessment experience: An illuminative evaluation**

**Paula Jane Crick**

**Doctor of Education**

**School of Education**

**March 2010**

**Abstract:**

This illuminative evaluation utilises a mixed-method design to explore the first assessment experience of first year student nurses and consider how aspects of this experience impact on their self-beliefs regarding academic ability. The study investigates the experience of a cohort of student nurses as they go through their first summative assessment of theory on their Nursing diploma course at a post-1992 University in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom. It aims to elicit, from their perspective, aspects of the assessment process that enhance their confidence and self-belief about ability, and those that serve to undermine it. The study considers whether the assessment experience differs for students with different levels of pre-entry academic qualifications, age, or history of family experience of higher education, and will examine students' conceptualisations of intelligence to ascertain if these beliefs relate to their learning behaviours or achievement.

Most students believed that their intelligence could be improved with effort, utilised tutorial and peer support and believed that learning and understanding were more important than assessment. Following this assessment experience, however, there was a shift in these beliefs, with more students seeing the assessment as most important. The assessment grade received by students, peer support and tutorial support had the greatest positive, and negative, impact on student self-beliefs, with formative feedback having less impact. This cohort of students experienced a good level of achievement and a significant improvement in confidence to undergo their next assessment. Achievement was not related to pre-course academic qualifications, or to family experience of higher education, but mature students achieved better grades when compared with younger peers. This finding supports the inclusion of mature students with weaker academic backgrounds, raising questions about how to continue to include them in the nursing profession as it progresses to all graduate registration.

This study highlights the need to create a learning milieu that has learning and understanding at its core, fosters effective peer support and includes students far more in the assessment process, supporting development of the positive self-beliefs, confidence and self-reliance essential to their academic and professional development.



## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor, Prof Lorraine Ellis, for her inspiration, learned guidance, support and patience, and to the whole of the EdD team in Sheffield for keeping me interested and motivated. Thanks to Greg Brooks for guiding me through the statistical analysis, and to friends and colleagues who have engaged in aspects of this journey with me. The most heartfelt of thanks are reserved for my wonderful young sons, Christopher and Thomas, who have watched mummy constantly studying, tolerated her tiredness and sacrificed the odd game of monopoly or football in order to give her time to study. I love you, and owe you both so much. Finally Mark, hang in there, I will emerge from the paperwork at some point!





## **Contents**

	Page
Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	3
Chapter 1 Introduction	11
Chapter 2 Literature review	26
Chapter 3 Design and methods	51
Chapter 4 Documentary analysis	72
Chapter 5 Analysis	91
Chapter 6 Discussion	149
Chapter 7 Recommendations and reflections	185
References	224

## **Figures**

Fig 2.1 Proposed causal model for achievement based on Dweck's postulates	41
Fig 2.2 Summary of key concepts from literature review	48
Fig 3.1: Study Design: An illuminative evaluative study employing mixed methods of data collection	58
Fig 5.1. Thematic analysis of students' feelings before embarking on their first assignment	100

<b>Fig 5.2 Thematic analysis of students' beliefs about tutorial support</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Fig 5.3 Grade achieved and test result</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Fig 5.4 Pre-assessment confidence</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Fig 5.5 Post-assessment confidence</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Fig 6.1 Study findings relative to summary of key concepts from literature review</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Fig 6.2 Proposed association between variables within a model of achievement for this cohort of student</b>	<b>158</b>

#### **Tables**

<b>Table 5.1</b>	<b>Relationship between being first in the family to go University (or not) and age group</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Table 5.2</b>	<b>Participants' academic background</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Table 5.3</b>	<b>Relationship between age group and academic qualifications</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Table 5.4</b>	<b>Age and academic background</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Table 5.5</b>	<b>Relationship between first in family to attend university and academic background</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Table 5.6</b>	<b>Confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Table 5.7</b>	<b>Relationship between confidence to undertake assessment and first to family to go to university or not</b>	<b>101</b>

Table 5.8	Relationship between experience of doing an essay-type assessment and being first (or not) in the family to go to university	102
Table 5.9	Relationship between having experience of doing an essay-type assessment and confidence to do this one	102
Table 5.10	Relationship between age-group and confidence to undertake this assessment	103
Table 5.11	Relationship between academic level at entry and confidence to undertake this assessment	103
Table 5.12	Relationship between Dweck's two outcome measures of implicit theory of intelligence	106
Table 5.13	Relationship between Dweck's two outcome measures of implicit theory of intelligence excluding those without a clear theory	107
Table 5.14	Relationship between Dweck's questionnaire outcome and learning / performance	108
Table 5.15	Relationship between entity/incremental theorist from equation and learning / performance goals	109
Table 5.16	Relationship between entity/incremental theorist from equation and learning / performance goals omitting those without clear theories	109
Table 5.17	Implicit theory related to age	110
Table 5.18	Relationship between entity/incremental theorist from equation and age group	110

Table 5.19	Relationship between entity/incremental theorist from equation and age group	111
Table 5.20	Relationship between being the first in the family to go to university and implicit theory	111
Table 5.21	Relationship between being the first in the family to go to university and entity/ incremental theorist from equation	112
Table 5.22	Relationship between being the first in the family to go to university and learning goal	113
Table 5.23	Relationship between academic profile and implicit theory	113
Table 5.24	Relationship between academic profile and entity/incremental theorist from equation	114
Table 5.25	Relationship between academic profile and learning goal	114
Table 5.26	Assessment choice and age group (1)	116
Table 5.27	Assessment choice and age group (2)	116
Table 5.28	First in the family (or not) to go to university and assessment choice	117
Table 5.29	Experience of essay type assessment and assessment choice	117
Table 5.30	Relationship between assessment choice and confidence	118
Table 5.31	Relationship between confidence about assessment and tutorial support	122

Table 5.32	Age and tutorial support	122
Table 5.33	Academic background and tutorial support	123
Table 5.34	Academic background and tutorial support	123
Table 5.35	Grade achieved	130
Table 5.36	Relationship between academic background and grade achieved	133
Table 5.37	Academic qualification cross-tabbed with pass/ referral	134
Table 5.38	Family history of university and grade achieved (a)	134
Table 5.39	Family history of university and grade achieved (b)	135
Table 5.40	Pre- assessment confidence and grade achieved	135
Table 5.41	Type of tutorial support and grade achieved	136
Table 5.42	Implicit theory and grade achieved	138
Table 5.43	Beliefs about intelligence and grade achieved	139
Table 5.44	Learning goals and grade achieved	139
Table 5.45	Pre and post-assessment beliefs about intelligence	145
Table 5.46	Pre and post-assessment learning goals	145

## Appendices

Appendix 1	Principles of good formative assessment and feedback practice	197
Appendix 2	Participant Information Sheet	198
Appendix 3	Consent Form	201
Appendix 4	Questionnaire 1	203
Appendix 5	Questionnaire 2	208
Appendix 6	Focus Group Information	213
Appendix 7a	Detailed assignment brief for Assignment A	214
Appendix 7b	Detailed assignment brief for Assignment B	218
Appendix 8	Conditions under which assessment supports learning	223

## Chapter 1 Introduction

This illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton 1972) utilises a mixed-method design to explore the first assessment experience of first year student nurses. It will consider how their personal characteristics, and aspects of the assessment experience, impact on their self-beliefs regarding academic ability. Participants are students enrolled on a Nursing diploma award in a post-1992 UK University who aim to register as either adult or mental health nurses. The wide-entry gate to this award means that students can commence this diploma with differing levels of academic ability, and consequently different experiences of assessment.

This study seeks to investigate the student experience of assessment from the student perspective. Data will be collected before and after a summative assessment to examine aspects of this process that enhance student self-belief, and those which serve to undermine student self-belief with regard to academic ability.

Assessment is said to have a 'profound effect on' (Trotter 2006) and 'frame' learning (Gibbs 2006:23). It is a key consideration in enhancing teaching and learning, and assessment outcome indicates student progression and ability. Assessment is inextricably linked to learning and teaching, but is also central to the student experience and is an area students attach specific importance to (Falchikov and Thomson 1996; Taras 2002). The way students experience and learn from assessment, including their use of tutorial support, and formative and summative feedback, may be integral to their future approach to, and success with, written assessments. The first assessment experience in higher education should serve a formative purpose in enhancing student learning and may impact on students' perception of their ability and confidence to undertake future assessments (Pajares 1996).

It has long been known that factors other than ability, such as self-beliefs about ability, influence whether individuals seek or withdraw from challenge, and persist or give up when tasks become difficult (Dweck 1986). It is also known that certain student characteristics are associated with academic engagement and success, for example, older students having more desirable approaches to learning (Richardson 1995), and being more successful academically than their younger peers (Houltram 1996; Ofori 2000). This study will consider the impact of student characteristics including self-beliefs, on engagement with the assessment process, and look at



how aspects of the process itself, such as feedback and tutorial support affect students' beliefs about the nature of their intelligence, and their confidence to engage in future assessments. By exploring this first assessment experience from the student perspective, it is hoped that insight will be gained into what students perceive as enhancing self-belief and supporting their learning, and aspects they see as less constructive. The student perspective may provide a level of insight that can highlight areas for improving the first assessment of first year nursing students, including, for example, staff development and curriculum improvement.

In order to explore the student experience of assessment in higher education, the context within which students are learning and being assessed needs to be considered, from the nature of the higher education institution and how it reflects social policy, through to the psychological resources of the student.

Firstly, this study takes place in a post-1992 University in the United Kingdom that is committed to 'widening participation'; to include what would be considered 'non-traditional students' (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003a). The University has developed strategies aimed at including students from lower socio-economic groups, which has resulted in widening of the entry-gate to some awards, attracting students with weaker academic backgrounds, as well as greater diversity in the student body with regard to age and socio-economic background. Accommodation of this more diverse student body impacts on the learning milieu, and on teaching and assessment strategy. Secondly, assessment is a central feature of both learning and the student's experience (Falchikov and Thomson 1996), but there is some concern that assessment can limit learning, encouraging a focus on passing the test rather than learning (Elton 1988; Savin-Baden 2004). Thus the principles underpinning the assessment process are important to consider. Thirdly, students bring their own characteristics, experiences and psychological resources to their course of study, all of which influence their engagement with learning and assessment. In particular, it is known that students' self-beliefs about their abilities and capabilities impact strongly on their learning (Bandura 1986). Some understanding of how students' self-beliefs and confidence impact on their approach to aspects of the assessment process, for example, their use of tutorial support and formative feedback would be useful.

Finally, important to the context of this study is the researcher. May (2001:54) suggests that the researchers' values affect all aspects of the research process, from the interests leading to research; the aims, objectives and design of the research; the data collection process and

interpretation of data, to the use made of research findings (see also Bryman 2001:22; Wellington *et al* 2005:99). The researcher, therefore, should strive to maintain an awareness not only of their value position throughout the research process, but also their ongoing impact on the research process and any outcomes. As well as being the researcher, I am also the module leader of the module that features in this study. This further highlights the need for transparency and reflection throughout this study.

### Social policy and higher education

Social-class remains a powerful predictor of educational achievement in the UK with working-classes achieving less academically relative to middle-classes (Bynner *et al* 1998; Reay 2001). Inclusion of more young people from poorer socio-economic groups in higher education not only fulfils the aim of contributing to the knowledge economy (DfES 2003b, 5.1-5.4), but it also enhances life chances for the individual, breaking what for many has been described as the intergenerational 'cycle of deprivation' (Department of Health 2003:9) that constitutes the lived experience of some of the poorer sections of our society. Success in higher education can lead to rewarding employment, enhances social and cultural capital, and can lead to an improved standard of living and better health as compared to a non-graduate (Yorke and Longden 2004). The University in which this study will take place is a post-1992<sup>1</sup> UK University with a strong widening participation agenda, reflected in a mission statement that clearly advocates making higher education widely available to all in our community. This University subscribes to strategies that aim to fulfil both the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2003a) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2001) goal to widen participation in higher education, and to up-skill the countries workforce (Leitch 2006). The Faculty actively recruits 'non-traditional' students to the Nursing diploma course, successfully attracting student nurses from a wide variety of educational and socio-economic backgrounds, including many students that are the first in their family to come to University, and students who have no formal academic qualifications. Ofori (2000) has observed that nursing relies on mature, motivated but often less academically qualified students who are able to enter nursing because the entry gate is wide. Prior to the publication of 'Fitness for Practice (United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) 1999a) students wishing to enter a course of study to become a registered nurse

---

<sup>1</sup> Post-1992 Universities: Following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 polytechnics were granted university status, and so these universities are often referred to as post-1992 universities.

required a minimum of five GCSE's (or equivalent), which included Maths and English. The wider entry gate (UKCC 1999b; NMC 2004) means that students are now able to enter pre-registration nursing courses at a level determined by the University. In the case of the University where this study takes place students should evidence numeracy and literary skills at a level that enables them to study at diploma level. This University also offers a nursing degree course which has the usual entry requirement of two A levels (or equivalent), but the focus of this study will be the diploma course, as this embraces a more diverse body of students, and has implications for learning and assessment in higher education that requires us to take account of a much more diverse range of needs and requirements.

A more diverse, 'non-traditional' student body has its advantages in attracting more mature students, some of whom approach this programme of study with a wealth of experience. Some students on the nursing diploma award have been, for example, health-care assistants who have spent many years in clinical practice, or are mature adults changing their career. Study can be more challenging for mature learners as they are more likely to have other demands competing with their study, including demands from family, child and household responsibilities (Ashton and Shuldham 1994; Shipton 2002), and often demands from the need to continue to be engaged in paid work (Gibbs 2006:15).

It is not unusual for first year students to voice anxiety about their first assessment in higher education, and part of the impetus for this study was responding to students studying on both degree and diploma nursing awards who reported feeling unprepared by their previous educational experiences to undertake writing a 2000 word essay. Exploration of reasons for this, selected from feedback from past cohorts of students, include comments such as; 'school assessments were smaller and more manageable'; 'I am used to being given all the materials I need, it is too hard to find things myself'; 'I have never done an essay before'; 'I don't think I am clever enough to be here'; 'maybe I should not be at university'.

Of the comments that students make about their difficulties with assessment the hardest to counter are those concerning 'not being clever enough' or 'not belonging in University'. Such comments are most often voiced by students with little confidence in what they see as their weak academic profile, those who have not studied for many years or those who are the first in their

family to experience higher education. Working-class students are overwhelmingly over-represented in post-1992 universities (DfES 2003a; Archer 2007); and the success of widening participation at this University means that it reflects this trend. Archer and Leathwood (2003) found that some working -class young people have 'classed-assumptions' about their abilities and destinies, and feel they are not entitled to higher education and do not belong (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Archer *et al* 2003). They may see University as only being for 'eggheads and wealthy people' (Squirrel 1999:11) and not appropriate for 'people like me' (Ball *et al* 2000; Williams 1997). Such notions lead to questions of how students perceive themselves and their ability, and how these self-beliefs impact on their perceived ability or confidence to undertake assessments, as well as their actual engagement with assessment. As a researcher and a tutor, questions emerge around what it is that students take from their experience of being taught and assessed that fosters positive self-belief, and what is it that confounds self-doubt. Further, how do students conceptualise their ability and how do these beliefs impact on their engagement with assessment and the feedback they receive?

Answers to such questions may offer greater insight into what fosters positive self-beliefs about ability and confidence. Academic staff may be able to use any insight gained into students' self-beliefs to enhance the teaching, learning and assessment of students at this early stage in their studies.

The first months at University are important in laying down the foundation for future learning and achievement, and student attrition from University courses is the greatest within in the first year of study (Department of Health 2006:12). HEFCE data (2002) reveals a correlation between non-continuation following first year of study and lower socio-economic group (Pearson  $r = 0.79$ ). Whilst this correlation does not imply causation, the relationship is worth considering in terms of whether self-beliefs about belonging, or perceptions of ability, have any impact on the loss of these students from their course. This consideration is supported by Nicol (2007) who explains that attrition in the first year relates to lack of clarity regarding expectations, paucity of student feedback, low levels of student motivation and poor self-belief related to study. Braxton (2000) asserts that a key means of gaining some insight into why students fail to continue with their studies is attention to the student perspective. Investigating this first assessment experience of a diverse cohort of students, from their perspective, may facilitate a greater understanding of what

they actually experience, and the effect this process has on their confidence for future assessment and self-beliefs about ability.

### Assessment and learning

Assessment is the process of appraising students' knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2006a:4). It has a profound effect on the way that students learn; determining, shaping and limiting the way they learn (Russel *et al* 2006; Snyder 1971; Trotter 2006). Assessment and feedback are not only central to learning, but also central to the student experience (Falchikov and Thomson 1996; Nicol 2008a). Assessment 'frames learning' (Bryan and Clegg 2006:2) and will probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor, and can have more impact than teaching (Boud 1988; Gibbs 2006:23). Whether assessment coerces students into learning or is a source of motivation it certainly acts as a 'constant prod' to encourage learning (Rowntree 1987:22).

Assessments are carried out with the intention of benefitting students in terms of reflecting their achievement and informing future learning (Rust 2002), but also serve to demonstrate standards of teaching and learning within the higher education institution, and to the public, including employers (QAA 2006a:4). Assessment is the means by which we appraise achievement of learning outcomes, but these outcomes can restrict learning (Elton 1988) and can encourage students to aim to 'pass' an assignment rather than engage in deeper learning or developing a deep understanding of the course content (Savin-Baden 2004).

One outcome of assessment is tutor feedback. This feedback can be described as summative or formative. Summative feedback, which is the grade or mark awarded at assessment, is a key focus of higher education institutions as it judges what has been learned (Russel *et al* 2006). Formative assessment feedback usually accompanies the grade and tells the student what has been done well within their assessment, what could be done better and what s/he needs to do to improve her/his work. There is a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates that effective formative feedback is valuable in enhancing student learning and maintaining motivation (for example Black and William 1998; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Gipps 2005; Mohl 1996). For assessment to support learning Gibbs (2006:29-30) emphasizes the need for feedback that is of good quality, sufficient quantity and received by the student in time for it to benefit their learning. Gibbs asserts that the feedback itself should focus on learning rather than grade, be clearly linked

to the assessment and be understood by the student. Student evaluation at this institution (University student satisfaction survey), and award and module evaluations (conducted by tutorial staff) reveal dissatisfaction among students with how long it takes to get summative and formative feedback to them after assessment. This is not a phenomenon unique to this higher education institution. Rust (2007) highlights that across higher education institutions and across academic disciplines assessment practices have been consistently marked out as one of the weakest features during subject review by the QAA, with ten percent of institutional audit reports making recommendations regarding improving consistency and timeliness of feedback (QAA 2006b:12). Dissatisfaction with formative assessment practices and provision of feedback are also consistently reflected in the National Student Survey (Nicol 2008a). One issue is that timing of traditional assessment is usually too late to enable timely, effective feedback (Light and Cox 2001). Assessments are traditionally undertaken at the end of the module, and students do not receive their written formative feedback until an award board has sat and their grades ratified. The length of time between submitting an assignment and receiving feedback on this award is usually around six to eight weeks. By the time first year students receive their first assessment feedback they are already deeply engaged in their next module of study, which is not always directly related to the first. Tutorial staff, who have no contact with a group of students once their module has ended, would not know whether students read or attended to the feedback, and if they did, whether they perceived it as having any relevance to their subsequent learning and assessments. Most of the coursework in a modular curriculum is summatively assessed, and the timing of feedback means students have little opportunity to act upon assessment feedback. By the time they do receive this feedback, the module is over with. This observation is supported by Hartley and Chesworth (2000) who found that 59% of the students in their study responded that feedback was given too late to be helpful as it was received after the module end.

As well as issues with the timing of formative feedback, there is also evidence that once received formative feedback is not as useful as tutors would like it to be. Work by Orsmond *et al* (2002, 2004), and Brockbank and McGill (1998) on how students make sense of formative feedback suggests that they may be overwhelmed by it, or not able to decipher the writing and / or the meaning of tutor comments. Fritz *et al* (2000) believe that even when students are given feedback that it does not improve learning, with Wojas (1998) reporting research findings from one University suggesting that some students were concerned only with their mark and not the

feedback. Wojas (1998) did claim that students could improve their work once they understood the purpose of feedback and assessment criteria. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) agree, pointing out that only when students are given opportunities to construct some degree of understanding of the feedback, through discussion for example, can it be used to enhance their learning. If students give little regard to the written feedback they receive with assessment results, it may be, as Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that some students are unable to decipher or understand the feedback message. Gaining some degree of insight, from the student perspective, on the value and usefulness of the written formative feedback that accompanies their summative grade would be useful, and may suggest means of making this valuable feedback more useful to student learning. It would also be useful to ascertain what impact, if any, formative feedback has on self-beliefs about ability and student confidence regarding their next assessment.

This study aims to appraise the overall assessment experience of a cohort of students from their perspective within the context of current literature. It will include looking at student characteristics, how they engage with the assessment, and their use of support and feedback. It is hoped that this will enhance understanding of the students' experience of the assessment process, and the impact it has on their confidence and self-beliefs. A deeper understanding may contribute to future development of assessment strategy and support processes to facilitate enhancement of student self-beliefs. This could include informing curriculum planning and staff development at one level, and at another informing tutorial staff about how their feedback is seen by students.

### Self-beliefs about ability

Integral to the assessment process are the students themselves. Their knowledge, skills, past-experiences and self-beliefs will impact on their engagement with learning and the assessment process, as well as their achievement. It is evident from the literature, and from discussion with first year students on a nursing diploma, that confidence and self-beliefs about ability are not always positive. This is concerning, as an individual's perceptions about their own abilities can guide their behaviour and how much effort they will put into their performance (Bandura 1977; Bandura and Jourden 1991). Self-beliefs about ability can have a 'self-fulfilling' quality, impacting on learning behaviours that affect achievement (Furnham 2001). Within social cognition theory student's self beliefs about their ability are described as over-lapping with constructs such as self-

concept and self-efficacy (Bandura 1986), and relate to expectations of success, perceptions of control and attributional style, for example, whether success is attributed to effort, ability or luck. Students' self-beliefs about their ability are to some degree based on past performances, but also impact on future performance, what Bandura (1986) has termed 'reciprocal determinism'. As self-beliefs have this significant impact on engagement with learning and subsequent achievement it is important, within a study about the students' experience of assessment, to consider the students' self-beliefs about ability. It would be useful to know if self-beliefs were related to personal characteristics, and to appraise both the impact of their self-beliefs on their engagement with the assessment process, as well as ascertain the impact of the assessment experience on their self-beliefs and confidence for future assessment. This study sets out to explore the self-beliefs about ability that first year student nurses hold as they experience their first assessment. Understanding more about the nature of students' self-beliefs as they relate to assessment may enable modification of aspects of the assessment process to maximize enhancement of positive self-beliefs, and highlight aspects of it that undermine self-belief. It would be useful to know, for example, if conceptions students hold about their ability are associated with response to feedback and use of tutorial support, and whether certain kinds of feedback enhance self-beliefs about ability better than others. Developing a better understanding of student perceptions of their ability, use of feedback and use of strategies for learning at this early stage could be important in fostering early success that may impact on future achievement (Busato *et al* 2000; Pajares 1996).

Study of student self-beliefs about ability, student behaviours during the assessment process, and how they conceptualise their achievement require a conceptual framework that will facilitate measurement and appraisal of these factors. A model that fits well with an exploration of self-beliefs about ability and how this relates to behaviours and achievement is the model of achievement motivation developed by Carol Dweck (2000). This is a social-cognitive approach that purports that students' theories about their intelligence or ability impact on how they pursue goals, how they deal with challenge and can consequently effect academic achievement. Dweck (1990:2) proposes that individuals have two ways of understanding their intelligence; entity theorists believe that intelligence is 'fixed', that you have a certain amount of it, and incremental theorists believe that intelligence is malleable and can grow throughout the lifespan with hard work and effort. Dweck and colleagues (for example, Dweck 1975, 1986, 1996a, 1996b; Dweck and Elliott 1983; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Elliott and Dweck 1988; Heckhausen and Dweck



1998; Heyman and Dweck 1992) have demonstrated that these beliefs are linked to patterns of behaviour. The incremental theorist has a mastery-oriented approach to their study, embracing challenge, putting in effort and adopting strategies to succeed, which is in contrast to the entity theorist who is more likely to blame success or failure on ability rather than effort, and is less likely to value feedback and tutorial support. Further, incremental theorists are generally more interested in learning goals and in learning for the sake of learning, than they are in the performance goal of, for example, a good grade. Entity theorists, on the other hand, are more focused on performance goals, and reluctant to take on difficult tasks that may challenge their ability (Dweck 1986). Both performance and learning goals have a place within higher education, but a focus on the importance of performance goals can 'drive out' learning goals (Dweck 2000:151). It is learning goals that encourage initiation of tasks and are a cue for effort, for exploration, and for creativity that leads to intellectual growth (Dweck 1986). Though there is no evidence that individuals with an entity or incremental understanding differ in their intellectual ability, the behaviour patterns described can have profound effects on academic performance (Dweck 1986). Knight (2002) asserts that although much is known about skills for learning and learning for understanding we know considerably less about how to encourage incremental self-theories that are related to the behaviours that Dweck and colleagues describe, including encouraging students to embrace challenge and persistence at tasks, and fostering strategic thinking.

Across the first semester of University study I feel that if we are better informed about the self-beliefs that students hold about ability, then we may be able to adopt or develop strategies that can foster positive self-beliefs within students and consequently promote academic performance and achievement. This may include re-thinking assessment strategies, or how we prepare students for assessment, and consideration of how formative feedback and tutorial support we offer supports positive self-beliefs about ability. It may also lead to consideration of ascertaining new students' understanding of intelligence to identify those who, if Dweck's theories are reflected, may be less inclined to see effort, tutorial support and feedback as useful strategies. For example, Dweck (2000) has demonstrated that feedback can influence how students feel about themselves, with beliefs about intelligence impacting on how they interpret or explain their success or failure. These interpretations are made on the basis of whether students perceive their intelligence as being fixed - entity theorists, or malleable - incremental theorists. These beliefs

about the nature of their ability impact on whether they are more likely to engage in mastery (the incremental theorists) or helpless (the entity theorists) oriented behaviours in response to feedback. Though beliefs about intelligence may not be related to actual intelligence they will impact on academic performance in educational settings (Dweck 1986, 2000). Dweck (1986) asserts that it is well known that factors other than ability impact on academic performance; beliefs about one's intelligence are one such factor. If one believes that intelligence is fixed this may impact on effort made in academic work. For example, those who perceive their intelligence as poor and 'fixed' may give up or withdraw as the academic task may seem insurmountable, whilst those who see themselves as highly intelligent are more confident in tackling the task. Dweck also discusses the possibility of entity theorists who believe they are highly intelligent becoming complacent, not putting effort into their work and so possibly not succeeding. Subsequently, academic grades may have more to do with student effort made than actual intelligence (Nicholls *et al* 1986). Dweck's achievement motivation model has implications for how students with different views of the nature of intelligence deal with, or act on, summative assessment scores, formative feedback and tutorial support. According to Dweck (2000:3) for individuals who perceive their intelligence as 'fixed', passing an assessment confirms their level of intelligence. This is not problematic, unless or until they have to face an assessment they find challenging, when fear of failure may prevent them from pursuing that challenge. Failing an assessment calls the intelligence of the entity theorist into question, they blame their failure on their low ability and feel discouraged (*ibid*:35). This questioning can threaten self-esteem and lead them to become overly concerned about their ability and vulnerable, and they may disengage from tasks that seem too difficult (*ibid*:44). Formative feedback may be seen by the entity theorist as critical rather than constructive, and tutorial support may not be sought as it may be seen as weakness. These behaviours are summarised as helpless-oriented behaviours and are seen by Dweck (2000:154) as limiting people, impeding growth and development. She believes that people are capable of change, and that an incremental theory of intelligence, with its associated mastery-oriented behaviours enables a more positive and motivating approach to learning. Students with an incremental theory of intelligence are more likely than entity theorists to see a summative assessment result as reflecting the effort and strategies they used, they are more likely to act on the formative feedback given and to seek out and act upon tutorial advice.

The literature in this area reflects that research into beliefs about intelligence has largely involved participants who are children or young students in American schools and colleges (Dweck and colleagues work), and in the United Kingdom has taken place in what Furnham *et al* (2003) term 'elite' (Russel group<sup>2</sup>) universities with young students who have positive beliefs about their intelligence that afford a confident approach to their studies (for example, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2004; Furnham 2001; Furnham and Chamorro-Premuzic 2005, 2007). In contrast, there is a lack of literature that considers self-beliefs about ability and the assessment experience of first year diploma students in a post-1992 University, or specifies inclusion of students who have no family experience of higher education or few academic qualifications. A study that includes appraising the self-beliefs of a diverse group of nursing students within a post-1992 UK University, as they go through the assessment process for the first time, may offer some level of insight and understanding of self-beliefs and behaviour. This could facilitate development of more effective strategies to enhance student motivation and success.

### Researcher positionality

Within any research positionality of the researcher with respect to their study should be acknowledged. Having insight into ones position is integral to understanding what has driven ideas and decision-making during the research process. Denny (1991) views objectivity within the research – researcher relationship as a myth, with May (2001:49) proposing that if we accept that values are implicit within human beings, then we cannot possibly suggest it is possible to eradicate them from the very human activity of research. What we can do, however, is acknowledge these values and how they affect the research.

The values, beliefs and perspectives that researchers bring to their research are shaped by their experiences, occupational/professional culture, social and biographical factors and their epistemological and ontological assumptions (Bryman 2001:23, Mauthner and Doucet 2003; May 2001:54). Reflexivity, which has been described as the 'critical gaze turned toward the self' (Koch 1998: 1184), is a means researchers have of examining these factors and making their position, biases and prejudices explicit (Hall and Stevens 1991; Waterman 1998). The aim of a reflexive approach is not to engage in some sort of narcissistic, self-indulgent introspection that takes

---

<sup>2</sup> The Russell Group is a collaboration of 20 UK universities that was established in 1994 to represent their interests to the government, parliament and other bodies. They receive around two thirds of UK research grant and contract funding. The Russell group is sometimes referred to as the British equivalent of the Ivy League in the United States of America.

precedence over the objectives of the study (Waterman 1998) but to provide a degree of transparency that illuminates the rationale for decisions made.

This approach not only necessitates ongoing self-appraisal and critique (Koch and Harrington 1998: 888), but assumes a considerable level of self-awareness, as well as an assumption that researchers are happy and willing to make their beliefs values and prejudices explicit. Exploring ones values and beliefs can be a difficult and possibly uncomfortable process (Cook 1999; Scott 1997; Waterman 1998), and despite reflection it may not prove possible to really access the 'unconscious filters through which we experience events' (Mauthner and Doucet 2003:425). It should be acknowledged that reflexive accounts cannot be considered as 'objective' as they are created by their author, and there are limitations to the degree of self-awareness a researcher may have, but they may provide an insight into the values, beliefs, philosophies and assumptions that the researcher holds.

My position is undoubtedly influenced by a working class upbringing in a deprived inner city area, where aspirations for success were low, and educational achievement considered somehow 'disloyal' to ones roots. It was not unusual to hear criticism and accusations of 'trying to get above your station' being levelled at those who were doing well at school, contemplating A levels, or planning to go University. Such individuals can be seen as trying to escape or deny their heritage, to escape being 'working class'. This observation is echoed by Reay who reported that:

'In England, in the minority of cases when the equation of working class plus education equals success, education is not about the valorisation of working classness, but its erasure; education as escape' (Reay 2001:334).

I moved away from this community, geographically as well as socially, gained an education and a profession and experienced changes in my life course that I believe offers benefits to both my future and that of my children. As a result I feel that anyone, regardless of their background should be given the opportunity to receive an effective education and fulfil their potential. The University that I work in has a strong 'widening participation' agenda, and attracts to its Nursing diploma award a number of students with few (or no) academic qualifications, many being the first in their family to come into Higher Education. I am committed to supporting these learners to achieve success. I am aware that this drive has led me to offer and give support to students above and beyond what is expected within the curriculum.

With regard to assessment, I feel it is appropriate that adult learners should be as informed and involved in the process as possible. There should be a range of modes of assessment to accommodate different learning styles, so as not to disadvantage those students who lack a traditional academic background. Most importantly I feel assessment should be *for learning* not just *of learning*; that the assessment process should yield feedback and support that fosters future learning, and enhances self-reliance and confidence.

Investigators should clarify, from the outset of their study, their role within a study (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:26; Malone 2003). Throughout this study my aim is to be reflexive and to maintain, as far as is possible, insight into what drives my thoughts and actions, so that I may appraise the impact of these on the research process and output. Being reflexive should expose and acknowledge my 'filters' (e.g. my values, position, biases and prejudice), as far as I am aware of them, without detracting from the research itself (Hall and Stevens 1991). There are many strategies documented that purport to support reflexivity, and these are summarised well in the work of Koch and Harrington (1998), Lamb and Huttlinger (1989), Mauthner and Doucet (2003) and Northway (2000) and include maintenance of a research journal, audit and peer review. These reflexive strategies aim to offer openness and transparency which serve to expose and appraise the trustworthiness of research (for example see Speer 2002; Northway 2000; Mauthner and Doucet 2003), in effect making explicit our beliefs, values and potential biases in order that we present as accurately as possible the influences on our actions and decision making within the research process. As well as facilitating reflexivity within the research process, reflexive strategies can provide an audit trail which may be seen as a means of increasing confidence and achieving rigour in the research process (Northway 2000: 393).

For the duration of this study I will maintain a reflexive journal, advocated by some researchers (for example: Koch 1998; Koch and Harrington 1998; Lamb and Huttlinger 1989; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Tuckett 2005) as not only serving as a log of the researchers position, ideas, decisions and insights during the research process (which may be invaluable when writing up) but also as a tool to aid maintenance of a critical dialogue with oneself (Northway 2000:395). It is anticipated that these notes and reflections will add to the credibility and dependability of the research as both a source of data to triangulate with other findings and in providing an audit trail (Koch and Harrington 1998:887; Tuckett 2005:32). As well as a reflective log I will also maintain

dialogue with peers (Tuckett 2005:39) who may serve as 'critical friends' (Richardson 1997). Such dialogue will enable peer and self-reflection on beliefs, potential biases and decisions; will stimulate reflexive thought and may unearth areas of bias or values I was unaware of. Strategies, which facilitate reflexivity, should promote honesty, transparency and fulfil Guba and Lincoln's (1994) trustworthiness criteria. Research cannot be 'objective' or 'value-free' (Denny 1991; Greenbank 2003; Medawar 1963), thus it is imperative that transparency is evident within a study to enable the reader, as Koch and Harrington (1998: 889) propose, to make up their own mind as to the authenticity of the research product.

To summarise, the impetus for this study has arose primarily from the experience of teaching one of the first modules to Year 1 student nurses in a post-1992 UK University that has a strong widening participation agenda and subsequently recruits large numbers of 'non-traditional' students to its nursing diploma award. Comments made by students about their fears, and issues raised around their first assessment has prompted consideration of how their self-beliefs relate to this first assessment experience, and how the experience itself will impact on their self-beliefs about ability and confidence to undertake assessment in future. Though I teach the student cohort for their first module, support them in their learning and preparation for their first assessment and (anonymously) participate in grading their assessment during their first module, I have little feedback from students about the impact of this assessment on them. I see student results at an assessment board, but because the module evaluation occurs before assessment hand-in, I do not get feedback related to the assessment process. For example, I do not how they felt about their assessment feedback or how the assessment generally has impacted on them. Having this insight may enable modifications to aspects of the assessment process that foster confidence and self-beliefs about ability, and facilitate behaviours that support achievement. This study seeks to gain this insight into the assessment experience from the perspective of students undergoing this process for the first time within higher education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

This study arose from the desire to learn more about the impact of the first summative assessment on first year student nurses enrolled on a Diploma in Nursing award (leading to registration as a nurse) in a post-1992 UK University. The modular curriculum of this award results in assessments being submitted several weeks after teaching contact has ended, giving module tutors little or no opportunity to elicit feedback from students about the assessment elements of the module. It would be useful to know, for example, how supported they felt, how prepared they were, and how they felt about their summative assessment grade and their formative feedback. It would be useful to gain, from the student perspective, some understanding of how the first assessment experience in higher education affects their self-beliefs and confidence about their ability to undertake assessment in future. This would ultimately facilitate appraisal of current practices and processes associated with assessment in order to consider how to enhance the assessment experience to foster positive self-beliefs. This study will explore the assessment experience from the student perspective, seeking to illuminate aspects of the assessment process that enhance student self-belief, and those which serve to undermine student self-beliefs with regard to confidence and academic ability. A literature review was necessary in order to gain an understanding of current issues around assessment in contemporary higher education, and to review evidence that relates to the relationship between student characteristics and self-beliefs about their ability and summative assessment. It is hoped that this review will reveal the current state of knowledge regarding assessment, and the student experience of same, to consider what underpins student self-belief regarding their ability and the impact these beliefs have on how they engage with, and respond to, the assessment experience.

### **Search strategy**

A literature review was undertaken to identify the evidence base in the areas of student nurse summative assessment, support for assessment, the relationship between student nurse characteristics and assessment, and beliefs about intelligence / ability related to assessment. The review aims to identify key themes and authors, and involves interpretation and synthesis of published research to provide a context for this study and facilitate evaluation of findings (Merriam 1988:6). There are two key strategies to the literature search, the first a search of databases, the second a search through the reference lists of papers that emerged from the electronic search to

identify further relevant papers and seminal works that are frequently cited. Databases searched included: ISI Web of Science, the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), OVID, Pubmed, British Education Index and Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC). Search terms used included combinations of the terms: 'student nurse', 'first year student', 'assessment', 'summative assessment', 'formative assessment', 'widening participation', 'entry qualifications', 'tutor support / tutorial support', 'beliefs and intelligence'; 'assessment and ability'; 'assessment and intelligence'. Criteria for initial selection of articles primarily included: years from 2000, articles in English and articles in full text. The restriction of papers to those from 2000 onwards was to ensure the most up to date literature was accessed, and place a restriction on the number of articles that emerged from an unrestricted search (though the perusal of reference lists revealed relevant articles that pre-date 2000). Papers reporting research outside of the UK were included if the content was generalisable to UK Higher Education.

Searches including the terms nurse and assessment / summative assessment produced lengthy lists of articles which were concerned with clinical assessment of patients, or assessment of the clinical practice of students, neither of which are relevant to this inquiry. The search was not limited to papers that focused purely on nursing students, but included students from other disciplines in their first year of University study in order to develop an understanding of the first year student experience. Articles found that were specifically concerned with assessment of theory and the support of student nurses and / or first year students illuminated some key issues, and the reference lists of these articles proved key to furthering the literature search. Key text books were revealed which focused on assessment in higher education (such as Bryan and Clegg 2006) and self-theories (Dweck 2000), and material published on assessment by the Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy, including work on the Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project (JISC 2007). Literature was searched and read to the point where searches through reference lists of articles revealed no new material. Identified literature was reviewed to establish key issues around assessment of theory of student nurses in UK higher education.

Sixty-five percent of literature that emerged from the search was from the UK. Literature not from the UK included seminal works from Sadler (Australia) and Dweck (US) that appeared consistently in the reference lists of papers. Of the 31 primary studies that were identified, 13



adopted a quantitative design, 9 were qualitative studies and 9 used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain their data. The majority of papers located were reviews of the literature leading to opinion pieces, discussion of issues, and proposals of guidance for enhancing elements of assessment procedures and / or processes, for example, guidance on good practice in assessment (Nicol 2007, 2008a, 2008b) and formative assessment (Sadler 1989, 1998).

Overall, the literature offered a comprehensive overview of assessment in contemporary higher education. Key themes identified from the literature included issues around student characteristics, including pre-entry qualifications and age; the importance of effective formative feedback, and the relevance of students' self-beliefs about ability to learning and assessment. What was learned from this review about the assessment experience of first year student nurses was structured around four key themes that reflect these issues. These themes are assessment in contemporary higher education, assessment and student nurse characteristics, summative assessment and formative feedback, and self-beliefs about ability. These are summarised in Fig 2.2 at the end of the chapter.

### Assessment in contemporary higher education

The literature reviewed provided a comprehensive picture of contemporary issues in the area of assessment in Higher Education, contextualized within the over-arching frameworks of pedagogy and curricula more generally. Cross (1996) describes three inter-related, interdependent conditions for excellence in teaching. These outline that firstly, students should have high expectations that they own (Sadler 1989:129), secondly that students should participate and be involved, and thirdly that they should have good assessment and feedback. This third condition was described by Cross as the weakest of the three, but the area that students attach most importance to, and the aspect of teaching that is most central to learning. Assessment is described by Knight (2002) as being 'in disarray', and assessment practices have consistently been identified by the National Student Survey and the Quality Assurance Agency as one of the weakest features within subject reviews across higher education institutions, particularly feedback (Nicol 2008a; QAA 2006b; Rust 2007).

Assessment serves a range of functions for students, education institutions, the public, stakeholders and the Quality Assurance Agency, but Heywood (2000:32) reminds us of the

etymology of the word 'assessment' from the Latin *ad* and *serere* which means 'sitting together or beside', suggesting assessment is a supportive collaboration between tutor and student. Bryan and Clegg (2006:3) question, however, whether in our focus on grades and quality assurance we 'lose sight of the pedagogic role that assessment can and should play in improving learning'.

An examination of the purpose of assessment and a call for more student-centred assessment was voiced some years ago by Graham Mohl (1996) an advocate of 'innovative assessment'. Mohl is a firm believer that assessment should be primarily about learning and the learner, not about, for example, demonstrating the quality of teaching within an institution. Mohl asserted that students should 'learn through assessment not learn to be assessed', and felt that the purpose of assessment should be to produce students who are 'deep' rather than 'surface' learners, who are highly motivated, committed, enterprising, and equipped with a range of transferable skills; they should be capable of self-criticism and evaluation and be active and reactive participants in the learning process (Mohl 1996). Aiming to equip students with such qualities and skills fits with the shift in what the core business and purpose of contemporary higher education is considered to be. Universities may have been perceived historically as bastions of knowledge and learning, and one would hope this is still the case, but undoubtedly there has been a shift to what Gibbs (2006:19) describes as a more utilitarian view that sees higher education as a means of preparing for employment, with learning outcomes aimed at developing 'transferable skills' and grasping 'key skills', rather than solely assessing the acquisition and utilization of knowledge. A key aim of higher education is to foster lifelong learning, and equip students with higher order cognitive skills in order to compete and flourish in today's social and economic conditions so they may thrive within, and contribute to, our knowledge economy (Dearing 1997; Knapper and Cropley 2000). As Dearing (1997) states:

'The world of work is in continual change: individuals will increasingly need to develop new capabilities and to manage their own development and learning throughout life' (p12).

Such qualities and capabilities are fostered by learning and teaching strategies that are more student-centred, for example problem-based learning (Biggs 1999; Hewitt-Taylor 2002). There is little doubt that there has been a significant paradigm shift in higher education over the past decade (Rust 2002). Lecturers are increasingly adopting the role of facilitating learning, as compared to the more traditional 'teaching' role of imparting knowledge to a class (Latchem and

Hanna 2001:10). This is expressed well in Bentley and Hargreaves (2003:346) observation that 'within the space of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the teacher's role as a principal gateway to knowledge for the learner has been in progressive decline'. The tutor's role increasingly involves guiding and supporting students to locate and access information they require, and support them in developing their ability to appraise its source, relevance and quality. For students, this shift implies that they require a greater degree of self-reliance and self-regulation. Though students are being encouraged to develop into more autonomous learners, Nicol (2008a) observes that learners still have little control over their assessments. He argues that assessment should be more flexible, more innovative and enable student choice, which he believes would offer the student more control over the assessment process, and motivate and empower them at this critical early point in their educational career. Interestingly, research by Fazey (1993:197, 1996) indicated that first year University students perceived they had more autonomy than second and third year students; that perception of control over learning decreases as they progress through their course. James (2000) adds that over this same period students lose self-confidence. As the aim of higher education is to foster independent, autonomous learning these are worrying findings. They beg the question of whether going through higher education and assessment processes erodes or enhances self-beliefs about ability and whether motivation for future learning is stimulated.

As well as changes in what society expects of graduates in terms of knowledge and skills, other changes within Higher Education have impacted on academic assessment. Curricula, and teaching and assessment strategies, have undoubtedly been influenced by changes in the student body, which is far more diverse as participation in Higher Education has widened (DfES 2003a). Curricula have also changed shape with the shift to modularization which has led to increased, but smaller and often less integrated pieces of work, with more 'course based' assessment as opposed to examinations (Gibbs 2006; Taras 2002). Each module, with its discrete set of learning outcomes may be seen by students as more manageable, and indeed there is much evidence to suggest that course work is responsible for the incremental increase in higher degree classifications achieved (Elton 1998; Gibbs and Lucas 1997). The contained nature of modules with their own learning outcomes, and often lack of integration, has contributed to concerns about assessment being seen in purely instrumental terms, with students working towards passing an assignment rather than learning in depth (Gibbs 2006; Innis 1996). This

concern is echoed by Rowntree (1987:45) and Savin-Baden (2004) who discuss assessment in terms of its potential negative effects on learning, where education is seen in terms of passing the test or getting the certificate / credits, rather than in terms of learning and understanding. Since Snyder (1971) published his work on the 'hidden curriculum' it is widely acknowledged that students work strategically and may 'leave out' work not deemed necessary to meet assessment requirements. This can restrict learning to just the learning outcomes being assessed (as discussed by Elton 1988; MacFarlane 1992; Miller and Partlett 1974). Gibbs (2006:15, 23-25) describes the strategic study of today's student involving focusing their effort more narrowly, and in a more surface way, to achieve what is necessary to pass the assessment, choosing topics they know most about that require least effort, but he does place this within the context of contemporary student life. Today's student is more likely to be doing paid work and only studying part-time despite being enrolled on a full-time course (Gibbs 2006:15; Nicol 2008a), and mature students are more likely to have extra demands from family, child and household responsibilities (Ashton and Shuldham 1994; Shipton 2002).

#### Assessment and student nurse characteristics

Nursing courses attract a diverse range of students with wide ranging entry qualifications, and a significant proportion of mature students (Ofori 2000). The differing characteristics of student nurses have been found to impact on their approach to learning and subsequent achievement (Kevern *et al* 1999; Ofori 2000). Ofori (2000) in a 'same-subject' design study looked at the effect of type of entry qualification of 222 nurse diploma students in a UK University on their academic performance across three modules. Ofori found no significant difference in performance regardless of whether the student held GCSE's, an access course or no domain specific qualifications (psychology, sociology or biology). Subsequent analysis of data by Ofori and Charlton (2002) also found that students' entry qualifications were not the best predictor of academic performance, and should not be relied upon as the key criterion for selecting student nurses. They did find, however, that age made a difference. What he labelled the 'non-mature' group (under 20's) were identified as being 'at risk' in terms of their academic performance, whilst the 'very mature' (35 years plus) were associated with better overall academic performance. He came to two conclusions, firstly that paper qualifications were not that reliable as predictors of academic performance, and secondly that nursing courses should encourage older entrants as they may be more likely to cope with the demands of the more student-centred approach to

learning that characterizes University education. An Australian study by Murray-Harvey (1993) agreed that more mature learners were higher achievers, in this case achievement being framed in terms of greater depth and quality of learning.

Whilst mature students may have fewer academic qualifications, their previous experience is likely to play a part in their approach to learning. Studies by Richardson (1995) and Sadler-Smith (1996) found differences between approaches taken to learning by mature and younger students, concluding that mature students exhibit more 'desirable approaches to learning' (Richardson 1995:5). Mature learners are described as more likely to adopt 'meaning' oriented approaches to learning; being critical of what they are told, and trying to work out meanings for themselves, contextualising information within their own experiences and other things they have learned. This is in contrast with the more surface / reproductive approach of younger students who are described by Sadler-Smith (1996) as more likely to accept ideas without depth of understanding, trying to rote learn, lacking direction and trying to acquire information without considering the wider context for it. In addition, studies by Harper and Kember (1986) and Richardson (1995) suggest that the differences found in how mature and younger students learn may be related to the greater intrinsic motivation of mature students, and their ability to embrace student-centred and more autonomous approaches to learning better than younger students. Gibbs *et al* (1997) and Fearnley (1995), however suggest that mature students may make better use of tutorials and one-to-one tutor support which minimizes the negative effects of being within a large cohort of students in a classroom. Ofori and Charlton (2002) report a relationship between the support-seeking of mature students and their better academic performance concluding that support-seeking was more predictive of student success than entry qualifications, and speculating that this support-seeking may compensate for the effects of lower academic qualifications.

A qualitative study by Brown (1993) goes some way to proposing why more mature students are able to access tutorial support. Brown investigated nurse teachers and students perceptions of power in relationships and found that mature students were treated more as 'adults' by lecturers, possibly because mature students have the confidence, assertive and social skills that foster better engagement with lecturers. These are qualities that Ofori and Charlton (2002) also related to support seeking and enhanced relationships with tutors. Ofori and Charlton went on to express

concern that younger students are less willing to seek tutorial support, putting them at risk of failure and withdrawal from their award.

The student perspective on support seeking was investigated within a study by Crook *et al* (2006) who held discussion groups around the issue of assessment and support with 16 second year student volunteers from their own psychology department (UK University). Student reflection's included that they don't expect to be 'spoon-fed'; only expect to receive limited tutorial guidance, and they expressed some degree of self-consciousness or uncertainty about actively seeking tutorial support, believing it may reflect negatively on perceptions of their intellectual maturity. Unfortunately Crook *et al* (2006) do not include data on the characteristics of students that participated in their study (apart from assuming they were largely female), so there is no indication of the age range of the students that made these comments. It appears from evidence reviewed that mature learners tend to do well in higher education, with support seeking, which may be related to age, identified as having the potential to significantly predict academic success. Student characteristics that may impact on the assessment experience are summarised in Fig 2.2.

### Summative assessment and formative feedback

The importance of tutor feedback, particularly in the first year of undergraduate study, is emphasized strongly in the literature (For example, the work of Black and William 1998; Nicol 2008a; Yorke, 2005). Summative assessment is effectively an evaluation or judgement; a process that summarizes a student's performance in an assessment and awards a grade or points that give some indication of whether a student has met the required standard; the grade accrediting the learning.

Sadler (1989) believes that assessment focuses too predominantly on producing reliable grades and having high content validity rather than facilitating learning. Taras (2002) and Sadler (1989:121) describe the grade or mark awarded to a student as a one-way message often having the unhelpful effect of distracting the student from the essential information within the formative feedback, thus making it counter-productive to formative purposes, and not enhancing learning (Gipps 2005). The grade may actually be detrimental to the learning and confidence of some students (Black and William 1998). The precedence of grade above feedback is illustrated by

three of the twelve year 3 biology students in Orsmond *et al's* (2005) study who reported not collecting their formative feedback if they were happy with their grade. Another disadvantage of grades is that despite tutorial emphasis on students focusing on their own learning, students often perceive assessment as comparing or competing with each other.

Whilst good grades can be really motivating for students, poor grades or a failure can leave students with strong negative feelings about their ability which can impact on future learning (Thorpe 1998). Dweck (2000) argues that focus on assessment and grades can lead to students focusing on performance (passing the assessment) rather than concentrating on the learning itself. Dweck and colleagues (Dweck 1986, 2000; Dweck and Leggett 1988) have written extensively about the negative effects of focusing on performance goals, stressing that learning (or mastery) goals are more beneficial to enhancing learning and success. For example, students adopting learning goals are more likely to utilize feedback to improve their learning than those who adopt performance goals, as these individuals are less interested in their feedback (Knight 2006). In contrast to these largely negative views of the impact of summative grade on perceptions of ability and performance, the importance of formative feedback is strongly and consistently evident within the literature.

Formative assessment should ideally provide feedback on student performance that facilitates enhancement of their learning by offering a sufficiently detailed appraisal of the work they have produced, highlighting its strengths and suggesting areas for improvement. An extensive review of research literature by Black and William (1998) found that strengthening formative assessment improves learning, concluding that:

Firm evidence shows that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and its development can raise standards of achievement' (p39).

Moreover, Black and William found that improved formative assessment helped lower achieving students more than others, effectively narrowing the range of achievement, but raising achievement overall. The function of formative feedback is described by Ramaprasad (1983:4) as 'information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way'. In simpler terms this represents student recognition of the desired goal, evidence about his/her present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two (Sadler, 1989:121).

Three conditions that contextualize formative assessment emerge from Sadler's (1989) propositions for effective feedback and promote what he describes as 'student self-monitoring'. Firstly, knowing what is required to be achieved within the assessment by the student - the standards, secondly, the student having the ability to compare those standards with one's own work, and thirdly, the student taking action to close the gap. All three of these aspects have to be understood to facilitate learning and help students develop a realistic view of their ability, what they have achieved and what they can do to improve their learning. This level of understanding of assessment is particularly important within the first year of study when students may be experiencing a very different educational experience in higher education than that encountered in previous education. Unfortunately, as revealed within the literature, student understanding of what is required of them in an assessment is not always so obvious. For example, Rust *et al* (2003) reported that under-performance of students in assessments is in some measure due to failure of students to fully understand what is expected of them. As Cross (1996:4) asserts, students 'need to know what they are trying to accomplish' in order that subsequent feedback can inform them of 'how close they are coming to the goal'. This may, in part, reflect Sadler's (1989) finding that teachers' conceptions of quality are held largely inside their heads, and not effectively articulated. The student view of this is illustrated well in a study by Crook *et al* (2006) who ascertained from the views of 16 students studying psychology (from their own department) that there was a problem knowing what was expected of them, for example, one student stated 'it seems each teacher has their own style that they want, and that they'll like' (p.104). Despite having documents that detail expectations of an assignment and grading criteria, some students still feel they do not understand what exactly is required; a lack of understanding that will impact on what they produce within their assessment, and subsequently how well they achieve (Nicol 2008a; Rust *et al* 2003). Worryingly, as in Crook *et al*'s (2006) study, some students interpret elements of their formative feedback as 'belated revelations' of things they felt they should have known prior to starting their assignment. In order to understand and thus engage with formative feedback, students should have a thorough understanding of the assessment criteria and standards, but Taras (2006) argues that undergraduate students generally lack opportunities to develop comprehension of these. Not having this insight makes it difficult for students to understand what is expected of them, how to interpret the formative feedback they receive and subsequently how to improve their work.



Despite formative feedback being given to students Sadler (1989) notes that it does not necessarily follow that student work will improve. Though some students may not read their feedback as they are only interested in their grade (Orsmond *et al* 2005), we cannot assume that those that do read the feedback can understand it (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). On the contrary, strong evidence is emerging that feedback is often delayed, complex and difficult to decode and therefore may not be understood so cannot be used to enhance performance, or it may be glanced at to ascertain the grade then discarded, or even not picked up at all (Crisp 2007; Gibbs 2006:26; Higgins *et al* 2001; Ivanic *et al* 2000; Nicol 2008a; Wojas 1998). Ramaprasad (1983), and later Orsmond *et al* (2004), contest that if feedback is unreadable or can't be understood, or if it is not engaged with and acted upon, then it does not constitute formative feedback at all. In contrast to the findings discussed so far, Higgins *et al* (2002) in a study examining the meaning of assessment for year one students in two universities in UK (a pre and a post-1992 higher education institution) found that students believe that they do attend to formative feedback they receive, with Weaver (2006) finding that feedback was valued by students. Looking more closely at the qualitative results from Weaver's (2006) study, based in a post-1992 UK University, comments elicited from open-ended questions within a survey completed by 44 business and art and design students, and a group discussion with 22 students from these departments, centred around four main aspects of feedback that students found less helpful in supporting and improving their learning. This included that feedback was often too vague or generalized, too negative, lacked guidance, or was unrelated to the assessment criteria. This concurs with findings from other studies about formative feedback which include not being able to read feedback, not understanding terminology used or not comprehending the intended meaning of what was being said (Crisp 2007; Crook *et al* 2006; Higgins *et al* 2002; Orsmond *et al* 2004). In essence, the literature supports Sadler's (1998) assertion that we cannot assume that when we give feedback to students they will know what to do with it.

Another important issue evident in the literature (for example, Lea and Street 2000), relates to the modular nature of awards and timing of feedback; with results and feedback often received by the student well after the end of the module. Sadler (1989:38) made the point that it should not be surprising that some students do not seem to take on board tutor formative feedback as opportunities to integrate it into future work may appear limited, with Taras (2006) adding that formative feedback is of little value if students do not have an opportunity to use it. Receiving

feedback many weeks after the end of a module is seen as too late for students to benefit from its guidance (Light and Cox 2001). This was illustrated by 59% of the 94 psychology students in Hartley and Chesworth's (2000) study who reported, in a questionnaire on essay writing, that feedback was too late to be helpful as it appeared well after the module had ended. Similarly, if feedback seems to relate only to the module just assessed then it may not be seen as relevant to future modules. This was evidenced by the psychology students in Crook and colleagues (2006) study, for example, who reported that formative feedback was limited in its value as it was situated within the context of a particular module.

In short, good formative feedback should be sufficient, understandable, focus on what the student has learned rather than the grade, be linked to the assessment criteria / learning outcomes, encapsulate what the student has achieved and what they should do to improve in future, and be timely enough so it can be utilised (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 2006). Feedback should enable students to 'self-correct' their work (Nicol and MacFarlane Dick 2006), providing advice that prioritises areas that require attention to facilitate improvement. This is what Nicol (2008a) describes as 'feed-forward', which he believes is more important than 'feedback' as the former highlights application of current learning to future assessments. Nicol (2008a) built on earlier research with an extensive literature review (Nicol and Mc Farlane–Dick 2004), findings from the REAP project (JISC 2007), principles drawn from the QAA Code of Practice on Assessment (QAA, 2006a) and on published studies of University policies and practices that are associated with high levels of student success (Kuh *et al* 2005) to propose 12 principles of good formative assessment and feedback (see appendix 1). These principles went further than those of Gibbs and Simpson (2004) by considering the broader implications of feedback on learning and teaching, the development of student autonomy and the ability to self-regulate, thus enabling students to be more proactive and less reactive within the assessment process (Nicol and MacFarlane–Dick 2004; 2006). These principles summarise well the issues and guidance raised by other scholars in this field, and will serve as a good benchmark against which to appraise the assessment experience of Year 1 student nurses.

### Self-beliefs about ability

At the centre of the assessment process is the student. Literature reveals the impact of personal characteristics, such as age, on how a student may approach assessment, utilize support and

attend to feedback, but at a more fundamental level self-beliefs held by the student about their ability, their confidence and how competent they feel about undertaking assessment also impact on assessment performance (Dweck 2000; Furnham 2001; Pajares 1996; Stipek and Gralinski 1996). For example, research reports (Collier *et al* 2002; Gilchrist *et al* 2003:90) that students from lower socio-economic groups undervalue their intellectual ability compared to that held by middle-class students, having 'classed assumptions' about their ability (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003:137) and 'classed identities' (Archer and Leathwood 2003:177) which prevent them from feeling that they can be a part of higher education and fit into the traditionally middle class institutional culture. Students from lower socio-economic groups are also less inclined to believe that they are entitled to go to University (Archer *et al* 2003). As participation in higher education widens and is more inclusive of students across the socio-economic spectrum, then differences in self-beliefs about ability are worthy of consideration.

Intelligence is often conceptualised as being measurable, with some believing it can be represented by a value - the intelligence quotient (or IQ), but Dweck (2000:59) reminds us that Alfred Binet, who developed the IQ test, knew this was not the case. His test was not developed to offer a fixed value on someone's intelligence, rather to identify children who were not thriving at school. His aim was to develop educational programs to facilitate learning and growth of intelligence. Despite this there is an underlying belief within our society that intelligence is something we 'have' in a certain quantity depending on IQ, implying that those with a higher IQ know more or are 'brighter' than those with a lower IQ. This conceptualization of intelligence though tells us little about how we learn. Carol Dweck (1986; 2000) believes that a shift to a more socio-cognitive approach to understanding ability and how learning situations are construed or interpreted can tell us a more about what motivates learning, and thus can indicate means of fostering motivation to learn. Her theories resonate well with beliefs, particularly those of self-doubt, expressed by some of my students. This resonance led to a more in depth review of her work to ascertain its relevance to understanding how beliefs about intelligence impact on learning strategies and performance in UK students in higher education.

Implicit theories provide a framework for attributions we make, which impact on how we interpret events and behave in response to them (Hong *et al* 1999). Bandura (1986, cited in Pajares 1996), referring to social cognitive theory, discusses how an individuals' self-referent thought mediates

between knowledge and action. It would seem intuitive to assume that experience impacts on self-belief; but knowledge, skill and past successes or failures are often weak predictors of future performance. This is because of beliefs people hold about their ability, and the potential effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their efforts (Pajares 1996). Pintrich and Degroot (1990) put the relationship between self-beliefs, cognitive strategies and performance simply in their statement: 'students need to have both the "will" and the "skill" to be successful ..'(p.38).

Dweck and colleagues (Bandura 1986; Bandura and Dweck 1985; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Leggett 1985) assert from extensive research that individual's tend to perceive and understand their level of ability or intelligence as either innate, i.e. you are born with it, or see it as a result of working hard. In terms of Dweck and colleagues achievement motivation theory, differentiation is made between individual's that have an implicit belief that their intelligence is innate and fixed, i.e. they hold an *entity* theory, and those that believe their ability is malleable and has the capacity to develop and grow – an *incremental* theory. These beliefs or self-perceptions impact on confidence, self-esteem and self-confidence, indeed a whole raft of self-perceptions that can impact on learning and assessment (Bandura and Dweck 1985; Bandura and Jourden 1991; Leggett 1985). Dweck and colleagues (Diener and Dweck 1978, 1980; Dweck 1975, 1986; Dweck and Leggett 1988) describe how these two different mind sets, the individual's implicit theories regarding their ability as being either entity or incremental, can result in two very different sets of learning behaviours.

Incremental theorists believe they (and others) can nurture and develop their ability through effort and guidance, are keen to learn, embrace challenge and see setbacks as something to overcome. Incremental theorists are described as having a mastery-oriented approach to learning, embracing and seeking challenge, seeing effort and motivation as integral to success and thinking in terms of mastery or learning goals (seeking to increase their competence). Learning goals appear to have a positive impact on learning, as these students will be more comfortable admitting deficits in knowledge in order to learn more, and will seek out, explore and initiate tasks that promote learning. They will also consider their success as resultant of their hard work. Mastery or learning goals have been found to be associated with deep-processing learning strategies, greater effort and persistence which indirectly impacts positively on achievement, but a direct relationship with achievement is less clear (Dupeyrat and Marine 2005). Incremental

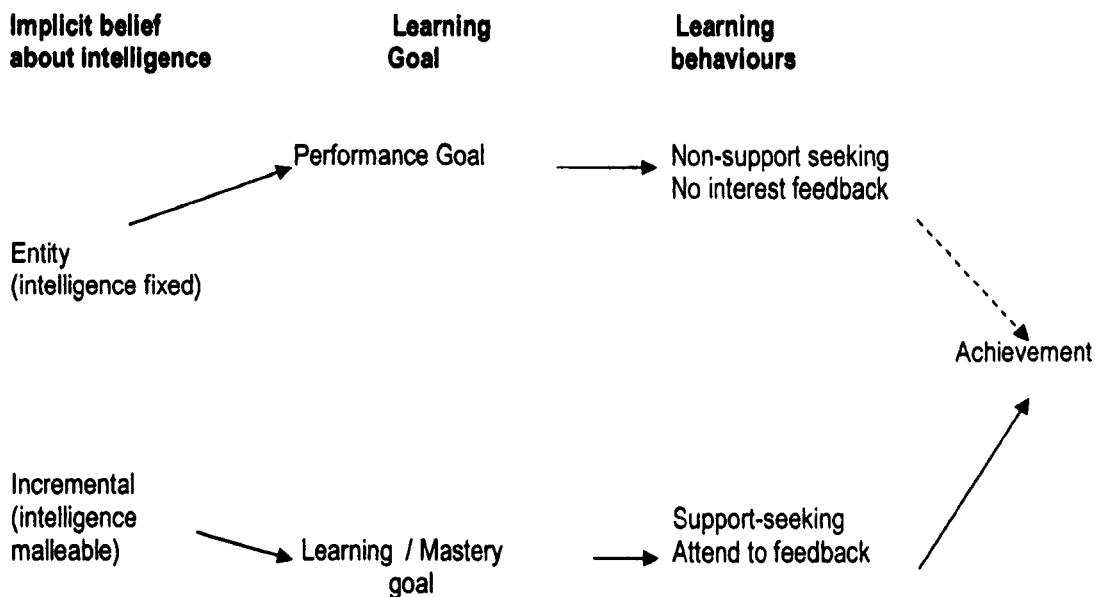
theorists tend to focus less on traits, and more on behaviours, strategies and cognitions, for example "I failed because I didn't work hard enough" or "I wasn't motivated enough".

Dweck (2000:3) describes entity theorists, in contrast, as cognisant of the amount of intelligence they have (or don't have) and as a consequence they strive to look like they have enough; that they appear 'bright'. This concern impacts on the kinds of tasks they will engage in, preferring to engage in activities that are easy for them, that they can perform without much effort, and so confirm their intelligence. What entity theorists are more reluctant to do is engage in challenging tasks that may not be easily achievable, as this may call their intelligence into question. As their intelligence is perceived as 'fixed' failure is problematic as it reinforces a level of intelligence that can't be changed. As entity theorists prefer easy success, they may miss out on valuable learning opportunities, may find dealing with setbacks difficult and are unlikely to develop a 'can-do' mentality (Dweck 2000:3-4). These more maladaptive behaviours characterise the entity theorist who is also described by Dweck (1975; 1986) and Dweck and Leggett (1988) performance goal focused (seeking a positive judgement of their competence), the outcome of that goal being seen as a reflection of their ability. Those who think in terms of performance goals may interpret lack of success as reflecting their low ability and foster defensive behaviours (such as reluctance to try again for fear of failing) that can prohibit engaging in challenging tasks, and thus learning. Entity theorists who are successful see this success as reflecting their ability, and will not see value in working harder or making a greater effort to learn (Dweck 1988). Dweck *et al* (1995) demonstrated that if one has a fixed, trait-like belief in one's ability (entity theory) then outcomes and actions are understood and interpreted in terms of that trait, for example "I failed the assignment because I am not bright".

In the context of perceptions about a fixed level of intelligence, Furnham (2001) considers how we appraise our level of intelligence and highlights the potential problems associated with fixed views about intelligence. He warns that individuals who erroneously believe they are less intelligent than others, less than what they consider the 'norm', may confirm their own hypothesis through their behaviour, for example, not making efforts to learn. Similarly, those who believe they have superior intelligence may be complacent, arrogant and similarly not make efforts to learn.

Though performance goals have been found to be related to shallow-processing type strategies (such as rote learning) and not related to effort and persistence, there is some evidence that performance goals are related to both deep and shallow learning strategies and to higher levels of achievement (Dupeyrat and Marine 2005). Whilst Stipek and Gralinski (1996) demonstrated that students' beliefs in fixed versus malleable intelligence predicted their academic achievement, a study by Furnham *et al* (2003) demonstrated that beliefs about intelligence did not correlate with academic performance at all. The Furnham *et al* study did take place in what was described by the authors as an 'elite' UK University, where beliefs about intelligence may be high by virtue of the fact that their academic achievement was good enough to secure a place in a Russell group University. Beliefs about intelligence may be different, however, for students enrolled on a diploma award at a post-1992 institution.

In their extensive review of Dweck's model Dupeyrat and Marine (2005) make it clear that Dweck's model does not propose that achievement behaviour is determined directly by the individual's implicit beliefs about intelligence, but rather these two factors are mediated by goal orientation – either a learning / mastery or performance goal. The relationship between these factors is depicted in Fig 2.1.



**Fig 2.1** Proposed causal model for achievement based on Dweck's postulates. Solid lines represent positive relationships, dotted lines negative relationships.

The relationship between self-beliefs about the nature of intelligence, holding an entity or incremental theory, and pursuing performance or learning goals respectively is not always a straightforward one. Roedel and Schraw's (1995) study testing Dweck and Leggett's (1988) model with 157 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory educational psychology class in a large University in Midwest USA found that entity theorists pursued performance goals, but this was unrelated to the pursuance of learning goals (there was not a positive or negative correlation with learning goals). Though choosing a more challenging task was related to learning goals, Roedel and Schraw (1995) found that learning and performance goals were independent of each other, and that beliefs about intelligence did not have a direct relationship with behaviour when faced with a challenge. In contrast, studies by Dupeyrat and Escribe (2000) and Dupeyrat and Marine (2005) found that those holding an entity theory were not associated with perusal of performance goals but a negative correlation was found with learning goals. Dupeyrat and Marine (2005), in a study conducted in France, looked at a range of studies within this area when testing out Dweck's model with 76 students who were embracing the challenge of returning to education to complete their Baccalaureat. They could not demonstrate the predicted relationship between implicit theories (beliefs about) intelligence, goal orientation and cognitive engagement. Stipek and Gralinski (1996) developed a causal model to look at the relationship between these variables and found only weak evidence that an entity theory was related to performance goals and an incremental theory to learning / mastery goals. They also found that holding an entity theory of intelligence had a direct effect on shallow learning strategies which impacted on achievement, but the influence of an incremental theory failed to emerge. Taken together, studies looking at the relationship of factors within Dweck's model reveal some consistency regarding the relationship between learning goals / performance goals and achievement, but less consistency and some instability regarding the relationship between implicit self-beliefs about ability and goal orientation.

The assumption that success leads to mastery and increased confidence makes intuitive sense, and may be the case for some, but Dweck (2000:53) challenges this and suggests that those who are most successful can be the most vulnerable, and she cites research with high achieving 'bright' girls. These girls, she says, are more likely than boys to hold an entity theory of intelligence, more likely than boys to choose tasks that present little challenge, and prefer tasks they are sure they can do well in. Dweck (2000:57) asserts that for students who hold an entity

theory of intelligence success may provide a boost for as long as they are succeeding, but confidence and success are not enough to manifest a desire for challenge in future, on the contrary challenge still provokes reticence or anxiety. This proposal is important in the context of how tutors support all learners, not just those who ask for support, but those who generally succeed with their assessments and assume they don't require support. As they progress through University and the academic level increases, it may be those students who have always succeeded without, they perceive, much effort, are reluctant to seek support as their work becomes more challenging.

Dweck (2000:141) believes that attributions and attributional style are central to the model of self-beliefs about intelligence that she and colleagues have developed, and are central to the individual's self-theories and goals. Work by Hong *et al* (1999) demonstrated this link between belief about ability and attribution of success / failure to either effort or intelligence. Their study, involving 97 undergraduate students in a US University (half of whom participated as a requirement of their psychology course, and half were paid a small fee to participate), revealed that incremental theorists who receive negative feedback attribute this to effort, and are more likely than entity theorists to take action to improve performance. Incremental theorists see feedback as informing them about the status of their current work, what they are doing well or not so well, and how to improve it.

Earlier work by Hong *et al* (1998 cited in Dweck 2000) had demonstrated this response to feedback in a study where following test results tutors offered students a tutorial to improve their work (as all were told they could improve). Of the students that did well on the test there was little difference in whether those holding entity or incremental beliefs about their intelligence attended a tutorial, but there was a different response from students who had not done so well on the test. Of those that did poorly, 73.3% of those with an incremental theory of intelligence attended for tutorial, but only 13% of entity theorists attended. Dweck (2000:26) expresses concern that it is this group of students, those with a fixed belief about intelligence who are struggling that are in most need of tutorial support, but clearly avoid it. Whilst students who hold incremental beliefs about their ability perceive feedback as contributing to their teaching and learning, those holding an entity theory perceive it as an evaluation of them as individuals, which can be threatening and impede learning (Dweck 2000:152). Similarly, Rhodewalt (1994) found that when entity theorists



were confronted with a challenging task they intentionally withheld effort, for example by not studying until the last minute. Such a strategy enables entity theorists to maintain belief in their ability by reassuring themselves that had they applied themselves they would have succeeded. Dweck (2000:41) feels that a sad consequence of these entity beliefs is that effort is not valued, and effort is important in life, it demonstrates what one cares about and what one is willing to work at. Bandura (1986) cites a similar outcome from beliefs about self-efficacy which, he says, mediate the effect of other self-beliefs on performance by impacting on persistence, perseverance and effort.

Learning more about students' self-beliefs regarding their ability as they relate to the assessment process may provide us with information that offers insight into, for example, the students' interpretation of attainment. This could lead to development of strategies that foster beliefs about improving ability, and in turn impact positively on confidence, self-beliefs and future performance. For example, promotion of learning goals, as opposed to performance goals, could have a significant impact on learning. Individuals who pursue learning goals tend to attribute their performance to effort, rather than ability (Ames 1984), they report better intrinsic motivation and cognitive engagement (Meece *et al* 1988), seek support in the face of difficulties (Butler and Neuman 1995) and learning goals are associated with more frequent use of cognitive strategies that facilitate deeper information processing and persistence (Ames and Archer 1988; Miller *et al* 1993). Dweck's (2000) model does not propose that learning goals have a direct impact on performance outcomes, rather they have an indirect mediating effect as learning goals are related to greater persistence and effort and deeper cognitive learning strategies. Indeed, though some studies identify a positive relationship between learning goals and achievement (such as Miller *et al* 1993); others fail to find a significant relationship between these two variables (e.g. Meece *et al* 1998).

Though Dweck (2000) presents this theory of implicit beliefs about intelligence in a polemic way, she is not suggesting that everyone is either wholly an incremental or entity theorist, rather, as Hong *et al* (1999) acknowledge many may see both effort and ability as contributing to academic performance, but have a leaning towards seeing innate ability or effort being at the root of their success or failure. Though the virtues of learning goals are extolled, there is a place for performance goals too, with Dweck (1986) and Dweck and Leggett (1988) emphasizing that both

learning and performance goals can be adaptive depending on the context. Performance goals are also a necessary part of demonstrating achievement; it is when they have greater importance than the learning itself they can be problematic.

As there is much evidence to suggest that assessment motivates or 'frames' learning (Bryan and Clegg 2006:2) then how students perceive their own learning and capabilities, their beliefs about their intelligence, the strategies employed that could enhance or diminish chances of success, and how they respond to failure, are important considerations. It is evident from this overview of Dweck and colleagues work that an incremental theory of intelligence that manifests learning goals and mastery-oriented behaviours is seen as more advantageous than holding an entity theory. This is all very well for the incremental theorist, but one has to consider whether the implicit beliefs of entity theorists can be changed, in effect, how stable or consistent implicit theories are. Dweck and Leggett (1988) suggested that one's implicit beliefs about intelligence may be a permanent personal attribute, not a momentary judgement. Robins and Pals (1998 cited in Dweck 2000:35) examined this within a US study looking at whether students' theories of intelligence predicted their goals and responses over their college years and found that implicit theories were stable over students' years in college. They also found that entity theorists entered college with higher grades, but this did not translate into higher achievement.

If self-beliefs about ability are a 'stable' trait, then addressing any subsequent maladaptive learning behaviours adopted by entity theorists could be a challenge, but one should consider the reasons why individuals may hold an entity theory of intelligence. Dweck (2000:151) suggests that holding fixed beliefs may offer some sense of security in an otherwise complex world, a view reflected in the work of personality theorists such as Kelly (1955) who believe that the ability to predict and anticipate future events can be imperative to the well-being of individuals. An entity theory is also simple, easy to understand and has face validity in a world where we differentiate between those who are 'bright' and 'not so bright', whether this is in the form of streaming children at school or awarding grades for an assessment. A disadvantage of holding an entity theory is the restriction it may have on ability, limiting the potential for growth.

Offering a more positive way forward, research in this area (Aronson and Fried 1998 cited in Dweck 2000:37; Steele and Aronson 1995) has demonstrated that those holding an entity theory

of intelligence can be 'trained' to think like incremental theorists and to believe that they can improve their intelligence with effort. As Dweck (2000:154) acknowledges, it may be the case that genetic endowment makes learning easier for some than others, but she asserts that under the right circumstances virtually everyone can learn. As such, developing an understanding of these facilitative circumstances, promoting them and encouraging belief in an incremental theory of intelligence (that people can change) is a worthy aim.

Dweck and colleagues propose a social-cognitive model regarding the implicit beliefs that individuals hold regarding their intelligence which, they believe, has significant and important implications for how individuals engage with learning and assessment. Dupeyrat and Marine (2005) point out that few studies have looked at Dweck's model and the relationship between implicit beliefs about intelligence and goal orientation in an academic context with adults, and those that have been carried out have only partially supported the model. A study by Grant and Dweck (2003) confirmed the validity of this model within higher education in 5 studies (US), and Yorke and Knight (2004) found that within a sample of 2269 undergraduates in their first and final year of study, across a range of disciplines, across 5 universities in the North-West of England, two in seven students held beliefs about intelligence being fixed, so could be imposing a limit on what they see themselves as being capable of achieving.

Much of the research that has tested this model has been based in the United States. In the UK Furnham and colleagues (2003) have engaged in research around self-beliefs about intelligence, which includes Dweck's postulates, but this has taken place in what would be described as 'traditional' University settings, not in post-1992 Universities. Though Yorke and Knight's study may have included post-1992 UK Universities, it focused on the implicit beliefs individuals held regarding their ability (whether entity or incremental), not how these implicit beliefs relate to assessment. There is little evidence of Dweck's work on implicit theories of intelligence being explored within a cohort of students in a post-1992 UK University. Self-beliefs about ability may differ in the more diverse student body admitted to diploma study at a post-1992 University; a student body that includes mature students, students who have few or no academic qualifications and students who are the first in their family to go to University.

### Summary of the literature:

The themes that emerge from the literature review appear to relate to four key areas associated with student assessment in higher education and their self-beliefs about ability. These include the learning environment, in terms of the nature and aims of higher education, the student body and their characteristics, the structure of the assessment process and the self-beliefs that students bring to this experience that may impact on their engagement with it. Looking at the literature as a whole, it is apparent that issues and factors that impact on the students' experience of the assessment process are numerous and significant, from the nature of higher education itself, through to the implicit beliefs that students hold about their ability. Fig 2.2 depicts key concepts evident from the literature review, and the relationship between these factors in terms of the assessment experience for the student. The assessment experience and what is learned from it may also reciprocally impact on the student, the assessment process and the higher education institution.

Factors in bold type in Fig 2.2 represent those highlighted within the literature as having a particular significance on the assessment experience for the diverse student body attracted to a nursing diploma award.

Within a post-1992 higher education institution (1) there is an aim to produce students who develop into independent, lifelong learners with transferable skills such as reflection, decision-making and problem-solving (Dearing 1997; Gibbs 2006:19; Knapper and Cropley 2000). Student characteristics (2) of maturity and social-class are strongly evident in literature reviewed as contributing to success and engagement in higher education (For example Collier et al 2002; Ofori 2002), and the students' conceptualisation of ability (3) is proposed to have a strong influence on learning and success, for example, it is seen as advantageous to hold an incremental theory of intelligence, subscribe to learning / mastery goals and engage in subsequent learning behaviours such as support-seeking (Dweck 2000). The assessment process itself (4) will impact on the student experience of assessment in terms of, for example, future learning related to feedback (Nicol 2008a; Yorke 2005) and tutorial support (for example Crook et al 2006), with the suggestion that more control of the assessment process, for example being given choice of assessment, may enhance development of self-reliance which is essential to both future learning and professional development.

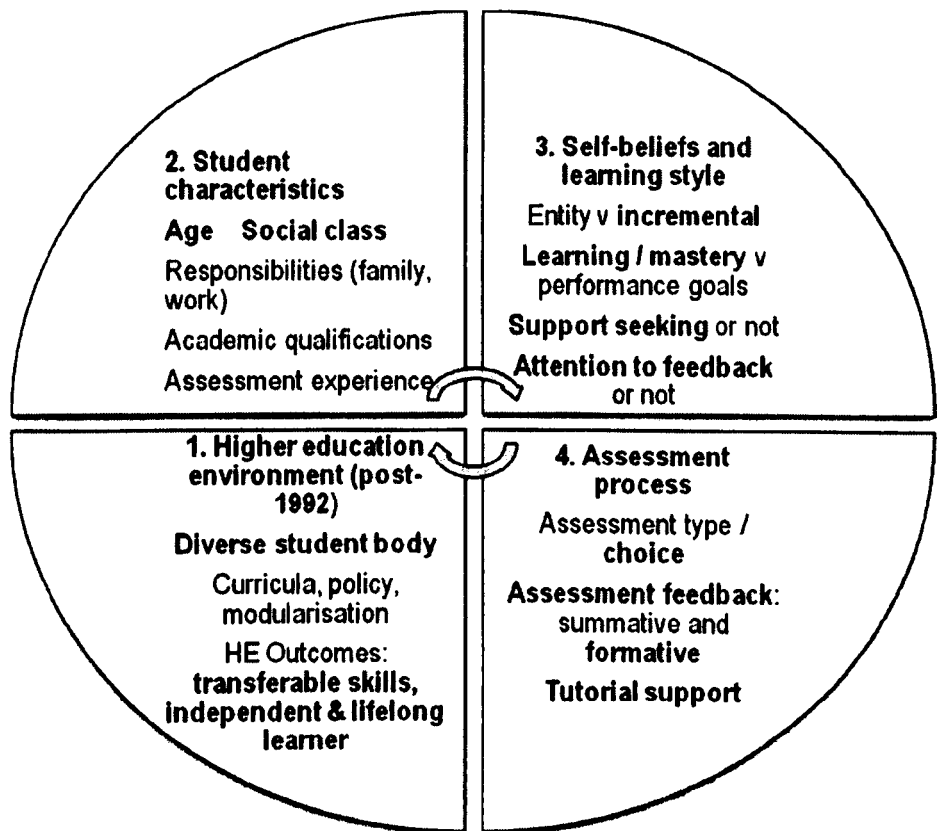


Fig 2.2 Summary of key concepts from literature review

The introduction to this study offered an overview of the thoughts, experiences and prior reading that stimulated the desire to undertake this inquiry, with this chapter presenting a review of the literature around the assessment experience and how students may perceive their ability. Whilst there is much literature around assessment of students, including guidance for best practice, there is little evidence of the impact of the assessment process and summative / formative feedback, on the student, from the student perspective. The student view of how the assessment process impacts on their self-beliefs about their ability, and their confidence and competence to engage in assessment in future would be a useful insight. There has been research that has looked at how students use formative feedback, and their views of it (for example, Higgins *et al* 2002; Orsmond *et al* 2005) but not a focus on the impact of feedback on the students self-beliefs. Both Higgins *et al* (2002) and Nicol (2008a) point out the need for the student experience to be at heart of research, to ascertain their views and beliefs about assessment in order to gain greater insight into what academics do that enhances learning and self-belief, and what is less effective. With this perspective in mind, and subsequent to review of the literature, the following research aims and questions have been developed; the students' experience being central to them:

The study aims are:

1. To identify practices and experiences within the first assessment period that students perceive enhance or undermine their self-beliefs regarding their ability to succeed in a written assessment.
2. To identify whether the assessment experience differs for students with different levels of pre-entry academic qualifications, age, or history of family experience of higher education.
3. To establish if the way that students define their intelligence is related to their behaviours and responses toward assessment choice, summative and formative feedback and tutorial support.

Leading to the research questions:

1. What is the students' experience of being assessed in this first module of study, and what aspects of the assessment process foster positive self-belief, or confound self-doubt?

2. What factors impact on students' beliefs about their intelligence and capabilities, and how do these factors relate to their engagement with the assessment, tutorial support, and the summative and formative feedback they receive?
3. What model of achievement motivation emerges from students studying for a Diploma in Nursing at a post-1992 UK University?

These research aims and questions led to a review of research methods to establish the most effective study design, and methods of collecting data, that could address the research aims and still maintain the student perspective. It was concluded that an illuminative evaluation would fulfil both these requirements. Justification of this choice, and a detailed account of the study design and methods are detailed in chapter 3.

## **Chapter 3: Design and methods**

### Introduction

This study will explore the first assessment experience of a cohort of first year nursing students in a post-1992 UK University. It will reflect the students' experience of this assessment, from their perspective, and include exploration of self-beliefs about ability as they undertake their first academic assessment at University. An illuminative evaluation was adopted utilising mixed methods of data collection, as the literature suggests that a variety of methods of data collection fit with this approach (Ellis 2003; Parlett and Hamilton 1972:16). Documentary analysis will elucidate the context of the assessment experience in terms of the instructional system and learning milieu, and questionnaires and focus groups will generate quantitative and qualitative data to address the research aims and questions detailed on pages 49-50.

A range of factors influence decision-making with regard to research design and choice of methods and methodologies. Throughout the literature there is emphasis on choice of method being appropriate to research questions and issues under investigation, with choice of methods being clearly articulated and justified. This rationale should involve the researcher reflectively and reflexively examining their position, from epistemological and ontological perspectives, when considering the research questions before them. This chapter begins with a reflection on, and justification for, choice of methodology and methods.

### Epistemological and philosophical positioning with regard to research

Though a primary factor in choice of methods is the research question (Burnard and Hannigan 2000), other factors influence choice such as personal experiences, predilections and characteristics of the researcher in terms of their values, interests, life history, and occupational / professional background (Creswell 2003:21; Wellington *et al* 2005:99). Dellgran and Hojer (2003), for example, suggest that knowledge of, and epistemological preferences for, certain kinds of research methods could be grounded in education. The suggestion that a researcher's choice of research topics and methods is influenced by their predilections or career interests is not generally seen as problematic (as post-positivists accept that researchers influence their research), but what is increasingly stressed within the literature is the need for openness to scrutiny of the background assumptions upon which research decisions and analyses are made



(May 2001:67). Greenbank (2003:793) proposes that we align ourselves with the methodology we feel most comfortable with. Accessing these personal influences on choice of methods requires reflection on one's position, and engaging reflexively with the study to maintain cognisance of one's own influence on the research process.

Reflection on my own ontological and epistemological position with regard to research reveals a leaning toward an interpretivist approach. In simple terms, I consider social reality as far from being a 'given', but being open to manipulation and construction. For example, I view poverty and social conditions as having a much greater impact on our health and well-being than genetics, and, for me, there is merit in focusing on factors that we can influence; this seems a more fruitful route for social inquiry. Further, the prospect of 'reality' existing 'out-there' is for me overshadowed by the infinitesimal possibilities of interpretive, constructive and subjective perspectives. In competition, and in direct contrast with this position, I aspire to engage in positivist inquiry as I have a long-held belief about the superiority of this approach above the interpretivist approach.

I am aware that my educational development both at school and as a healthcare professional, as well as working for many years alongside the medical profession, suggests some explanation for this predilection toward positivism, as well as providing some insight into values I hold that impact on my understanding of, and preference for, particular research methods. Paley (2002: 28) describes "an acute power gradient" between doctors and nurses. There are wide disparities in the educational and social backgrounds of these two healthcare professions with 33% of medical students coming from a professional background, but only 6.6% of nurses coming from this group (Wicks 2001; Page and Meerabeau 2004). Medical doctrine has a strong emphasis on evidence based medicine / evidence based practice (EBP). The rationale for EBP, that reflects National Health Service policy initiatives (Chambers 1998; McSherry 1999), is that healthcare should be guided by the judicious use of evidence, not the traditional 'trial and error' approach to healthcare engaged in historically. All healthcare professionals include EBP within pre-qualifying curricula, which includes developing an understanding of hierarchies of evidence, and in particular the credibility and prestige of different sources of evidence (Kroke *et al* 2003). At the top of this hierarchy are meta-analyses and systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials (RCTs), with qualitative methods appearing toward the bottom of the list. The RCT is clearly held up as the

'gold-standard' for research (Meldrum 2000; Slade and Priebe 2001; Tse *et al* 2000) and is the research approach of choice within medicine. Nurses are educated and work within a culture that extols the supremacy of scientific method (Northway 2000: 392), but nursing research more often adopts qualitative methods. Burnard and Hannigan (2000:4) suggest that whilst qualitative nursing research offers a distinctive contribution to the care of people it can easily be undervalued within a medically dominant evidence based milieu as lacking credibility. For example Gournay and Ritter (1997:441) criticize it as amounting to 'no more than anecdotal accounts of nurses' and patients' experiences'. The educational and social backgrounds of doctors and nurses (Page and Meerabeau 2004) as well as their professional concerns goes some way to explaining their predilection to the methods that typify their research, but the 'superiority' of RCTs continues to be supported both culturally and politically. It is therefore not surprising that my respect for, and aspirations toward, a positivist research paradigm has led me to consider this approach to my own study.

This inclination toward a positivist approach to research has been challenged over recent years. My long held assumptions about the supremacy of quantitative research, and RCT's in particular, are being eroded as the lenses through which I now view research shift toward more interpretivist ideas. I consider this approach to inquiry to have more logic and validity in our socially complex world, even if this approach is viewed by some as less rigorous, value-laden or biased. The positivist assertion that research should be 'objective' and can be 'value-free' underpins the belief that the positivist approach is 'best', but many (Medawar 1963; Denny 1991), view objectivity as a myth. If we accept that values are implicit within human beings then we cannot possibly seek the impossible of eradicating them from the human activity of research (May 2001:49).

Though it is accepted that values are implicit in the research process it is imperative that standards should be upheld in the conduct of all research, regardless of methodology. The emphasis on rigour in research demands that it be reliable, valid and objective. These terms may not be deemed appropriate to more phenomenologically based research where 'objectivity' is not a realistic proposition, and values should be acknowledged. It has been proposed (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1994) that qualitative studies should be appraised according to the different, but parallel criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness encompasses four criteria that echo the equivalent, more positivist, criteria above, that is, credibility – internal

validity; transferability – external validity; dependability – reliability; confirmability – objectivity. Reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process should facilitate and promote honesty and transparency, and go some way to fulfilling Guba and Lincoln's (1994) trustworthiness and authenticity criteria.

Though reflection offers some understanding of my desire to engage with both qualitative and quantitative methods, the growing literature on the benefits of mixed methods have reinforced, if not over-shadowed, my initial subjective affiliation to this approach.

### Research design

This illuminative evaluation involving a cohort of first year diploma student nurses in a post-1992 University will employ mixed-methods to collect and explore data to address the research aims and questions. The purpose of this is to explore the students' experiences and perceptions of their first theoretical assessment in order to ascertain the impact of this experience on their self-beliefs about ability and capabilities, as well as consider how their initial self-beliefs about ability relate to their engagement with the assessment process. This study will also investigate whether characteristics such as educational background, age, or family experience of University have any bearing on how students perceive and experience the assessment process or perceive their ability. Exploration of how students conceptualise their intelligence, and how these self-beliefs relate to learning behaviour and achievement, may suggest a model of achievement motivation. The research design needs to reflect the genuine desire to gain insight and understanding of the student perspective.

When considering an appropriate approach to study design the research questions, and what is already known within this field of inquiry, should dictate research methods used (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:15). The exploratory nature of this study, with the range of research questions presented regarding assessment as an educational process, and the necessity of eliciting the students' experiences from their perspective suggests that an illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:19) would be appropriate. Parsons (1980 cited in Crotty 1990) agrees that illuminative evaluation is most appropriate for education research, aiming for description, interpretation and understanding through a variety of data collection methods. Illuminative evaluation enables a critical stance on the educational programme itself to gain an understanding

of the learning milieu and its impact, as well as exploring and documenting the experiences of those experiencing this education. Illuminative evaluation does not propose a standard methodology, but is adaptable and eclectic, enabling different techniques to be combined to throw light on, or 'illuminate' issues; and, in common with advocates of mixed methods, this combination of methods and vantage points on issues can aid triangulation and cross checking of findings (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:16).

Illuminative evaluation was introduced as an approach to the study of educational programs by Parlett and Hamilton (1972). Parlett and Hamilton challenged and critiqued the dominant experimental and psychometric approaches to educational research, believing that these failed to accommodate complexities inherent within a learning milieu, and thus were inadequate in making an effective contribution to subsequent decision-making within that learning environment. Further criticism of the traditional, experimental approach expressed the view that this approach is artificial and 'tidy', with unrealistically controlled conditions that yield results which have little applicability to the 'untidy' real-world in which we live (ibid:5-7). They proposed a more holistic approach to educational research that enabled reflection on educational programs as a whole, within the context of the learning milieu that may impact on the education experience and its outcomes. This is in contrast to the more traditional focus purely on outcomes of specific programs or interventions (ibid:1-3).

The primary function of illuminative evaluation is to explore educational programs or innovations rather than measure them or predict outcomes. It aims to reveal and consider complex issues and questions within educational programs or settings. For example, how they operate, what influences them, how they change over time; and offer an 'insider view' of what it is like to be participating in this program / learning experience. This fits with the intention of this study to explore the assessment process as experienced by students themselves. Parlett and Hamilton (1972:9) propose two concepts that are central to understanding this approach – the 'instructional system' which includes pedagogical assumptions, details of curricula, and teaching and learning strategies; and the 'learning milieu' which is described as the 'social-psychological and material environment' in which teachers and students work together, a unique suffusion of social, cultural, institutional and psychological variables that make up the teaching and learning environment experienced by participants.

A mixed methods approach fits with the aims of illuminative evaluation; utilizing different methods to elicit data that can be combined to offer a fuller picture of the experience of student nurses during their first University assessment experience. Different methods bring together qualitative and quantitative data for analysis which is complementary. The strengths of both methods are exploited and enable comparison, validation, confirmation or corroboration of both quantitative results and qualitative findings. 'Mixed method' refers to between or across method triangulation where qualitative and quantitative strategies are combined in one study (Begley 1996; Boyd 2000; Kimchi *et al* 1991; Mitchell 1996). Justification for employing a mixed-method approach, echoed robustly within the literature, is its ability to offer a greater degree of 'completeness' (Fielding and Fielding 1986; Jick 1979; Redfern and Norman, 1994; Tobin and Begley 2004). Flick (1998:231) sees it as adding 'rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any enquiry'. Mixing methods is not intended purely as a means of confirming data, but offers a deeper and more complete picture of the phenomena under investigation (Tobin and Begley 2002:7). I feel this approach fits well with the interpretivist paradigm that I primarily subscribe to, and fulfils what I am looking for when carrying out a study such as this that involves complex aspects of human behaviour and interactions. Research within the social sciences, with the multi-faceted nature of human behaviour and social situations is challenging. One approach to research is unlikely to answer all the issues and questions researchers wish to explore, and to paraphrase Begley's (1996) conclusion, if the main purpose of research is to increase existing knowledge, then what better way to achieve this using a method that offers both confirmation and completeness.

The illuminative evaluation approach is described by Parlett and Hamilton (1972:18) as consisting of three over-lapping and inter-related stages: observation, inquiry and explanation. It also requires an understanding of the environment, the learning milieu, within which students are learning and undergoing their first assessment. Different sources of data, collected by different methods, will provide both the quantitative data that enables comparisons and correlations to be made, but the qualitative dialogue that tells us something about the experience of assessment from the students' perspective. Observation, inquiry and explanation within illuminative evaluation are iterative as opposed to a linear process.

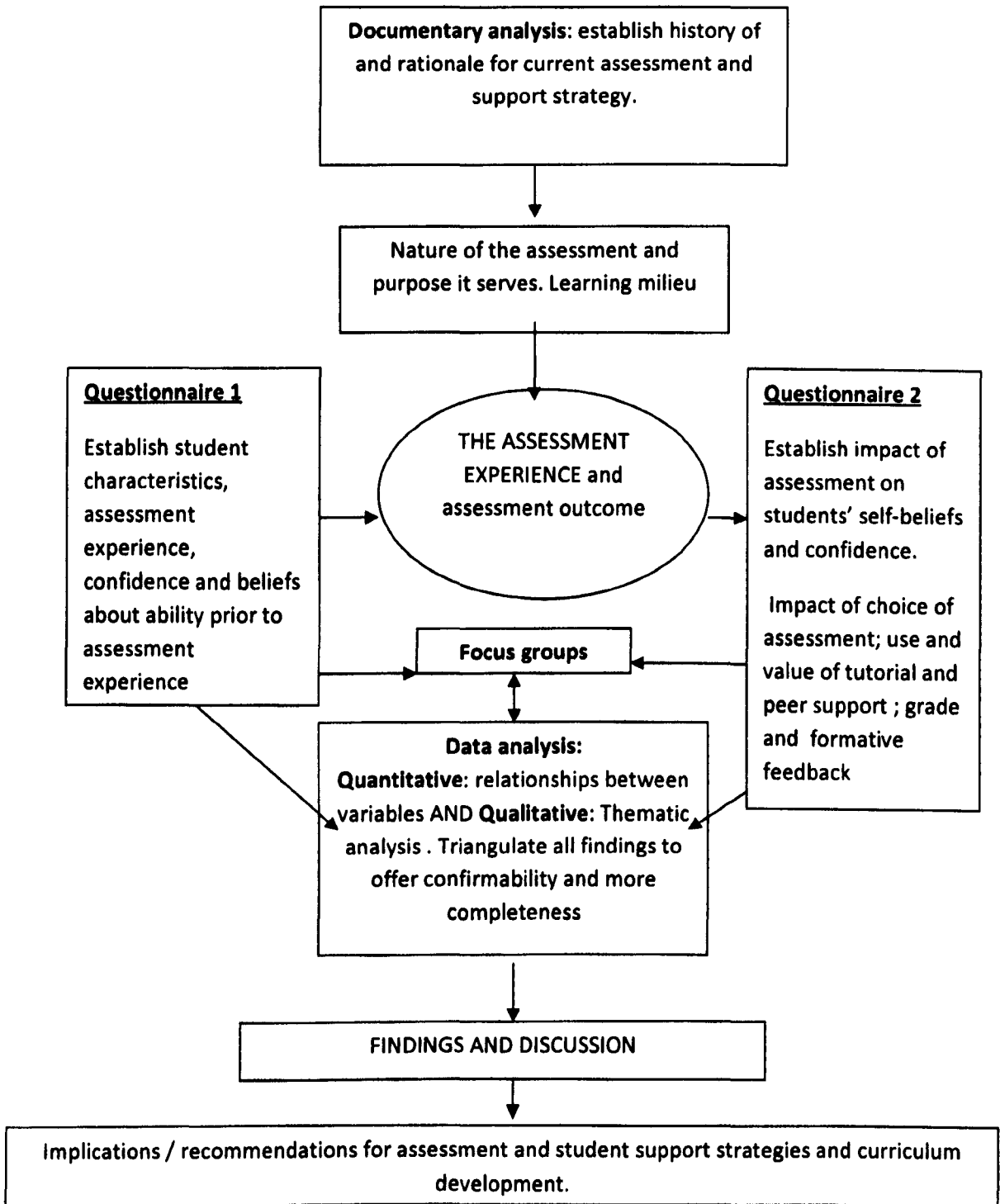
Though mixing of methods enables a range of data, comment and feedback to be collated, this kind of mixed method approach has its critics. Thurmond (2001), for example, argues that there is an increasing lack of thought to methodology, and a 'more is better' mentality in the frequency with which triangulation via mixed methods is employed in research, even though it often fails to add anything more to the study. Within this study a mixed methods approach is believed to be appropriate to facilitate effective illuminative evaluation of the students' experience of assessment and enable research questions to be addressed. The collation of data from a range of sources will offer a more complete picture of the phenomena under investigation.

The data that is collected and analysed should reveal relevant issues through 'progressive focusing' that require more concerted attention (Parlett and Hamilton 1972: 18). Findings will contribute to addressing the research questions, facilitate discussion of the issues under investigation, and hopefully suggest means of enhancing elements of the assessment process in future.

#### Data collection methods

The first part of this inquiry will be a documentary analysis of curricula and module documents, as well as Faculty documents and policies related to assessment. This is necessary to gain an understanding of how the curricula shapes and contextualises assessment, and impacts on the learning milieu within which students are assessed. Observation within this study will not constitute direct observation by the researcher, but will involve observation in terms of the student view of the assessment process as they experience it. Their observations and experience will be captured by questionnaires and a focus group. Questionnaires issued at the start of the module, and subsequent to the assessment experience, were designed to collect data about their characteristics, and inquire into their experience of assessment, feelings about assessment, use of support and feedback and beliefs about ability from their viewpoint, including ascertaining their implicit beliefs about ability and learning goals.

The three data collection methods: documentary analysis, questionnaire and focus groups are detailed below, and Fig 3.1 details the study design, including how these methods contribute to this illuminative evaluation.



**Fig 3.1: Study Design: An illuminative evaluative study employing mixed methods of data collection**

### Documentary analysis

Documentary analysis is the systematic examination of documents, in this case educational documents including curricula and policy documents, to identify the essence of, and background to, the educational activity. The focus of this analysis is to gain insight into all aspects of teaching, assessment and student support that relate to modular summative assessment of theory. Documentary and background information serves a useful function within an illuminative study in providing the historical context for educational developments, indicating areas for inquiry and pointing to topics worthy of discussion (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:23). Analysis involves a critical examination rather than a description of the documents, and will include questions about the purpose of the documents, how they are used, and how they contribute (or not) to learning.

These documents constitute a secondary data source as the content of these documents was not developed for this study (Stewart 1984:11), nor anticipated to be included in this research, and so should be unbiased relative to this study (Webb *et al* 1984:114). Existing documents have the advantage of being readily available as a source of information that can provide context and highlight issues relevant to this inquiry, but may be inaccurate, may reflect inherent author bias, and the evidence upon which they are based may not be known (Appleton and Cowley 1997; Webb *et al* 1984:114).

Documents for analysis include the full set of curriculum validation documents for the Registered Nurse diploma award, the Faculty and award learning, teaching and assessment strategy, student evaluation data and the module handbook and supporting materials for the module that provides the assessment experience under investigation in this study. From these documents it is anticipated that a deeper understanding of the underlying pedagogy, intended syllabus, assessment strategy and student support mechanisms within the curriculum and the module within which the study takes place will be revealed. An understanding of these aspects of the learning milieu will provide context when analysing student responses regarding their experience of assessment. Documentary analysis may expose, for example, how the curriculum and module have evolved (if at all) since validation, and should highlight any differences between the intended award / module outcomes and actual teaching, learning and assessment that students experience. The analysis will focus on all aspects of assessment within the current curriculum, as



evidenced in the definitive documents that were validated by the University Quality Improvement service and Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The method of analysing documents will be based around the 5 step model presented by Appleton and Cowley (1997), which consists of: familiarisation with the documents; a simple sort process; development of criteria for critique; establishing a database and final analysis. This model was adapted slightly for the purposes of analysing this set of documents (as compared to Appleton and Cowley's analysis of questionnaires). The process firstly entails reading through all the documents to develop a general picture of their content and purpose. Secondly, a simple sort process that constitutes the first part of data reduction. This highlights parts of documents that relate to assessment, to be categorised under headings of, for example, student support and assessment guidance. This process will give a feel for the breadth of areas and specific issues that can be revealed from these documents. Thirdly, rather than a 'simple criteria for critique', content will be appraised relative to five specific aims that were devised to offer focus the analysis in terms of developing an understanding of the origin, development, purpose and operationalisation of the assessment process. These aims are stated within the documentary analysis itself (Chapter 4). Fourthly, the data that emerge from all documents will be collated under headings that reflect the five aims of the analysis, to offer an overall picture of assessment related issues and processes.

### Questionnaires

Within a larger scale illuminative evaluation like this one questionnaires can be an advantage (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:21). Questionnaires will be administered before and after the assessment experience to elicit a range of quantitative and qualitative data that will contribute to exploration of the student experience of assessment and its impact on self-beliefs. Students' self-beliefs will be accessed from qualitative comments made about their feelings prior to the assessment in questionnaire 1, and comments offered on the impact of the assessment process in questionnaire 2. Asking the student about their confidence to undergo an essay-type assessment will also reveal their self-beliefs regarding perception of their ability (Dweck 2000:52). Researchers often assess self-beliefs generally by asking participants to report on the level and / or strength of their confidence to accomplish a task or master a certain situation, but Pajares (1996:547) stresses the importance of the measure of confidence being specific to what we are

interested in, in this case that we are asking the student to appraise their confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment, not asking for a general view of their confidence.

A self-administered questionnaire comprising of both open and closed questions was developed as a means of providing an efficient and quick way of systematically collecting both quantitative and qualitative data that would contribute to addressing the research questions. Suitable questionnaires were not available so were designed by the researcher and screened by a statistician for suitability to address the research questions. Though not anonymous (participants will include their student number) this method offers a confidential means of collecting information. The questionnaire was constructed with both closed questions, to enable collection of data for statistical analysis, and open questions to provide data that will add to quantitative findings, but may also provide issues or themes for further exploration in subsequent focus groups.

The questionnaire was administered to a pilot group, who confirmed that it was clearly understood, and that wording and sequencing was logical. Feedback from the pilot group did not identify any significant threats to the instruments reliability, such as ambiguous or leading questions, and the validity of questionnaire was established in terms of the information gathered meeting the requirement of addressing the research questions.

The first questionnaire will be administered at the start of the module; the second four weeks after students have received their summative assessment result and formative feedback. Questionnaire 1 (Pre-assessment) and Questionnaire 2 (Post-assessment) are included as appendix 4 and 5.

Questionnaire 1 (Pre- assessment) aimed to collect demographic data, and establish assessment experience that students have, how confident they felt about an essay-type assessment, and their beliefs about their ability and the nature of intelligence. It comprised:

- a. demographic information including student number, age, gender, whether the student is the first in their family to come to University, academic qualifications, and first language;
- b. prior assessment experience;

- c. confidence to undertake assessments, including specifically an essay-type assessment
- d. Dweck's 8-item theories of intelligence scale (Dweck 2000: 178). This measure has 4 entity theory items and 4 incremental theory items. A previous scale had entity items only, as the incremental items that were originally developed were too appealing and drew very high rates of agreement. The original, 3 item (entity theory items only) scale was demonstrated as having high validity and internal reliability (with  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.94 – 0.98) by Dweck *et al* (1995). Levy and Dweck (1997) developed the 8-item scale which includes strong incremental statements, and this has been utilised in subsequent study. Internal validity of the 8 item scale is reported as Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.93-0.95 (Levy and Dweck, 1997). The 8-item scale was also found to correlate highly with the 3 item scale with correlations between 0.83 and 0.92 in two validation studies (Levy *et al* 1998).
- e. Two further questions are presented that will explore whether students hold beliefs that their intelligence is 'fixed' or 'malleable' (i.e. whether they hold an entity or incremental theory of intelligence). The first, aims to ascertain their focus on either a learning goal or a performance goal, the second, developed by Mueller and Dweck 1997 (cited in Dweck 2000:62) asks students to offer their view of the relative contribution of effort and ability to intelligence by completing the equation: Intelligence = ....% ability and ....%..

Questionnaire 2 (Post-assessment) was designed to elicit aspects of the assessment process that students found helpful / less helpful in terms of enhancing or undermining their self-beliefs about their ability. Questions focused on key areas identified in the literature, including tutorial support, peer-support, and summative and formative feedback. It also included open questions that prompted students to comment on any other issues related to the assessment process that impacted on their self-beliefs. It comprised:

- a. Student number;
- b. details of which assessment the student completed and why;
- c. an account of assessment support that was accessed, including tutor and/or peer support and how useful (or not) this was;

- d. grade received and how the student felt about it;
- e. whether feedback was read / understood / attended to;
- f. confidence regarding next assignment.

It will finish with Mueller and Dweck's (1997) equation of intelligence: Intelligence = ....% ability and ....%.

### Focus groups

Final data collection will be via two focus groups of 8-10 students (one on each geographical site). This size of group is seen as optimal to generating discussion, but not too large that identifying voices on the recording and subsequent transcribing becomes too difficult (Kitzinger 1995; Kreuger 1994). Kreuger (1994) describes the purpose of a focus group as enabling a planned discussion around a defined area of interest in a non-threatening setting. A draft guide for the focus groups in this study was developed that was modified, once questionnaires had been analysed, to include any themes that emerged from student comments.

Themes will centre around participants' perceptions of their ability, competence and confidence toward assessment, and how this experience has impacted on their self-beliefs. The focus groups should enable participants to express their perspectives and beliefs more naturally and spontaneously than may be obtained through a questionnaire or structured interview. Focus groups can offer a more detailed exploration, explanation and some confirmation of pertinent issues elicited from questionnaire findings. In this study, focus groups aim to elaborate on issues raised in the questionnaire to add depth of understanding, and ensure clarity regarding any conclusions that may be drawn from the questionnaires about the student experience. Participants' contributions will be rich in their own language, and reflect their own beliefs and values around the subject area that they have been asked to consider (Kitzinger 1995), hopefully adding depth and detail to comments that have been made in questionnaires. It is acknowledged that the semi-structured nature of focus groups means that issues introduced by the researcher or moderator can be responded to from a variety of perspectives, revealing areas of discussion not considered when drafting a schedule for the group. To this end the focus group will not be too structured as this may restrict open dialogue about issues most pertinent to participants, but some structure is necessary to ensure that research objectives are met. (Focus group guidance is included as appendix 6).

In order to facilitate a focus group effectively and enable group members to speak freely the moderator should have knowledge of group dynamics and effective group management skills. Such skills will assist in situations, for example, where one group member is domineering. Though Polit and Beck (2006) caution that some individuals may feel uncomfortable expressing their views in a group setting, Parahoo (2006) proposes that some feel more comfortable voicing their views in a group than individually in an interview. Goss and Leinbech (1996) also point out that participants can feel valued for their 'expert' opinion and chance to collaborate on an issue with a researcher. In short, this dialogue via focus group with participants should enable the researcher to verify understanding of the participants' viewpoint (Soltis-Jarrett 1997), which is essential in a study where a key aim is to elicit the students' / participants' perspective.

### Setting

This study takes place in a post-1992 higher education institution in the West Midlands area of the United Kingdom. The University has a strong and successful widening participation agenda, keen to include students from non-traditional backgrounds. The diploma in nursing, leading to registration as an adult or mental health nurse, attracts students from a wide age range and with varying levels of academic qualifications. The award is delivered on two sites, across two counties approximately 40 miles apart.

The diploma in nursing is a three year modular programme leading to a diploma in nursing and registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council as an Adult or Mental health nurse. The programme is full time, which equates to 5 days a week for the student over 45 weeks of the year, a total of 4600 hours, 50% of which are theory undertaken at the University, and 50% nursing practice experienced in the local NHS Trusts and some non-statutory health care settings. Student nurses in adult and mental health study the first year of the programme together, known as the common foundation stage, then spend two years focusing more specifically on their chosen branch of nursing – adult or mental health. The first module 'Foundation studies in practice' leads to their first written summative assessment on this programme of study. The module itself has 12, 3 hour taught sessions over a 15 week period. Students across the two University sites receive the same module content, delivered the same way, at exactly the same time, but by different tutors. The two groups are treated as one cohort and, for example, work collaboratively in the same virtual learning environment that supports this module.

### Procedure

The illuminative evaluation process requires the undertaking of a documentary analysis of key documents that inform the learning, teaching and assessment of this student group (Parlett and Hamilton 1972). A documentary analysis was conducted that included policy documents, award documents (as validated by the University and Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and module documents. This analysis elucidated the context for learning and assessment that this cohort of students would experience, and is detailed in chapter 4.

Students were asked if they would like to participate in this study during their introductory week, and were issued with an information sheet (Appendix 2). It was stressed that participation was completely voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that non-participation would have no impact on their teaching and assessment during this module.

On the first day of the module 'Foundation studies in practice' students were asked if they would like to participate, and it was re-iterated that participation was completely voluntary, and not part of their course. Students who agreed to participate completed a consent form (Appendix 3). The initial questionnaire (Appendix 4) was explained, and distributed to the 138 students present by tutors on both sites at the same time. This was done in class time to facilitate a good response rate and ensure that any misunderstandings about the research or questionnaire could be discussed (Oppenheim 1966). Completed questionnaires were left at the front of class as they left the lecture theatres. A total of 136 questionnaires and consent forms were returned, but 3 did not contain a student number and so were excluded. The remaining 133 questionnaires were therefore included in the pre-assessment analysis.

Students / participants progressed through the module, which included 12 weeks teaching contact and tutorial support from a designated tutor. They submitted their summative assessment 9 days after their last taught session. There was no reference made to this study throughout the module contact time and assessment period.

120 students submitted an assessment, and received their results, comprising a summative assessment grade and written formative feedback, 9 weeks later. The other 13 students had either left the course, or failed to submit an assessment at this first opportunity.

Questionnaire 2 was issued to the same cohort of students four weeks following receipt of assessment grade and formative feedback for the 'Foundation studies in Practice' module. This time frame gave them time to read and digest their grade and feedback, and seek tutorial support if they wanted to. 107 questionnaires were returned. This reduced number reflects students who did not submit an assessment, students who had left the course or intermitted from it, students who may have been absent when questionnaire 2 was distributed or students who may have chosen not to complete this questionnaire. Of the 107 questionnaires returned, 9 had no student number or had numbers that did not match with those collated from questionnaire 1, and so were excluded, leaving 98 completed questionnaires for analysis.

Focus group participants were recruited by asking for volunteers through Blackboard (the online learning environment) after the second questionnaire had been completed. A focus group was held 12 weeks after receipt of assessment results. Only one focus group with 8 participants was held due to a poor response to a request for volunteers on one of the sites. Focus group participants were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, and that their contributions would be anonymised. They were given a focus group information sheet (Appendix 6), asked to speak loud enough for the recorder to pick up their voices, and to state their name (a pseudonym) prior to speaking so that they could be identified when transcribing. Participants chose to use their own names, knowing they would not appear in any subsequent write-up of the study. Students were reminded that the focus group was only concerned with their first module assessment experience, and asked if they had any questions. There were none. Participants provided their student numbers to enable matching of their contributions to their demographic data.

The timing of distribution of questionnaire 2 and the focus group was influenced by availability of the whole cohort of students on a university site.

#### Study timeline:

Students informed of study: 7<sup>th</sup> January

First day of module - Consent to participate and invite to complete first questionnaire: 14<sup>th</sup> January

End of taught element of module: 21<sup>st</sup> April

Last date for summative assessment submission: 30<sup>th</sup> April

Results published: 2<sup>nd</sup> July

Participants invited to complete questionnaire 2: 30<sup>th</sup> July

Students to be asked to volunteer for focus group: 31<sup>st</sup> July and 11<sup>th</sup> August

Focus groups to be held 22<sup>nd</sup> September and 23<sup>rd</sup> September

### Participants

Participants are a purposive sample of the 138 students who commenced on the diploma in nursing at the University where I work. Of the 133 students who participated in this study 120 (approximately 90%) were female, and 13 were male. Age range was from 17-55 years, with a mean age of 28.6 (Standard deviation: SD 9.9). 20% of the cohort were in the 18-19 year age group, and 53% were over 25 years. Only 2 students recorded their first language as not English. The gender bias and mean age of this cohort is typical of the student nurse population elsewhere (Ofori 2000; Wright *et al* 1998). Academic background ranged from those with no academic qualifications at all, to students who already held a first degree.

### Analysis

Analysis aims to address the research questions by utilising all the sources of data collected, as illustrated in Fig 3.1.

Prior to analysis of data obtained from students, a documentary analysis was conducted that elucidated the context within which participants experienced assessment, as presented in chapter 4. This analysis provided a context for this assessment experience prior to analysing the student perspective of it.

Questionnaire data that is quantifiable will be coded for, and analysed with, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16. Descriptive data and trends will be presented. Data analysis will include correlations to ascertain relationships between variables (e.g. being an entity theorist and seeking tutorial support).

The focus group will be recorded (audio only) and transcribed. Qualitative comments included on questionnaire 1 and 2 will be collated, and the focus group content will be transcribed into a



document. This data will be subjected to thematic analysis to identify themes that contribute to addressing the research questions.

Thematic analysis offers an 'accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data' (Braun and Clarke 2006). The aim of this thematic analysis is to provide a rich description of themes related to the assessment experience that are important to this student group. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach to analysis of data that is described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as being effectively independent of epistemology and theory and so can be applied across a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches. Thematic analysis fits well with illuminative evaluation which supports the utilization of different techniques and methods to throw light on the issues under investigation (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:16).

It is argued by some that thematic analysis is merely a tool or set of generic skills that is used across different methods rather than a method in its own right (Boyatzis 1998; Ryan and Bernard 2000), but Braun and Clarke (2006) argue strongly that thematic analysis is a distinct method that has a clear advantage in its flexibility from theory. This flexibility, though, does not imply that thematic analysis can be conducted without being methodologically sound. It is imperative that the analyst makes their ontological and epistemological assumptions clear in their account of conducting their analysis (Holloway and Todres 2003). This thematic analysis will be theoretically as opposed to inductively driven, within the context of current evidence, in order to address the research questions. Coding of data will relate to the research questions, but any other issues or questions that evolve during analysis will be noted too. As Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, although studies may be guided by research questions, these can be refined as the study progresses.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data in this study will involve analysis of the whole corpus of data collated from both the questionnaires and the focus group transcript. The data will be read, with identification of themes and patterns from the data set being selected that relate to the research questions. Thematic analysis can be used as a realist method – reporting the experiences and reality of the participant experience, or as a constructionist method – relating their experiences and meanings to societal discourse. Effort was made within the analysis to give voice to the participants in this study and reflect their thoughts, feelings and beliefs, whilst acknowledging my

subjectivity in selecting what appears to be relevant content, as well being aware of my prior engagement with literature that may have sensitized me to particular issues or comments that may appear in the data (Tuckett 2005). Participant's contributions will be collated into themes and analysed in the context of the research questions and the literature that informed and underpinned their construction. The process will be recursive and iterative rather than linear and will be carried out manually. It will involve gaining familiarity with the data, close reading, transcribing ideas, generating initial codes, noting of potential themes, applying and reviewing themes and finally defining and naming themes and reporting them.

Quantitative and qualitative findings will be reviewed together during the analysis to both triangulate findings as well as aim to offer a rich description of the first year student experience of assessment and its impact on their self-beliefs.

#### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and granted from both the University where the study took place, and the University supervising this researcher. The study aims, design, tools and other materials developed for the study were included in the ethical review. Participants were invited from a diploma cohort during their introductory week at University, which was prior to commencement of the module that is part of this research. This study aimed to maintain the privacy, dignity, and safety of participants at all times. Informed consent was sought and free choice of participants was consistently re-iterated throughout the duration of study.

All students in the cohort were given a participant information sheet (included as appendix 2) in their introductory week by a member of staff who was not related to the study, or to the module that is the focus of this study. The participant information sheet outlines the purpose of the study, assuring students that participation is voluntary, and that they can discontinue participation at any point. The information sheet states how long they will be involved in the research and what they will be expected to do.

Participants were assured that the privacy of their data will be respected, and that any qualitative data that appears in the research dissertation will be anonymised. My contact details were

included on the information sheet in the event that students had any questions or wanted to withdraw from the study.

Students were invited to participate in the study on the first taught day of the module. Consent was sought from students who agreed to participate. Students were asked not put their names on questionnaires, but their student number was included to enable matching with assessment results and questionnaire 2. This cohort of students was approached again following receipt of their assessment results to fill out a second questionnaire. Volunteers were sought to participate in focus groups via the online discussion forum that supports the module after completion of questionnaire 2. Participants self-selected by volunteering via this online discussion forum. The identity of these students was known, but they were not named on any documentation related to the study, only their student numbers were recorded. All data collected within this study was identifiable by student number only, and these numbers were used solely to match up questionnaires and assessment results, and will not appear within the write up of the study or any published material. Research findings will be shared with the cohort of students.

#### Internal and external validity

The predominant ethical issue that may impact on internal validity is that the researcher is the module leader. As the module leader of the module assessment under scrutiny I am intrinsically involved in this study. I will teach some of the module sessions to some of the participants on one of the University sites, I am the author of the assessment that students will undertake and have developed the model of tutorial support. As module leader, I organise the teaching team across both geographical sites to ensure parity of student experience regardless of where the student is studying the module, and I will grade a proportion of the (anonymised) summative assessments. I will have met students when the first questionnaire was distributed, but will be well known to some participants when completing the second questionnaire. I will not have knowledge of participant's names, and am therefore unlikely to be able to link questionnaires which have student numbers on them to participants, particularly in such a large cohort. Despite these measures, there is still the possibility that a power relationship between researcher and students may impact on responses received from them. Leathwood (2005) noted in a paper she wrote critiquing assessment policy and practice that however supportive she was as a tutor she may be seen as a 'judge' of their work, provoking a degree of fear and anxiety in some students.

I may recognise some of the students who volunteer to participate in the focus group, but will aim to conduct the group as objectively as possible. It is acknowledged that the student – tutor relationship experienced between myself and some of the participants may possibly impact on the focus group, with the potential for some degree of coercion, bias and familiarity that could influence firstly their participation, and also their responses (Schutz 1994), but there are some advantages to the researcher conducting the focus group as the students and I will already have a shared understanding of the module and assessment content, and assessment processes, thus allowing more time to discuss their thoughts, feelings and beliefs.

I have been teaching this module for several years, and have not changed any aspect of the taught material (apart from updating it) for this cohort of students. In particular, there is no module material that gives any indication of my research interests. Issues around experiences of assessment and beliefs about ability / intelligence were not raised within any contact with this student group. During and after the study I will reflect on and discuss any perceptions of bias that may have arisen whilst conducting this research with the students that I have had some involvement with.

Internal validity should be strengthened by the collation of data from multiple sources, for example information from comments made on questionnaires that can be corroborated and explored within focus groups, and by discussion of findings with participants.

External validity of findings about the student experience of assessment and self-beliefs about ability may be limited as findings may not be generalisable to first year student nurses in other higher education institutions, but they may be useful with respect to diploma nursing students in other universities that have a wide entry gate for admission of students, particularly post-1992 institutions.

## **Chapter 4: Documentary analysis**

Within an illuminative evaluation acknowledging the diversity and complexity of learning milieux is an essential pre-requisite for the serious study of educational programmes (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:12). The educational context is known to impact significantly on the quality of student learning and performance (Ofori and Charlton 2002). Within this study it was imperative to have an understanding of the learning environment, including insight into the philosophy, pedagogy and parameters that underpin assessment strategy and processes. This documentary analysis should offer insight into the context and environment within which current assessment strategy has developed and is operationalised (Appleton and Cowley 1997). Documentary and background information serves a useful function within an illuminative evaluation in providing the context for educational developments, indicating areas for inquiry and pointing to topics worthy of discussion (Parlett and Hamilton 1972:23). Documentary analysis is used to elucidate one of the basic central tenets within an illuminative evaluation – the instructional system. The following documentary analysis aims to reveal this context. It will focus on aspects related to assessment within the current nursing diploma curriculum, and within the 'Foundation studies in practice' module, as evidenced in the definitive curriculum documents validated by the University Quality Improvement Service and Nursing and Midwifery Council in 2004. These documents will be analysed alongside the Quality assurance agency (QAA) Code of practice for assessment (2006a) and University policy, as well as literature reviewed regarding best practice in the area of assessment. What should be gained is a better understanding of the underlying syllabus, processes and strategies that first year, first module students should experience during their first assessment, i.e. what the intended assessment experience should achieve and what underpins it. It should also reveal tutorial guidance regarding student support and feedback through the assessment process, and reveal how the assessment of the module under scrutiny has shifted or evolved over time since validation of this curriculum.

The focus of this analysis is therefore to:

1. Establish the philosophical and pedagogic underpinnings to the current assessment strategy in the context of the overall learning and teaching strategy of the award.
2. Determine what the award assessment strategy is and how the first assessment contributes to this overall strategy.
3. Identify the parameters and constraints of development of the assessment strategy.

4. Determine the stated of the purpose of assessment within this award and within the module.
5. Ascertain guidance to tutorial staff regarding student support, development of module assessments and the provision of formative and summative feedback.

The analysis that follows will be presented under sub-headings that reflect these foci.

The philosophical and pedagogic underpinnings to the current assessment strategy in the context of the overall learning and teaching strategy of the award.

'if we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures' (Rowntree 1987:1).

The Registered Nurse Diploma in Nursing Practice programme was validated in July 2004 (with re-validation in 2008). The overall award outcomes were developed to reflect the QAA (2001a) benchmark statements for nursing, the QAA National Qualifications Framework (2001b) and the University award outcomes as well as the needs of local stakeholders (for example, the local Hospitals and Primary care Trusts). The assessment strategy was informed by University policy, QAA guidance (2006a), professional body (Nursing and Midwifery Council) requirements (NMC 2002), evidence of best practice from the literature, and evaluation and appraisal of assessment processes and strategy from the old (pre-2004) curriculum.

Assessment and feedback are not only central to learning but also to the student experience (Falchikov and Thomson 1996), and throughout the literature reviewed the centrality and importance of assessment to all learning is clear. The assessment strategy and related processes, such as student support, are inextricably linked to the learning and teaching strategy, thus reviewing this programme's documents should elucidate the philosophical and pedagogic basis of the learning milieu within which assessment strategy and processes have developed.

The pedagogic approach to the learning and teaching strategy within the Diploma in Nursing award is stated within the programme specification as focusing on 'enabling achievement', with a shift from more tutor led learning in the first year of the award, to more independent learning within the third year of the award. Student self-directed, or independent, learning is highlighted as a feature throughout the award, with a statement in the Student Handbook stating that it would be unusual for a student to pass a module without considerable independent study. There is emphasis on a broad range of teaching and learning strategies to accommodate both the subject

matter and the diverse nature of the student body, who are anticipated as having varying skills, knowledge, experience and ability. The range of teaching and learning approaches aims to meet the needs of students with different learning styles and maximize learning for this diverse population. The 'philosophy' of nurse education described in the student award handbook emphasises preparation for entry to the professional nursing register, and developing a skilled practitioner who can adapt to the dynamic and changing nature of nursing, with personal, professional and educational development of the student being key. The philosophy of nurse education claims to be based on principles of androgogy; building on prior learning and experience, facilitating reflection and promoting personal responsibility for learning (Knowles *et al* 2005). The student is described within the documents as being an 'equal partner' in the learning process, with their own experiences, beliefs and values; someone who is 'motivated towards learning to care for people'. Evaluating this proposition it is evident from student feedback and tutor evaluation of modules and awards that the students own knowledge and experience is central to their learning and built upon, and that self-motivation is essential in an award that requires full time attendance that includes commitment to clinical practice as well as theoretical learning. Student feedback that is collated at the end of modules and awards includes reflection on the philosophy of education, as it appears in the programme specification. This feedback reveals that students feel their evaluation of modules and awards is valued, and that their feedback does make a difference and lead to change, but they do not perceive themselves to be 'equal-partners', the predominant power-base, they argue, remains with their tutors and clinical practice mentors.

The overall assessment strategy states the intention of being 'effective in measuring student attainment of the intended learning outcomes for the award / module', a rather narrow definition that is more instrumental than learning or student-centred. The award assessment strategy describes offering a variety of assessment methods including portfolio, viva voce exam, reflective writing, objective structured clinical exam (OSCE), written assignments / essays, practice assessments and presentations to peers. A scoping exercise looking at the range and type of assessments students had to complete within the award was undertaken by me in June 2007, prior to commencement of this study. This revealed that within the Diploma in Nursing award students summative theoretical assessment over the three years of the award included 8 written pieces of work in a variety of essay type formats, a workbook, one exam, and an oral (viva voce)

exam, as well as continuous assessment of clinical practice. This does not constitute quite the diverse range of assessment strategies that the strategy within the award documentation proposes. All theoretical assessments were undertaken at the end of the module studied, with summative assessment of clinical practice occurring over 1 term per year. Among the recommendations made at the end of this scoping exercise was that the variety of assessment methods should increase to reflect the diverse range of teaching and learning methods students are engaging in, and more frequent, less 'weighted' assessments should be offered throughout modules, rather than a single assessment at the end of the module, to enable provision of timely and more frequent formative feedback. This exercise did, in fact, prompt an increase in diversity of assessment method over subsequent years; particularly evident in the 2008 re-validation of this award, but there has been no change to weighting of assessments.

The award documentation claims assessment is student-centred, but apart from stating that students are made aware of grading criteria, are given detailed assignment guidance, and that marking and moderation are explained to them, there is no other information to support this claim, nor evidence within the assessment strategy that students are central to assessment processes, for example, there is no reference to self or peer assessment.

The student award handbook uses words including 'friendly', 'lively', 'exciting' and 'challenging' to describe the learning environment. Student feedback for the 'Foundation studies in practice' module since 2004 reflects this, with students viewing this module as challenging and exciting, and comments made about the friendliness, approachability and support of tutorial staff.

#### Determining the award assessment strategy and how the first assessment contributes to this overall strategy.

The aim of assessment stated within the assessment strategy of the award programme specification is embedded within the teaching, learning and assessment strategy generally, and aims to enable the student to attain a high standard of achievement, facilitate integration of theory with practice and demonstrate the importance of lifelong learning and continuing professional development. A statement within the 'Principles of assessment' acknowledges that the overall workload and schedule of assessments is considered within award development, but there is no further indication of underlying pedagogic principles to the assessment strategy.



The underpinning of assessment with principles of equity and fairness, and the robust nature of quality assurance and enhancement processes is stressed, reflecting both QAA (2006a) guidance and University assessment policy principles. Faculty guidance on module assessment states that formative assessment and feedback should be embedded within all modules, and that the formative task(s) set must relate to the summative assessment. Review of the module descriptors for all modules within the award reflects this principle. It was made very clear as this curriculum was developed that formative tasks unrelated to the summative assessment were not permissible. As well as a fear of 'over-assessing' students who were already being continually assessed in theory and clinical practice, students themselves were perceived as unwilling to engage in tasks for purely formative reasons. This strategy reflects observations in the literature that today's students are rarely prepared to undertake tasks unless they are summatively graded (for example Gibbs 2006:18), though Taras (2003) contests this view.

The module central to this study 'Foundation studies in Practice' is the student nurse's first experience of a written, summative assessment within this programme of study. It is the only written assessment that students submit within the first term of the first year, and is submitted at the end of the module, after teaching contact has ended. This module assessment contributes toward the award assessment strategy in terms of reflecting the award teaching, learning and assessment philosophy, mapping to all the University award learning outcomes, and mapping to a selection of the QAA benchmark statements for nursing (2001a). As the leader of this first module and assessment, I feel it is imperative that this first assessment not only reflects the award assessment strategy, but offers the student an assessment experience that is positive, supporting their future academic development. At the time the module and award were validated the module assessment was a 2000 word essay that was based on a subject chosen from a list of 6 subjects, and should focus on a specified group in society of their choice, for example, subject: smoking, group: young people. Within the academic year prior to this study being conducted I changed the module assessment. This change aimed to better reflect our stated underlying philosophy to be more student-centred as the new module assessment enabled them to choose an assessment method (as well as subject) that best suited their needs and / or perceived abilities. This change also reflected evidence within the literature that suggested year 1 students may benefit from more frequent, smaller pieces of assessment that elicited feedback (for example Light and Cox 2001). Aware of the diverse nature of students who study for a Diploma in nursing, in particular students

with weaker academic backgrounds, I was keen to facilitate success. In the revised module assessment students could choose between a longer (2000 word) essay to be submitted at the end of the module, or submit three smaller pieces of work at given intervals throughout the module each of which elicits formative feedback. Assessment guidance supplied to students is included as Appendix 7a and 7b. Students with experience of writing academic essays were encouraged to choose the long essay, but students that did not feel confident putting together this essay had the option to do the three smaller pieces of work. Regardless of which assessment was chosen, students would be given equal access to tutorial support and ongoing formative feedback on their developing work. All students had to engage in a formative piece of assessment. This involved working in groups (which included their own group space on Blackboard – the online learning environment), to put together a powerpoint presentation detailing the key issues associated with the health behaviour they were researching for their summative assessment. Each group presented their powerpoint work, as a group, and were given verbal and written tutor and peer feedback that centred around their presentation skills, the quality and appropriateness of research they used and ability to reference their findings.

This first assessment, as validated in 2004, did contribute to and reflect the award assessment strategy, but I would argue that the revised module assessment, with a greater emphasis on student-choice and formative feedback reflects more strongly the aspirations of the teaching, learning and assessment philosophy of the award. Falchikov (2005:37) observes that learners typically have little or no control over traditional assessment processes which, she believes, force them to be 'passive consumers of what is thrown at them'. Offering choice of assessment type intended to offer the student some control within the assessment process for this module, and contributes to the student-centred aim of the award philosophy.

#### The parameters and constraints of developing an assessment strategy.

The Nursing award curricula was developed by the Faculty in partnership with service providers, largely NHS hospitals and Trusts, with some involvement of service users (service users were increasingly integral to any educational developments over subsequent years). There is little doubt when looking at award and module documentation that the requirements and guidance emanating from nursing's professional body (the NMC 2002), from the QAA (2001a, 2001b, 2006a) and from University policy are clearly key considerations in developing the award curricula and assessment strategy, and there are numerous tables that demonstrate the mapping of award

learning outcomes to these requirements. Outside of this regulatory guidance are other constraints and influences on assessment policy and practices, some of which are reflected well within the documentation, others being less evident, but these influences impact on both the assessment strategy and how we support students. Some of the factors that can constrain innovative assessment development were noted by Bryan and Clegg (2006) and included existing assessment regulations and quality assurance procedures, diverse types of less well-prepared students, increased class-sizes and concerns about standards and fairness, plagiarism and cheating. These factors are considered further in the context of the award documentation and development of assessment strategy.

Firstly, the award documentation reveals incorporation of University assessment regulations, and the award was validated in line with University quality processes. Quality processes are well understood within the Faculty and adherence to them is robust. Though there is good peer support within the nursing and midwifery academic team for any lecturer who wishes to develop any modules or awards, there is some reticence to develop more innovative approaches to assessment as there is a perception that proposals that are different will be difficult to take through quality processes. As a consequence innovation can be limited

This study takes place in a post-1992 UK University that places emphasis on its mission to widen participation in education. Within the nursing diploma award in particular there are usually a high number of mature students, and some students with few or no academic qualifications. The Nursing and Midwifery council removed standard entry requirements to pre-registration nursing courses in 2004 (NMC 2004), leaving it to universities to establish that applicants for nursing awards met basic criteria of having literacy and numeracy levels that would enable them to study the award, as well as appraising evidence of good character. As a result of enrolling students with such a diverse range of academic backgrounds, tutors that facilitate learning on this award have gained experience in giving support, guidance and encouragement to students with little previous academic experience. Some students require not only tutorial support and feedback, but also 'monitoring' to ensure they are coping with the academic demands of the course. The Faculty has a robust system of personal tutoring and award leadership, as well as dedicated student support staff. These staff aim to identify students that may be having difficulties at the earliest possible opportunity in order that supportive measures can be instigated. The nature and extent

of this support is evident in the award student handbook, and is consistently referred to as being of value in award and module student feedback.

The learning atmosphere, palpable within the lecture theatre of a first year group of diploma nurses, is one that is accepting of differing levels of ability and life experience, and that applauds this diversity. Those students with academic experience or knowledge of using information technology readily share this knowledge with their peers, and equally those with health or social care practice backgrounds offer their experiences. The diverse nature of the student body is an important parameter in the development of the assessment and support strategy, which needs to accommodate this wide range of ability and experience. It needs to be challenging to those with a stronger academic background, yet manageable for those with fewer or no academic qualifications. It should encourage those with healthcare experience to utilise their expertise whilst not disadvantaging those without a clinical or health-related background. The award documents do acknowledge the diversity of the student body; and language within the student handbook in particular reflects this. For example, in the Student Award Handbook, under the heading 'Teaching and Learning' (p.27); ' A wide range of strategies will be utilised, reflecting the level of knowledge of the student, the subject area, and the diverse nature of a mixed group of students entering the Award with their own knowledge skills and experiences'.

The diversity of the student body also highlights another parameter to consider within the development of the assessment strategy, which was evident within the literature review, which is that students often have commitments to family and / or employment as well as to their study (for example Ashton and Shuldham 1994; Nicol 2008a; Shipton 2002). This may effectively lead to strategic study which could be aimed at passing the assessment rather than engaging in learning all module content, with students omitting work or topics not deemed necessary to meet assessment requirements (e.g. Elton 1988; Entwistle and Entwistle 1991; MacFarlane 1992). Quality processes through which modules within the award are validated, are robust in ensuring that learning outcomes and the assessment are closely aligned, and that module content relates directly to both. In addition, as described above, formative tasks have to be directly related to the module assessment. This module is therefore designed to minimise student perception that any taught content is 'irrelevant'.

Class size was a factor when the assessment strategy for this award was developed. Up to a hundred students can attend this first module on each site, and supporting them effectively through the assessment process, with both formative and summative tasks, is a real consideration. Within the award documentation and assessment strategy there is no mention of class-size, nor any explicit statement regarding the amount of support students can expect to receive; rather, students are directed to the 'Student support and guidance policy'. This policy informs the student of the support they can expect with an assignment. From the module team they should receive an assignment launch, a group tutorial and a further group or personal tutorial, as well as contact with their personal tutor if they have concerns about their academic writing or study generally. Gibbs (2006:18) believes students in our modularised system, with larger class sizes are actually receiving less support than those in smaller classes, and there is evidence that large class size negatively affects student performance (Fearnley 1995; Gibbs *et al* 1997; Raimondo *et al* 1990), and negatively impacts on student-teacher interaction and class discussion (Mahler *et al* 1986; Raimondo *et al* 1990). Such findings were in mind when tutorial support mechanisms for this module were developed, as discussed below.

Assessment practices have changed in UK Higher Education over past decades, with increased use of coursework and continuing assessment and a reduction in end of course examinations. This shift to continuing assessment and essay type submissions and increased use of the internet is felt to have increased the risk of plagiarism beyond that experienced with exams and is a growing concern within UK higher education (Bryan and Clegg 2006:216; Gibbs 2006:17). As is evident within the award specification and student handbook, theoretical assessments within this award are largely essay type pieces of work in which students have to demonstrate their ability to utilize sources of evidence, apply theory to practice and demonstrate higher order cognitive skills such as analysis, reflection and application. These outcomes, which reflect a deeper level of learning, are not so easily demonstrated in an examination where students may memorise or use other surface methods of learning (Mohl 1996), but offer less opportunity for plagiarism. Gibbs *et al* (1997) and Gibbs and Lucas (1997) cite many findings in their work that confirm the 'almost universal' experience of both students and tutors that course-work elicits better grades than examinations. One could argue that this is due to course-work enabling students to demonstrate their learning more effectively, though the cynic may consider course-work 'easier'. As Elton (1998) discusses, the explanation of higher grades from course-work is more about the change of

assessment strategy – the instrument of measurement - than a drop in assessment standards or rise in student attainment. Development of the assessment strategy had to consider the advantages of course-work in enabling assessment of both the students ability to apply theory to practice, essential in a nursing award, and the development higher order skills, against the risk of plagiarism. As a consequence there is only one unseen examination within the programme. Examinations may be 'less risky' in plagiarism terms, and may assess student knowledge to some degree, but they may not facilitate demonstration of skills such as application and reflection, integral to nursing practice. Within the award documentation that went through validation in 2004 there is only one reference to plagiarism, which stresses how seriously cheating is taken, and refers the student to the University regulations on the issue. Interestingly, over subsequent years the guidance within award and module handbooks has become more detailed as incidents of plagiarism have been detected, with the University now using plagiarism software within some of its modules / awards.

Finally, a significant influence on curricula and subsequently on assessment in higher education comes from the very evident shift in the learning and teaching landscape, described well by Sancho (2006). Sancho discusses traditional higher education in terms of tutors being experts that teach students, with student assessment reproducing knowledge provided by the teacher, and other resources such as books, to the required standard. In contemporary times, with the wealth of resources available to students online, tutors are required to focus more on teaching students how to access, appraise and utilize resources, to facilitate the development of students who can think and work independently and be creative, analytic and able to problem-solve. Some assessments within this award offer students a choice of areas to focus on, and so subject content *per se* is not necessarily taught in detail in class in some modules, but students are taught where to find information, how to discriminate between that which is appropriate and that which is not, and how to analyse, reflect on and apply information. With a class that can comprise nurses from different branches, such as adult, mental health and children's nurses, an approach to facilitating learning that enables students with different interests or aims to learn the same principles, but apply them to their own branch, is essential.

Within the module 'Foundation studies in practice' the key parameters for me as module leader, in developing the assessment for the module, were the number and the diversity of the student

body, with consideration given to student's prior experience, academic background and branch of nursing. It was imperative to consider this diversity and ensure that all students are both challenged and given opportunity to succeed, and are offered consistent, effective support and formative feedback.

Determine the stated of the purpose of assessment within this award and within the module.

Assessment should be inextricably linked with the teaching and learning strategy, with assessment supporting learning (Biggs 1999). The award assessment strategy, as stated in the programme specification, centres on the student achieving theoretical and practical module and award learning outcomes, integrating theory and practice and developing as a lifelong learner. The award outcomes are focused on producing a registered nurse who is 'fit for practice' and 'fit for purpose' as required by the Nursing and Midwifery Council; and a diploma graduate able to meet standards set by the quality assurance agency and the University. Though the aim of assessment is not primarily framed in terms of achieving grades, undoubtedly there is concern with 'passing' the assessment, particularly from the student perspective. A disadvantage of this focus on achieving a 'pass' is that students can be reluctant to learn material and undertake tasks unless they are seen by them as contributing to the assessment (Gibbs 2006:18). Strategic learners may only engage with learning they see as relevant to an assessment, and as a consequence may disregard material outside of this remit, including formative tasks (Miller and Parlett 1974; Gibbs 2006:15; Snyder 1971). As Black and William (1998:39) concluded from their extensive review of the literature there are significant advantages to undertaking formative assessment tasks in terms of improving student achievement. Encouraging students to undertake formative work within this curriculum was executed by ensuring all formative tasks within modules were directly related to the summative assessment, this was to enable feedback from the formative task to contribute to the summative one.

Achieving a 'standard' or 'outcome' is essential, but it is also imperative that student nurses engage in meaningful learning that has relevance to practice, enabling reflection on thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs as they develop into health care professionals. All award documentation reflects this need for students to develop higher order cognitive skills in order that they develop as effective practitioners who can, for example, reflect, analyse and apply their knowledge in practice situations within an ever-changing health service. The challenge within the

assessment strategy is developing forms of assessment that can capture and encourage this learning and the development of higher order skills. Essays or longer written pieces are viewed as giving students the opportunity to research, reflect, analyse and apply knowledge, demonstrating a deeper level of learning (Race 2001:56), fulfilling the award aims. This outcome of written assessments, as well as evidence that students usually perform better in essays than examinations (Gibbs *et al* 1996), may have contributed to the adoption of so many written essays within the assessment strategy for this award.

The award states an aim of encouraging lifelong learning, essential as well as obligatory to the continuing professional development of registered nurses (as stated in NMC Post-registration education and practice or PREP requirement, re-issued in 2008). The assessment strategy, like the learning and teaching strategy more generally, aims to promote and foster students taking responsibility for their own learning by, for example, setting assignments that require the student to search the literature, analyse it, reflect on it and apply it to practice. These skills will be required throughout their careers as they strive to maintain and update their knowledge and skills. One assessment, a viva voce examination, requires development of a portfolio of their clinical practice experience. This prepares students for maintenance of a portfolio once they are a registered nurse, a PREP (NMC 2008) requirement that evidences their continuing professional development.

As assessment is stated as supporting learning, it is worth considering Gibbs (2006:29) summary of conditions under which assessment supports learning to see if our award assessment strategy fulfils these aims (see Appendix 8). In brief, looking at these aims I would argue, firstly, that during the validation of this award there was a good deal of thought and debate about the quantity of assessment expected of the student, with attention to distribution of assignments across the programme to ensure student effort was evenly spread. Debate centred on ensuring that we did not over assess students, as they have both theoretical and practice assessments to undertake, but also strived to spread assessment across the curriculum to prevent multiple assessments being handed in at the same time. Secondly, module leaders are committed to creation of assignments that are challenging as well as achievable, and as per QAA (2006a) guidance, they should enable students to demonstrate their capabilities and achievements within each module. Thirdly, external examiner feedback attests that feedback given to students is detailed, useful and



supportive, though timing of it, so long after the module has ended, may impede on student perception of its usefulness. Whether feedback is useful to students themselves is not clear. Award evaluation by students suggests that feedback is valuable, though the issue of not being able to read the tutor's hand-writing is raised frequently. At the modular level there is no mechanism for evaluating how useful or not feedback has been as module evaluation is carried out prior to submission of assessment (on the last teaching contact day).

Assessment does not aim to induce stress, but as Archer and Lamnin (1985) and Sarros and Densten (1989) have found students have identified size and number of assessments as major stressors. This brings into question whether the strategy of continuous assessment reduces stress, as end of year exams do not feature, or whether being constantly assessed may be more stressful for some. Student views about their preference for larger, less frequent assessments (i.e. one at the end of the module) as compared to smaller but more frequent assessments with more variety of method throughout the module were gathered by me in May 2007 in a proposal via online software known as the Values Exchange (see [www.values-exchange.com](http://www.values-exchange.com) ). The results were interesting with 38 of the 48 respondents agreeing that smaller, more frequent and more varied assessments would be fairer to students with different learning styles, and offer more formative feedback, but 10 students felt that more assessments, regardless of size, meant more work and would be more stressful.

The stated purpose of the assessment for the module 'Foundation studies in practice' was to meet the learning outcomes, which centred around developing an understanding of determinants of health, health policy and health promotion as well as demonstrating the ability to engage with evidence, locating, analyzing and discussing it. The means of demonstrating these outcomes developed from the assessment validated in 2004 (a 2000 word essay) to the re-validated choice of assessment offered from September 2007. This change was in response to student feedback and experience of marking assignments that revealed some students had difficulties with basic academic writing, including undiagnosed dyslexia, which was only becoming apparent when the module assessment was graded at the end of their first term at University. So though an explicit aim of this assessment was to demonstrate an understanding of evidence, at a more practical level an implicit aim was identification of students experiencing learning or academic writing difficulties, and addressing that difficulty early on in their award. A key driver for both the

assessment format and the model of tutorial support for the module was the promotion of success. According to according to Nicol (2008a) success early in a course of study enhances self-belief and motivation; I wanted as many students as possible to experience success in their first assessment, to give them confidence to engage in academic work in future. The design of the module assessment and system of student support developed aimed to facilitate this success.

Guidance to tutorial staff regarding student support, development of module assessments and the provision of formative and summative feedback.

Academic staff are at the heart of developing the content and the assessment method for individual modules, guided by the overall award strategy, but there is reticence regarding development of new and innovative approaches to assessment within this curriculum, with most adhering to 'traditional' approaches. In defence of academics, there have been concerns raised by them, echoed in the literature, about fear of innovative approaches to assessment not being approved by the institutions quality procedures, and of innovations not being understood or approved by external examiners (Gibbs 2006: 20; Taras 2002). Such concern inevitably constrains innovative development of assessment strategy. Mohl (1996) argues that subscription to traditional methods of assessment may unintentionally overlook the needs of the learner as academics attempt to provide easily comparable, and seemingly robust methods for stakeholders and others, begging the question 'who is assessment for'?

Assessment guidance from the QAA (2006a), the University, and from and the philosophy underlying the award strategy for the diploma in nursing, advocate assessments that are developed to accommodate the diverse range of our student body. Development of the assessment strategy for the 2004 curriculum did not include or refer to any particular innovative approaches to assessment, but when the assessment for 'Foundation Studies in Practice' was developed to incorporate a choice of assessment in 2007, and taken through the quality process within the Faculty, it was successfully validated, though it necessitated a robust defence regarding the parity of the two assessments the students could choose from. The re-design of this module assessment to enable student choice did serve as an example that more innovative approaches in assessment can be developed.

There is empirical evidence that tutorial support predicts academic success in nursing courses (Meriel Hutton 1998; Ofori and Charlton 2002), and that tutorial support has been found to improve retention rates of the 'academically at risk' in minority students (US studies by Abrams and Jernigan 1984; Friedlander 1982;). Thus the importance of effective student support cannot be understated. Student support related to module assessment is primarily from module tutors, though some students will also access support for study skills more generally from their personal tutor, and from study skills support staff based in the library. Students with identified learning differences (such as dyslexia) are also supported by a specialist tutor. Within the student handbook students are informed that they will receive tutorial support (includes both personal and module tutor support) to help them set achievable goals, achieve objectives, devise action plans, identify the boundaries of self-directed learning, maintain personal and professional standards, understand the concept of evaluation and to help them seek and utilise feedback.

Guidance on good practice for tutorial staff is in the form of staff development events, for example, looking at grading and annotating work, as well as guidance from University and Faculty policy.

The student award handbook states that students across the two university sites will receive exactly the same taught content and academic support, and it is up to the module leader to ensure that parity is maintained. There is scope for module leaders to adapt tutorial support mechanisms to accommodate the size of their class, the range of academic levels evident within the class and the type of assessment method being used. In the case of the module 'Foundation Studies in Practice' the module leader adopted a model of tutorial support that included allocation of a specific module tutor to support each student with their module assessment. The allocated module tutor offers ongoing e-mail support, group tutorials and individual face-to-face tutorials as requested by the student. Essay plans and draft work may be submitted for feedback at any time up to one week prior to submission. Students across both geographical sites received the same model of tutor support. In addition students were advised to engage in peer support via the discussion board in Blackboard (an online virtual learning environment). This discussion forum included students from the whole cohort – from both university sites. Tutorial staff facilitated this discussion area, only contributing if students could not come up with the correct solution to an issue. Ongoing student feedback was welcomed throughout the module in class, via the online discussion area and via e-mail.

Though students who request it can receive ongoing formative feedback, there is a risk that some students will not access support or guidance, and effectively miss out on any feedback on their developing assignment during the module. Litchfield (2001) claims there is inconsistency in how students are supported, and across modules within this award this may be the case. Inconsistency may arise from different philosophies held by tutorial staff, but are also likely to differ depending on what year of study the student is in. For example, I would expect first year students to require more support than year 3 students, particularly with developing their academic writing skills. An evident inconsistency is that some students utilize tutorial support more than others. Willingness to seek support has been found to account for why older nursing students perform better than their younger counterparts (Ofori and Charlton 2002), and within this first module mature students do tend to seek support more frequently than younger students. This was one reason why peer and tutorial support was set up in Blackboard, and e-mail support was offered, in the hope that those who may be reticent in approaching staff may feel more comfortable engaging online or by e-mail with staff and / or peers.

A means of ensuring that all students are progressing and receive some formative feedback early on in the module is to set formative tasks. Students can be reluctant to engage in these, but will do so if there is a clear link between the formative task and summative assessment. The formative task within the 'Foundation studies in practice' module is a group presentation on the subject they have chosen for their summative assessment (e.g. smoking; diet). Tutor and peer feedback includes advice on, for example, their literature searching skills, referencing, spelling and grammar, whether material used is credible or not, and so on. An emphasis on formative assessment in the early weeks of the first year, and on a regular and frequent feedback is associated with student success (Tinto 2005; Yorke 2005). Formative tasks provide both teachers and students with information about performance and enable them to adjust teaching and learning in ways that promote achievement. Another means of identifying students who are struggling academically but not accessing support is setting summative tasks early in the module that require students to hand in work, for which they will receive feedback.

Award documents claim that developmental or formative feedback that is given to students is appropriate and timely. The 'appropriateness' of feedback from tutorial staff is guided by staff development events which consider, for example, use of grading criteria, consistency in grading

and how to structure formative feedback. When the award was validated students were informed via the Student Handbook that assignments would not be returned to them. This changed in 2005 when annotation of assignments was instigated. Students now have their assessed work returned to them annotated, as well as a formative feedback sheet. Within the 'Foundation studies in practice' module tutor feedback is offered on an ongoing basis to students throughout the module. They are given written and oral feedback following a class presentation related to their summative assessment, face-to-face or e-mail support and feedback on plans and drafts of their summative assignment and written feedback following summative assessment. Within this module feedback is consistently applauded by external examiners as excellent, with detailed written feedback on the summative assessment that is supportive and promotes development of future learning, but I would argue that this feedback is not timely, coming as it does up to 8 weeks after work is submitted when students have left the module behind and 'moved on' to the next modules of study. This is not an issue isolated to this programme of study, but as Taras (2006) points out, is an issue highlighted as problematic within modular awards. For feedback to be of value it should be received so that it can be used to inform the next assessment, but formative feedback on summative assessment within this award appears many weeks after the end of the module. Unless a student needs to re-submit an assignment formative feedback may be seen as worthless. For those who have passed, their work is done, will not be repeated, and they 'move on' to a different module with a different focus, not necessarily seeing any relationship between assessments. The experience of our students reflects a student comment cited by Gibbs (2006:26) that:

'feedback on my assignments comes back so slowly that we are already on the next topic, and I have already submitted the next assignment. It is water under the bridge really. I just look at the mark and bin it'.

If feedback is provided faster, there may be more likelihood that students will read it and respond to it.

To summarise, analysis of award and module documentation reveals evidence of a supportive learning environment for year 1 students that aims to foster success. It reflects a diverse range of students, in terms of academic background, age and occupational backgrounds within the student population, with learning, teaching and assessment strategies developed to accommodate this diversity. Development of module assessment lies with the module leader guided by Award

parameters (as detailed in the programme specification), Faculty and University teaching, learning and assessment guidelines and NMC requirements. Assessment across the award lacks diversity, with the majority of assessments being in an essay type format. The module 'Foundation studies in practice' offers a choice of assessment method, a new phenomena within this programme, which was developed to accommodate the diverse range of academic backgrounds within this first year, first module cohort. This change was made in response to tutorial concerns about accommodating students with weaker academic backgrounds or lack of experience or confidence to engage in producing a long essay-type piece of work, and the need to identify students with learning differences at the earliest opportunity.

Analysis of documents confirms alignment between assessment, learning and teaching, and an assessment strategy that aims to be inclusive. There is emphasis on the curricula and assessment strategy preparing students for entry to the professional nursing register; developing a skilled practitioner who can adapt to the dynamic nature of contemporary nursing. The programme is underpinned by principles of androgogy. It sets out the aim of developing students with more autonomy as they progress through their award, but there is a stated requirement for students to engage in independent learning from the outset of the award.

The assessment strategy focuses on enabling achievement and promoting success, with commitment to good tutorial support. Formative learning tasks must be related to the summative assessment, and assessment should be challenging but achievable, and exemplify the standards of robustness, fairness and equity expected of both the University and stakeholders.

Students are described as 'equal partners', but they would argue that their power is limited in relation to tutors, particularly in the area of assessment.

Though curriculum documents, including the learning, teaching and assessment strategy and module learning outcomes offer a framework and guidance for how module tutors design their module of study, they still have a significant influence on the learning environment. This can include, for example, the actual module content and the model of tutorial and peer support adopted.

This documentary analysis explicates this assessment experience in terms of the philosophy, pedagogy and policy underpinning it, as well as its stated intentions. It offers some insight into the learning environment within which this first assessment takes place, offering a context within which learning, assessment and related activities such as tutor support and feedback take place. Having explored this context, the students' perspective of their assessment experience will now be analysed from the data collated via questionnaires and the focus group.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

This study set out to explore the first assessment experience of first year student nurses. It considered how their characteristics impacted on the assessment experience as well as how this experience influenced their self-beliefs regarding their academic ability. Data to enable this illuminative evaluation was collected from a cohort of students during their first module of study on a nursing diploma in a post-1992 UK University, before and after their first assessment to explore the assessment experience from their perspective. Prior to data collection a documentary analysis of all key documents related to this first summative assessment was carried out to establish the learning milieu within which this assessment took place. Data was collected from students via two questionnaires, and a focus group.

Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data was conducted concurrently and iteratively to explore the students' experience of their first written assessment, for most their first experience of an assessment in higher education. Analysis of questionnaire 1 commenced with collation of demographic data. Quantifiable responses from Questionnaires 1 and 2 were inputted into SPSS 16.0 for statistical analysis, and a thematic analysis of the qualitative comments students had made in response to questions was conducted. Thematic analysis also included data collected at the focus group. Findings from analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data were collated and explored in relation to the research questions, which are:

1. What is the students' experience of being assessed in this first module of study, and what aspects of the assessment process foster positive self-belief, or confound self-doubt?
2. What factors impact on students' beliefs about their intelligence and capabilities, and how do these factors relate to their engagement with the assessment, tutorial support, and the summative and formative feedback they receive?
3. What model of achievement motivation emerges from students studying for a Diploma in Nursing at a post-1992 UK University?

This analysis begins by presenting student characteristics, and goes on to explore data that tells us something about the students' thoughts and feelings about their first assessment before they began the course. This offers a 'start point' or baseline for data collected after their first assessment experience. Analysis will then reflect the student journey through their first



assessment. It will consider their choice of assessment, their tutorial and peer support, their grades and how they felt about them, their feelings about and use of feedback, and issues raised by them that relate to the assessment process. Analysis will consider the assessment process in terms of aspects of this first assessment experience that enhanced their self-beliefs regarding their ability, and those that were perceived as less helpful or undermining of their self-beliefs. Further analysis of data investigates participants' implicit beliefs about their ability, considering relationships between implicit beliefs, learning behaviours and achievement to ascertain if participants in this study reflect the model of achievement motivation developed by Dweck (2000), or whether a different model or conceptualization of achievement motivation is evident.

### Participant details

Of the 133 students who participated in this study 120 (approximately 90%) were female, and 13 were male. Age range was from 17-55 years, with a mean age of 28.6 (Standard deviation: SD 9.9). 20% of the cohort were in the 18-19 year age group, and 53% were over 25 years. Only 2 students recorded their first language as not English.

For the purposes of analysis regarding 'younger' and 'older' participants, the age of 25 was considered the 'cut-off' between younger and older students. This was because the over 25's have for some time been referred to within the nursing literature as 'mature' or 'non-traditional' (for example, Bean and Metzger 1985; Jeffreys 1998).

Eighty-three (62%) participants reported that they were the first in their family to attend University; their mean age was 29.4 years (range of 18-55 years; SD 9.5), this compared to 50 students who stated they were not the first to attend University in their family whose mean age was 27.2 (range of 17-50 years; SD 10.4). Though this mean age appears similar, a cross-tabulation (Table 5.1) of first in the family to attend University (or not) and age group (25 and under and 26 years plus) reveals more participants aged over 25 as the first in the family to enter higher education. A chi-square test was used as this non-parametric test of association allows comparison of these two forms of categorical data (Maltby et al 2007:257; Salkind 2008:263). Chi square reveals  $X^2(1) = 3.97$ ,  $p = 0.046$ , so significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, confirming that students who are the first in their family to attend University are likely to be older.

Age group	first to university in family		
	Yes	No	Total
25 or under	35	30	65
26 +	48	20	68
Total	83	50	133

Table 5.1: Relationship between being first in the family to go university (or not) and age group.

The 'traditional' entry gate to preparation to register as a nurse was a minimum of 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) prior to 1999 (UKCC 1999a,1999b). The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) subsequently permitted approved higher education institutions to enrol students onto a pre-registration nursing programme as long as they provided evidence that their literacy and numeracy levels are sufficient to undertake nurse education at a minimum of diploma of higher education level (NMC 2004). As a result the entry gate is now diverse. As table 5.2 suggests, within this cohort 82 students (62%) had qualifications equal to or above the 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) that were traditionally required for nurse education. The remaining 51 students (38%), over a third of the cohort, had not met this level of academic achievement.

A summary of participants' academic backgrounds is presented in Table 5.2.

Highest qualification	Number	Mean age (SD)
First degree	6	37.5 (6.8)
Undergraduate diploma	11	25.7 (9.2)
3 or more A levels	11	21 (4.5)
1-2 A levels	22	24.7 (8.9)
NVQ 3 (A level equivalent)	12	33.8 (11.5)
5 or more GCSE's (or equivalent)	20	20.8 (6.1)
1- 4 GCSE's	27	29.7 (8)
No qualifications (of these 'Portfolio of evidence' entry)	24 (20)	37.2 (7.4)

Table 5.2 Participants' academic background

Table 5.2 reflects the diverse range of academic backgrounds within a cohort of students, from those who already have a first degree, to those with no formal academic qualifications at all.

Table 5.3 considers the relationship between age group and academic qualifications, and it appears that those with no qualifications or portfolio entry tend to be older, with only 1 student aged 25 or under at this academic level, but 23 students over 25 years of age. Those with 5 GCSE's or more tend to be younger, with 56 aged 25 years and under achieving more than 5 GCSE's as compared to 26 over 25's who have attained this level.

Age Group	Academic qualifications								Total
	no qualifications	portfolio entry	1-4 GCSE's	5 GCSE's or more	1-2 A level's/BTEC /Access HE/ NVQ3	3 or more A levels	diploma	degree	
17-21	0	0	6	14	15	9	5	0	49
22-25	0	1	2	4	5	1	2	1	16
26-30	1	2	5	0	2	0	2	0	12
31-35	1	6	10	1	5	1	0	0	24
36-40	0	4	1	1	2	0	0	2	10
41+	2	7	3	0	5	0	2	3	22
Total	4	20	27	20	34	11	11	6	133

Table 5.3. Relationship between age group and academic qualifications ('GCSE's' includes O'Levels and/or CSE's as GCSE's began in 1988 those within the cohort born before academic year 1971/ 72 may have these).

The significance of the relationship between age group and academic background, in terms of those who fulfilled or did not fulfil the traditional entry requirement for pre-registration nursing, was

analysed with a Chi square test (see Table 5.4). Chi square:  $X^2 (5) = 34.5$ .  $p = 0.00$ ; which confirms a significant relationship between age and academic background, with older students more likely to have less than 5 GCSE's (or equivalent).

Age group	'Traditional' entry requirement		
	less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	Total
17-21	6	43	49
22-25	3	13	16
26-30	8	4	12
31-35	17	7	24
36-40	5	5	10
41+	12	10	22
Total	51	82	133

Table 5.4 Age and academic background

As older students are more likely to be the first in their family to attend University, and older students tend to have a weaker academic profile, then taking this finding further the relationship between those with fewer academic qualifications and being the first in the family to attend University was examined (Table 5.5). Although a trend is revealed, in that of the 51 students with less than traditional qualifications 37 are the first in the family to enter higher education (73%), 46 of the 83 students who are the first in their family to enter higher education meet or exceed this traditional entry requirement (56%). Chi square revealed  $X^2 (1) = 3.63$ ,  $p = 0.57$ , this is not a significant relationship.

First in family to university	Entry requirement		
	less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	Total
Yes	37	46	83
No	14	36	50
Total	51	82	133

Table 5.5 Relationship between first in family to attend university and academic background

### Pre-assessment – feelings and beliefs about assessment

Pre-assessment experience and confidence is important to ascertain a baseline regarding self-beliefs about ability to undertake the first assessment. Questionnaire 1 revealed that 113 students reported having experience of an essay-type assessment, with 20 stating they had not had this experience. In questionnaire 1 (Appendix 4, question 6b), students were asked to choose from a selection of key words to describe their past assessment experience. The majority of participants, 80 of them, chose the word 'challenging', with 43 believing that past assessments were within their capability, 7 students regarding past assessment as difficult or scary, and 3 students did not choose any words from those offered.

Students were asked about their confidence to undertake this first (essay-type) assessment at University. Four students chose not to offer an appraisal of their confidence on the grounds of their lack of experience of this type of assessment. 129 students offered an appraisal, this included the 113 students who had experience of an essay-type assessment, and 16 of the 20 students who had no experience of this type of assessment. These 129 expressed their level of confidence as reflected in Table 5.6 which shows a fairly even split, with 64 students reporting feeling very or quite confident, and 65 feeling not very confident or afraid of assessment.

Confidence	Frequency	Percentage
no experience	4	3.0
very confident	3	2.3
quite confident	61	45.9
not very confident	57	42.9
Afraid	8	6.0
Total	133	100.0

Table 5.6 Confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment

These 129 students also commented on their feelings about undertaking the first assessment. The majority of statements reflected a good deal of anxiety, with many students across the age range and the spectrum of previous academic achievement, expressing fear and self-doubt.

Examples from the questionnaire and focus group are offered below, with a brief comment on the contribution of the comments to the thematic analysis:

'I am not confident, unsure what to expect and I can't really write essays' (18 years, 1-2 'A' level's) This is a young student with A levels expressing apprehension and a self-perception of lack of confidence.

'I am very nervous about the assignments as I do not know if I am going to be able to do them. But after being told that there is going to be help I am a little less fearful. ....I am fearful. I don't know if I can do this University thing!' (31 years, NVQ 3). A more mature student with an untraditional academic background who is expressing self-doubt about ability and fear, but knowing there is support alleviates some of that fear.

'I am very afraid as I have never done an assignment. I do wonder if I am clever enough to do this as I have no other qualifications, and having left school at 15 years of age I feel very "afraid". I would like to take all the extra guidance available to me, as I want this more than anything' (27 years, portfolio entrant). This is a mature student with no formal academic qualifications expressing fear and self-doubt about ability, and stating a requirement for support.

'I am nervous as I don't know what to expect as I have just left school and have discovered that University is very different from school. However I am very keen and excited to get the ball rolling. However although lots of help as been offered, with my problem of not being able to put down on paper the knowledge in my head I'm afraid that I might fail as no-one has been able to help me yet' (18, 5 or more GCSE's). A younger student who exceeds what was the traditional academic background but is still apprehensive about this first assessment and has self-doubt about academic skills, and feels the need for a lot of support.

'Because I hadn't been in school for 30 years, and suddenly going in to do an assignment, to talk and write academic, I just thought what the hell am I doing' (42 years, Access course). A mature student expressing apprehension about this first assessment, and expressing self-doubt about academic writing skills.

There were, however, statements that reflected more confidence and positive self-belief, for example:

'I'm fairly sure once I get started and acquire direction and structure that my skills and confidence will grow'. (39 years, portfolio entry).

'Excited, challenged, a little scared but very much looking forward to beginning' (40 years, portfolio entrant). Both these statements from mature students with no formal academic qualifications reflect positive self-beliefs toward this assessment, with the second student expressing some fear but seeing the assessment as a challenge.

'Feels like a huge mountain to climb, however I like a challenge and I am looking forward to it' (51 years, 1-4 GCSE). Again, this mature student sees the assessment in terms of challenge.

Many comments alluded to the need for tutorial support to help them succeed, or stated their intention to seek or access tutorial support, with some students stating that it was only with tutorial support they felt they could succeed. For example:

'Not confident, but with some help and practice I will feel confident enough to do what is expected of me'. (42 years, NVQ 3)

'I know I will struggle, as I have not written an assignment before. I am worried, but as long as I have support and help I will be alright' (51 years, NVQ3).

'A bit overwhelmed and scared as I haven't had to write essays for years and have forgotten a few things, but hopefully I will be able to get help from staff members' (21 years, 1-2 A levels)

Student comments suggest that regardless of academic background there is a good deal of self-doubt, lack of confidence and a belief that tutorial support will be required. A stronger academic background did not necessarily imply greater confidence.

Thematic analysis of all the comments that participants made regarding their feelings about writing this first assignment on their course (from both the questionnaires and focus group) was carried out. This involved collating all the comments made into one document, then reading and re-reading them to locate themes and patterns that related to the research questions, particularly in terms of self-beliefs about ability. Ideas about themes were noted and comments coded before reviewing the data again and defining themes and sub-themes that represented students' views and beliefs as comprehensively as possible. This analysis revealed a main theme of self-doubt, with a lesser, contrasting theme of self-assurance.

A representation of this analysis is presented in fig 5.1. The first part of this diagram represents the main theme of self-doubt, which was characterised by the 5 sub-themes of:

Fear / apprehension; questioning of own ability; questioning of own academic skills; poor self-perceptions generally; comments related to expectations of self / others. The speech bubbles next to each sub-theme, as well as statements above, illustrate comments made by students that led to the development of this theme and sub-themes. These comments came from students across the range of both age and academic background.



The second part of Fig 5.1 represents the theme of self-assurance, which was less prevalent than self-doubt and included two sub-themes of having experience / confidence, and feeling challenged and excited at the prospect of doing this assessment. Again, speech bubbles offer examples taken from student comments, and these also reflect the full range of student age and academic background. Fig 3.1 also reflects that across the cohort there was a strong overall thread that related to tutorial support. These comments reflected student desire for tutorial support, their expectations of it, and its perceived importance to them.

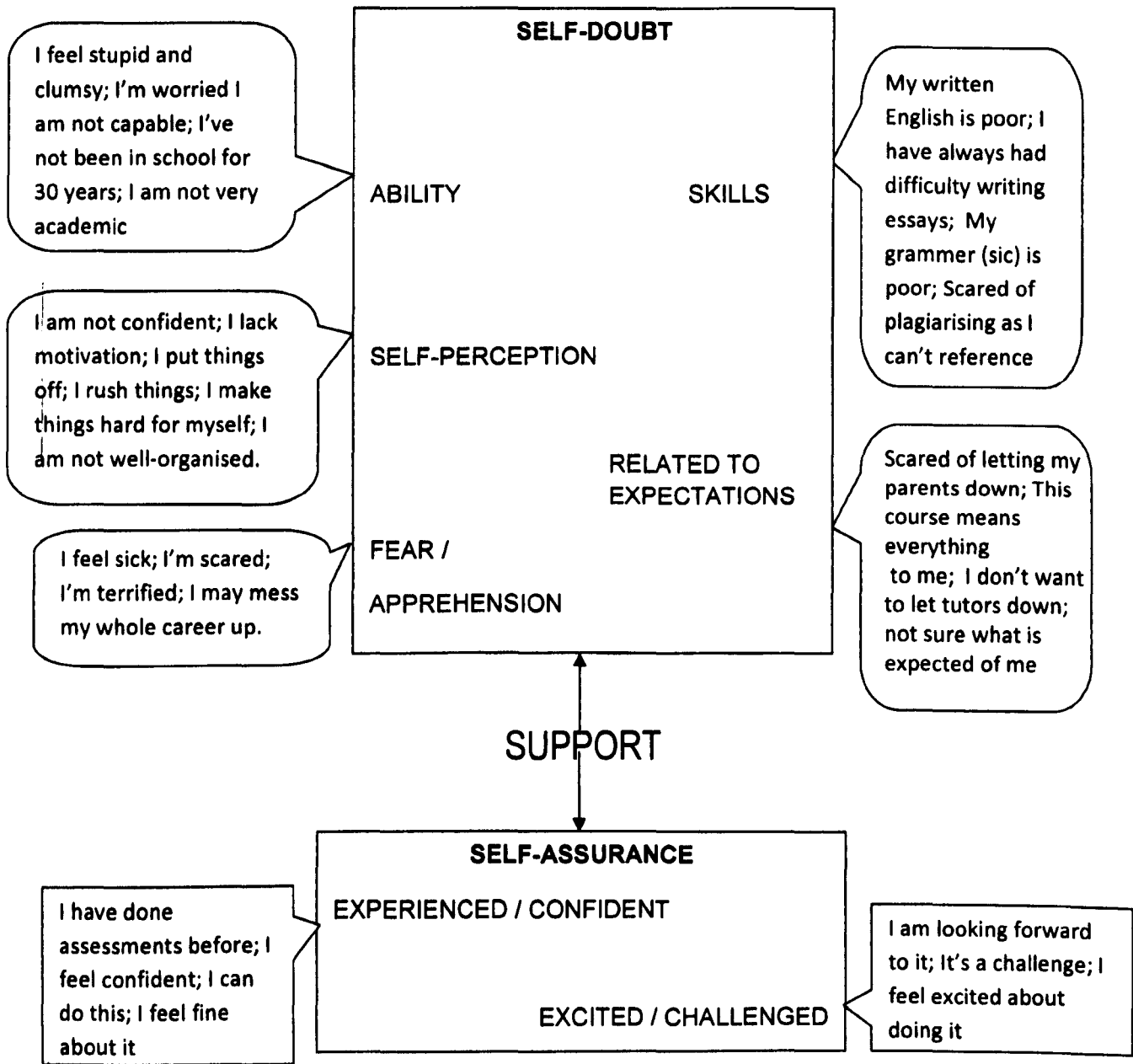


Fig 5.1. Thematic analysis of students' feelings before embarking on their first assignment.

Looking further at student confidence, the characteristics of students who felt confident / lacked confidence to undertake this assessment were examined to ascertain if any particular characteristic was related to their level of confidence. Firstly, the relationship between confidence to undertake this assessment and whether the student is the first in their family to attend University was examined (Table 5.7). This revealed that 49 of the 79 students (62%) who are the first in their family to come to University are not confident or afraid of undertaking this assessment. This compares to 16 of the 50 students (32%) who are not the first in their family to enter higher education. Chi square test of this relationship:  $X^2(3) = 13.9$ ,  $p = 0.003$ , which is a significant relationship.

first to university in family	confidence to undertake essay-type assessment				
	very confident	quite confident	not very confident	afraid	Total
Yes	2	28	41	8	79
No	1	33	16	0	50
Total	3	61	57	8	129

Table 5.7 Relationship between confidence to undertake assessment and first to family to go to university or not (4 students without essay type assessment experience did not respond to this question therefore  $n = 129$ ).

One student, who was first in her family to attend University, commented on her lack of confidence, stating she would find this assessment 'daunting...I will try my hardest but have a fear of it not being what the lecturer wanted – and then being more put off for the next time...' (24 years, 1-4 GCSE's).

Looking at this finding in more depth, the relationship between being the first to attend University in the family and having experience of an assessment is worth examining to better understand the significant relationship that was found between being first in family to attend University and lack of confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment. Further, the relationship between confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment and experience of having done this type of assessment may also have a bearing on this finding.

As table 5.8 suggests, the majority of students (113 out of 133) had done an essay-type assessment, but the differences between those who are first in the family to go to University, and

those who are not, is not revealed as significant ( $X^2 (1) = 3.1, p = 0.08$ ). As the majority of students had experience of this type of assessment this finding then this finding is not surprising.

Done essay-type assessment	first in family to attend university		
	Yes	No	Total
No	16	4	20
Yes	67	46	113
Total	83	50	133

Table 5.8 Relationship between experience of doing an essay-type assessment and being first (or not) in the family to go to university.

Looking at the relationship between experience of an essay-type assessment and confidence to undertake one in future (table 5.9), it appears that experience may be related to confidence, as of the 17 participants without experience 13 lack confidence. Chi square test  $X^2 (1) = 5.3, p = 0.02$  (so significant only at  $p < 0.05$  level) confirms this relationship.

Experience of essay-type assessment	Confident or not confident		
	Confident	not confident	Total
No	4	13	17
Yes	60	52	112
Total	64	65	129

Table 5.9. Relationship between having experience of doing an essay-type assessment and confidence to do this one.

This finding is echoed in comments offered by some students with experience of doing essay-type assessments in the past having confidence to undertake this assessment, and those with no experience lacking confidence. For example, from a student with experience of this type of assessment:

'I am fairly confident I am able to complete the assignment' (18 years, 1-2 A levels).

From a student without essay assessment experience: 'I am very scared of writing my first assignment' (24 years, NVQ3)

What is also evident from both Table 5.10 and comments made by students, is that despite having essay-type assessment experience, many still lacked confidence as they approached this assessment, voicing fears and self-doubt; 52 of the 112 students with experience revealed this.

As it could be argued that confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment may be related to academic background and / or age, these two variables were also examined for any relationship with confidence. Tables 5.10 and Table 5.11 show that age and academic background are not significantly related to confidence.

Age group	Confident or not confident		
	confident	not confident	Total
25 or under	32	31	63
26 +	32	34	66
Total	64	65	129

Table 5.10. Relationship between age-group and confidence to undertake this assessment

Fairly similar numbers of students represent the 25 and under and over 25 age groups (63 and 66 respectively) and there was a fairly even distribution between those who were confident or lacked confidence to undertake this assessment across both age groups.

Academic level	Confident or not confident		
	Confident	not confident	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	23	27	50
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	41	38	79
Total	64	65	129

Table 5.11 Relationship between academic level at entry and confidence to undertake this assessment.

A similar percentage of students reported feeling confident about this assessment regardless of academic level. 23 of the 50 (46%) students with less than 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) and 41 of the 73 (51%) with 5 GCSE's or more (or equivalent) felt confident about undertaking this assessment.

To summarise the characteristics of this cohort, there are 133 participants with an age range from 17-55 years, and a diverse range of entry requirements from no academic qualifications at all to students holding a first degree.

83 students (62%) are the first in their family to attend University, and the age of this group of students tends to be older than those who have a family history of University (significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). Students who are the first in their family to attend University have less confidence about undertaking this first assessment than those with a family history of University ( $p < 0.01$ ), but this is not related to their academic background, or having experience of this type of assessment. Older students tended to have a weaker pre-University academic profile (significant at  $p < 0.01$ ).

There is an even split across the cohort of those who are confident / fairly confident about undertaking this first essay-type assessment, and those who lack confidence or who are afraid of it. This is despite most students (113) having experience of essay-type assessment. Confidence was not found to be related to age or academic background, but those without experience of this type of essay tended to be less confident ( $p < 0.05$ ). Despite what appears to be an equal number of those who are more or less confident, the majority of students voiced some self-doubt about doing this first assessment. This included expressions of fear, concern about lack of ability, concern about lack of skills, poor self-perceptions, and fears related to expectations. Those who offered more self-assured comments cited their previous experience of assessment as making them feel confident, or were excited about doing it. Most students saw this assessment in terms of it being a challenge.

#### Pre-assessment – beliefs about intelligence / learning

Questionnaire 1 asked students about their beliefs about their ability, in Dweck's terms, their implicit theories. Two means of accessing their implicit theories, both taken from the work of Dweck (2000) were utilized which aimed to ascertain if students subscribed to an incremental or entity theory of intelligence. The first was an 8-item questionnaire, the second a simple formulae asking how much students feel intelligence is to do with effort and ability (see Appendix 4, Part D).

The 8-item questionnaire comprised 8 items with Likert scale responses ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The 4 incremental items were added together to give an incremental score, the 4 entity items were reverse scored. The two scores were added and divided by 8 to give an overall implicit theory score ranging from 1 – 6, with a higher score indicating a stronger incremental theory. To ensure that only participants with a clear theory are included in analysis Dweck *et al* (1995) suggest that participants can only be classified as incremental theorists if their overall implicit theory score is 4 or above, and as an entity theorist if their implicit theory score is 3 or below. Those with scores between 3 and 4 are excluded. Dweck *et al* (1995) suggest this generally excludes around 15% of the cohort, but that the remaining participants represent groups with clear implicit theories.

Following completion of this questionnaire by the 133 participants the reliability of the questionnaire was tested. The reliability of the 4 entity items (items 1, 2, 4 and 6) resulted in Cronbach's alpha = 0.85; reliability of the incremental items (items 3, 5, 7 and 8) Cronbach's alpha = 0.80, and the reliability of the measure as a whole was 0.79.

On the basis of this questionnaire, of the 133 students in this cohort 95 were revealed as incremental theorists, and 10 as entity theorists, with 28 students not fulfilling the criteria of either theory clearly and so being excluded. These 28 students represent 21% of the cohort, which is a higher percentage than Dweck *et al* (1995) expect to be excluded.

Looking at the result of students completing the equation: Intelligence = ....% ability and ....% effort. The largest number of students (61) believed intelligence was the result of 50% effort and 50% ability (46% of students). Those who attributed a higher percentage of intelligence to effort (and thus according to Dweck are more incremental theorists) amounted to 40 students (30% of the cohort), with the remaining 32 students (24% of the cohort) attributing intelligence mostly to ability (entity theorists).

What these two findings from students show is that there is a mismatch between the findings from Dweck's questionnaire of whether an individual is more an incremental or entity theorist (as revealed subsequent to answering questions about whether intelligence can be changed or not), and the beliefs students are aware of regarding the relative contribution of effort and ability to

intelligence (as revealed in the equation). If Dweck's theory regarding entity theorists having a stronger belief in innate ability, and incremental theorists being more focused on making effort, are to be upheld, then one would expect some correlation between findings from these two sources.

Looking at the cross-tab of these two outcomes (Table 5.12), 31 students were revealed as incremental theorists from both sources and 5 as entity theorists from both sources, i.e. 27% of the cohort were 'consistent' in their predilection to implicit theory of intelligence from both outcomes. The largest discrepancy in this comparison of the two outcomes is that, of the 95 students who were revealed as incremental theorists from Dweck's questionnaire, 45 actually put equal weighting to effort and ability in the equation regarding attribution to intelligence, with 31 seeing effort as contributing most (as expected) and 19 seeing ability as contributing more to intelligence.

Questionnaire Outcome	Equation re: intelligence			
	no difference	effort (incremental)	ability (entity)	Total
Unclear	13	7	8	28
Incremental	45	31	19	95
Entity	3	2	5	10
Total	61	40	32	133

Table 5.12. Relationship between Dweck's two outcome measures of implicit theory of intelligence

As per Dweck's description of analysis, in the second cross-tab (Table 5.13) those who do not reveal a clear / unambiguous theory are excluded thus  $n = 57$ . Chi square confirms that the expected relationship between these outcomes is not significant ( $X^2(1) = 2.8, p = 0.09$ ).

Questionnaire outcome (excludes unclear theorists)	Equation re: intelligence (excludes those no difference)		
	effort / incremental	ability / entity	Total
incremental	31	19	50
Entity	2	5	7
Total	33	24	57

Table 5.13 Relationship between Dweck's two outcome measures of implicit theory of intelligence excluding those without a clear theory.

Students were asked whether learning and understanding or passing the assessment was more important to them (to establish if they were learning / mastery or performance goal focused). Of the 133 students 93 (70%) stated that learning and understanding was more important to them, with just 27 believing passing the assessment was most important, and 13 who could not decide.

A relationship is proposed by Dweck and colleagues between implicit theory held and learning goals, whereby entity theorists are more likely to be focused on passing the module assessment, and incremental theorists are more likely to be interested in learning and understanding during the module. The relationship between implicit theory from Dweck's questionnaire (excluding those without clear theory) and the students' beliefs regarding the importance of learning and understanding or passing the assignment (a learning or mastery goal versus a performance goal) is shown in Table 5.14. Of the 95 students revealed as incremental theorists 65 stated learning and understanding were most important (learning goal) as would be expected, but 22 saw passing the assessment as more important (holding a performance goal). Of the 10 entity theorists, 9 were more focused on learning and understanding, with only 1 focused on passing assessment. This is not what would be expected within the theory.

74 of the 105 students (70%) with a clear implicit theory see learning and understanding as more important than passing the assessment, with only 23 students (22%) more focused on the assessment. The relationship between implicit theory and learning goals is not evident as predicted by Dweck's model.



Questionnaire outcome (excludes unclear theorists)	Learning / mastery goal or performance goal			
	both / can't decide	learning and understanding	passing assignment	Total
Incremental	8	65	22	95
Entity	0	9	1	10
Total	8	74	23	105

Table 5.14 Relationship between Dweck's questionnaire outcome and learning / performance goal.

The other measure of whether students subscribe to an entity or incremental theory was revealed from the equation: Intelligence = ....% ability and ....% effort, and as stated earlier yielded different findings from the questionnaire with regard to identifying entity and incremental theorists. Looking at the data on how the students attributed effort and ability to intelligence against their beliefs about learning and understanding versus passing the assignment (table 5.15), those with a more incremental theory (believing that effort contributes more to intelligence) seem to focus on learning and understanding (26 of the 40 students being more learning oriented) as expected, but of the 32 who perceive ability as contributing more to intelligence (entity theorists), only 5 see passing the assignment as most important (are more performance goal oriented). 61 students believe effort and ability contribute equally to intelligence, and most of these students (45) see learning and understanding as most important. Chi square:  $X^2(4) = 2.83$ ,  $p = 0.59$ , confirms that there is not a significant relationship between implicit theory as revealed from the equation about intelligence and learning goal. Simplifying cross-tabulation (Table 5.16) omitting those who felt, when asked about ability and effort, that both contributed equally, and keeping only those who demonstrated a clear theory, there is still no significant relationship when analysed with Chi square ( $X^2(1) = 0.73$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ).

Equation re: intelligence	Learning / mastery goal or performance goal			
	both / can't decide	learning and understanding	passing assignment	Total
effort / incremental	4	26	10	40
ability / entity	5	22	5	32
Both contribute equally	4	45	12	61
Total	13	93	27	133

Table 5.15. Relationship between entity / incremental theorist from equation and learning / performance goals

Equation re: intelligence (excludes those no difference)	Learning / mastery goal or performance goal (excluding those who stated both / can't decide)		
	learning & understanding	passing assignment	Total
effort / incremental	26	10	36
ability / entity	22	5	27
Total	48	15	62

Table 5.16. Relationship between entity / incremental theorist from equation and learning / performance goals omitting those without clear theories.

The results above demonstrate that regardless of whether a student's implicit theory is identified by Dweck's questionnaire as being an incremental or entity theory of intelligence, and whether the student sees ability or effort as contributing more to intelligence, the majority (70%) see learning and understanding as more important than passing the assignment. Thus, as a cohort they are more learning / mastery oriented than performance goal oriented.

Exploration of the demographic data to establish any characteristics that typified those who were revealed as subscribing to an entity or an incremental theory revealed that there was a fairly proportionate distribution of those revealed as incremental theorists, and those who had no clear theory across age groups (Table 5.17), but there was a cluster of 6 of the total of 10 entity theorists who were aged 21 years and under.

Age group	Questionnaire outcome (includes unclear theorists)			
	No clear theory	incremental	entity	Total
17-21	9	34	6	49
22-25	4	12	0	16
26-30	0	11	1	12
31-35	7	17	0	24
36-40	2	7	1	10
41+	6	14	2	22
Total	28	95	10	133

Table 5.17. Implicit theory related to age

Similarly, looking at how students completed the equation regarding the contribution of ability and effort to intelligence, as table 5.18 suggests, there was again a fairly even distribution across the three groups of mostly effort, mostly ability or both effort and ability equally contributing to intelligence. Almost half the students (61) believed that both effort and ability contributed equally to intelligence, and it appears that more of these are mature students.

Age group	Equation re: intelligence			
	Both contribute equally	effort / incremental	ability / entity	Total
17-21	18	17	14	49
22-25	8	6	2	16
26-30	9	3	0	12
31-35	10	7	7	24
36-40	6	2	2	10
41+	10	5	7	22
Total	61	40	32	133

Table 5.18 Relationship between entity / incremental theorist from equation and age group

Simplifying these age groups to those who are 25 and under and over 25 (Table 5.19) demonstrates that within the younger age group 39 (60%) chose either effort or ability as contributing most to intelligence, whereas in the over 25 age group just 49% chose effort or ability, the other 51% seeing both ability and effort as contributing equally to intelligence. Chi square analysis reveals that this trend does not represent a significant relationship ( $X^2 (2) = 2.2, p = 0.34$ ).

over & under 25's	Equation re: intelligence			
	Both contribute equally	effort / incremental	ability / entity	Total
25 or under	26	23	16	65
26 +	35	17	16	68
Total	61	40	32	133

Table 5.19 Relationship between entity / incremental theorist from equation and age group (25 and under and over 25 years)

Similarly, looking at the whether those who are first in their family (or not) to attend University are more likely to hold a particular implicit theory, as revealed by the questionnaire, Table 5.20 suggests that there is no significant trend. Of the 67 students who are first in their family to go to University, 63 reveal themselves as incremental theorists (94%) and, of the 38 students with family history of attending University, 32 (84%) reveal themselves as incremental theorists (Chi square  $X^2 (1) = 2.71, p = 0.1$ , not significant).

first to university in family	Questionnaire outcome (excludes unclear theorists)		
	incremental	entity	Total
Yes	63	4	67
No	32	6	38
Total	95	10	105

Table 5.20 Relationship between being the first in the family to go to university and implicit theory

Looking at the groups of students who are first in their family to attend University (or not) in relation to how they view the contribution of effort and ability to intelligence, Table 5.21 suggests that there is little difference between these two groups. Of the 83 who are the first in their family to attend university, 47% (39) believe both ability and effort contribute equally to intelligence, 31% (26) believe that effort plays a greater part, and 22% (18) believe ability contributes more to intelligence. Of those not the first in the family to attend University, 44% (22) see an equal contribution, with 28% (14) of students believing effort plays a greater role, and 28% (14) that ability is most important contributor.

First in family to university	Equation re: intelligence			Total
	Both contribute equally	effort / incremental	ability / entity	
Yes	39	26	18	83
No	22	14	14	50
Total	61	40	32	133

Table 5.21 Relationship between being the first in the family to go to University and entity / incremental theorist from equation

Similarly, there was little difference in the learning goals of students who are the first in their family to attend University (or not), as shown in Table 5.22. 83 students are the first in their family to attend University, and of these 60 (72%) see learning and understanding as most important, with 14 (17%) seeing passing the assignment as more important and 9 (11%) who can't decide. Of those not the first in their family to attend University (50 students), 33 (66%) of them felt learning and understanding was most important, 13 (26%) passing the assignment, and 4 (8%) were undecided. The most significant finding here (as already established) is that the majority of students feel that learning and understanding is more important than passing the assignment.

first to university in family	Learning / mastery goal or performance goal (including those who stated both / can't decide)			
	both / can't decide	learning and understanding	passing assignment	Total
Yes	9	60	14	83
No	4	33	13	50
Total	13	93	27	133

Table 5.22 Relationship between being the first in the family to go to university and learning goal

Looking at any relationship between academic profile and implicit theories, Table 5.23 suggests that, of the 10 entity theorists, 8 (80%) have 5 or more GCSE's, as compared to 59 of the 95 (62%) incremental theorists, suggesting entity theorists may have a stronger academic background. There is not, however, a significant relationship between academic background and holding an incremental or entity theory ( $X^2(1) = 1.3, p = 0.26$ ).

Academic background	Questionnaire outcome (excludes unclear theorists)		
	Incremental	Entity	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	36	2	38
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	59	8	67
Total	95	10	105

Table 5.23 Relationship between academic profile and implicit theory

Considering these academic groups and whether intelligence is seen as a result of effort or ability (Table 5.24), both reveal similar percentages that attribute intelligence to effort (24% and 34% respectively) and ability (25% and 23%).

With regard to learning goals (Table 5.25), there is also little distinction between these two groups of students from different academic backgrounds. Thirty-nine (76%) of those with less than 5 GCSE's saw learning and understanding as more important; with 8 (17%) seeing passing the

assessment as most important. This compares with 54 (66%) of those with less than 5 GCSE's believing that learning and understanding are more important, and 19 (23%) seeing passing the assessment as most important.

Academic background	Equation re: intelligence			
	Both contribute equally	effort / incremental	ability / entity	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	26	12	13	51
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	35	28	19	82
Total	61	40	32	133

Table 5.24 Relationship between academic profile and Entity / incremental theorist from equation

Academic background	Learning / mastery goal or performance goal (including those who stated both / can't decide)			
	both / can't decide	learning and understanding	passing assignment	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	4	39	8	51
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	9	54	19	82
Total	13	93	27	133

Table 5.25 Relationship between academic profile and learning goal

In summary, Dweck's theories around achievement motivation, including beliefs about intelligence, were explored in this cohort of 133 students at the beginning of the course. The 8-item questionnaire was found to be reliable (overall measure Cronbach's alpha = 0.79), and this questionnaire suggested most students, 95 of them, were incremental theorists, with just 10 entity theorists and 28 students not fulfilling the criteria for either implicit theory clearly.

There was a mis-match between the findings of this implicit theory questionnaire and the equation looking at the students' beliefs about how effort and ability contribute to intelligence; these results did not correlate. A relationship between being an entity theorist and seeing ability as contributing most to intelligence, and being an incremental theorist and seeing effort as contributing most to intelligence was not evident. In fact, regardless of the implicit theory the student had, 101 students (76%) felt that either effort alone or effort and ability in equal measure was what contributed most to intelligence, with just 32 students believing that ability contributed most to intelligence.

74 of the 105 students who demonstrated a clear incremental or entity theory felt that learning and understanding were more important than passing the assessment; this included 9 of the 10 entity theorists. Across the cohort of 133 students 93 (70%) saw learning and understanding as more important than passing the assessment. The relationship between being an incremental theorist and pursuing a learning / mastery goal is therefore evident, but a relationship between being an entity theorist and pursuing a performance goal is not. Looking at the characteristics of those who were revealed as entity / incremental theorists there was a clustering of entity theorists (6 of the 10 identified by the questionnaire) who were aged 21 or under, but incremental theorists were spread across age groups. Similarly, there was a fairly even distribution across age range of how students saw effort / ability contributing to intelligence. Slightly more students over the age of 25, 51% of them, saw both effort and ability as contributing equally to intelligence; this compares to 40% of those aged 25 and under. Of the 10 entity theorists 8 had an academic background that exceeded 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) or above, but the academic backgrounds of incremental theorists were spread across the range of qualifications. Academic background and family history of attending University were not found to be significantly related to the type of implicit theory one holds, how intelligence is perceived (in terms of effort / ability), or learning goals pursued.

### Choice of assessment

Students had a choice of option A – a 2000 word essay, or option B – 3 smaller essays (2 x 500 words and 1 x 1000 words). Choices made and student characteristics and beliefs that led to their choice were examined. In total 120 students submitted an assessment. 103 chose assessment A, 17 chose assessment B. Mean age of those who chose option A was 27.7 yrs (SD 9.9). Mean age of those who chose option B was 33.1 yrs (SD 7.9). Therefore, those who chose option B



more likely to be older. Looking at age groups to see if this relationship between assessment choice and age is evident, Table 5.26 suggests that the younger students did not choose option B, with only 1 of the 45 students between the ages of 17 and 21 years choosing option B. Constructing a simple table to compare the choices of younger and older students (Table 5.27) and doing Chi square analysis showed  $X^2(1) = 7.9$ ,  $p = 0.005$ , a significant relationship between age and choice of assessment, with younger students not opting for option B.

Age group	Assessment choice		
	Choice A	Choice B	Total
17-21	44	1	45
22-25	12	2	14
26-30	8	3	11
31-35	16	6	22
36-40	7	1	8
41+	16	4	20
Total	103	17	120

Table 5.26 Assessment choice and age group (1)

over & under 25's	Assessment choice		
	Choice A	Choice B	Total
25 or under	56	3	59
26 +	47	14	61
Total	103	17	120

Table 5.27 Assessment choice and age group (2)

Of the 17 students who chose assessment B, 15 were the first in the family to attend University (Table 5.28). This is a significant relationship, Chi square:  $X^2(1) = 5.60$ ,  $p=0.018$  (significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding needs to be considered in light of the finding that, of the 75 students who

were the first in the family to attend University, 60 chose and submitted option A. It may therefore be fairer to view this finding as demonstrating that those with a family history of University are less likely to choose option B.

first to university in family	Assessment choice		
	Choice A	Choice B	Total
Yes	60	15	75
No	43	2	45
Total	103	17	120

Table 5.28 First in the family (or not) to go to university and assessment choice

Experience of having done an essay-type assessment before was also found to be related to choice of assessment (Table 5.29). Of the 17 students who chose option B, 7 had not done an essay type assessment before. Only 10 of the 101 who have this experience chose option B. Chi square:  $X^2(1) = 9.55$ ,  $p=0.002$  (highly significant).

Experience of essay-type assessment	Assessment choice		
	Choice A	Choice B	Total
No	12	7	19
Yes	91	10	101
Total	103	17	120

Table 5.29 Experience of essay type assessment and assessment choice.

As a relationship was found between experience of this type of assessment and confidence to undertake this assessment in future, it is likely that the amount of confidence students expressed influenced choice of assessment. Of the 17 students that chose option B, 14 reported feeling 'not very confident' or 'afraid' of doing the assessment (Table 5.30). This relationship was found to be significant with  $X^2(3) = 15.3$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . ( $n = 116$  as 4 students did not express feelings about confidence).

confidence to do essay-type assessment	Assessment choice		
	Choice A	Choice B	Total
very confident	3	0	3
quite confident	52	3	55
not very confident	41	10	51
Afraid	3	4	7
Total	99	17	116

Table 5.30 Relationship between assessment choice and confidence

To summarise, choice of Option B is less likely to be made by a younger student, a student who has a family history of University, or a student who has experience of essay-type assessments and has confidence to do one in future.

In questionnaire 2, students were asked why they chose the assessment option they did. The responses not only confirm the findings above, but add some depth of understanding to why choices were made. Despite the fact that so many students voiced self-doubt about engaging with this first summative assessment, the majority chose to do the 2000-word essay (option A). Thematic analysis of questionnaire and focus group comments was carried out and identified 2 primary explanations for this choice. The first was that students that felt 'able' (experienced, confident, ready, option A easier); the second was students who felt 'driven' (challenge, motivation, want to get used to doing longer piece of work). There was a third small cluster of students who were 'advised', (recommended by tutor / friend / partner).

Examples of comments that reflect these clusters include:

'It seemed more challenging and I thought it best to deal with it now as the rest of the assignments are this style and length' (18 years, first in family to university, 5 GCSE's). A student that saw option A as a 'challenge'.

'Having spoken with my partner his advice was to go for A and not B' (45 years, first in family to university, no formal qualifications). A student who was advised to do option A.

'Although never doing (sic) an essay before even at a lower level I felt I had to start at this level straight away and learn from this' (50 years, not first in family to university, Portfolio entrant). A student who reflects wanting to get used to doing a longer piece of work.

'I was confident in my essay-writing ability due to being taught academic writing at college and University' (33 years, first in family to university, portfolio entrant); 'I am used to lengthy assignments as I studied A levels just before I came to University' (18 years, first in family to university, 3 A levels) and 'I felt this was an easier option for me and I am more comfortable with longer pieces of work' (19 years, not first in family to university, 1-2 A levels). These three students who felt confident in choosing option A as they reveal experience of writing longer essays, so comfortable with this type of assessment.

Analysis of comments made by students who chose option A revealed that those who chose option A were represented across the age range of the cohort, and across the variance in academic ability.

Comments from those who chose Option B were thematically analysed and the primary reason for this choice centred on self-doubt (lack of experience / confidence, thought it would be easier), with a small cluster of students who were 'advised', (recommended by tutor / friend / partner). Examples include:

'I chose this assignment as I thought it would be better for me as not being in study for a while it would be better to get back into the way of doing assignments' (29 years, not first in family to university, 1-4 GCSE's). A student who perceived option B as better as s/he lacked experience of study.

'Because I have been out of education for some years I was not sure if I could complete a full assignment straight away' (31 years, first in family to university, 1-4 GCSE's); and 'I chose this option as I had never done any academic writing previously and was very nervous about my first attempt at it. Breaking it down made it easier to tackle' (21 years, first to family to university, NVQ3). These students reveal lack of experience of academic writing and feel this option would be easier.

'Not very confident in own ability and have learning difficulties' (28 years, first in family to university, portfolio entrant). A student lacking in confidence and self-beliefs about ability.

'I was advised that it would be a more suitable option due to have (sic) little knowledge of writing an assignment' (51 years, first to family to university, portfolio entrant). This student reflects being advised to choose option B.

Analysis of comments made by those students that chose option B represent students with weaker academic profiles.

Interesting comments were offered in the open section at the end of the questionnaire, and in the focus group, that related to being given a choice of assessment. There was a strong feeling expressed by some students that being given a choice made a positive difference to them. Having choice of subject area and population to study gave them, they felt, the option to choose a subject area that was of interest to them, and therefore they felt more motivated to study it. The choice of type of assessment was commented on by students too. Many stated they chose option A as they felt it would be a challenge, and they felt as it was *their* choice they were more motivated to do this longer piece of work. Choosing to do the assignment led students to feel they had not been 'given' the assignment as such, but had chosen to do it and so felt more motivated.

Examples of comments include:

'not only were you given a choice in the topic, but it was in different age groups as well....that was good, so that put you on a good start really I felt' (33 years, 1-4 GCSE's)

'I think the reason I did so well was the fact that we got to choose something that interested me, however, this may not always be the case in future assessments' (20 years, 1-2 A level equivalent)

'I feel because we had a chance to choose our first assignment I enjoyed the research a lot more' (34 years, 1-2 A level equivalent)

'Having the chance to choose which assessment option to do made me feel more confident about starting the assignment, especially as it was the first one' (21 years, 1-2 A level equivalent).

Such comments affirm the decision to offer a choice of assessment, and reinforce the benefits of this choice to the student.

#### Post-assessment analysis – Tutorial support

In questionnaire 2, students were asked to reflect on the tutorial support they received. Most participants, 95 of them, reported accessing tutorial support and offered written comments about it. 76 of the statements described tutorial support as helpful and qualified why; 4 stated there were aspects of support that were helpful, but some that were not helpful, and 15 found tutorial support unhelpful and justified their reasons for this. Only 3 students said they did not access tutorial support. This finding is reflected in the quantitative data collected from questionnaire 2 about tutorial support, which showed that 40 students accessed both face-to-face and e-mail support, 30 students accessed face-to-face support only, and 25 utilised e-mail support only, with 3 students not accessing tutorial support at all.

As all but 3 students accessed tutorial support, accessing support generally could not be related statistically to factors such as assessment experience, academic background or other demographic variables.

The type of tutorial support students accessed may have varied for different groups of students. Looking at the different forms of tutorial support used, and student confidence to undertake this assessment, Table 5.31 suggests that type of support was not related to level of confidence.

A similar pattern of access to support across confidence levels is evident. (n=94 as 4 students did not rate their confidence level in questionnaire 1 due to having no experience of this form of assessment).

Tutor support	confidence about doing an essay-type assessment				
	very confident	quite confident	not very confident	Afraid	Total
no support	0	1	2	0	3
Face-to-face	0	13	15	2	30
e-mail	1	10	11	1	23
Face-to-face & e-mail	1	22	12	3	38
Total	2	46	40	6	94

Table 5.31 Relationship between confidence about assessment and tutorial support

As the literature suggests a relationship between accessing tutorial support and maturity, this was examined. The mean age of the 3 students who did not access support was 21 years, for the 25 students who accessed e-mail support only it was 26 years. The mean age of the 30 students who accessed face-to-face support only was 31 years, and those who accessed both e-mail and face-to-face support (40 students) mean age was 30.5 years. There is a small age difference; with those accessing only e-mail support being younger. This suggests that face-to-face support may be preferred by more mature students. As Table 5.32 suggests, most students accessed face-to-face support (70 of the 98). Looking at the difference between the age groups 25 and under, and over 25's, and cross-tabbing with face-to-face and e-mail support it appears that students over 25 may have a preference for face-to-face support. Chi square analysis shows this relationship to be significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level ( $X^2(2) = 7.6, p = 0.02$ ), suggesting a relationship between age group and type of tutorial support, with the older age group accessing face-to-face support more.

Age group	Tutor support			
	no support	e-mail only	face-to-face	Total
25 or under	3	16	25	44
26 +	0	9	45	54
Total	3	25	70	98

Table 5.32 Age and tutorial support

As type of tutorial support may relate to academic qualifications on entry to University this was looked at, but as can be seen in Table 5.33 there was no significant difference in the type of tutorial support utilized by those with weaker academic backgrounds to those with a stronger academic profile.

Academic background	Tutor support				
	no support	Face-to-face	e-mail	Face-to-face & e-mail	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	1	14	7	17	39
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	2	16	18	23	59
Total	3	30	25	40	98

Table 5.33 Academic background and tutorial support

Table 5.34 suggests that being the first in the family to attend University, or having a family history of higher education does not have a significant impact on type of tutorial support that was sought (percentage of group in parenthesis).

first to university in family	Tutor support				
	no support	Face-to-face	e-mail	Face-to-face & e-mail	Total
Yes	2 (3%)	19 (29%)	17 (26%)	28 (42%)	66
No	1 (3%)	11 (34%)	8 (25%)	12 (37%)	32
Total	3	30	25	40	98

Table 5.34 Academic background and tutorial support

The comments that students offered about their tutorial support within the questionnaire and focus group were analysed thematically with respect to the research questions. Examples of student comments that led to the development of the themes are included below. Firstly, 80% of comments were positive, with 16% negative and the remaining 4% ambivalent. The two clusters



that emerged reflected the student view that tutorial support was useful, or not useful. The majority of students thought tutorial support was 'useful', and their comments reflected three positive themes related to tutor accessibility, tutor guidance, and tutor feedback. Many comments within the latter two themes included reference to increasing confidence and self-reliance, largely through feedback regarding their work. Some students, however, did express the belief that it was the tutor support that led to their success, not their own ability or effort.

The much smaller 'not useful' cluster had two main themes. These were inconsistent tutorial advice from different tutors, and unsupportive tutors. These comments were very emotive.

Examples of comments that reflected 'useful' tutorial support include:

'Excellent. Without tutor support I don't think I would have got the mark I got' (42 years, Access course) and 'The tutors was (sic) very helpful in guiding me in the right direction, I feel that without this support I would not have done so well' (27, Portfolio). Though happy with tutorial support, these students reflect the belief that their success was in some part due to tutorial support.

'It's just as well that we could e-mail to you because we may have got fails, so I think that's the best way. The detailed assignment brief was absolutely brilliant, because we knew where we were looking, we knew what you actually wanted us to put in the assignment, so that was really a good start' (42 years, Access course). This comment reflects satisfaction with access to tutorial support (via e-mail) as well as with the written assessment guidance provided.

'First of all I was doing it wrong, when I e-mailed I got told to look at it differently, and the feedback what you said I found very helpful' (31 years, portfolio). This student reflects on the usefulness of feedback.

'Yes, it was very helpful. The tutor gave me a few pointers and instilled confidence in me by praising what I had done so far' (28 years, diploma). As well as seeing tutorial support as helpful this student cites praise within ongoing feedback as instilling confidence.

'I had no idea of the standard tutors expected, so it was very helpful to have that face-to-face to make it clear' (44 years, diploma). This comment reflects both accessibility of tutorial support (in terms of face-to-face support), with subsequent guidance making expectations clear.

'It was helpful as positive comments were made on my writing style and the content. It made me believe I would get an above average grade' (35, access course). This student comments on tutor feedback improving self-belief about ability to achieve.

'I found it (e-mail support) quite helpful 'cos you could be doing it at some silly time at night...and you could think well I can e-mail it now rather than remembering to make an appointment' (30 years, diploma) and 'Very helpful. Questions were answered promptly no matter how many questions needed answering. The tutors were very welcoming' (31 years, portfolio entrant). These statements reflect tutor accessibility.

(Comment from a student who did not access support until final week of module) ... 'because I never felt that I was up to writing the assignment, and it's nothing critical about the support, it's critical of myself....I had only got half of it done in the week before it was due in...and that was panic stations where I asked for it to be looked at and that's the truth of it.... I could not have done it in a group, in a room, because I thought it was rubbish' (50 years, portfolio entrant). This statement reflects the need to offer tutorial support in a range of formats to maximise its accessibility, but lack of confidence or self-belief in ability inhibited this student seeking support.

The following are examples of student comments that reflect tutorial support as 'not useful' to them:

'It helped to know I was on the rights tracks (sic) but comments from the tutor knocked me back a little as helpful as they were, they weren't very supportive and positive' (22 years, 5 GCSE's). This student describes accessing tutorial support, but the subsequent feedback was felt to be unsupportive and undermined the students' confidence.

'Not really helpful. E-mail too brief, harsh in what there (sic) were saying, appeared to me that she had no time to look at it' (18 years, 1-2 A levels or equivalent). This student reports dissatisfaction in terms of inadequate tutorial support.

'I e-mailed one tutor for help and got no response, so e-mailed a different one finally got two replies both saying to change or add different areas, some conflicting, so did not know what to put

in' (24 years, degree). This student reports difficulty accessing tutorial support, and then dissatisfaction with inconsistent advice.

Analysis of all student comments did not reveal any pattern in terms of how students across the age range or with different academic backgrounds reported usefulness (or not) of tutorial support.

Fig 5.2 represents thematic analysis of students' beliefs about tutorial support. It depicts the two clusters of tutorial support being 'useful' or 'not useful', the larger 'useful' box representing that this was the majority view. Themes are identified within the boxes, with speech bubbles that offer further examples of comments that led to these themes being identified.

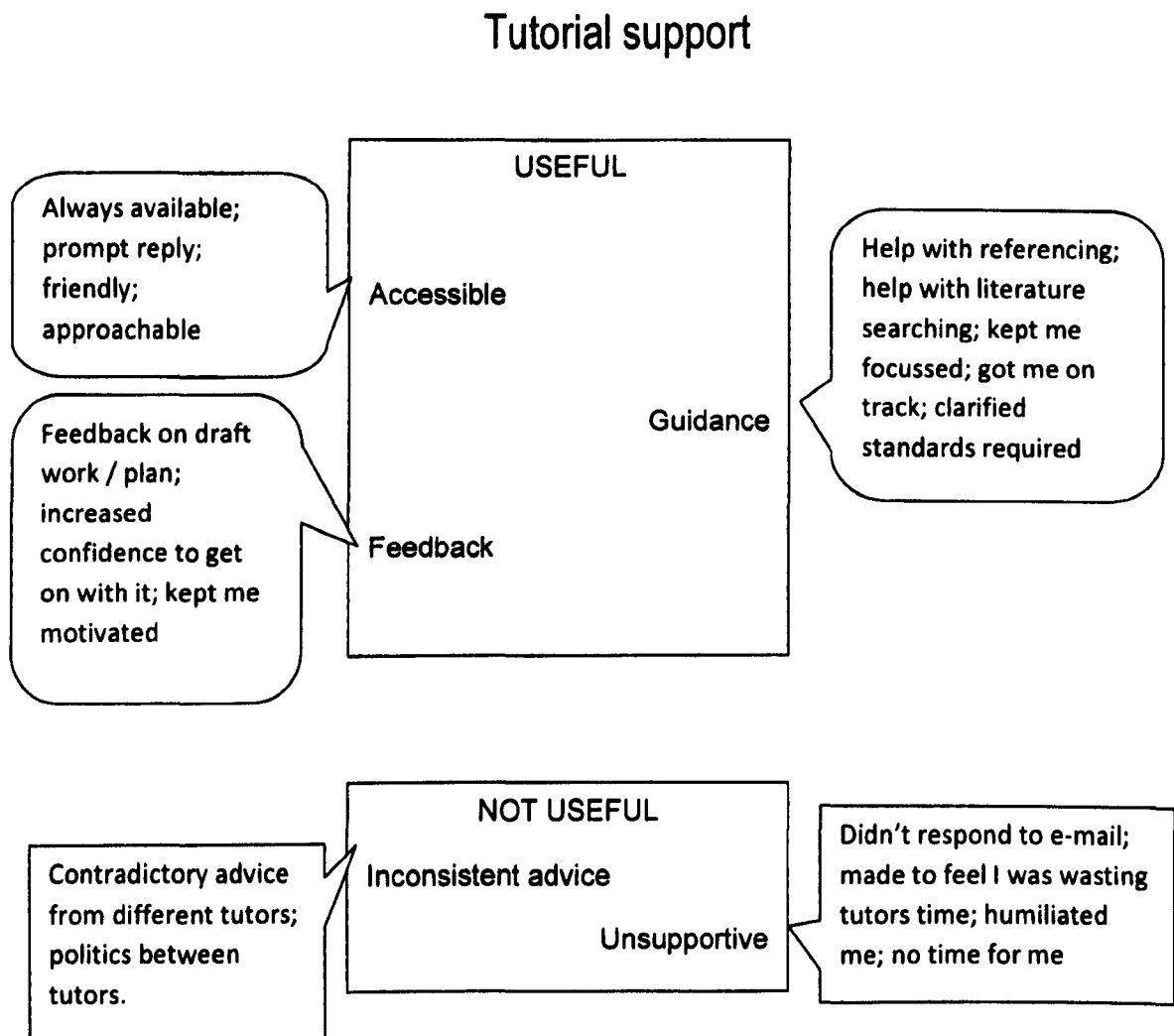


Fig 5.2 Thematic analysis of students' beliefs about tutorial support.

To summarise, all but 3 students utilized some form of tutorial support. The type of support they accessed was not related to experience of having done this type of assessment before, confidence to undertake this assessment, family history of University, or academic profile. Most students found tutorial support useful, guiding them, advising them and keeping them on track, with tutors described as accessible and friendly, but some students found tutorial support unhelpful, contradictory and on several occasions negative and undermining of their confidence. Findings suggested that the majority of students prefer face-to face tutorial support; and whilst some younger students may be happy using just e-mail support, more mature students tend to prefer face-to-face support alongside, or instead of, e-mail support.

#### Post-assessment analysis - Peer support

According to the data collected on questionnaire 2, twelve students reported that they did not use peer support. Of the 86 students that did use peer support, 59 engaged in face-to-face peer support, 5 accessed peer support via e-mail and 1 via blackboard, and 21 students utilised both face-to-face and blackboard / e-mail peer support.

As students had to work in groups to complete a formative piece of work, then it is unsurprising that most report working with peers. In the qualitative comments, 82 students offered some comment on their experience of peer support. Thematic analysis of these comments, and those transcribed from the focus group, revealed strong feelings about the benefits of peer support through a very evident network of support. This analysis highlighted two themes that reflected this network of support. One of these was a bonding of mutual support as they were 'all in the same boat', and so shared fears and difficulties, exchanging reassurance and support that they describe as boosting confidence, morale and motivation. The other theme was collaboration in terms of their work; sharing and pooling resources, giving each other advice, and guiding each other in areas such as referencing. Many students cited both the supportive and collaborative role of peers as valuable to them. The enthusiasm and strongly emotive nature of comments on peer support far exceeded the generally more 'instrumental' comments about the usefulness of tutorial support.

Comments that evidence mutual support and bonding with peers include:

'Support in general that your (sic) not alone isolated in negative feelings, helping to promote positive feelings. In short, being there for each other' (50, portfolio entrant).

'It's important that we all muck in together, because we are all here wanting to be nurses, working within a team, this is where it begins' (33years, 1-4 GCSE's).

Statements that evidence students' collaboration with their assessment preparation include:

'We shared places to look for articles, checked our referencing styles and reassured each other' (31 years, 1-2 A levels or equivalent).

'Working together when first starting to use IT resources / internet searching, general encouragement and swapping information' (41 years, diploma)

The following student comments encapsulate those who harnessed both pastoral support from peers and collaboration with study:

'It was useful to know that you were all along the same lines, so it was a good confidence booster, and we shared ideas of how to search for information' (24 years, 1-5 GCSE's)

'Sharing concerns and doubts about my ability. Also, to understand how the internet and e-mail worked' ( 31 years, NVQ 3)

'Peers were able to help me identify good and bad research. They were also a good support network when I felt under pressure, and working side by side in the computer room made me feel could concentrate better' (24 years, 5 GCSEs)

The few (n = 4) who did not find peer support entirely useful felt that working with other students made them feel more insecure or vulnerable regarding their ability. For example:

'It was helpful to discuss issues but I also felt quite vulnerable and insecure about my own ability when hearing about other students' (35 years, portfolio entrant)

'I chose to be quite selective as to who I spoke to as there was a lot of hype and panic and I didn't find that helpful' (44 years, diploma )

Dweck and colleagues' theories of achievement motivation state that it is incremental theorists that are more likely to seek support. As all but 3 students accessed tutorial support and all but twelve utilised peer support relating support to their theory is unlikely to yield meaningful relationships. From the results of Dweck's questionnaire, of the 98 respondents to questionnaire 2, seven were entity theorists, 70 were incremental theorists, and 21 had no clear theory. Of the 7 entity theorists all used tutorial support and only 2 did not access peer support. Of the 70 incremental theorists all but 3 utilised tutorial support, and all but 5 peer support.

No evident distinction in support-seeking behaviour between entity and incremental theorists was found. Almost all students, regardless of implicit beliefs about ability, utilized both tutorial and peer support.

#### Support of online learning environment

Students were asked about the usefulness of 'Blackboard', the virtual learning environment accessed online that contains all the course materials. Most students (n=75) reported it was useful to them, 20 did not find it useful, and 3 students could not recall using it. Positive comments related mostly to the quality of course materials, in particular the guidance offered within a detailed assignment brief, including study skills guidance, referencing guidance and grading criteria. Comments reflected that these materials helped them to understand what tutor expectations of the assessment were. Some students used the informal discussion board facility to discuss issues related, and unrelated, to the module. Those who did not find blackboard useful described issues with their ICT skills, or finding the platform itself difficult to use. There was no evident pattern of use of blackboard that related to student age or academic background. Examples of comments from students include:

'Very useful. We were able to access a lot of information and contact peers via blackboard'

'Very useful as it contained the module handbook and detailed assignment brief plus help on referencing'

'I found the assignment brief and referencing helpful on blackboard, as well as how to do academic writing'

'I am not PC literate, so didn't find blackboard easy. I am not very academic so struggled'

'It took me a few months to achieve a greater understanding of how to use blackboard with success, so for my first assessment it wasn't so useful'

'I didn't use blackboard that much. That's why I only got a grade C!'

Discussion in the focus group also raised the issue of the usefulness of the assignment materials in blackboard which, they felt, made the requirements of the assessment clear. For example: 'the detailed assignment brief was absolutely brilliant...excellent because we knew where we were looking, we knew what you actually wanted us to put in the assignment, so that was really a good start for me anyway'.

#### Post-assessment analysis – assessment achievement

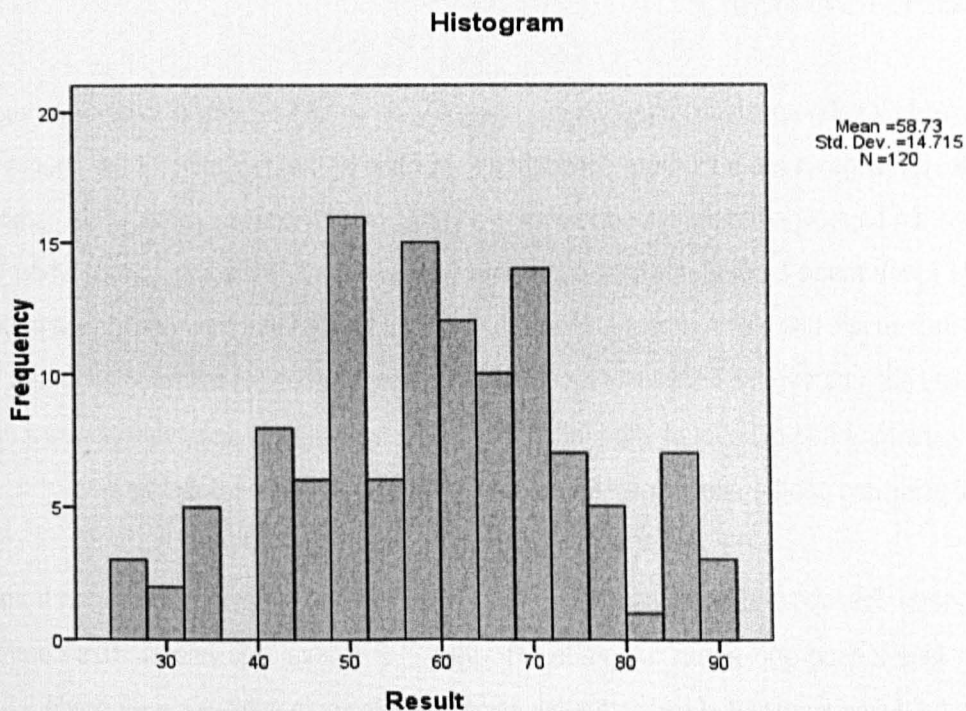
120 assessments were submitted, and were graded as shown in Table 5.35. Grade D and above are 'pass' grades. Grade E is a 'referral'; the student has not passed this attempt but may have a second attempt at this assessment. 27 students (23%) achieved an A grade, 32 (27%) a B grade, 31 (26%) a C grade, and 20 (17%) a D grade. 10 students (8%) did not achieve a pass grade. (13 students did not submit an assessment.)

Mean percentage was awarded was 58.7%, Range 25–90, Median 58, Standard deviation was 14.7.

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Frequency	27	32	31	20	10	120
Percentage	22.5	26.7	25.8	16.7	8.3	100

Table 5.35 Grade achieved

A histogram (Fig 5.3) reveals what looks like a normal distribution of marks around the mean. This distribution is considered normal as Kolmogorov-Smirnov test reveals p as 0.2 (and as this is greater than 0.05 there is insufficient evidence to suggest distribution is not normal).



Kolmogorov-Smirnov (120) = 0.070; p = 0.200

Fig 5.3 Grade achieved and test result

Students were asked, in questionnaire 2, how they felt about their grade. 97 of the 98 students who returned questionnaire 2 responded to this question. 46 reported their grade as better than expected, 28 felt it was what expected and 23 thought it was worse than expected. In written comments 63 students wrote about being happy with their achievement, 8 students made comments that reflected the grade was kind of what they expected, so did not feel happy or unhappy with it, and 26 commented on being unhappy about their grade. Many of the comments reflected positive feelings, with enhanced confidence and self-beliefs; others reflected undermining of confidence and self-beliefs.

Thematic analysis of both the questionnaire comments and the transcript from the focus group about the impact of grade achieved revealed two main themes. These represented factors that students felt contributed to their achievement (or lack of achievement). Firstly, the students' own effort and / or ability, and secondly the tutor's role. This was the case for both students who described an enhancement of positive feelings and self-beliefs, and those whose confidence had been undermined. Those for whom the impact of their result was positive described their hard



work / concerted study as paying off or being acknowledged, and tutor-support as playing a part in their success. For example:

'I was absolutely flabbergasted. I cried when I opened it as wasn't expecting to achieve such a high grade. It has given me a lot more confidence than I had at the beginning of the course as I now know I am capable of doing this course' (A grade, 40 years, Access course). This comment represents many made by students that expressed high emotions, including crying, when they found out their result. It also represents many students who stated that their confidence in belief in their ability had improved as a result of receiving the grade, as does the following comment:

'Amazed, although I had put a lot of effort into it. My confidence was low and I wasn't sure if I was capable of achieving good grades. Now I know I can' (A grade, 28 years, 1-4 GCSE's).

'Over the moon. Pleased and totally shocked. I feel it was the result of having the support from my tutor, both face-to-face and e-mail' (A grade, 31 years, 1-2 A level equivalent). This comment evidences the theme identified of seeing the tutor's role as a factor in achieving their grade.

For the effort I put in I felt I could have got a bit more, I also think that the marking was harsh (C grade, 19 years, 1-2 A level equivalent). This student reflects both themes, citing her/his own efforts as well as the role of the tutor as contributing to the grade (by marking harshly).

The more negative comments around losing confidence and self-belief also included comments related to ability, study skills or effort, or cited the tutor's behaviour (such as lack of support or harsh marking) as contributing to their grade. For example:

'Upset, annoyed as I felt I did better and deserved better. However, eager to improve and resolve mistakes' (Grade E, 18 years, 1-2 A levels equivalent)

There were a few comments outside these two clusters that acknowledged disappointment with their grade but felt assured they could improve on their performance.

'Disappointed, but motivates me to do better next time' (D grade, 20 years, 5+ GCSE's).

Factors related to grade such as age, academic background, family history of attending University, confidence and tutorial / peer support were examined to see if these factors impacted on achievement. With regard to age and grade achieved the mean age of those attaining a Grade A was 31.7 years; Grade B 30.3 yrs; Grade C 26.7 years; Grade D 24.1 years; Grade E 27.9 yrs. The mean age seems slightly higher for those achieving a grade A or B. Looking at a correlation of percentage awarded and age, Pearson product-moment correlation  $r(118) = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.015$ , so correlation between age and grade is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

The academic background of students prior to commencing this course was looked at alongside assessment grade achieved (Table 5.36), and a pattern does not emerge that suggests any significant relationship between these two variables.

Academic qualifications	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
no qualifications	0	2	2	0	0	4
portfolio entry	2	9	5	1	1	18
1-4 GCSE's	9	4	5	4	2	24
5 GCSE's or more	1	2	6	6	2	17
1-2 A level's/BTEC/Access HE/ NVQ3	8	5	8	8	4	33
3 or more A levels	2	6	0	1	0	9
Diploma	4	3	2	0	1	10
Degree	1	1	3	0	0	5
Total	27	32	31	20	10	120

Table 5.36 Relationship between academic background and grade achieved

Of the 120 assessments submitted, 46 were from students whose academic qualifications were below the 5 GCSE's that used to be required for registered nurse preparation; 74 had achieved above this level. This factor was cross-tabbed against students who passed / did not pass the

assessment to see if any significant relationship was evident (Table 5.37) and the subsequent Chi square ( $X^2 (1) = 0.32, p = 0.57$ ) clarifies that there is not a significant relationship between these variables.

Academic qualifications	pass / referred		
	Pass	referred	Total
less than 5 GCSE (or equivalent)	43	3	46
5 GCSE or more (or equivalent)	67	7	74
Total	110	10	120

Table 5.37 Academic qualification cross-tabbed with pass/ referral

Similarly, as is shown in Table 5.38, a relationship was not evident between grade and family history of attending University.

First in family to university	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Yes	19	18	24	9	5	75
No	8	14	7	11	5	45
Total	27	32	31	20	10	120

Table 5.38 Family history of university and grade achieved (a)

Of the 75 students who were first in their family to attend University 37 achieved A or B grade (49%); of those not first to University 22 (49%) achieved A or B. 70 (93%) of those students first in their family to go to University passed this first assessment, and 40 (89%) of those not first in their family to go to University passed. Thus, being the first in the family to attend University does not seem to disadvantage students in terms of their achievement. Simplifying this table for a Chi square (Table 5.39): First in family to University and pass / referred:  $X^2 (1) = 0.727; p = 0.394$ . Not significant.

First in family to university	pass / referred		
	pass	Fail	Total
yes	70	5	75
no	40	5	45
Total	110	10	120

Table 5.39 Family history of university and grade achieved (b)

Students' self-beliefs as they relate to confidence were analysed to see if they related to achievement in terms of grade (Table 5.40). In questionnaire 1 the question about confidence to undertake an assessment was not answered by 4 students who felt unable to offer an opinion on the grounds of having no experience of essay-type assessments, therefore the responses of 116 students are included. Of the 58 who were very or quite confident, 31 (53.4%) achieved an A or B grade, compared to 27 (46.6%) of the 58 not confident or afraid. At the other end of the scale, of the 58 confident, 5 failed to pass, compared to 5 of the 58 not so confident. Thus, as above, confidence to undertake assessment does not appear to be related to achievement in a significant way. (Chi square not significant.  $X^2(12) = 7.75, p = 0.80$ ).

Confidence to do essay-type assessment	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
very confident	1	0	2	0	0	3
quite confident	12	18	12	8	5	55
not very confident	12	11	12	11	5	51
Afraid	1	3	2	1	0	7
Total	26	32	28	20	10	116

Table 5.40 Pre- assessment confidence and grade achieved

The relationship between grade and tutor / peer support was also examined. Interestingly, thematic analysis of comments made by students about their grade (as noted on page 132) revealed that many felt their success (or downfall) was in some part due to the tutorial support

they had received. Looking at the data regarding the relationship between tutorial support and grade (Table 5.41) it appears that those students who accessed both face-to-face and e-mail support seemed to do best at achieving A and B grades.

Tutor support	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
no support	0	0	1	2	0	3
Face-to-face	8	8	5	6	3	30
e-mail	3	8	9	2	3	25
Face-to-face & e-mail	13	14	9	2	2	40
Total	24	30	24	12	8	98

Table 5.41 Type of tutorial support and grade achieved

To seek the significance (if any) of a correlation between accessing one or two forms of tutorial support and grade, the data were transformed. Access to support was annotated a value of 0 for no support, 1 for one form of support, and 2 for two forms of support; and grade was annotated values of 5 to 1 to grades A to E respectively. A non-parametric test - Spearman's rho was calculated to indicate the degree to which these two variable are related and revealed  $\rho(96) = 0.26, p=0.01$ , a significant correlation between grade and number of forms of tutorial support accessed. This suggests that accessing more than one mode of tutorial support may contribute to a better grade, and reflects some of the comments that students have made regarding the contribution of tutorial support to their success.

In relation to confidence, any shift in confidence level as reported before this assessment, and after (with respect to their next assessment) was compared. The histograms opposite (figs 5.4 and 5.5) represent pre and post assessment confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment:

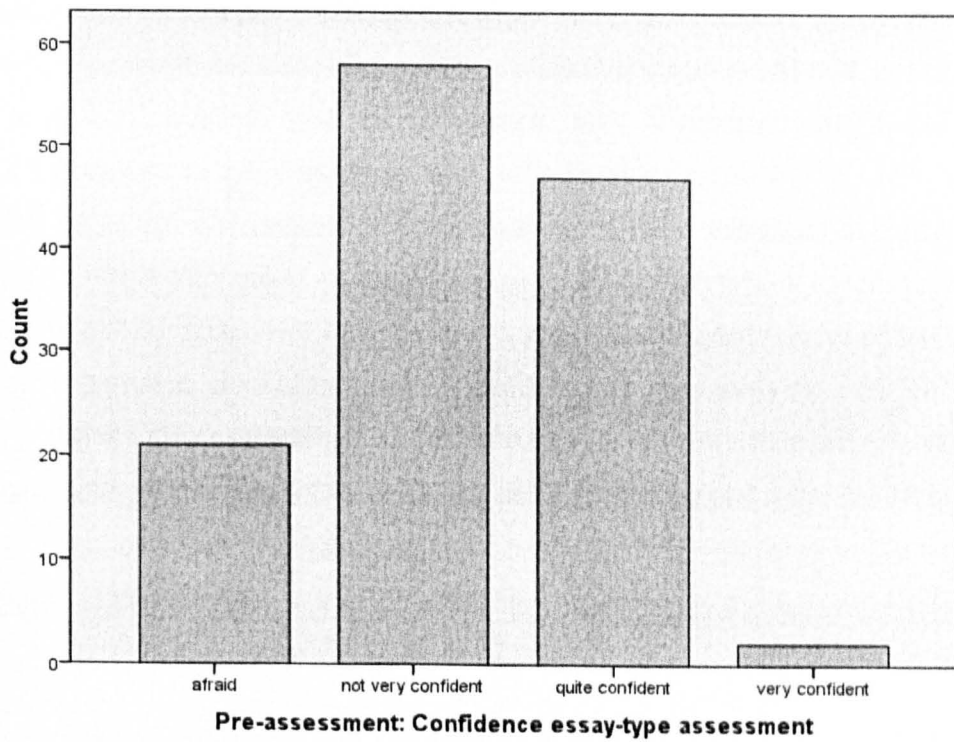


Fig 5.4 Pre-assessment confidence

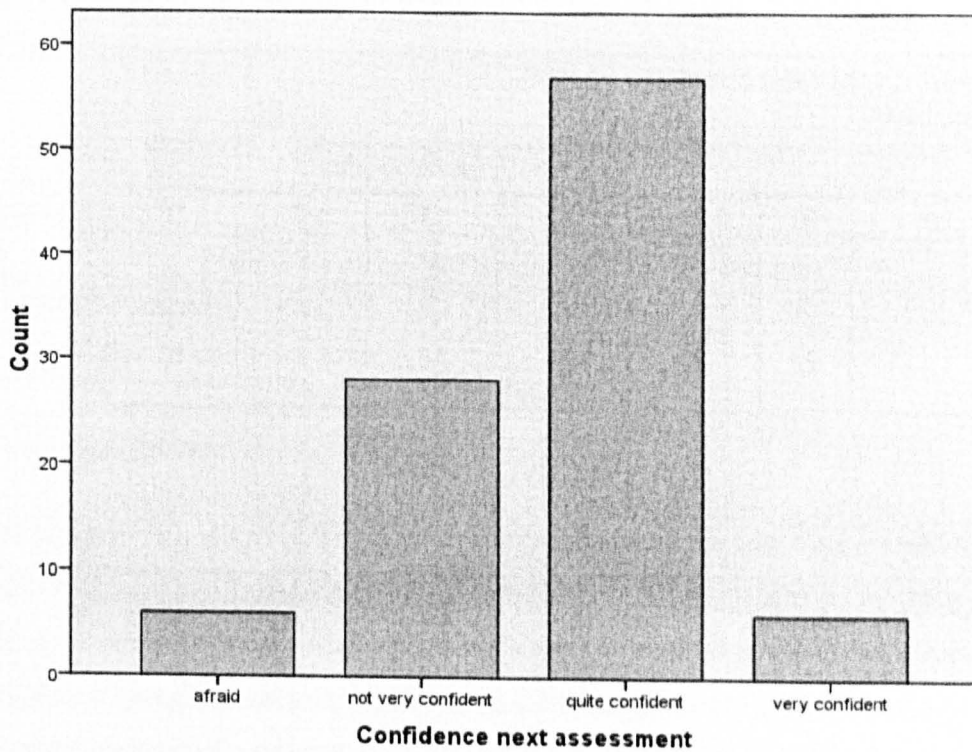


Fig 5.5 Post-assessment confidence

The difference between these two histograms suggests that following this assessment experience fewer people rate themselves as afraid / not very confident, but more rate themselves as quite confident, with a small increase in those stating they feel very confident. To look at the significance of this shift, Wilcoxon sign ranked test (a non-parametric test for comparing the two sets of scores) was conducted which shows that, of the 93 students who expressed feelings about their confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment, 14 lost confidence, 41 gained confidence and 38 did not change how they felt,  $z = -3.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.001$ ). This test reveals a significant shift, from pre-assessment to post-assessment, in confidence to undertake an essay-type assessment. This shift is most evident amongst the 64 students who were the first in their family to experience higher education. Prior to this assessment 43 expressed lack of confidence, and 21 some degree of confidence about undertaking this assessment. Post-assessment, 22 of these students expressed lack of confidence with 42 feeling fairly or very confident to undertake their next assessment.

As evidenced in Table 5.42 below, there was no relationship between achievement and whether a student was an entity / incremental theorist; with 50% of both groups achieving a grade A or B.

Questionnaire outcome (excludes unclear theorists)	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Incremental	20	23	23	14	6	86
Entity	2	3	2	2	1	10
Total	22	26	25	16	7	96

Table 5.42 Implicit theory and grade achieved

Looking at how students perceive intelligence (Table 5.43), a slightly higher percentage of those who see ability as contributing more to intelligence achieved an A or B grade – 17 of the 29 students (59%), as compared to those who see effort as contributing more -16 of the 37 students (43%). Similarly, of the 29 students seeing ability as contributing most to intelligence, just 6 (21%) achieved a D or E grade, as compared to 11 of the 37 (30%) who see effort as more important.

When excluding those who felt both effort and ability contribute equally to intelligence and performing a Chi square, there is no significance in this relationship.

Equation re: intelligence	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
no difference/ both contribute	11	15	15	7	6	54
effort / incremental	6	10	10	8	3	37
ability / entity	10	7	6	5	1	29
Total	27	32	31	20	10	120

Table 5.43 Beliefs about intelligence and grade achieved

Finally, with respect to learning and performance goals (Table 5.44), a similar pattern emerges regardless of pursuing a learning or performance goal, with 49% of those who feel learning and understanding is more important achieving an A or B grade, and 50% of those who see the assessment as more important achieving these top grades.

Learning / mastery goal or performance goal	Grade achieved					
	A	B	C	D	E	Total
both / can't decide	2	3	6	0	0	11
learning and understanding	19	23	21	17	5	85
passing assignment	6	6	4	3	5	24
Total	27	32	31	20	10	120

Table 5.44 Learning goals and grade achieved

To summarise, the student experience of achievement with this assessment was largely positive. A normal distribution of marks around a mean of 58.7% was achieved. It is evident from comments made by students that a good grade resulted in them reporting enhanced confidence



in terms of future assessment, and grades that were below that expected resulted in reduced confidence in ability, skills or faith in tutorial support. Whether self-beliefs were enhanced or undermined by their grade, students attributed their achievement, or lack of achievement, to their own ability / efforts or to tutor involvement. Academic background or being the first in the family to attend University (or not) does not appear to disadvantage or advantage students with regard to achievement. A relationship was found between age and grade whereby more mature students (26 years and over) tended to achieve better grades than younger students ( $p < 0.05$ ). Most students (70 out of 98) utilized face-to-face tutorial support. Students who accessed both face-to-face and e-mail support, as compared to just one form of support, tended to achieve higher grades ( $p < 0.01$ ), and more mature students tended to prefer face-to-face support to e-mail support alone. This relates to findings in the literature that suggest more mature students tend to achieve higher grades and access more face-to-face tutorial support.

Pre-assessment confidence level was not related to level of achievement, but there was a significant shift in confidence in a positive direction ( $p < 0.01$ ) when comparing pre- and post-assessment confidence to undertake this kind of assessment.

No relationship was found between the implicit theories of intelligence student's hold and achievement, or between their learning goals and achievement. Of the 98 students that completed questionnaire 2, 8 were referred on this assignment (Grade E): 4 were incremental theorists, 1 was an entity theorist and 3 did not meet the criteria of a clear theory from Dweck's questionnaire. Only 1 referred student did not seek tutorial support, and this student was an incremental theorist. The 'non-support seeking' behaviour expected of an entity theorist was therefore not evident. As so few students were revealed as entity theorists, and only one of these was referred on this assessment these numbers are too small to draw any conclusions from regarding the support-seeking behaviour of entity theorists.

#### Post-assessment analysis: Formative feedback and self-beliefs

An issue raised within the focus group, also raised in several questionnaire comments, was that the wait for their results and formative feedback was far too long. The wait was 9 weeks, and students felt this wait was difficult when they had moved on to different modules and further assessment without a result or formative feedback for guidance. Comments included:

'The stress of it really - did I pass? how did I do? you keep checking the dates and everything, so I think 3 months, to be honest, and again personally, I think it was WAY too long' (34 year old student, 1-4 GCSE's).

'Because I found I was waiting for my feedback to start the next assignment... even though you are getting your feedback from your tutor as you go along saying that you are going to be fine, you assume that means you are going to pass, but you don't know what sort of grade you are going to get, especially with your first assignment, first experience of University and it's a long time since you've studied, you don't know if you are getting it right, so I found that 'cos we had to wait so long you can't start the next one because you think, well, I need to get the feedback from that first to see if I'm doing the right thing' (30 years, diploma)

97 of the 98 students who returned questionnaire 2 reported that they had collected and read their feedback sheets. Of these 97 students only 44 said they could read the feedback, with 53 saying they could not read all or some of it. Despite difficulties understanding the feedback, few students went to see the tutor concerned to have the feedback read or explained to them. Only 7 of the 89 students who passed this assessment went to see a tutor to discuss their feedback (but did not state whether this was related to not being able to read the feedback), and 7 of the 8 students that were referred went to see their tutor (as they were told to in their referral letter). 4 of the 8 students in the focus group could not read their formative feedback, but none of them had gone to see the tutor who wrote the feedback for clarification or explanation of the feedback.

Questionnaire 2 did not elicit any information that explained why students did not seek clarification of what their formative feedback, but discussion in the focus group led to the facilitator asking: 'am I right in thinking that none of you went back to your tutor and asked for clarification, even though half of you couldn't read it?'

The response was that none of the group did see a tutor; the only explanation offered by one participant was that she was happy with her grade.

In response to the question asking students if there was anything in their feedback that they did not understand, responses centred primarily on difficulty reading the feedback. The main issue was illegibility of the tutor's hand-writing, with some students stating that the carbon copy was too faint. Focus group comments on written feedback supported the issue regarding the hand-writing and faint carbon copies.

The number of students that commented on their feedback is encouraging considering the difficulty in reading it. The comments in themselves demonstrate that many students not only read their feedback, but could also recall some of it 4 weeks later.

Students were asked to comment on elements of the feedback that made them feel good about themselves, and anything that made them feel less confident or capable. 82 students offered comment, with some clarifying that their appraisal was based only on the comments they could read. 63 students reported that something within the feedback made them feel good about themselves, and 19 reported that the feedback made them feel less confident or capable.

Looking at the comments made about formative feedback in the context of the questionnaire as a whole, there was a greater response, in terms of emotive responses and reflections on confidence, to the question asking students how they felt about the grade. Responses to this question about formative feedback were less emotive, and most not as detailed. This observation was reflected within focus group discussion, with all participants agreeing that they looked at the grade and focused on this, not reading the comments (if they were legible) until the impact of the grade had 'sunk in'.

Thematic analysis of comments made about how formative feedback made students feel (excluding comments about not being able to read the feedback), revealed two prominent themes the impact of the tutor(s) on enhancing confidence and self-belief or undermining it.

Comments made by tutors impacted significantly on how students felt, with emotions being expressed from happy and confident, through to disappointed and deflated. Tutor praise and positive affirmation of the students' work in terms of their ability, effort or academic skills was described as promoting confidence and self-belief with respect to future assessments, and was clearly motivating and affirming. Many students commented on how uplifting it was to receive praise for their work in their feedback. Tutor comment on deficits in academic skills or knowledge, however, were generally interpreted more personally by students, being seen as critical in the negative sense of the word and undermining both confidence and motivation for future study and assessment.

Below are comments that illustrate these points, which were offered in response to the question 'Was there anything in your written feedback that made you feel good about yourself?'

'Yes. Positive comments saying my essay was a 'pleasure to read', 'well-constructed' – made me feel very happy and confident' (Grade A, 37 years, degree), and 'Comments on the work being 'well-written' and 'well-researched' made the stress worthwhile' (Grade B, 24 years, 5 or more GCSE's). These comments illustrate the impact of specific comments made by the tutor on how the student felt about themselves, increasing confidence and making them feel good. Similarly, the comments 'All my written feedback gave me self-esteem; a massive confidence boost' (Grade A, 33 years, portfolio entrant) and 'The entire feedback really boosted my confidence in my abilities' (Grade A, 28 years, diploma) express how the whole of the tutor's formative feedback increased confidence and self-belief about ability.

'It has made me more confident about writing assignments. The tutorial support was good, if I hadn't of had it then I'm quite sure I would have got a worse grade' (Grade C, 24 years, 1-4 GCSE's). This comment again illustrates how formative feedback has improved confidence, but also sees tutorial support as contributing to achievement.

'I am happy that I passed, and I can improve with the feedback I was given' (Grade D, 18 years, 5 or more GCSE's). This comment illustrates the usefulness of the tutor's formative feedback to future learning.

'Nothing stood out as being positive, the feedback was very standard and mediocre, but pointed out areas for improvement. In general I feel that I am less able and less capable to achieve higher grades than in previous education' (Grade C, 21 years, 1-4 GCSE's). Although this student acknowledges that formative feedback highlighted areas for improvement, it also describes how the nature of the comments made by the tutor has undermined self-confidence and self-beliefs about ability. The following comments also illustrate the undermining impact of tutors comments on confidence and self-belief about ability, highlighting the profound impact that tutor comments were seen to have on how the student feels about themselves:

'Nothing whatsoever, the comments appeared most negative and undermining. I don't see how anyone's confidence can be built up by the comments. There are a variety of academic ability (sic) in the cohort yet we are all graded the same. I don't think this is fair...' (Grade D, 35 years, 1-2 A level equivalent).

'No. Only the grade. Comments made me feel less confident / capable as it concentrated on the negatives. Although this is useful constructive criticism it did not make me feel good'. (B grade, 22 yrs, 3 or more A levels).

'The grade and feedback made me feel less capable and made me question why I am on the course. Further reflection has allowed me to see that it is more about practice than the academic side of things'. (Grade D 18 years, 1-4 GCSE's).

'I felt deflated after I had worked so hard and it took a lot of support from my family to continue with the course. I doubt my ability now and feel physically sick at the thought of the next one' (Grade D, 18, 5 or more GCSEs)

These participant contributions also illustrate that statements made about the impact of tutor feedback, and the effect this had on confidence and self-belief, was not related to a particular age group or academic background, and does not appear to be specifically related to grade achieved.

#### Post-assessment: Implicit theories

In questionnaire 2, students were asked to complete again the equation: Intelligence = ....% ability and ....% effort ; and the question asking if they felt learning and understanding or passing the assessment was more important. These questions were asked again to see if there had been any change to students' implicit theories as compared to questionnaire 1.

This second completion of the equation Intelligence = ....% ability and ....% effort revealed that, of the 98 students, 43 felt that both ability and effort contributed equally to intelligence, 33 felt that effort contributed more to intelligence than ability (incremental theorist), 22 felt that ability contributed more than effort (entity theorist).

Table 5.45 offers a comparison of pre and post-assessment beliefs about intelligence (percentage of cohort in parenthesis) and suggests that there had been little change.

Beliefs about intelligence	Pre-assessment Equation re: intelligence	Post-assessment Equation re: intelligence
Both effort / ability equally contribute	61 (46%)	43 (44%)
Effort contributes more	40 (30%)	33 (34%)
Ability contributes more (Entity)	32 (24%)	22 (22 %)
Total	133	98

Table 5.45 Pre and post-assessment beliefs about intelligence

In order to test for any change Wilcoxon sign ranked test (a non-parametric test) was used to ascertain any change in the measure pre and post-assessment and confirmed that  $Z = -0.16$ .  $p = 0.88$ . No significant change.

The result of asking about learning goal - whether the students felt that learning and understanding or passing the assessment was most important to them - is presented in Table 5.46 alongside the pre-assessment responses.

Learning goal	Pre-assessment learning goal	Post-assessment learning goal
Learning and understanding more important (Learning / mastery goal)	93 (70%)	56 (57%)
Passing the assessment more important (Performance goal)	27 (20%)	40 (41%)
Both / can't decide	13 (10%)	2 (2%)
Total	133	98

Table 5.46 Pre and post-assessment learning goals.

There appears to have been a shift of focus, with an increased number of students, post-assessment, seeing passing the assessment as more important, and less seeing learning and understanding as less important, than was evident before the assessment. In order to ascertain the significance of this change Wilcoxon sign ranked test (a non-parametric test) was used to look

at the difference between this measure pre- and post-assessment, and confirmed this significance with  $Z = -3.9$ ,  $p = 0.00$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). A significant shift of the students focus was confirmed towards a performance goal with fewer pursuing a learning / mastery goal.

#### Further issues:

To ascertain if there were any issues related to this assessment experience that students wanted to raise students were asked a deliberately open question within questionnaire 2:

'Are there any points you want to raise about the support you had for this assignment, your result, the feedback you received or how the experience has made you feel about your ability to do another assignment in future'?

Analysis of responses to this question revealed some dissatisfaction with the length of time taken to receive assessment results and formative feedback, as discussed earlier. Several students felt that some of the module content was 'irrelevant' as they felt it did not relate to the assessment, which may reflect the students' focus on the assessment as opposed to learning within the module. There was further elaboration reflecting statements already made on tutorial support and formative feedback, the quality of both, and how they felt about support and feedback. This included some considerable emphasis on the how tutorial support was felt to have contributed to student success (or failure).

#### Summary of findings:

Looking at the data as a whole, a picture of this diverse cohort of students, and their journey through their first assessment process in higher education emerges. This picture is generally positive in terms of being supportive, enabling achievement and enhancing self-beliefs about ability, particularly evident in terms of increased confidence to undertake assessment in future.

Thematic analysis reveals three aspects of the assessment process that had the strongest positive impact on self-beliefs about ability, enhancing student confidence and motivation. These were the grade received, tutorial support and peer support. Tutorial support and grade also had the strongest negative impact on self-beliefs for some students. The impact of formative feedback was not as strong as the grade, but illegibility of the feedback is likely to have had a negative effect on its usefulness.

Regardless of academic background or age, most students voiced some anxiety about undertaking their first assessment, with those who are first in their family to attend University lacking confidence when compared to those who do have a family history of higher education. There was no subsequent difference in achievement between these two groups. Student feedback reflected that they understood what was required of them in this assessment.

Though more mature students generally commenced the award with a weaker academic profile, they achieved higher grades than their younger peers in the assessment. Academic background was not found to be related to achievement across this cohort. There was an increase in confidence and self-beliefs about ability across the cohort after the assessment experience.

Almost all students accessed both tutorial support (95 of the 98 participants) and peer support (86 of 98 participants). More mature students preferred face-to-face tutorial support to e-mail support, and students who accessed both e-mail and face-to-face tutorial support achieved higher grades. Many students felt their success (or failure) was attributable, to some degree, to tutorial support, with some attributing their achievement to their own ability and efforts.

With regard to self-beliefs about ability, this cohort proved to be a relatively homogenous group, with the majority of students being found to hold an incremental theory of intelligence; believing that intelligence is not fixed or innate, but can grow and develop with effort over time. Almost half of the cohort felt that both ability and effort contributed equally to intelligence. Most students felt that learning and understanding were more important to them than passing the assessment when they started this course, but after the assessment experience there was a shift towards fewer students seeing learning and understanding as most important; and more students believing that passing the assessment was a more important focus for them.

Though holding an incremental theory was related to pursuing a learning goal, very few students were revealed as entity theorists, and most students expressed the desire to pursue a learning goal, so a distinctive relationship between implicit theory and learning goal was not evident. Implicit theories about intelligence were not found to relate to support-seeking behaviours. Beliefs about intelligence and pursuing learning goals were not significantly related to age, academic background or having a family history of higher education.



Some of the findings from this study reflect findings in existing literature, with others offering a different view. In the following chapter these findings will be discussed within the context of the existing literature and the research aims.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

### Introduction

This illuminative evaluation explored the first assessment experience of a cohort of student nurses on a nursing diploma course in a post-1992 higher education institution. It aimed to ascertain aspects of the process that would enhance self-beliefs and confidence, and considered whether personal characteristics impacted on self-beliefs, on their engagement with the assessment process and on their achievement. It also examined students' beliefs about ability and whether there was a relationship between these beliefs and their learning behaviours during this assessment. Illuminative evaluation considered the assessment process as a whole, from the students' perspective, within the context of the learning milieu. Data was collated from a variety of sources not to measure the efficacy of the assessment process, or its outcomes, but to consider how it operates, what influences it and how it is experienced and judged by its main recipients – the students.

Student perceptions of the assessment experience offered some insight into practices within the assessment process that enhanced self-belief and increased confidence for future assessment, but practices that undermined self-belief were also revealed, which reduced confidence for future engagement with assessment. Looking at the data as a whole, a picture of this cohort of students, and their journey through their first assessment process in higher education emerges, a picture that is generally positive in terms of being supportive and enhancing self-beliefs about ability and confidence regarding future assessment. These findings are presented in Fig 6.1, which mirrors the key concepts from literature review and how they relate (presented in Fig 2.2), with factors in bold type reflecting the relative significance of these factors to student learning and the assessment experience.

Section 1 reflects the significance of the diverse student body within this study in highlighting the range of age and abilities that an assessment, and the learning environment, needs to accommodate. The need to look at curricula, policies and the impact of modularisation will be discussed within this chapter in terms of facilitating a learning environment that fosters student self-reliance and the development of independent, lifelong learners by, for example, enabling greater student involvement in their own learning. The inextricable link between learning and

assessment that should be deeply embedded within curricula and assessment policy, as well as reflected in education practice, will be discussed.

Section 2 considers findings in terms of the impact of student characteristics on assessment, and reveals that pre-course academic ability did not predict or relate to achievement in this first assessment. More mature students commenced the course with a generally weaker academic profile, but they achieved higher grades than their younger peers in the assessment. Social class was not studied directly, but the impact of being the first in the family to come into higher education was considered, and again this factor did not disadvantage students in terms of engaging with or achieving in assessment. This group were the least confident about undertaking an essay-type assessment, but this confidence did not impact on their engagement with tutors and peers, or on their achievement. They subsequently demonstrated the highest increase in confidence to undertake their next assessment.

Section 3 of Fig 6.1 considers the significance of self-beliefs about ability on the assessment experience. Students' implicit beliefs about intelligence related to learning goals and behaviours to a limited extent, but a different overall pattern of achievement motivation emerged than that proposed by Dweck and colleagues (Dweck 1986, 2000; Dweck *et al* 1995; Dweck and Leggett 1988). There was a significant increase in confidence to undergo assessment across the cohort after this experience, and a significant shift from a focus on learning and understanding, to seeing passing the assessment as most important. The homogenous nature of this cohort made it difficult to ascertain the relative merits of differing implicit beliefs, with this student group reflecting a belief in the malleable nature of intelligence and a preference for learning / mastery goals above focus on assessment, though this preference did shift somewhat subsequent to this assessment experience. It is worth considering how we can maintain this initial preference for learning rather than foster an increased focus on assessment as student's progress in higher education.

Finally, section 4 considers the assessment process as experienced by students. Aspects of the assessment process that had the strongest positive impact on self-beliefs about ability, and on confidence and motivation were: the grade received; tutorial support and peer support. Tutorial support and grade also had the strongest negative impact on self-beliefs, and deficiencies of formative feedback were evident. Again, increasing student involvement in the assessment experience is considered essential to offer more control to students and foster the degree of independence and self-reliance essential for supporting future learning and developing a health

care professional.

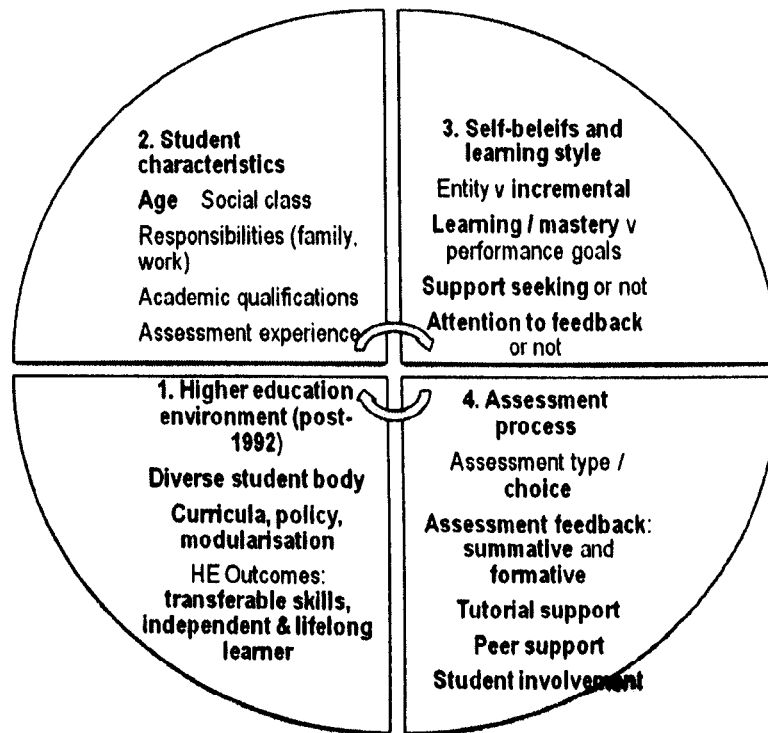


Fig 6.1 Study findings relative to summary of key concepts from literature review

If student success is measured in terms of achievement in assessment, then this assessment experience proved to be a successful one, and certainly the module team, award team and faculty would view the results (ninety-two percent pass rate) positively in terms of student learning. What grades achieved do not reveal is the effect of the assessment experience on the students' self-beliefs. Looking deeper, the student experience that lies behind these results reveals some very positive outcomes in terms of effective tutorial support, the mobilisation of peer support, good grades, increased student confidence, and predominantly student satisfaction with this assessment experience. Other findings, though, suggest that focus on the grade above formative

feedback could be problematic in terms of future learning, and the shift in student belief to reflect increased importance of the assessment over learning and understanding is antithetical to the intended aims of the pedagogical approach to learning within this award (as evidenced from documentary analysis)..

The first part of this discussion will consider the diverse nature of this cohort of students, their characteristics and self-beliefs and the impact (if any) of these factors on engagement with the assessment process. The student perspective on the assessment process will be explored, with a focus on the three aspects of this experience that were revealed by students as having the most impact on their self-beliefs and confidence: tutorial support, peer support and the grade. There will also be consideration of the role of formative feedback, which had a relatively weaker impact.

The second part of this discussion will consider the role of tutors in terms of their influence on the assessment process and how their actions impact on the student experience. This will include how tutorial support was structured; provision of feedback, both summative and formative, and how peer-support was fostered.

Finally, this discussion will draw together study findings and evidence of best practice in assessment to reflect on how the assessment process could be enhanced to foster students' positive self-beliefs, and facilitate their progress toward the learning, achievement and competence required of them as future health care professionals.

### **The students' experience of assessment: The impact of their characteristics**

This diverse group of students arrived at university with the aim of achieving a diploma and qualifying as a registered adult or mental health nurse. In common with many nursing cohorts (for example, Ofori 2000; Wright *et al* 1998) ninety percent of this group are female, with an average age of 29 years. The nursing diploma has a wide entry gate, enabling students to access the award with the minimum requirement of literacy and numeracy sufficient to complete a diploma, and evidence of good character. As a consequence the academic background of this group is broad, and includes students with a first degree through to students with no academic qualifications at all. Sixty-two percent of this group are the first in their family to access higher education Thirty-eight percent of this cohort have qualifications below 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) with mature students (over 25 years) generally holding weaker pre-entry academic profiles, but interestingly these more mature students tended to achieve better grades in the assessment than

their younger peers. This is not an isolated finding. Studies by, for example, Murray-Harvey (1993), White *et al* (1999) and Kevern *et al* (1999) found that mature students do better academically, and Ofori and Charlton (2002) concluded that students' entry qualifications were not the best predictor of academic performance, but that age made a difference, with 'very mature' (35 years plus) students demonstrating better overall academic performance. As age is revealed in these studies as a better predictor of academic performance than pre-entry qualifications it is worth considering why this is the case. One explanation is that more mature students access tutorial support more effectively and form relationships with tutors more easily (Brown 1993; Ofori and Charlton 2002), with Gibbs *et al* (1997) and Fearnley (1995) suggesting they make better use of tutorials and one-to-one tutor support. Within this study all but three students accessed tutorial support, so it was difficult to differentiate significant differences in use of tutorial support across the age range of the cohort, but what was evident was that more mature students preferred face-to-face tutorial support, and those students who accessed two forms of tutorial support (for example, face-to-face and e-mail support), regardless of age, tended to achieve better grades.

It has been suggested that differences in how mature and younger students learn may be related to the greater intrinsic motivation of mature students, their greater ability to engage with the more autonomous approaches to learning expected within higher education than their younger peers and having a deeper learning style (Harper and Kember 1986; Ofori 2000; Richardson 1994, 1995; Sadler-Smith 1996). Within this study intrinsic motivation was not measured, and learning styles not appraised, and any comments students made that referred to motivation and determination were not specific to a particular age group. What can be concluded, in line with other findings, is that academic qualifications may not be the most reliable main criterion for selecting student nurses (Jeffreys 1998; Meriel Hutton 1998), and that we should continue to attract mature students, even if their academic background is not strong, as they tend to achieve well. This study supports the appropriateness of the wide entry gate for those who want to register as a nurse with a diploma. If the nursing profession were to progress along its current trajectory of educating nurses at both diploma and degree level, then we would maintain this wide entry-gate to the profession. Recently a decision has been made by the Department of Health to make nursing an 'all graduate profession' with all future nurses being educated to degree level from 2013 (Department of Health 2009). Looking at the entry qualifications of this cohort, 71 (53%)

students within this current intake would fall below the minimum entry requirement for the degree programme which is currently 2 A levels or equivalent. Though higher education institutions are looking at ways to educate those with weaker academic backgrounds to ensure they are not lost to the profession, such as access courses and foundation degrees, it will inevitably mean these students will have to study longer than the traditional 3 years to become a registered nurse. They may also be more reluctant, at a confidence level, to consider degree study as compared to diploma level study. It can be deduced that despite lacking a strong academic background mature students do well in higher education. What they are likely to have, by virtue of their application to study in higher education, is some degree of self-belief that they can achieve, and as Bandura (1997) argued belief in one's ability to succeed may be the single-most important determinant of success.

#### **Students' self-beliefs and the assessment process:**

A positive finding in this study was that student confidence regarding assessment increased significantly subsequent to this assessment experience. This improvement in confidence was most evident in students who were the first in their family to experience University, a group that had less confidence about embarking on their first written assessment at the beginning of their course as compared to those with a family history of higher education. This initial lack of confidence was not related to their academic background or age, and did not impact on their achievement, but may have been directly related to lacking a family history of higher education. This group may have approached their studies with more trepidation than those students who had some insight or 'inside knowledge' of higher education because a family member had experienced it. To students without family experience of higher education 'University' can epitomize an elite institution considered to be out of their reach; or outside of their life choices. Archer and Leathwood (2003:184), for example, cite examples of working-class women talking positively about higher education as a means of bettering oneself, but feeling that participation was impossible for them. Such discourses are not uncommon (Ball *et al*, 2000; Raey 2001; Williams 1997), and can place self-doubt in the minds of those students taking this step into higher education, with concerns about not belonging or succeeding. Dweck (2000:37) discusses the phenomenon of this group of students, suggesting they may perceive they have less intelligence, which may impact on their efforts, create self-doubt and manifest defensive strategies such as reduced effort. Despite this postulation self-beliefs about intelligence were not found to differ

between those who have a family history of higher education and those who do not, within this cohort of students, but further exploration of this group's lower confidence levels when they enter University may be worth exploring. Certainly the significant increase in confidence following this assessment would suggest that elements of this experience enhanced their self-beliefs, in particular, peer and tutor support and success in this assessment.

Self-beliefs and learning behaviour: The achievement motivation model developed by Dweck and colleagues (Dweck 1986, 2000; Dweck *et al* 1995; Dweck and Leggett 1988) implies that the implicit theories that people hold structure elements of their behaviour and how they react to, or understand things. A distinction is made between incremental theorists and entity theorists. Incremental theorists see intelligence as malleable - that it can be improved with effort; they tend to pursue learning goals and employ deeper learning strategies. Entity theorists see intelligence as fixed, tend to pursue performance goals and employ more shallow learning strategies. These implicit theories suggest particular forms of behaviour, for example, the entity theorist is less likely to seek support or request feedback, whereas the incremental theorist is more inclined to seek support, adopt strategies that enhance their learning and seek challenge. The theory does not see these positions as polemic, but suggests that most people will subscribe to one or other position to some degree. Dweck and Leggett (1998) believe that the contrasting patterns of achievement behaviours predicted by this model would be strongest when students are confronted with challenge. Within this student group the majority referred to their first assessment as 'challenging', but despite this the proposed relationships between implicit theory, learning goals and behaviours did not emerge strongly, with participants revealed as a relatively homogenous group. The majority of students were found to be incremental theorists who pursued a learning / mastery goal. Most sought tutorial support, peer support and responded to feedback whilst developing their assignment. There were so few students identified as entity theorists that making any significant conclusions about behaviour patterns related to Dweck and colleagues achievement motivation theory was problematic.

Of the 133 students who participated in this study 95 were revealed as incremental theorists using Dweck's 8 -item questionnaire (Dweck 2000: 178), with 10 students classed as entity theorists and 28 students (21%) unable to be categorised as their score on the measure did not fulfil the requirement for a clear implicit theory. This percentage of 21% is higher than the 15% that Dweck



*et al* (1995) would expect to be excluded. The small number of entity theorists revealed is in contrast to Yorke and Knight's (2004) finding that one third of 2269 undergraduate students in their first and final years, across five universities in the North West of England were identified as entity theorists. Unfortunately, it is not evident from their study what the age range of participants was, a factor that may have gone some way to an explanation of the different findings had more of their participants been younger, as Dweck (2000) found that entity theorists were more highly represented in the younger age group.

On a second measure of implicit theory, where students had to offer the relative contribution of ability and effort to intelligence, the majority of students felt that both effort and ability contributed equally, with thirty percent students of believing effort played a greater part, and twenty-four percent that ability contributed more. Results from these two measures of implicit theory did not correlate, but according to the theory, those identified as incremental theorists should see effort as contributing most; and entity theorists should see intelligence as more attributable to ability. This finding suggests that in the case of this cohort there was not strong consistency between implicit theory (entity and incremental) and the degree to which students felt ability or effort contributed to intelligence. Though a slightly higher percentage of those who saw ability as contributing more to intelligence achieved an A or B grade as compared to those who see effort as contributing more, no significant relationship was found between implicit theory and achievement.

There was some difference between the pre-entry qualifications of incremental and entity theorists, but the difference was not statistically significant. Sixty-two percent of the 95 incremental theorists had 5 GCSE's or more, and eighty percent of the 10 entity theorists started the award with this level of academic achievement. The trend reflects Dweck's (2000:36) finding that entity theorists generally entered college with higher qualifications, but as found in this study, she reported that this did not equate to better achievement.

Mature participants achieved higher grades, and the literature reveals that mature students are credited with deeper learning strategies and more effective support-seeking behaviours (Richardson 1995; Ofori 2002) that contribute to their higher achievement. Such learning and mastery oriented learning behaviours are associated with incremental theorists, but as so many

participants in this study were revealed as incremental theorists, represented across all age groups, an association could not be confirmed between holding an implicit theory, age and use of support seeking behaviour.

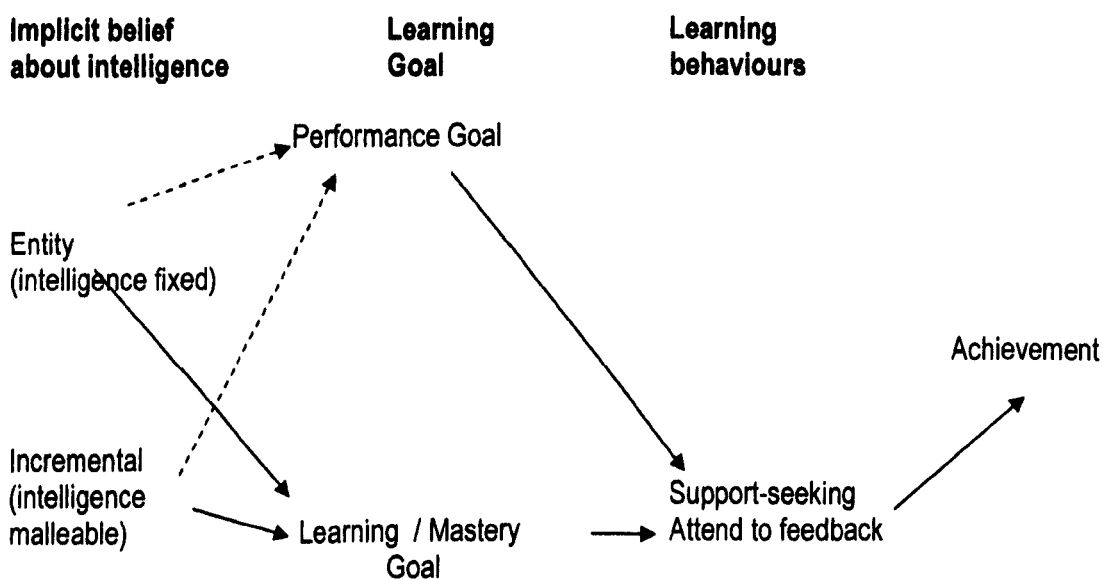
Similarly, almost all students regardless of whether they were incremental or entity theorists utilised tutor and peer support, commented on their grade and feedback, and reported learning behaviours associated with holding an incremental theory (Dweck *et al* 1995; Hong *et al* 1999). In this study only one student with an entity theory pursued a performance goal, seeing passing the assessment as more important than learning and understanding. Looking at other studies conducted in higher education, Roedel and Schraw (1995) found a weak relationship between entity theory and performance goal when students were faced with a challenge, and reported, similar to this study's findings, that entity theorists pursued both learning goals and performance goals. Furnham *et al* (2003) and Dupeyrat and Marine (1995) also reported lack of consistency between self-beliefs and goal-orientation. Taken together these findings call into question the consistency of the relationship between implicit theory and learning goals, particularly with students in higher education.

The literature does reveal some evidence of consistency in the relationship between learning goals / performance goals and achievement, for example Miller *et al* (1993) and Dupeyrat and Marine (2005) found a positive relationship between learning / mastery goals and achievement. This was not reflected in the findings of this study, as there was little difference between the achievement of those who pursued learning goals and those who pursued performance goals. Other studies which failed to demonstrate this relationship include Harackiewicz *et al* (1997) and Meece *et al* (1998).

Comparing this study to others the one study that stands out as possibly being comparable in terms of student characteristics is a French study by Dupeyrat and Marine (2005). They explored the self-beliefs about intelligence of students who were returning to college after failing their baccalaureate or dropping out of school, and so considered their return to study challenging. Many were older and had families and / or employment. Similar to findings in this study, more of Dupeyrat and Marine's participants felt that intelligence was malleable rather than fixed, and most adopted learning / mastery goals. They did not find any significant relationship between goal

orientation and age, but more of their younger students (aged 20-30 years) were performance goal oriented as compared to the 31-40 age group. Interestingly in this study a trend was revealed with six of the ten entity theorists being aged under 21 years, but a significant relationship between age and implicit theory was not established. Dupeyrat and Marine (2005) did conclude that learning and mastery goals have a positive effect on learning activities and outcomes, a finding with which I can concur as most of the participants in this study pursued learning / mastery goals, including all but one of those who were revealed as entity theorists. They also found that implicit theories were not found to impact on goal orientation, in particular they were not related to performance goals. This is similar to this study's finding as regardless of implicit theory most students pursued a learning goal.

Overall, the relationship between variables within this model appear weak, and are depicted in Fig 6.2. This suggests that a relationship was not evident between implicit beliefs about intelligence and achievement directly, but that pursuing a learning goal and utilising associated learning behaviours may contribute to achievement.



**Fig 6.2** Proposed association between variables within a model of achievement for this cohort of students. Solid lines represent strong relationships, dotted lines weak relationships (in terms of number of students).

The majority of entity and incremental theorists pursued a learning goal, but regardless of pursuing a performance or learning goal students engaged in learning behaviours that would be associated with the incremental theorist and pursuance of a learning / mastery goal, such as support-seeking. Support for Dweck and colleagues achievement motivation model is difficult to evaluate due to the homogenous nature of the cohort. It could be deduced that holding an implicit theory and pursuing a learning / mastery goal contributed to use of support and learning strategies and contributed to achievement, but in the absence of a contrasting group, i.e. entity theorists who pursued a performance goal and did not utilise support or feedback, then it cannot be concluded that this group reflects the model of achievement motivation proposed by Dweck and colleagues.

One possible explanation for the apparent homogeneity of this group in terms of beliefs about intelligence and learning goals and behaviours may be that many students were mature learners and as such may have a more complex conception of intelligence. As a group of adults, many have had diverse life experiences, and may have developed competencies in other areas. Rather than conceptualising intelligence in uni-dimensional terms, related to ability and / or effort, it is likely that they view it in a variety of domains, such as social and practical domains (Sternberg 1997). Much of Dweck and colleagues work has involved research with children (for example, Blackwell *et al* 2007, Dweck and Leggett 1988, Mueller and Dweck 1998) with whom this simpler conceptualisation of intelligence may resonate better. Deeper exploration of this group of students' thoughts and beliefs about intelligence may elicit more information about how they view intelligence than the responses given in measures on a questionnaire.

Changes in beliefs: Learning and understanding versus assessment? Robins and Pals (1998) found that beliefs about intelligence were stable over students' college years. Over the shorter period of this study participants' implicit beliefs remained stable, but goal-orientation shifted, with more students seeing assessment as more important than learning and assessment after this experience than before. At the start of this programme of study seventy percent of students reported that learning and understanding were most important to them with twenty percent viewing the assessment as most important (ten percent were undecided). Post-assessment those seeing learning and understanding as most important reduced to fifty-seven percent, with forty-

one percent of the cohort now viewing the assessment as most important. From the student perspective there must have been aspects of their experience during this first module and their assessment experience, which amplified the importance of the assessment over and above learning and understanding for these students.

Evidence of focus on assessment was revealed in some comments by students who felt that material taught within the module was not relevant, as it did not relate to the assessment, for example 'Some material was not relevant to the assignment' and 'the module could have been condensed as lot of info (sic) was irrelevant to the assignment'.

Comments such as this highlight that perhaps the tutor did not make the relevance of all taught sessions clear, by either linking the material to the assessment, or stressing the importance of the material to their knowledge base in terms of their development as a nurse. All content within this module is 'relevant', contributing to module and award learning outcomes, but it is acknowledged that some students work strategically (Miller and Parlett 1974; Snyder 1971). This shift from seeing learning and understanding as most important to assessment may reflect the reality of University life. Whilst students may begin this award with a desire to engage in deep learning and understanding, the juggling of study, clinical placements, and in many cases family and work, may mean it becomes more realistic to work strategically to pass the assessment.

There is some evidence from student comments that aspects of the tutor's role may have contributed to this shift. For example, some students commented on how often tutors referred to the assessment constantly when teaching, for example: 'it was annoying that we were told in class about literature we MUST use in our assignments in order to pass. I gave up listening in the end'.

Such comments reveal a paradox in the emphasis that tutors place on the assessment as the module progresses. If content is not clearly linked to the assessment some students will see it as irrelevant and may ignore it; if tutors relate too much content to the assessment the student may feel overwhelmed and ignore it. The increase in the importance of passing the assessment for students may emanate from an overt or subliminal message from tutorial staff regarding how important the assessment is. Tutorial staff want students to succeed, and will support them to achieve. This point is reflected in the many statements made by students regarding the extent and quality of support they received; but this concerted support and consistent reference to the

assessment, grading criteria and importance of referencing may inadvertently escalate the overall importance of the assessment so that it could, for some, assume precedence to learning and understanding.

Curriculum documents claim that assessment is inextricably linked to learning and teaching, with assessed work appraising both the depth and scope of student learning. If the aim of Higher Education is not purely instrumental, then it would be useful to be able to nurture and promote learning without assessment being seen as the main goal or driving force. Depth of learning and understanding is imperative within the context of developing a health care professional. It could be argued that assessment appraises the achievement of learning by ensuring learning outcomes have been met, but this position assumes that all the learning required to become a registered nurse can be encapsulated in learning outcomes (of theory and practice). If students are commenting that taught material is 'irrelevant' if it is not directly related to an assessment then it could be argued that learning, teaching and assessment are not as aligned as curriculum design intended.

Changes in self beliefs: confidence: Confidence, as a representation of self-belief about ability, was not found to be related to implicit theory; nor did it predict achievement. Prior to this assessment approximately half of the cohort were confident or fairly confident about taking an essay-type assessment, and half not very confident or afraid. Confidence was not related to age or academic background, but a higher level of confidence was related to having a family history of higher education, and those without experience of this type of assessment had less confidence. A positive shift in confidence to take an essay-type assessment in future was found following this assessment, with forty-two percent of the post-assessment cohort reporting greater confidence than that before the assessment experience. Unfortunately fourteen percent reported that their confidence had reduced. The three most frequent explanations for this change in confidence, for better or worse, as voiced in student comments were tutorial support, peer support and the grade received, with some evidence that formative feedback received with their grade and having a choice of assessment also enhanced their confidence.

Student self-beliefs and tutorial support: All students were given the name of one tutor that would support them personally with their assessment; this was in addition to group tutorials. Students were advised that they could access their tutor's support face-to-face, or via e-mail. Students

were encouraged to discuss plans and draft work with their tutor, and were given verbal and written feedback on their developing work. All but 3 students reported utilising tutorial support regardless of their academic background, confidence or family history of higher education. More mature students preferred face-to-face support, and e-mail support was accessed most by younger students.

Tutorial support is cited by students as having a significant influence on every aspect of the assessment process, with subsequent impact on their self-beliefs in terms of confidence for future written assessments. Most students perceived that good tutorial support had enhanced their confidence, academic development and ultimately contributed to their success. Tutorial support was viewed by the majority of students as being easy to access, with tutors described as being friendly and responsive, and offering feedback and guidance that enhanced confidence and 'kept them on track'. Student comments reveal all but 2 students felt that the combination of tutorial support and materials available to guide and support study for, and writing of, the assessment led to them knowing what was expected of them. Coupled with the subsequent finding that student confidence increased following this assessment, an overall evaluation of tutorial support from the student perspective is that it was effective. This does not, however, mean that tutorial support was effective for all. A minority of students described quite forcefully the ineffectiveness and at times destructive impact of tutors on them. This included feeling ignored, put down and wrongly advised or guided, and tutors being unresponsive or insensitive to their needs. Comments about poor tutorial support were accompanied by reference to damage done to their confidence and motivation, and to their beliefs about their ability. Several students expressed concern about the inconsistency of advice or information issued from different tutors. Despite asking students to use one tutor only, and advising them that tutors may differ in their views, students were still unhappy when they received different messages from different tutors. It is concerning that none of this negative feedback about what was perceived as poor tutorial support was fed back to the staff who evaluated the module. Module evaluation takes place at the end of the teaching period, but before assessments are submitted or graded, so it could be argued that the assessment process itself is therefore not part of module evaluation. Students may also be reluctant to offer criticism of tutors prior to their work being assessed. As a minority of students reported that tutorial support undermined their confidence and self-beliefs about their ability this does need to be addressed. For example, staff development events could look at student-tutor relationships and how to frame

feedback. The Faculty should also look at how and when modules are evaluated to ensure that all aspects of the module are commented on by students, including the whole assessment process. A factor that did emerge from many students comments was the extent of influence that tutors were perceived to have had on student achievement (or lack of achievement), with some students failing to acknowledge the contribution of their own abilities or effort to the same degree as that of the tutor. Many students believed that they would not have achieved as well without the support and guidance of a tutor, and others believed that their poor result was in some way attributable to lack of tutorial support. The strength of belief in the role that the tutor played in student achievement may reflect the actual high level of tutorial support offered and utilised by this cohort of first year students embarking on their first written piece of assessment on this award. It does, however, raise some concerns as to whether the extent of tutorial support given is fostering dependence, with students feeling the need to 'check out' what they are doing within the assessment rather than rely on their own judgement. As such, strong tutorial support may undermine rather than enhance self-reliance and self-beliefs regarding ability. It could be argued that for this first assessment students felt it was necessary to check they were progressing with the assessment, and required reassurance that they were 'on track'. It is evident from student comments recorded at the beginning of the module that even at this early stage many students felt tutorial support would be essential to their progress.

The considerable impact of tutorial support, from the student perspective, on their achievement, how they feel and their ability highlights the need to think about how we attenuate the amount and degree of tutorial support given to students as they progress through the course of an award. It is both reassuring and concerning that so many students attributed their success (and failure) to tutorial support, but it is imperative that whilst we support students, we do not foster dependence, or have students believe that their success is contingent on tutor involvement. These students will need to become more self-reliant as they progress. They will eventually be health care professionals who need to be capable of, and confident in, self-evaluation. It would be useful to appraise student use, and responses to, tutorial support as they progress through the award, in particular to appraise degree of attribution of success / failure to tutors and to self, and ascertain levels of dependence versus self-reliance.



Student self-beliefs and peer support: When this first module commenced students were asked to self-select into small working groups to complete a formative assessment task. This strategy proved successful in fostering peer collaboration, with eighty-eight percent of students reporting they engaged actively in peer-support. The enthusiasm and emotive nature of comments offered about peer support far exceeded the generally more 'instrumental' comments about the usefulness of tutorial support.

The two key themes that emerged that underpinned the effectiveness of this support were the mutual support gained from individuals that are in the same position as oneself, and the ability to collaborate with others to further learning. A shared understanding between students of what it was like to be at University, preparing this first assessment resulted in an exchange of reassurance and support that was described as boosting confidence, morale and motivation. Hopefully this peer and social support will continue beyond this module and across the award; consistency they will not have from module tutors. Most students discussed collaboration in areas such as literature searching, sharing resources and learning to reference correctly. They described how students who knew how to search a database or reference, for example, shared those skills with others. Collaboration extended to reassuring each other that they were on the right track, proof-reading each other's work, checking references for each other and generally offering the kind of support that would be associated with tutorial guidance. In some cases this peer support and collaboration was clarified in terms of it being easier to speak to a peer than a tutor, but more generally was described as a welcome, valued and well-used continuous source of support. Krause and Coates (2008) discuss the wide benefits to learning of this kind of peer collaboration, particularly in terms of building a network of support outside of the classroom setting within which students can discuss issues and make sense of them, demonstrate their knowledge as well as learn from each other, and, importantly for future healthcare professionals, develop their interpersonal skills.

There were two activities within the module that were seen as facilitating this peer support, from the student point of view. These were the formative task that was set for them, and use of the online discussion board which had both an informal space and assessment discussion area. Literature around peer support acknowledges that meaningful and frequent interaction with peers within the learning environment encourages better engagement with learning (Gellin 2003; Terenzini *et al* 1996) and evidence from this study would support this.

The 12 percent of students who didn't utilise peer support felt that peers undermined their confidence, or they did not feel confident enough to collaborate, comments included, for example: 'I was feeling vulnerable about my abilities; hearing others made me feel more insecure;' and 'I was selective about who I spoke to as there was a lot of hype and panic that was not helpful'.

In short, the vast majority of students found that support from peers provided an excellent network that offered a deep and meaningful support.

Student self-beliefs: Grade and formative feedback: Before considering the impact of the grade received on students' self-beliefs, it is worth noting that many students expressed dissatisfaction with the length of time that they had to wait to receive their result. The timeliness of feedback is a consistent issue that arises in national student surveys. For example, the National Union of Students report (2008) states that a quarter of students have to wait more than five weeks for feedback on their coursework, and that students attending post-1992 universities usually have the longest wait for feedback. By the time the cohort of students in this study received their grade and formative feedback, some nine weeks after submitting their assessments, they had already moved on to a different module with a different focus. This was described as a stressful time by many students, who were eager to know their first assessment result to evaluate how they were progressing. This issue is well recognised in the literature (for example Crisp 2007; Hartley and Chesworth 2000; Higgins *et al* 2002), with many studies noting the impact of tardiness of feedback in terms of student dissatisfaction and the consequent limitations of its usefulness to future learning. Considering this cohort began their studies in early January, receipt of their first summative assessment results in early July was a long time to wait for the first formal evidence of their progress.

Sadler (1989) saw the grade students receive for an assessment as essentially 'passive', and not having an immediate impact on learning. The response of this cohort to the grade, however, could not be described as passive, with most students offering statements about the impact of the grade on how they felt, but also offering insight into the impact of the grade on their confidence and perception of their ability or capability, which may impact on future learning. Considering that questionnaire two was issued four weeks following receipt of the grade and formative feedback, the emotive and detailed nature of comments made about the grade received was surprising. The

significance of the grade was evident in the out-pouring of relief, and emotive comments made within the questionnaire when asked about how their grade made them feel. Of the 98 students who commented on the impact of their grade, almost half (46) reported that their grade was better than expected, with just 23 doing less well than expected and the remainder achieving as expected. So many students doing better than expected may go some way to explaining the increase in confidence expressed by this group of students following this assessment. All students offered a comment about their grade, most of which stated how they felt:

'happy; 'excited': 'pleased'; 'shocked'; 'fabulous'; 'fantastic'; 'relieved'; 'proud'; 'satisfied'; 'amazed'; 'unexpected' through to 'upset' and 'disappointed'; with many accompanied by some comment about their confidence being boosted, or lost.

Two key points were revealed from thematic analysis of student comments made about their grade. The first was that it reflected their ability and / or the effort put into the work; the second point was that it reflected the role played by the tutor in supporting their achievement or facilitating their failure. Those who perceived their grade as 'good' reported enhanced confidence in terms of future assessment, but those who perceived their grade to be below that expected reported loss of confidence and / or motivation. A disadvantage of 'grades' is that they can manifest a competitive quality within students (Black and William 1998). Grades can leave students with a sense of having ability or not in relation to their peers, which tells the student little about what they can do to improve. Good grades can lead some students to feel complacent, but poor grades can leave them feeling incapable, neither position being particularly helpful in terms of future learning (Dweck 1986). An interesting comment made that illustrates this peer comparison was:

'I was happy with my grade, but then I felt upset when others were crying about a C grade being so bad. It felt like I was put down'.

As all but ten students passed this assessment, for the majority of students receipt of their results was vindication that they could succeed in higher education. This early success was particularly important to those who doubted their ability, with comments from these students reflecting their sense of increased confidence and belief in their ability to succeed in future. As well as success in this first assessment being meaningful to them in terms of validating their capability, early success was also found by Busato *et al* (2000) to be the most important predictor for academic attainment,

even after 2 and 3 years of study. This implies these results can be viewed with some optimism for future success.

Focus on grade, as noted within the literature, can at times be more destructive than constructive (Sadler 1989; Taras 2002; Thorpe 1998), and is why formative feedback is so important to qualify the student's achievement and provide guidance in a more contextualised way.

Though most students commented positively on their formative feedback, the lack of depth of comments was a little disappointing. This could be explained in several ways. Firstly, it may be partly due to the fact that 55% of students reported not being able to read their feedback as the tutor's hand-writing was illegible, or the carbon-copy was too faint to read. Sadly, as these students did not go to a tutor to ask for the feedback to be read to them then they effectively did not get feedback. This is an unfortunate yet not unusual finding (Higgins *et al* 2002), which is unacceptable in this information era where communication is so accessible. Secondly, a simple explanation for the apparent lack of detailed comment on formative feedback may be that the grade is easily recalled when asked about it four weeks later, but the specific nature of formative feedback may not be so readily remembered. Thirdly, it could be argued that the length of time that students had to wait for their assessment results meant that the grade was their key focus – in particular whether they had passed or failed, and thus the aspect of feedback that was most meaningful to them.

Students who participated in the focus group reported noting the grade, celebrating or sharing their result with peers, and only reading the formative feedback (if it was legible) at a later date. Many would argue (for example, Butler 1988, Sadler 1998, Taras 2002) that formative feedback is actually undermined by the grade; with student focus on grade meaning that they pay less attention to formative feedback and therefore don't use it to make improvements. For the tutors who had formulated the formative feedback in this study, this dialogue was considered extremely important for future learning, particularly as it was the first the student had received on a written assessment on this award. Sadly, student comments suggest that formative feedback may not have contributed as much to future learning as was intended by tutors when they crafted it. Though the grade told the student something about what they had achieved, attention to formative feedback is necessary for them to learn what it was that they did that contributed to that achievement, and how to improve in future.

Two key themes were revealed in comments that students made about formative feedback that reflected making them feel more confident and capable, or undermining confidence and beliefs about capability. A particularly memorable aspect of feedback for students was praise from tutors, particularly praise that affirmed or reflected recognition of the amount of study the student had done, or how hard they had worked. Schunk (1982), comments on the usefulness of feedback like this that attributes performance to effort, and noted that in school-children this kind of attributional feedback raised their self-efficacy expectations regarding their capability. As far as adults are concerned, Bandura (1986) has also demonstrated the effectiveness of feedback that attributes achievement to effort as contributing to enhancing self-belief, and raising confidence and competence for future learning. Students reported that tutor comments that related to the tutor being 'disappointed' with them, or suggesting they had not done enough work undermined their confidence and beliefs about their ability.

Though comments from students who could read their formative feedback did not express dissatisfaction with the nature of the feedback, it could be argued that as this was the first feedback they had received following a summative assessment in higher education (for the vast majority of students), so they may not have known what to expect. This study did not appraise the actual content of formative feedback, but was concerned with the student view of how it impacted on their self-beliefs about ability. It is possible that more overtly formative elements of the feedback, such as guidance on developing academic writing, were not referred to by students as these comments may not have made as significant an impression on their self-beliefs, when compared to, for example, praise. Sadler (1998) refers to the need for formative feedback to not only appraise their work and guide their future learning, but also highlights its 'catalytic and coaching' value, its ability to inspire confidence and motivate the student. As these students reported how feedback made them 'feel', then there is evidence that their formative feedback had this affective quality, and for many was motivating, though a minority of students reported feeling less capable.

It is evident looking at tutorial support and provision of grade and feedback to this cohort of students that these processes had a significant impact on their self-beliefs. For most students this enhanced their self-beliefs and subsequent confidence, but for some it undermined them and caused them to feel less capable. In both cases it is evident that communications between tutor

and student can have a profound impact on self-beliefs, and make a significant difference to levels of confidence and feelings of competence to engage in future assessment.

Student self-beliefs: choice of assessment: One other part of this process that was commented on as increasing confidence with regard to being able to deal with this first assessment was being given a choice of assessment. Students reported advantages to being offered both a choice of assessment subject and type. Choice of subject enabled students to pursue study of a subject area that they found interesting, and consequently they felt more motivated to engage with the work. Choice of type of assessment was not something students were used to having in previous educational experiences, but was welcomed; particularly by students who were less confident about tackling a larger piece of writing and those with weaker academic backgrounds or less experience of written assessment. The choice of type of assessment was developed in order to offer the less confident student a more incremental way of developing their assignment, with structured formative feedback as each small piece of work was submitted. Analysis of who took up the option of the 3 smaller pieces of work found it was more appealing to the more mature student who was less confident or had no experience of essay-type assignments, and was likely to be the first in their family to experience higher education. This 'gentler' introduction to developing academic writing helped this group of students to feel the assessment was achievable, and so enhanced their feelings of being able to progress. Following this assessment, this group experienced a similar increase in confidence, and similar pattern of achievement to those students choosing the single, 2000 word essay. This is an encouraging finding for a group of students who cited clearly their lack of confidence and experience.

Most students opted to undertake the 2000 word assessment. Many felt that 'choosing' this option rather than being 'told' to do it made a difference to their level of motivation. They offered reasons for selecting this option in terms of it being a challenge, wanting to test themselves, or 'getting used to' the type of assessment typical to higher education. Students' positive comments about having a choice confirmed that this made a positive difference to student engagement with the assessment from the outset of the module. Having a choice of assessment offered students a sense of control within this first part of the assessment process, and a stronger sense of ownership of the work they were engaging with.

### **The tutor's role in the assessment process**

Having considered the impact of the assessment process on students' self-beliefs, it is worth noting this student perspective to reflect on the role that the tutors played in the assessment process, and how this affected the student experience, for better or worse. Assessment strategy is influenced strongly by the award curricula, but module tutors not only shape and define the assessment task itself, but their interactions and actions throughout the assessment process influence the student experience. As evidenced in this study the decisions tutors made about the structure of the assessment task (including the formative task), the facilitation of peer-support and provision of tutorial support and assessment feedback all impacted on student self-belief. The tutors influence on each aspect of the assessment process will be briefly considered within the context of current best practice.

During their induction week students were introduced to their award, both the practice and theory elements, and expectations of them within their first year were set out. Modules commenced in week two, and on the first day of the module 'Foundation studies in practice', the assessment was launched. This involved offering students a choice of subject to study and choice of assessment format (either a long essay or three smaller pieces of work). The tutorial decision to offer this choice was viewed positively by students. It offered students more control over their learning; enabling them to study a subject they are interested in, as well as a form of assessment they felt most comfortable with. Offering this choice of assessment made it more inclusive (Higher Education Academy 2008) aroused enough gentle trepidation among students so that it constituted a challenge (Taras 2002) and fits with best practice (Nicol 2007, 2008a).

Throughout the module, assessment requirements were repeatedly verbally outlined, and students were directed to supporting materials. Student comments reflected that they were satisfied with the amount of information given, both verbally and online, to support the assessment. This is an encouraging finding as Gammon and Morgan-Samuel (2005) report that being fully informed by tutors about assessment requirements ameliorates student stress, fosters feelings of control and promotes more effective coping.

Following discussion around the range of different health behaviours that students could choose to focus on for their assessment, students were asked to self-select into study groups (depending

on the health behaviour they wished to study). Each group was allocated their own space on Blackboard, and each group were given the formative assessment task of developing a powerpoint presentation outlining facts and issues related to the health behaviour they were studying. This collaborative task clearly brought students together and undoubtedly contributed to the development of excellent peer support as the module progressed. As well as being important in facilitating student engagement with learning (Coates 2006), group tasks that are set up in the first weeks of a course have been shown to help foster friendships which can last through the programme of study (Tinto 2005). The value of this social integration to student engagement and persistence with the award cannot be under-estimated (Nicol 2008a).

Following presentation of their formative work, student groups received feedback from tutors and peers on the quality and relevance of the material they had included in their presentation, and their ability to reference correctly. This feedback was specifically structured to relate to the summative assessment. Formative assessment like this is important within these early weeks of this first module, and is associated with student success (Nicol 2008a; Tinto 2005; Yorke 2005).

The model of tutorial support for this module included a named tutor, who could be contacted via e-mail or be seen face-to-face if required. It was requested that students restricted the number of e-mails and meetings to a reasonable number, but that they should access support if they felt they required it. Group tutorials were held within class time, and a discussion area was set up in Blackboard (online learning environment) that allowed students to discuss issues related to the assessment, or ask questions of each other. This online area was facilitated by tutorial staff who would address issues only if students could not resolve them. This model was seen by module tutors as open, and as offering the level of support that may be required by year one students undergoing their first assessment. Student comments were largely positive about the tutorial support received, with most reporting that they found tutors accessible and friendly. The assessment discussion area in Blackboard was used well by students, and facilitated peer support; it also enabled those who did not want to contribute to see what issues were being raised and how they were being dealt with. For example, students would ask in the discussion area how to reference a particular resource; students would offer their solution and a tutor would only intervene if erroneous advice was being given. Salmon (2000) is a strong advocate of this type of online support. She describes how it enables the student to engage in an informally discursive way, with no pressure to actually contribute but much to gain from 'lurking' (logging in and looking



at the postings of others). The discussion board offers the permanence of the written word which can be accessed by all, throughout the module; permanence that is important to those who may not recall verbal advice or discussions with peers or tutors well.

Students emphasised the impact that they perceived tutorial support had had on their achievement. Specifically, there was a feeling that their assessment result was to some degree attributable to tutorial support. As discussed, this raises concern regarding the potential fostering of student reliance on tutorial support. It is plausible that the emphasis on the role of tutor support may have been because this was the students' first assessment, but there is concern that tutors may be communicating a message that conveys to students the need to access to tutorial support in order to complete the assessment in a certain way to achieve a pass. This highlights the need to reflect on the learning milieu to examine how it fosters learning. Documentary analysis carried out before this assessment period revealed a learning milieu that was framed by an over-arching philosophy of androgogy, expecting adult learners to engage in independent study, and aimed to accommodate a diverse student body. Curriculum documents emphasise that students are responsible for their learning, and should develop more autonomy as they progress through the award. This approach to learning may be unfamiliar to more mature students, or even to younger students who describe being 'spoon fed' at school. As a consequence it is possible that the emphasis on the importance of tutorial support to achievement for this student group could be related to the accommodation of this shift from 'pupil' (being taught) to 'learner' (discovering knowledge for oneself). If this is the case, then reliance on tutorial support should become less important to the student as skills of, for example, information literacy improve as the programme of study progresses.

The majority of students arrived on this award with a drive to learn and understand, with relatively few focused on passing the assessment. But following this assessment experience there was a shift toward more students feeling that the assessment was more important than learning and understanding. In order to maintain a 'learning' focus Spinath and Steinsmeiser (2003) discuss the need for a learning environment that emphasises individual learning and task enjoyment, and avoids the more competitive, result-focussed tasks. They go on to highlight that not just those with lower ability, but all students would benefit from the kind of learning environment that fosters belief that ability is a changeable and controllable aspect of their development (Taras 2002). This

raises the question of whether the learning environment experienced by this group of students led to an increase in perception that the assessment was more important than learning and understanding. Within this award learning and understanding is appraised primarily by summative assessment, this is what validates their learning and enables them to progress.

Formative assessment, award documentation insists, must be linked to the summative assessment, and module content has to relate to module learning outcomes, which in turn must all be appraised in the assessment. Thus, the assessment ultimately provides a framework for learning and teaching within a module. Despite curriculum and module documents guiding module development, Black and Wiliam (2009) remind us that the tutor ultimately has responsibility for the design and implementation of an effective learning environment, which includes conveyance of messages to students about their responsibilities and the tutor's role related to assessment. It is possible that there is a 'collective' effect (Pajares 1996) whereby the learning milieu created within this large group, by tutorial and peer support and materials used, combine to produce an environment that produces a particular approach to learning. The way students' perceive the purpose of a learning setting can be a strong predictor of learning goal (Ames 1992; Church *et al* 2001). In this case, it could be concluded that activities and interactions within and outside of the classroom conveyed the assessment as an important part of the module to students. In this study, comments reflect tutor behaviour that consistently highlighted the centrality of the assessment. This included the early launch of the assessment which set the scene for its importance; a formative task related to the assessment, consistent encouragement to access tutorial support, repeated advice to follow the assessment brief and refer to grading criteria, and being asked to include key texts and documents in their work. This could go some way to explaining the shift in this cohort from a focus on learning and understanding, to a focus on assessment, and highlights how tutors can influence the learning environment. What appears to be a significant focus on the assessment may also be related to tutors being driven to support student achievement. It is widely acknowledged that there is pressure to support students to succeed (Batty 2004), and that this can be related to such issues at student retention and institutional rating. At the level of module tutor, the drive to support success at this early stage in higher education is important in terms of students' self-beliefs, particularly amongst those who have doubts about their ability (Yorke 2005). It is worth questioning, however, whether enthusiasm to maximise student success, focusing on supporting or even coaching students to

pass the assessment, distracts from promotion of learning and understanding. If this is the case, then the learning milieu, created by a combination of the over-arching award philosophy and the efforts of tutors to support success, fundamentally supports performance goals – it aims at passing assessments.

Whether or not students saw learning and understanding or assessment as most important, this cohort did experience a high level of achievement in the assessment (92% pass rate). This undoubtedly contributed to the significant improvement in student confidence in their ability to engage in assessment in future. Hopefully what was created within the learning milieu was a collective belief about the capability of these students to learn, and of their tutors to facilitate learning (Pajares 1996). Bandura (1993) believed that a 'can do' environment like this can mediate the effects of factors such as prior academic achievement and socio-economic status. It would be interesting to know if this assessment experience has had this kind of 'collective impact' on this cohort of students, and if so, whether it will continue in future.

One factor that did not seem to significantly enhance the assessment experience was formative feedback that accompanied their grade. Students reported being unhappy with the nine week wait for results, which not only proved stressful in terms of concern about whether they had 'passed', but left them with no guidance regarding preparation for their next assessment, even though the next assessment had already been launched and they were expected to be working towards it. To exacerbate this fifty-five percent of students could not read their formative feedback, having just the grade to indicate their level of their achievement. Cross (1996) provides a graphic metaphor for learning without feedback, likening it to learning archery in a darkened room. Students without feedback may not know what they need to do to develop their work, leaving them at risk of not progressing. The tutors aim should be to:

'provide accurate academic feedback that helps (students) develop reasonable academic expectations, but at the same time communicates that their competence and skill will develop' (Taras 2002).

It is questionable whether students felt they had received this message. Students who could not read their feedback did not seek clarification from their tutor, and as stated within the focus group, some felt they had 'moved on' and were now deeply involved in the next module. This situation raises questions about the effectiveness of how formative feedback is issued. It should be

received earlier, should be legible and there should be opportunity to discuss the feedback with a tutor to ensure the formative message is understood. The current assessment process does not facilitate this. Feedback should be inseparable from learning, but as it is presented so disparately from the module it relates to, the formative aspect can be lost (Orsmond 2004); its relevance is eroded by the time and distance from the module it relates to. If students are not utilising formative feedback as was intended by the tutor, either not able to read it, understand it or see it as relevant, then the time and effort of writing up may be futile.

From the tutor's perspective providing good quality, well thought out feedback relatively quickly is a challenge. In a short time frame the tutor has to make complex decisions regarding the quality of each assessment. For example, whether the assessment criteria are met, how it related to the grading criteria, whether the work reflects concerted study, level of understanding...and so on. Further, the tutor then needs to comment on what the student can do to improve their work in future, focusing on the most salient points that will contribute to student learning. As Black and Wiliam (2009) point out these complex decisions take place in a matter of minutes with little time for reflection on what one is writing before committing to it paper, in some cases in hand-writing that the tutor knows is going to be difficult to read. With large class sizes the process of marking, second-marking and moderation is time-consuming. Speeding this up may mean students get feedback quicker, but the quality and quantity of feedback could be affected adversely.

Looking at Nicols (2008a) 12 principles of good formative assessment and feedback practice (Appendix 1) to appraise this assessment experience, good practice is evident, as are areas that could be improved. Students had a choice of type of assessment and subject to study, but no control over grading criteria or timing. Though peer-assessment was adopted for the formative assessment, self-assessment did not feature in this module, nor were students involved in the development or execution of assessment policy or practices. Formative feedback that students received from tutors whilst they were structuring their assessment was useful to students and acted upon, but the formative feedback accompanying their grade was perceived as less useful. Written feedback did offer some idea of what constituted good work (in terms of goals, criteria, standards), and helped them self-correct, but this was only the case for students who could read their feedback. Students viewed the formative and summative tasks as challenging; and with regard to the formative task spent a lot of time and effort with peers working on this in their study

groups. The summative assessment reflected learning in terms of achieving the module learning outcomes.

Overall, this study reflects that this first assessment experience resulted in an increase in students' confidence and self-beliefs regarding their next assessment regardless of their entry qualifications and characteristics. This largely positive experience has hopefully enhanced self-belief about ability and will afford greater motivation and confidence for future learning and assessment.

### **Enhancing the assessment experience?**

The student perspective on the assessment experience has illuminated aspects of the process that have contributed to enhancing self-belief and confidence for future assessment, as well as aspects that have undermined self-belief. The learning environment, assessment strategy, peer and tutorial support and feedback all contribute to the assessment experience, and could be enhanced to provide an assessment experience that is more reflective of expectations of contemporary higher education, and meets the needs of diverse groups of students aiming to be registered nurses.

It is worth considering how we can structure the learning environment, including the curriculum and the assessment strategy, to not only maximise student success, but to enhance self-beliefs, confidence and self-reliance; qualities essential to the enjoyment of learning and the development of an accountable health care professional. We should therefore strive to facilitate the development of confidence and skills within students to enable them to embrace more student-centred learning, which includes giving them more responsibility and control in the area of assessment. It is also essential that learning and assessment maintain close alignment, with a strong emphasis on learning, not just aiming to 'pass the test'.

A more student-centred approach is evident in contemporary higher education with tutors playing a greater role in facilitating student learning rather than teaching them (Rust 2002). Documentary analysis revealed that students are expected to engage in student-centred and develop into more independent learners as the programme progresses. It is therefore imperative that as students progress through this award they develop a stronger sense of self-reliance, as without this they

can't engage effectively as independent learners. Developing the skills to monitor, manage and self-assess learning is a key requirement in the professions, and in lifelong learning (Boud 2000; Knight and Yorke 2003; Nicol 2008a; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). The increased responsibility of students for their own learning is not mirrored, in practice or in curriculum documents, by an increase in their responsibility in the area of assessment (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006; Taras 2002). The assessment process appears to be almost completely controlled by tutors, though this study, at least, offered students a choice of assessment method, which represents some small progress (Nicol 2007; 2008a). Self-directed learning must be accompanied by self-directed assessing, and is a particularly relevant proficiency in the future professional lives of these students whose competence in appraising their own practice and that of others will be essential (Nieweg 2002). Strategies to enhance such self-reliance could include, for example, peer and self-assessment, and student involvement in setting of grading criteria, but needs to be incorporated into an overall assessment strategy that has the development of learner autonomy at its heart.

The assessment strategy: Documentary analysis revealed the assessment as a means of ascertaining achievement of learning outcomes, and thus a means to progress. Students see assessment as an important element of their higher education experience, but as this cohort of students demonstrated, at the start of this course they felt that learning and understanding was more important than assessment. This has shifted somewhat following their first assessment experience, with an increased number of students seeing the assessment as more important than learning and understanding. This shift causes one to question the nature of the learning milieu in terms of the message being conveyed to students about the relative importance of assessment. The issues associated with an assessment led environment, in terms of strategic learning for example, are not conducive to the depth of understanding of the whole curricula expected of a future health care professional. This is not an unfamiliar argument. Taras (2008), for example, believes that 'assessment vies with learning for supremacy at the heart of the educational experience', with Heritage (2007) going further in claiming that the 'reciprocal relationship between teaching and assessment has been lost from sight'. The key to ensuring that the learning milieu does not become overtly assessment led is to ensure that underpinning the curriculum is a good understanding of the assumptions, theories and practices around learning and assessment, and that these are closely aligned (Biggs 1999). Quality processes and existing doctrine around

assessment strategy and the principles that underpin them are generally not reflected upon (Russel *et al* 2006), and often resistant to change (Delandshere 2001). Added to this, developing an assessment strategy around a modular system can be complex. This does not mean that change is not possible, and there are good examples of innovation in assessment within the literature, which includes, for example, offering students a choice of assessment type (Bryan and Clegg 2006; Easterbrook *et al* 2006). It would be useful to move away from an instrumentalist approach to learning, toward students participating more in the learning process Nicol (2008a). As a start point, it would be useful to have a clear, coherent assessment strategy across a programme of study that enabled more frequent formative or lower stakes assessments in the first year that allow students to re-work and try again. A shift away from high stakes assessment in the first year may be beneficial as it can be counter-productive (Yorke and Longden 2004) and even detrimental for some students, particularly mature students, who have been found to leave a course at this early stage if they receive a poor grade (Yorke 2005). Students require time to experiment, to work out which strategies which work for them, and receive feedback that guides their developing academic work (Nicol 2008a). A focus on formative assessment tasks or frequent low stakes assessment (that attracts some marks) structured around tasks that reflect the kinds of issues and skills relevant to the workplace would be more useful for year 1 students. These tasks should elicit regular feedback to support learning and progression, but could also facilitate early experience of success which, it is widely acknowledged, enhances self-belief and motivation (Busato *et al* 2000; Nicol 2008a). Working to maintain student focus on learning and understanding is fundamental, as it is learning and mastery that encourages initiative, effort, exploration and creativity that leads to intellectual growth (Dweck 1986).

Summative and formative feedback: As was evident in this study, the grade received for assessed work had a significant impact on students' self-beliefs, for many students a stronger impact than the formative feedback, which seemed to have less importance, relatively speaking. Indeed, some students reported lack of interest in the formative feedback once they had their grade. As fifty-five percent of students could not read their feedback, then in effect the grade constituted their feedback, and grade alone does not enhance learning, good feedback does (Gipps 2005). As a minimum standard formative feedback should be legible; being type-written would enable this. There are also other ways of issuing formative feedback that include aurally via a podcast or audio-file (Maag 2006; Rotherham 2007), or verbal feedback on a one-to-one basis from a tutor.

Strategies to improve student attention to formative feedback may result in better use of it. Crooks *et al* (2006) found that students felt that coursework deserves a more considered and personal form of feedback than a couple of paragraphs of (possibly illegible) writing. For example, a tutorial, either to individual students or in groups, or tutors could only issue results to students once they have booked a tutorial with them. Face-to-face discussion would enable the tutor to set the feedback clearly in the context of both current module assessment and to future learning, and may help interpret formative feedback messages that are not clear. An NUS report (2008) notes that 71% of students would like individual verbal feedback, but only 25% receive this, and Crook *et al* (2006) found that only 1 of 16 psychology departments surveyed utilised a face-to-face model of returning formative feedback. Feedback should be 'formative'; it should reflect the students achievements, guide future learning and have a motivating and coaching value, inspiring confidence and self-belief. An extensive review of evidence in this field by Nicol (2008a) revealed a paucity of guidance for tutorial staff in higher education on what constitutes good written formative feedback for first year students. Staff development in this area is required, especially around structuring feedback that will be 'formative' for year one students, utilising evidence of best practice.

For year 1 students there has been a call to not give a grade at all or withhold the grade until students have read their feedback and demonstrated they understand it, in order to emphasise the importance of learning (Taras 2001, 2002). Withholding the grade may not only give students time to assimilate the formative message, but also reinforce the importance that tutors place on formative feedback.

Peer support It is important to support the development of a learning community amongst students (Nicol 2008a), enabling them to work together, make decisions and reflect on their work. Setting up group formative tasks requires students to work collaboratively, as they would in their professional role, but can also lead to formation of friendships and support networks that persist throughout the award, an important factor in determining student success (Nicol 2008a; Tinto 2005). It was evident in this study that the support, guidance and learning achieved by students as a group of peers was considered as important, if not more important, than tutorial support as students embarked on their first summative assessment. Fostering a strong peer-support network within the learning environment can create a sense of 'collective efficacy' Pajares (1996:567), a



shared belief amongst students that they can succeed; boosting their confidence and self-beliefs regarding their capabilities at both a social and personal level.

The effective peer-support within the learning environment for this cohort of students was undoubtedly enriched by the diversity of the student group. The wide age range, differing levels of healthcare and life experience, and range of academic backgrounds were particularly useful when it came to peer support. Students shared their knowledge and skills and gained confidence and reassurance from each other. Richardson (1994) believes that mature students enrich the quality of courses in higher education. He feels they set a good example in terms of their approach to learning; role-modelling qualities of persistence and perseverance. Levels of attainment of more mature students are as good as those of younger students (Richardson 1995), with many (such as Kevern *et al* 1999; Murray-Harvey 1993; Ofori 2002; White *et al* 1999) arguing that more mature students achieve better overall than their younger peers, regardless of academic background. As nursing progresses toward all students obtaining a degree to register then it is worth considering how we maintain this rich, diverse student body that contributes so much to the learning environment.

Supporting student self-reliance: As students have more responsibility for their own learning it is important that they are equipped with the skills, confidence and self-belief to engage with learning autonomously. There is an increasing interest in self-assessment and peer –assessment in higher education (Boud 1995). These tasks involve students developing knowledge and skills to identify standards and criteria in order to apply them to their own work, and that of their peers, making judgements as to the extent to which these standards have been met (Boud 1999; Taras 2001). Black and Wiliam (1998) have found that students are generally honest and reliable in assessing selves and others. The ability to make these evaluative decisions fosters greater self-reliance with respect to their own learning (Nicol 2008a), but can also contribute to their professional development in terms of appraising standards and becoming an accountable professional (Nieweg 2004). By commenting on peers work students develop detachment of judgement, which can be transferred to assessment of their own work (Nicol and MacFarlane Dick 2006). Developing skills of self and peer-assessment will also enable students to better understand assessment process, particularly the relevance and importance of formative feedback messages from tutors. Wojas (1998) claimed that students who have developed insight into assessment in

terms of skills of self-assessment improve their work as they then understand, for example, assessment criteria and feedback better. Advantages of peer assessment are that students can often explain issues better than a tutor, using more accessible language, and present alternative views, strategies and perspectives from the student perspective. Skills such as self-assessment, goal-setting, reflection and peer-collaboration with learning would enable students to be in better control of their learning (Stiggins and Chappius 2006). These kinds of approaches develop beliefs about being in control of one's learning, and prepare students for higher stakes assessment which, ideally, would be in years two and three of a diploma or degree.

Offering this group of students a choice of assessment afforded them with some control over both the subject area to study, and the mode of assessment. This greater flexibility offers students not only some control over their learning, but supports development of autonomy and is preparation for lifelong learning (Nicol 2008a). Having a choice of assessment rather than being told what to do was also motivating. It offered a sense of ownership, and promoted a sense of intrinsic motivation toward the work, as opposed an extrinsically motivated response to the demands of their tutor (Deci et al 1999).

Tutorial support Though it is encouraging that student confidence had improved after this assessment experience it is questionable as to whether at this is confidence in their own ability to succeed with an assessment, or is it confidence that 'with support' they will succeed. Evidence from this study suggests that many students felt that their success (or lack of success) was in part attributable to tutorial support, and in part attributable to their own ability and effort. As this was the students' first assessment on this award it is likely that students accessed tutor support to ensure that they were 'on the right track' in what for most students is a very different educational environment. This could explain the number of students who, from the outset, felt that their success would be contingent on 'support', and the number who subsequently felt that their grade was related to tutorial support.

Tutorial support is an important aspect of assessment strategy, particularly with respect to Year 1 students. Tutor support was offered to this group of students on an 'open-door' basis, with both face-to-face and e-mail support on offer. More mature students tended to prefer face-to-face support, with e-mail support being used better by younger students. This multi-modal model evaluated well in terms of meeting student need, but some research (Abrams and Jernigan 1984;

Blanc *et al* 1983; Gammon and Morgan-Samuel 2005) suggests that student-initiated support programmes may not be utilised effectively by the most 'at risk' students, with Gammon and Morgan-Samuel (2005) promoting a more proactive, structured approach to tutorial support which they found lowered student stress, improved self-esteem and increased perceptions of being able to cope with their studies. Giving students the opportunity to access tutorial support as and when they feel they require it is, I feel, giving the student control of this area of their learning. Opening up modes of support that include e-mail, face-to-face meetings and online discussion boards (with tutor and peer participation) hopefully offers even 'at risk' students the opportunity to access support in the most non-threatening way for them.

### **Assessment for learning**

Creating a learning environment that has learning and understanding at its heart requires the assessment process to be closely aligned to learning, but not leading or structuring learning. Students should be engaged actively with both learning and assessment to develop the skills of self-reliance required of today's student and tomorrow's health care professional. Learning and assessment should enhance positive self-belief, confidence and motivation for learning, not foster anxiety, competitiveness, self doubt or lend itself to strategic learning.

This study has demonstrated that student self-beliefs and confidence can be enhanced by an assessment experience that is supported by peer collaboration, responsive tutorial support with attributional feedback that offers acknowledgement of effort, and should be an experience that enables achievement. This diverse cohort of students began learning together with differing academic backgrounds and life experiences. Despite this most students believed that they could improve their intelligence or ability with effort, and their focus was engagement in learning and developing understanding, with relatively few (only twenty percent) more interested in passing an assessment. The learning environment should be structured to reflect and support this positive approach to learning, fostering learning / mastery goals and not being overtly or covertly assessment led. It is important to ensure that students have early experience of success with assessment, but in the first year this could be through more frequent, low stakes assessment that allows students to receive and respond to formative feedback, and re-work assessments, in order to develop confidence and competence for higher stakes assessment as the award progresses. Formative feedback should be received in good time to be useful to the student, legible, and

structured to guide the students' future learning, attributing achievement to effort and inspiring confidence and motivation. It would be useful if formative feedback was contextualised by tutors through individual or group tutorials.

In the early part of the course first year students would also benefit from being involved in setting of grading criteria, and engaging in self and peer assessment to not only give them a insight into the nature of assessment, and increase their feelings of involvement and control within this process, but also afford them with skills of self and peer appraisal imperative to their future development as health care professionals. Fostering effective peer working promotes networks of collaboration and social support. In this case, this support was seen to be as effective, and at times more effective, than tutorial support, but is also good preparation for the kind of communication and collaboration essential to the health care professional. The fact that this was such a diverse group of students, in terms of age and academic background, undoubtedly added depth to this peer network, particularly endorsing the inclusion of mature students. As students with weaker academic profiles succeeded with this assessment, and those who were the first in their family to come into higher education demonstrated the biggest improvement in confidence, then this first assessment experience was clearly a positive one for the majority of students. Despite this success, there is work to be done to enhance the assessment process in terms of creating a more formative assessment strategy for year one students, enhancing student involvement in the assessment process and improving formative feedback to make it effective to future learning.

At the level of the institution Black and William (1998) acknowledge that fundamental change in education happens slowly, but there is evidence of best practice around assessment that can guide curricula and professional development (for example the work of Nicol, 2008a, 2008b). Bandura (1986) also firmly believes that as teachers we need to focus on raising student's feelings of self-worth and competence in order to enhance academic achievement. To this end, it would be useful to gain greater insight into students' perceptions of their psychological resources, and gain a better understanding of how perceptions of their abilities / capabilities impact on their learning. More insight may suggest strategies to promote self-awareness, maintain an incremental way of thinking and importantly foster self-reliance.

Although the findings of this study reflect the experiences of this specific cohort of students, engaging in one module, findings may be useful in terms of reflection on curriculum planning, assessment strategy and student support across other programmes of study that attract a similar diverse student body, in particular students preparing for the health care professions in post-1992 higher education institutions.

Taras (2008) who has written in the area of assessment, including extensively in the areas of formative, peer and self-assessment, highlights that learners involvement in, and perceptions of, the assessment process is a neglected area of study. It is hoped that his study goes some way to addressing this deficit.

## **Chapter 7: Recommendations and reflections**

This study set out to explore the impact of the first summative assessment experience on students' self-beliefs about their ability, from the student perspective. An illuminative evaluation approach was adopted utilizing mixed methods of data collection to bring together a body of data to address the research questions. Quantitative data was analysed to detail demographic data and investigate relationships between variables, and qualitative data was thematically analysed. Findings reflect the impact of the assessment process on students, as experienced and voiced by them, but it is acknowledged that the researcher may have had some influence on data analysis and presentation. A mixed methods approach enabled collation of findings and contributed to a fuller picture of the assessment experience, and may have contributed to ameliorating some of this bias.

On the whole the assessment experience for students was revealed as positively impacting on their self-beliefs, with increased confidence to undertake their next assessment, satisfaction with support they received and good levels of achievement. Though academic staff could be pleased with such findings, it is disappointing that formative feedback had relatively little impact, and that some students who started this programme of study feeling that learning and understanding were most important to them saw assessment as more important following this first assessment experience.

### **Recommendations**

Study findings led to recommendations to changes in assessment that could contribute to enhancing self-beliefs about ability in year 1 diploma students in higher education. These centred primarily on the learning environment and assessment strategy.

Firstly, it is worth considering how we maintain the wide-entry gate to the nursing profession. Mature students not only succeed in higher education, even if their academic profile is not strong, but they also enhance the learning environment. They bring with them their experience and constructive approaches to learning which positively impact on the student group, having a 'collective' effect on self-beliefs about ability to succeed (Pajares 1996). Further, maintaining the wide-entry gate ensures that many students are included who are the first in their family to attend University. This has significant benefits to both the student themselves and their families,

enhancing their life chances, their health, and improving their standard of living (Department of Health 2003:9; Yorke and Longden 2004). In this study these students who were the first in their family to enter higher education commenced with less confidence than peers who had a family history of University study, but this did not impact negatively on their achievement, and they experienced the most significant improvement in confidence after this experience.

Fostering peer support, collaboration and networks was found to contribute to enhancing positive feelings within the student group in both learning and social terms. A learning environment should encourage group collaboration by, for example, setting up group tasks and bringing together discussion groups, which can forge relationships and networks of support that not only have a significant impact on student confidence and self-beliefs in the early part of their studies, as was found in this case, but can establish long term support and friendships that last throughout the award, contributing considerably to both student engagement and persistence with the course of study (Nicol 2008a; Tinto 2005).

When these students commenced their studies the majority believed that they could improve their ability with effort, and that learning and understanding were more important than passing the assessment in this first module of study. The fact that a significant number of students changed their beliefs following this first assessment to seeing the assessment as most important implies that the learning environment may overly promote the importance of the assessment at this early stage in their studies. It is worth looking at how we could create a learning environment that reflects concern with learning and understanding within the first year of higher education, and does not overly endorse assessment. Assessment strategy could make a difference by reducing the emphasis on the 'importance' of assessment at the start of an award, but emphasising and encouraging learning and mastery. The first year of study could be formative, in preparation for the higher stakes assessment later in the award, and should foster confidence and self-belief about ability by enabling early success. An assessment strategy that offers frequent, low stakes assessment in the first year; that offers good formative feedback and the opportunity to re-work assignments would be more useful than high stakes assessment with feedback that is often seen as unrelated to the next piece of assessment. This could ameliorate some of the assessment anxiety that students felt at the start of this study, and build up confidence and self-beliefs across the first year. Within the assessment strategy it would be useful if formative feedback that

students receive following assessment was actually used as intended by the tutor who writes it. In this study, formative feedback was not useful to many students as it was illegible, and so did not contribute as effectively as it should to enhancing their self-beliefs, confidence or future learning. The grade did have a strong emotive impact on students' self-beliefs about their ability and confidence for future assessment, but offers little guidance for future learning. Formative feedback needs to be timely enough to be able to be acted upon, and legible. It should attribute achievement to effort, have a motivational and coaching quality and guide future academic development and learning. Feedback that has the quality of inspiring confidence and motivation as well as being formative makes a difference to students. It would be advantageous for year one students to receive formative feedback verbally, individually or in groups, to ensure feedback is understood in terms of the assessment it refers to, as well as future learning and assessment. Staff development that promotes structuring of formative feedback that attributes achievement to effort, and has a catalytic and coaching value that motivates students as well as clearly sign-posting areas for future development would benefit students.

A flexible model of tutorial support that offers a range of modes of support, including face-to-face, e-mail and online discussion was found to be effective in meeting the needs of this diverse group of students. An 'open-door' policy to support was adopted that allowed students to access support as and when required, and students found this useful, enhancing their confidence and 'keeping them on track'. As many students reported that they felt their achievement was contingent on or due to tutorial support, then it is worth being cautious about fostering dependence. Students need to recognise their own efforts, and develop self-reliance, confidence and beliefs in their ability. It is evident that though students are expected to develop more autonomy with regard to learning, they are not afforded commensurate involvement in the assessment process (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). Learning and assessment strategy should develop student self-reliance and responsibility by ensuring the student is at the centre of the assessment process. Supporting the development of skills of self and peer-assessment would enable them, for example, to understand grading criteria, learn to discriminate between academic grades and levels, and develop skills of self and peer appraisal that are central to their personal, academic and professional development.



These recommendations could only be realised in the context of significant changes to the curriculum, and to learning and assessment strategy, and would need to be supported by staff development. A learning environment and assessment process that fosters positive self-beliefs, instils confidence, and enhances student self-reliance could markedly enhance achievement and retention (Busato *et al* 2000; Pajares 1996; Yorke and Longden 2004) whilst contributing to the development of a competent, autonomous health care professional (Light and Cox 2001; Nicol 2008a, 2008b; Nieweg 2004).

### Reflection on research design and methods

Illuminative evaluation enabled greater student-focus, rather than evaluator or researcher focus, on the assessment experience. An advantage of this approach was that it elucidated issues that had not been considered to be so prominent at the outset of the study (Melton and Zimmer 1987), but were most pertinent to students. In particular, the importance of peer support to students, the impact of the grade, the motivating quality of having a choice of assessment and the disappointment of receiving results and feedback so late, and in many cases having no formative feedback at all. All these issues had an impact on students within this cohort. My expectation that formative feedback would be highly valued and utilized was refuted, and I was surprised that students who start this programme of study seeing learning and understanding as most important, can shift to believing that assessment is most important. This has raised serious questions for me and caused me to reflect on the learning milieu that we create, from the curriculum planning level, through to what happens between tutors and students in the classroom.

A key criticism of illuminative evaluation is that it is subjective, with the researcher interpreting data as they see fit (Bastiani and Tolley 1979:37). Parlett and Hamilton (1972), who developed this approach, also discuss the possibility of investigator partiality. Whilst one cannot escape the influence of one's values and beliefs on how one sees and interprets qualitative data in particular, I would argue that I have endeavoured to analyse data as objectively as possible, collating quantitative data with qualitative data that was systematically thematically analysed to offer both confirmation and completeness. Discussions with colleagues as 'critical friends' during analysis of data aimed to reduce subjectivity. For example, when analysing student comments within the questionnaire that related to tutorial support it was highlighted by a colleague that I seemed to be picking out negative comments more readily than positive. Review of data I had extracted

confirmed this, and so I began the process of analysing this aspect of the data again with a different, and more balanced, focus.

Transparency has been offered with regard to positionality, choice of methods and the predilections that may have led to decisions made; and throughout the research process reflections on my behaviour and feelings have been recorded in a reflexive journal. This journal was maintained throughout the study that reflected my thoughts and feelings as I progressed with the research. This journal revealed, for example, that I was almost completely disengaged from this study during the period that I was teaching this cohort of students, with no entries over this 12 week period. I was not consciously aware that I was disengaged, but was deeply involved in teaching over this period with little time to study. On reflection, the absence of attention to this research over this period reinforces my belief that I did not raise the issue of this study over the period of student contact time.

My interest in assessment and drive to facilitate success of first year students clearly influenced my choice of study, and may be reflected within the discussion, but the knowledge and understanding that has been gained from the literature as I have progressed through this study is also likely to have influenced analysis and discussion to some degree. Rosenthal (1966 cited in Crotty 1990) argued that 'no form of research is immune to prejudice, human error and experimental bias', but the combination of triangulation of evidence, complementary sources of data and the openness and transparency that underpins this study hopefully affords it with the authenticity and trustworthiness to be credible (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Thematic analysis is also open to subjective bias, and again, it is imperative that the researcher is cognisant of the potential partiality of their position, interests and aims (Holloway and Todres 2003). Braun and Clarke (2006) caution that thematic analysis should actually analyse data, not just present extracts that vaguely relate to each other, and they state that themes that are identified should be distinct, coherent and consistent, with examples from the data that illustrate the theme. The amount of data that was generated for analysis had to be progressively reduced to identify key themes, but effort was made to maintain the student voice and, in particular, the emotive quality of issues, as progressive reduction could have lost this aspect of the student perspective which was important in a study looking at student self-beliefs. This analysis was

theoretically led to address specific research questions, as opposed to inductively driven, with issues and themes emerging that reflected the student perspective, and to some degree ameliorated researcher subjectivity.

Questionnaires proved to be a simple and convenient way of collecting data from a large group, with minimal researcher involvement, but they did generate a lot of data. As I was interested in relationships between many different variables I carried out a vast number of statistical tests. All the tests conducted were out of genuine interest in particular relationships, but theories of probability would suggest some significant findings may be reflective of the very number of tests carried out. It may have been useful to set the alpha level at 0.01 for all tests rather than accept values of between 0.01 and 0.05 as significant, or to have carried out multiple regression tests.

It was encouraging that most students offered lengthy comments within questionnaires, which may reflect their interest in the subject area, or could have been seen as an opportunity to evaluate the assessment process, feedback that is not usually requested from students following module assessment. The amount of comments made offered some reassurance that students were completing the questionnaires because they wanted to make their views known, not just because a tutor had asked if they would fill it out. If the power gradient between students and me had made students feel they ought to participate, then they could have just ticked boxes rather than offer dialogue. Carrying out just one focus group was a disappointment as views from both sites would have been advantageous. The timing of the focus groups, which had to be after receipt of results, meant that students were deeply involved in the next module and so may have been reluctant to take time out to discuss a past module.

Extraneous variables mean that findings should be treated with a degree of caution. I did have a tutor-student relationship with some students in this cohort, and my position as module lead may have led students to feel they had to participate. Similarly, students may have offered favourable comments because I am a tutor. Though student numbers (on questionnaires) were never matched to names in this study, students may still have felt that comments they made could be traced to them. This study did not ask students how many times they sought tutorial support. Some would have accessed far more than others and it would have been useful to know how many tutorials (face-to-face and e-mail) students received to better appraise the relationship between tutorial support and, for example, pre-course academic level, confidence and

achievement. With regard to the quality or nature of the tutorial support that students received, questionnaire comments would suggest that tutors may have differed in their style or approach to students, as such different approaches were described. As this study did not differentiate which tutor gave support then any differences remain anonymised. Asking students to name their tutor may have inhibited student responses, and could have been threatening for some staff. The majority of students had never been through an assessment process in higher education before, and so may not know what to expect in terms of, for example, having a choice of assessment or quality of tutorial support. The questionnaire specifically asked them about the effects of aspects of the assessment process on their self-beliefs, but responses may have reflected whether their expectations were met or not. Being able to support data with qualitative comments, and vice versa, was a strength of this study, and justified use of mixed methods.

#### Reflection on validity of study

A key threat to the validity of this study, and a consistent ethical consideration was my involvement with some of the participants of the study as a tutor as well as a researcher. Though there are advantages to teachers being researchers of their own practice (Stenhouse 1975; Tobin 1999), such as having a wealth of knowledge which someone outside of this situation or the organisation may not have (Tedlock 2000), it is imperative to be aware of, and where possible minimise any bias on the research process. A means of minimising this bias is to make the research process as transparent and honest as possible (Hammersley 2000), allowing the reader to construct their own perspectives and make their own minds up as to the validity of the study (Cohen *et al* 2000, Koch and Harrington 1998: 889). Throughout the research process I have maintained a reflective journal and discussed aspects of the study with colleagues to try and maintain a reflexive engagement with the research, and remain cognisant of my influence on the research process (Lamb and Huttlinger 1989; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Northway 2000). Looking back through my reflections highlighted Bishop's (1999) observation that we only see some of the ethical issues related to our work when writing up. One issue that emerged was that despite having an information sheet, consent form and being told that they could withdraw at any time, students may have felt coerced into participating as they were being asked to by their tutor. This student group were a convenient and opportunistic sample, and appeared to be willing participants, but Malone (2003) crafted a thought provoking insight into what students may really be feeling, and what they may be consenting to. She rightly points out the power relationship

between tutor and student that makes non-participation and withdrawal problematic. When I reflect on the degree of trepidation and anxiety expressed by this cohort of students when they commenced this programme of study (in questionnaire one), it is plausible that few may have had the courage to 'opt out' even if they had wanted to. Though only some of the students were taught and supported by me; the whole cohort knew that I was the module leader. The other issue that Malone (2003) raises is what exactly participants consent to, arguing that the inductive nature of qualitative study implies that we cannot always be certain what will emerge during the study, so may be asking students to consent to something yet to transpire. She goes on to claim that informed consent is not possible in a qualitative study, and that this is because the whole issue of consent is embedded in assumptions related to scientific method. Guba and Lincoln (1985) have re-defined terms within the qualitative paradigm to reflect quantitative assumptions of validity and reliability (replacing them with credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability), but the issue of how we elicit consent within an interpretivist paradigm may need to be thought out to accommodate the inductive and often complex nature of qualitative research. Reflecting on information supplied to participants prior to consent, I feel confident that students have not been asked or coerced into any activity that was not made explicit before the study commenced. Students were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time. I was not aware of any students withdrawing, but the power relationship between participants as students, and myself as a tutor, may have inhibited any students requesting to withdraw. Students could have opted out of completing questionnaire two, or not included their student number if they were unwilling to participate further. As I did not follow up those who did not complete questionnaire two I would not know if any participant had chosen to withdraw in this way.

Reflections on my dealings with this cohort of students reveal a strict delineation between my role as researcher, and my role as module tutor. The study was discussed with all potential participants when they commenced this programme of study and again when consent forms and questionnaire one was distributed in week one of the module. Thirteen weeks after the module ended, when students had their assessment results and feedback the research was briefly discussed again with participants. I only spoke with a proportion of these students; colleagues distributed most of the questionnaires. There was a distinct benefit to collecting data before and after the taught component of the module that meant that my role as tutor and researcher were

never presented at the same time. The subject of my research did not arise at any point when teaching or doing tutorials with this group of students, and students did not ask about it.

It could be argued that my interest in the study of assessment, and how the whole process was impacting on students self-beliefs influenced my engagement with some of the students within this group, but on reflection I was not aware of teaching or relating to students in any way different to previous iterations of the module.

The only part of the research within which my relationship with participants could have been blurred was when I facilitated the focus group. The students who volunteered to participate were known to me. I reflected long and hard about whether I should facilitate this group, or have a colleague do this for me. The rationale for my involvement was that I had an inside, shared knowledge of the process that these students had been through, and this provided a valuable shared understanding that negated the requirement to scene set or go into long explanations of events that had occurred within the module. Not only did this enable the focus group to direct more time and energy to the specific aspects of the assessment we were interested in exploring, as a group, but a relationship of mutual respect and trust was evident which may have contributed to more honest and open engagement. It is also argued that participants may feel more comfortable and talk more freely if they know the researcher (Tierney 1994). Conversely, it could be argued that the students I knew may have offered comments they felt I wanted to hear.

All students in this cohort knew that I would not be teaching them again on this programme of study, and more than half of the participants were not taught or supported by me. These factors may have enabled them to feel they could be honest in their responses. Certainly, there were much more detailed comments, particularly of a critical nature, offered in questionnaires that were not voiced during evaluation of the module which adds weight to the belief that students were honest and open regarding their views. Student anonymity was maintained well in terms of the researcher not knowing participants, as only student numbers were included on questionnaires, with no indication which geographical site students were based on. This degree of anonymity also meant that comments made by students about, for example, poor tutorial support, could not be related to any particular tutor or location.

### Future study

It would be useful to build on this study with a longitudinal view of how students' self-beliefs about their ability and their view of learning changes as they progress through their award. For example, looking at whether students, as Fazey (1996) suggests, become less autonomous as they progress, or develop as independent learners as the curriculum intends. As this study found a shift towards students seeing assessment as more important than learning and understanding, it would be useful to know if this shift develops further as student's progress, whether this finding is replicated for other students experiencing their first assessment in higher education, and whether there is a similar finding in other awards and / or universities. This could tell us something about the learning milieu in higher education and whether learning and assessment strategy, and the way we engage with students, over-emphasises the importance of assessment at the expense of learning and understanding. It would also be useful to ascertain from students how reliant they feel they are on tutor support, as compared to how self-reliant they feel, and whether this balance shifts as they progress through the award, or differs depending on the model of tutorial support. Findings could indicate models of tutorial support that foster dependence or enhance self-reliance.

### Personal development

As well as exploring the students' journey through the assessment process, this study has been a journey of self-exploration, gaining insight into my influence on students, and leading to questions about what shapes my philosophy of education and how that translates into teaching and assessing of students.

The most prominent issue for personal reflection has been how to create a supportive learning environment for year one students that does not create tutor dependence, but fosters self-reliance. Further, how to attenuate student support so that as students progress through their award they develop a strong self-beliefs about their capabilities and self-reliance. Getting this balance right is important in terms of their engagement with education, but even more so in terms of being an effective healthcare professional.

Interestingly, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) found that insight into their doctoral work was lacking at the time of conducting it, but with time, distance and detachment, when they had moved on in

their academic and personal lives, they were able to identify and understand what shaped their work, reflexivity being easier with hindsight. This suggests that whilst there are limitations to how reflexive we can be when actually engaging in the research process, further insight and learning should emerge with time and reflection.

A key reason for engaging in educational research is to make a difference to educational practice (Bensimon *et al* 2004, Cohen *et al* 2000: 297). Research should enable reflection on practice and contribute to improving, innovating, changing and developing current practice (Zuber-Skerritt 1992:11). The student perspective on how the assessment process impacts on them supports recommendations for the creation of a learning environment and assessment strategy that supports development of self-beliefs about ability, confidence and self-reliance. Learning, understanding and insight gained through this study has made a significant difference to both my teaching practice, and to learning and assessment within the faculty in which I work. The scoping exercise I carried out to appraise the weight and variety of assessment across awards has resulted in re-validated curricula now including a much greater variety of assessment methods, including poster and powerpoint presentations. My example of offering a choice of type of assessment has now been followed by others and is held up as an example of good practice, and has been promoted at staff development events on 'inclusive assessment'. I have re-written the Faculty grading criteria, simplifying the language so it is accessible for students, and making clear what is required to achieve each grade at each academic level. I have also contributed greatly to the debate on issuing of unratified results and the subsequent change in practice; grades and formative feedback are now issued to students within a shorter time-frame. The importance of timely formative feedback that is motivating, informative and useful to students is evident in ongoing discussions on how feedback can fulfil its formative function effectively, but will require changes to practice and staff development. I conducted a pilot study that provided word-processed feedback to students. This proved successful, and a larger scale pilot is now being carried out. I am hopeful that all students will be able to benefit from legible and timely formative feedback in future. There is still much work to be done to influence assessment strategy within undergraduate awards to reduce high-stakes assessment in year one, and offer more opportunities for practice, feedback and re-working of assignments. This would make year one more 'formative', enhancing student confidence and self-beliefs about their ability to succeed with assessment as they progress to the necessary high stakes assessment later in their course.



To conclude, this study has offered insight, from the student perspective into how the first assessment experience impacted on the self-beliefs of first year nursing diploma students. Elements of this experience that students felt enhanced their confidence and self-beliefs were related to success with the assessment in the form of a good grade, and aspects of peer support, tutorial support and tutor feedback, but a poor grade, ineffective tutor support and negative comments made by tutors also served to undermine confidence and self-belief for a minority of students. This study highlighted areas of good practice, and raised issues worthy of consideration to improve the assessment process, student learning and importantly student self-belief.

The importance of maintaining close alignment between learning and assessment is imperative, as is the creation of a learning environment that reflects the student focus of wanting to learn and understand rather than reflecting the importance of assessment. Formative feedback on assessment should be 'formative', informing students how to develop their learning, but should also be motivational, inspire confidence and attribute achievement to effort. It also needs to be timely, and presented in a way that facilitates it being understood and hopefully used by students. Enabling peer support, maintaining a range of modes of tutorial support, facilitating student support that fosters self-reliance rather than dependence and involving the student more within the assessment process are all considered key to developing autonomous, independent lifelong learners and effective health care professionals. Increasing student involvement and control in the area of assessment would benefit both their educational and professional development.

The inclusion of a diverse range of students across the range of age and academic ability not only contributes positively to the learning environment, but benefits those who may traditionally have been excluded from higher education. Mature students who have weaker academic backgrounds achieved as well as their younger or more qualified peers, and those with no family history of higher education experienced equal success to their peers and enhanced confidence to undergo assessment in future. Means of continuing a wide-entry gate to nursing to maintain this diversity, and enable opportunity, should be pursued.

## **Appendix 1 Principles of good formative assessment and feedback practice**

The 12 principles presented below set out that good formative assessment and feedback practice should:

1. Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards).
2. Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks.
3. Deliver high quality feedback information that helps learners self-correct.
4. Provide opportunities to act on feedback (to close any gap between current and desired performance)
5. Ensure that summative assessment has a positive impact on learning.
6. Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and teacher-student).
7. Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning.
8. Give choice in the topic, method, criteria, weighting or timing of assessments.
9. Involve students in decision-making about assessment policy and practice.
10. Support the development of learning groups and communities
11. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
12. Provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape their teaching

(Nicol 2008a)

## Appendix 2

# Participant Information Sheet

**Research Project Title: Exploring student nurse's first assessment experience: A mixed-method illuminative study**

*I am inviting you to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.*

### The Research Project: Purpose

I am carrying out a research project as part of a programme of study (Doctor of Education at Sheffield University), and I am interested in finding out about how you feel about your first written assessment at University. I will be focusing on your first assignment for 'Foundation Studies in Practice'. I would like to find out how the tutorial support you have, your assignment result and the feedback you get on your feedback sheet affect how you feel about your ability and your confidence to do your next assessments. My aim is to find out how the assessment process can be improved to help to support you better, and what may contribute to making you to feel positive about your abilities.

To this end you are being asked to complete two questionnaires, one at the beginning of your course, and another following your first assignment results. I will need to know from you:

1. How you feel about the assessment before you do it, and what you think about your ability generally.
2. After you have had your assignment result I would like to know how you felt about it, and how helpful or unhelpful you felt the support and feedback were.

During term 2 I will also be inviting some of you to talk about your experience of this first assessment in a small group of around 10 people so that I can gain a deeper understanding of how the assessment period has made you feel about yourself and about writing your next assignment. This session will be taped, with your permission,

but the recording will be kept by me and not made available to anyone else. The recording will only be used for my analysis, and may be used for illustration purposes in conference presentations and lectures. I would not use your recording for any other reason without your written permission.

Any information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential, and any of your comments that do appear in the final research report or any reports or publications will be anonymised, so that it would not be possible to identify you. Before completing the research report I will present what I have written to you to allow you to comment on how you feel about what I have found, and to let you know of any changes that may happen as a result of this research.

*I am inviting your diploma cohort to participate, but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and a copy of a consent form, which you will be asked to sign. You can withdraw at any time without it affecting any aspect of your course and you do not have to give a reason.*

#### Are there any risks to taking part?

There are no risks to taking part. You will need to take the time to fill out two questionnaires, and you may volunteer to participate in a focus group. You will only be identifiable by your student number in order that questionnaire 1 and 2 can be matched; you will not be identifiable in any reports or papers that are written about this research project.

#### Are there any benefits to taking part?

There are likely to be benefits from taking part. Your experience of the assessment process is likely to highlight issues that may lead to changes that improve the assessment process in future, for example, the tutorial support and feedback we give you.

#### What happens if the study stops earlier than expected, or something goes wrong?

If the research has to stop, or there are problems with it, I will let you all know via the Discussion area in Blackboard.

#### What will happen to the results of the project?

The results of the project will be presented within a research report that I will submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Education, and may also be written up in papers for publication. I will present the results back to your cohort once I have completed the report, so that you can see for yourself what I have found and ask questions if you wish. The results will also be seen by our Faculty Directors who may want to make changes to how we assess and support students in future.

**Who has ethically approved the project?**

Sheffield University school of Education have approved this project as being safe and ethical, and our Faculty Directors, Dean and Chair of our ethics committee at Staffordshire University have also scrutinised the research proposal and are happy for the research project to go ahead.

Thank you very much for considering participating in this research project.

**If you would like any further information please contact:**

Paula Crick (researcher): Tel: 01785 353683 or E-mail: [p.j.crick@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:p.j.crick@staffs.ac.uk)  
or Lorraine Ellis (research supervisor) [l.b.ellis@shef.ac.uk](mailto:l.b.ellis@shef.ac.uk)

**Reference: Sheffield University participant information sheet guidance. Available at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/04/09/57/PARTICIPANT%20INFORMATION%20SHEET.doc> accessed 22 10 07**

**Title of Project: Exploring student nurses' first assessment experience: A mixed-method illuminative study**

**Name of Researcher: Paula Crick**

**Participant Identification Number for this project (your student number): 050117967**

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 30 11 07 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Contact Paula Crick [p.j.crick@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:p.j.crick@staffs.ac.uk) to withdraw.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

I agree to take part in the above research project.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant Date Signature  
*(or legal representative)*

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of person taking consent Date Signature  
*(if different from lead researcher)*

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*

\_\_\_\_\_

Lead Researcher Date Signature

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*

Reference:

School of Education University of Sheffield participant consent form. Available at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/04/09/57/Participant%20consent%20form.doc> accessed 22 10 07.

**Appendix 4                      Questionnaire 1**

**Student number:**

**Age:**

**Part A    About you**

**Please underline answers that describe you:**

**1. Are you                      Male                      Female**

**2. Are you the first in your family to attend university? Yes                      No**

**3. Is your first language English?                      Yes                      No**

**4. What academic qualifications have you achieved? Please underline your highest qualifications from the following:**

**A portfolio of evidence (passed portfolio module)**

**Between 1 and 4 GCSE's at grade C or above**

**More than 5 GCSE's**

**1-2 A levels**

**3 or more A levels**

**A diploma**

**A degree**

**Any other qualifications (please state) .....**





**Part C Your feelings about undergoing assessment at university**

**7. How confident do you feel about taking the following assessments on this nursing course:  
(underline the answer that best describes you)**

**Writing an essay**

Very confident

Quite confident

Not very confident

Afraid of doing it

Don't know as I have never done one

Any other comment?.....

**Taking a written exam paper**

Very confident

Quite confident

Not very confident

Afraid of doing it

Don't know as I have never done one

Any other comment?.....

**Verbally presenting work to the whole class**

Very confident

Quite confident

Not very confident

Afraid of doing it

Don't know as I have never done one

Any other comment?.....

**Spoken exam (viva voce)**

- Very confident
- Quite confident
- Not very confident
- Afraid of doing it
- Don't know as I have never done one

Any other comment?.....

**Demonstrating a nursing skill under exam conditions (OSCE)**

- Very confident
- Quite confident
- Not very confident
- Afraid of doing it
- Don't know as I have never done one

Any other comment?.....

**Can you describe in your own words how you feel about writing your first assignment for this course?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Part D How you feel about your ability and intelligence**

This questionnaire has been designed to investigate ideas about intelligence. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your ideas.

Using the scale below, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by writing the number that matches your opinion in the space underlined after each statement:

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Strongly Agree	Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

1. You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can't really do much to change it \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much \_\_\_\_\_
3. No matter who you are, you can significantly change your intelligence level \_\_\_\_\_
4. To be honest, you can't really change how intelligent you are \_\_\_\_\_
5. You can always substantially change how intelligent you are \_\_\_\_\_
6. You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence \_\_\_\_\_
7. No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it quite a bit \_\_\_\_\_
8. You can change even your basic intelligence level considerably \_\_\_\_\_

Now answer the following:

9. Overall, what is more important to you:

- a. learning and understanding the module content
- b. passing the assignment

10. Complete the equation below to indicate how much you think intelligence is to do with Effort and ability:

Intelligence = \_\_\_\_\_ % effort and \_\_\_\_\_ % ability

Part D from Dweck CS (2000) Self-Theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development Hove: Psychology Press

**Appendix 5 Questionnaire 2**

**Student number:**

**Part A: The following questions are about your assessment for the module SHN50000-1  
Foundation studies in practice.**

**1. Did you submit an assignment for this module?                      YES                      NO**

**2. Which assignment did you choose to do (please underline):**

**Assignment A – 2000 word essay**

**Assignment B – Three smaller pieces of work**

**3. Can you briefly describe why you chose this option?**

.....  
.....

**These questions are concerned with the support you had for your assessment (assignment)  
during the module time, before you handed it in.**

**4. Did you get support from your tutor(s)                      YES                      NO**

**If yes, was this support:**

**1. Face-to-face (in class, after class, personal tutorial).....**

**2. by e-mail.....**

**(tick which apply)**

**If no, can you say why you did not have tutorial support?**

.....  
.....

5. If you did have tutorial support was it useful? Please briefly describe what you found helpful or unhelpful.

.....  
.....  
.....

6. Did you get support from other students in your cohort? YES NO

If yes, was this via: Blackboard e-mail Face-to-face (underline which apply)

7. Was support from your fellow students useful? Please briefly describe what you found helpful or unhelpful.

.....  
.....  
.....

8. How useful (or not) were materials in Blackboard?

.....  
.....  
.....

These questions are about your assignment result and your written feedback.

9. What grade did you receive? A B C D E F U  
(please circle)

10. Was the grade (please underline your choice):

Better than expected

About what you expected

Worse than you expected

**11. How did you feel about your grade?**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**12(i). If you passed your assignment: Have you been to see a tutor since you got your result for any further comment or support concerning your result or feedback sheet?**

**YES**                      **NO**

**a. If YES, comment on anything from this meeting that was useful or unhelpful to you.**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**12(ii). If you did not pass your assignment: Have you been to see a tutor since you got your result for support and to prepare for your second attempt?**

**YES**                      **NO**

**a. If YES, comment on anything from this meeting that was useful or unhelpful to you.**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**b. If NO, is there any reason why you have not seen a tutor?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**13. All students: Did you read the feedback written on your results sheet?**

**YES**

**NO**

**a. Could you read the writing?**

**YES**

**NO**

**b. Were there any words you did not understand?**

**YES**

**NO**

**If yes, what words did you not understand?**

.....  
.....

**14. Was there anything in your written feedback that made you feel good about yourself?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**15. Was there anything in your written feedback that made you feel less confident or less capable?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**16. Was the feedback of any use to you in preparing for your next assignment?**

**YES**

**NO**

**17. How confident do you feel about doing your next assignment? (underline response that applies to you)**

**Very confident**

**Quite confident**

**Not very confident**

**Afraid of doing it**



**18. Are there any points you want to raise about the support you had for this assignment, your result, the feedback you received or how the experience has made you feel about your ability to do another assignment in future?**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**19. What advice would you give to a first year student preparing their first assignment?**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**20. Is there anything that you think module tutors can do to support you better?**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**Part B: How you feel about your ability and intelligence**

1. Complete the equation below to indicate how much you think intelligence is to do with Effort and Ability:

Intelligence = \_\_\_\_\_ % effort and \_\_\_\_\_ % ability

2. Overall, what is more important to you: (tick one statement only)

- a. learning and understanding the module content
- b. passing the assignment

**Thank you for the time taken to contribute this information.**

## **Appendix 6 Focus Group Information**

Good morning!

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this discussion about your assessment experience for the module 'Foundation Studies in Practice'. I am very grateful for your time.

You kindly volunteered to take part in this discussion via the online discussion forum in Blackboard, and you have also been kind enough to complete two questionnaires about your assessment experience. Thank you. At the beginning of your course you received a participant information sheet and signed a consent form, but you may still choose not to participate at any point.

I am interested to know how you felt about this module assessment and over the next hour would like you discuss your experience of your first assessment here at this university. What you tell us will contribute to how we develop assessments and support for you in future so please be honest and speak freely. What you say will remain confidential within this room, and when the discussion is analysed and written up no names will be used, or any information given that may identify you.

This focus group will be audio-taped, with your permission, but the recording will be kept safely in a locked cupboard by the researcher and not made available to anyone else. The recording will only be used for analysis for the purposes of this study only, and may be used for illustration purposes in conference presentations and lectures. I would not use your recording for any other reason without your written permission.

As in any discussion group please respect each others contributions and try not to talk at the same time as someone else. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' issues here, and it is OK if you disagree with each other.

The questions we will explore are (these will evolve from the questionnaire data, but illustrative examples are presented below).

1. How you felt about the way you were supported as you prepared your first assignment and how you felt about having a choice of assessment.
2. The way you used feedback that was given to you on your results sheet.
3. How this experience has affected your confidence, and how capable you feel about doing assessments in future.

## **Appendix 7a Detailed assignment brief for Assignment A**

You should read this alongside your Module Handbook and Study Skills Handbook

### **Cover Sheet for hand in:**

The front sheet of your assignment should have on it:

The module number: SHN50000-1

Module Leader: Paula Crick

Your student number

Word Count

### **The assignment**

An essay of 2000 words.

Your assignment MUST be double spaced and typed in arial 12 point. Please include page numbers and (if you can) your student number as a header or footer on each page. Do not put your name anywhere in your work.

Ensure you do not breach confidentiality (see your study skills handbook and read the confidentiality guidance carefully). Ensure you do not write anything that could be misconstrued as prejudicial to any group, for example racist, ageist, etc.

**Assignment title** Write a title that says EXACTLY what your essay is about. For example 'Smoking in young people' or 'Children's diet'

### **What your assignment is about:**

You are to choose one of the health behaviours below and write about what can be done to address the issue in a given group in our society.

Health behaviours related to:

**Smoking**

**Diet**

**Alcohol misuse**

**Physical activity**

**Sexual Health**

**Suicide**

The groups are:

**Children; young people; adults; older people.**

If you wish to make this branch specific you may choose, for example, pregnant women, new mothers, mental health service users.

### **Your assignment should include**

1. A 2000 word essay that explores ways of tackling the chosen issue in a particular group of our society. Your work needs to be supported well by good evidence. This evidence should include policies and strategies from Government bodies (such as the Department of Health), peer reviewed Journal articles and books. (Take care with use of websites – how credible are they?).
2. A reference list – all materials used in your assignment need to be listed and written up correctly as demonstrated in your study skills handbook
3. A search strategy outlining your search for evidence to investigate your evidence based question. This should be included as an appendix.

Your work should reflect the breadth of issues engaged in during this module, and evidence your study and reading around the subject. It should reflect the learning outcomes specified in the module descriptor (see your module handbook).

The following guidelines may help you to structure your essay.

- 1 An Introduction which tells the reader what your essay will be about. From the introduction your reader should know what to expect of the rest of this essay.
- 2 A main body that presents what the issue is (for example with smoking or poor diet). It will briefly discuss problems associated with the main issue (e.g. problems associated with poor diet, smoking).
- 3 The main part of your essay should focus on what we, as nurses/practitioners and as part of a wider community, can do about the issue you have been studying. This may include strategies / policies from Government offices (such as the Department of Health or Home Office), projects / strategies you are aware of in your local community, and research (in the form of published journal articles, Systematic reviews) which support and inform our interventions and strategies aimed at individuals. (Take care with use of websites – how reliable are they?) There is no set format to your essay you only have 2000 words so you cannot cover “everything”. Feel free to focus on specific strategies / interventions if you wish. Remember that this is a health & social care essay, so ensure you think about the work we have done around inequalities in health, and what makes healthier choices easier for some than others. Bear in mind all the things that contribute to our health (a holistic approach – remember the biopsychosocial model?) and

the necessity of health promotion, not waiting for people to get ill before we offer healthcare strategies.

Subheadings may be used to promote clarity if this helps you.

- 4 Conclusion. This should, in a few sentences, bring together the main themes of your essay and come to some sort of conclusion about where we are with regards to the issue. You may suggest any further work / research / ideas you have that may take forward our efforts to tackle the issue you have been writing about.
- 5 References. Must be in Harvard format. You **MUST** use the Study Skills Handbook to guide you.
- 6 Appendix: You **must** include your search strategy. Other appendices such as tables or graphs may also be included as appendices.
- 7 Word count. Your essay should be 2000 words. You are permitted to exceed this by 10% (so a maximum of 2200 words is allowed). If you exceed 2200 words you will lose 15% of your marks. There is no penalty for being under the word count, but make the most of the words you have to achieve the best grade you can.

**NOT** included in the word count are: Headings and subheadings; direct quotes, references in brackets, your reference list, appendices (so the search strategy is not included in your word count).

Please refer to your Module Handbook for the level 1 marking criteria.

Students who achieve well within this module assignment:

- Demonstrate that they have read and studied a good range of literature including policies, reports, guidelines, peer-reviewed journals, core text books and authoritative websites (such as the Department of Health and Health Development Agency)
- Always attend to the assignment brief and answer the question directly
- Seek tutorial advice if they are uncertain of any aspects of the assignment
- Refer to the marking criteria to ensure they are meeting the academic requirements of level 1.
- Reference their work completely and correctly using the Harvard referencing system (as demonstrated in your Study Skills Handbook)
- Carefully proof read their work prior to submission

Students who have difficulty in meeting the requirements of this assignment tend not to attend to the issues above. They may not answer the question set adequately, may fail to evidence their study and / or do not base their essay on an adequate evidence base.

## **Appendix 7b Detailed assignment brief for Assignment B**

You should read this alongside your Module Handbook and Study Skills Handbook

### **Cover Sheet for hand in:**

The front sheet of your assignment should have on it:

The module number: SHN50000-1

Module Leader: Paula Crick

Your student number

Word Count

### **The assignment**

For this assignment you will submit three pieces of work for formative feedback (we will comment on the work and tell you how you can improve it then return it to you), all three pieces are to be handed in TOGETHER on the hand in date. To allow us to offer you feedback you are to submit the three pieces of work to us as follows:

1. By 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008 submit a search strategy (500 words).
2. By 14<sup>th</sup> April 2008 submit a fully referenced fact sheet / handout to accompany your presentation (500 words)
3. On 30<sup>th</sup> April (**when you hand in all 3 pieces**) submit a short essay (1000 words). You are to choose one of the health behaviours below and write about health policy and health promotion strategies that address the issue in a given group in our society.

You may seek guidance and support at any point. The easiest way to contact us is via e-mail, or before or after class.

All of your work **MUST** be double spaced and typed in arial 12 point. Please include page numbers and (if you can) your student number as a header or footer on each page. Do not put your name anywhere in your work.

Ensure you do not breach confidentiality (see your study skills handbook and read the confidentiality guidance carefully). Ensure you do not write anything that could be misconstrued as prejudicial to any group, for example racist, ageist, etc.

The content of all three pieces of work will depend on the health behaviour your group has chosen to present and the group YOU have decided to focus on.

Health behaviours related to:

**Smoking**

**Diet**

**Alcohol misuse**

**Physical activity**

**Sexual Health**

**Suicide**

The groups are:

**Children; young people; adults; older people.**

If you wish to make this branch specific you may choose, for example, pregnant women, new mothers, mental health service users.

In more detail:

1. Search Strategy of 500 words.

You are to present a written search strategy that clearly outlines where you have been looking for resources, what you have found and how useful they have been, and (briefly) what you have learned about searching for academic resources. You should include a table that summarises your search (there is a template for this in the 'Assignment Folder – Detailed assignment brief' in Blackboard). This table will NOT be included in your word count.

A good start point are the websites we have listed in your module handbook, and you should explore the online journals and databases on the Staffordshire University Library website.

We are aware that many of you are new to searching for academic literature, what we want to see is the effort you have made to learn this skill, which will be refined over future months and years as your study skills develop.

2. A referenced fact sheet / handout that summarises your presentation (500 words). Provide a handout / fact sheet that outlines the topic you have researched including useful strategies or findings you think your fellow students



would find useful in practice. You should include useful references or websites and ensure you include a thorough reference list using the Harvard referencing system at the end of the handout / fact sheet. Please ask if you are unsure how to set this out.

3. An essay of 1000 words.

**Essay title:** Write a title that says EXACTLY what your essay is about. For example 'Smoking in young people' or 'Children's diet'

**What your essay is about:** By this time you have chosen one of the health behaviours (which you did a presentation on), so write succinctly about addressing the issue in a given group in our society. As you only have 1000 words there is no room for long descriptions of the issue itself, just briefly summarise the problem, then go on to discuss strategies to address it.

**Your assignment should include**

- 8 1000 words discussing ways of tackling the chosen issue in a particular group of our society. Your essay should focus on what we, as nurses/practitioners and as part of a wider community, can do about the issue you have been studying. Your work needs to be supported well by good evidence. This evidence should include policies and strategies from Government bodies (such as the Department of Health), and research (in the form of published journal articles, Systematic reviews) which support and inform our interventions and strategies aimed at individuals (Take care with use of websites – how credible are they?). There is no set format to your essay you only have 1000 words so you cannot cover "everything". Feel free to focus on specific strategies / interventions if you wish. Remember that this is a health & social care essay, so ensure you think about the work we have done around inequalities in health, and what makes healthier choices easier for some than others. Bear in mind all the things that contribute to our health (a holistic approach – remember the biopsychosocial model?) and the necessity of health promotion, not waiting for people to get ill before we offer healthcare strategies. Subheadings may be used to promote clarity if this helps you.
4. A reference list – all materials used in your assignment need to be listed and written up correctly as demonstrated in your study skills handbook

Your work should reflect the breadth of issues engaged in during this module, and evidence your study and reading around the subject. It should reflect the learning outcomes specified in the module descriptor (see your module handbook).

The following guidelines may help you to structure your essay.

- 9 An Introduction which tells the reader what your essay will be about. From the introduction your reader should know what to expect of the rest of this essay.
- 10 A main body that presents what the issue is (for example with smoking or poor diet). It will VERY briefly discuss problems associated with the main issue (e.g. problems associated with poor diet, smoking).
- 11 The main part of your essay should focus on what we can do about the issue you have been studying. This may include strategies / policies from Government offices (such as the Department of Health or Home Office), projects / strategies or research you are aware of in your local community, and interventions / strategies aimed at individuals. There is no set format to this you only have 1000 words so you cannot cover “everything”. Feel free to focus on specific strategies / interventions if you wish. Remember that this is a health & social care essay, so ensure you think about the work we have done around inequalities in health, and what makes healthier choices easier for some than others. Bear in mind all the things that contribute to our health (a holistic approach – remember the biopsychosocial model?) and the necessity of health promotion, not waiting for people to get ill before we engage with them.  
Subheadings may be used to promote clarity if this helps you.
- 12 Conclusion. This should, in a few sentences. Bring together the main themes of your essay and come to some sort of conclusion about where we are with regards to the issue. You may suggest any further work / research / ideas you have that may take forward our efforts to tackle the issue you have been writing about.
- 13 References. Must be in Harvard format. You MUST use the Study Skills Handbook to guide you.

Word count. The **WHOLE** assessment (3 pieces of work) should total 2000 words. You are permitted to exceed this by 10% (so a maximum of 2200 words is allowed). If you exceed 2200 words you will lose 15% of your marks. There is no penalty for being under the word count, but make the most of the words you have to achieve the best grade you can.

**NOT** included in the word count are: Headings and subheadings; direct quotes, references in brackets, your reference list, and any appendices.

Please refer to your Module Handbook for the level 1 marking criteria.

Students who achieve well within this module assignment:

- Demonstrate that they have read and studied a good range of literature including policies, reports, guidelines, peer-reviewed journals, core text books and authoritative websites (such as the Department of Health and Health Development Agency)
- Always attend to the assignment brief and answer the question(s) directly
- Seek tutorial advice if they are uncertain of any aspects of the assignment
- Refer to the marking criteria to ensure they are meeting the academic requirements of level 1.
- Reference their work completely and correctly using the Harvard referencing system (as demonstrated in your Study Skills Handbook)
- Carefully proof read their work prior to submission

Students who have difficulty in meeting the requirements of this assignment tend not to attend to the issues above. They may not answer the question set adequately, may fail to evidence their study and / or do not base their essay on an adequate evidence base.

## **Appendix 8** Conditions under which assessment supports learning

1. Quantity and distribution of effort – assessed tasks need to capture sufficient time and effort and distribute student effort evenly across topics and weeks
2. Quality and level of student effort – assessed tasks need to engage students in productive learning activity and communicate clear and high expectations.
3. Quantity and timing of feedback – sufficient feedback needs to be provided both often enough and sufficiently quickly to be useful to students
4. Quality of feedback – feedback should focus on learning rather than on marks, should be linked to the purpose of the assignment and to criteria and should be understandable to students
5. Student response to feedback – feedback is pointless unless it is received by students and attended to. It needs to be acted upon in order to improve students' work or learning.

(Summarised from Gibbs 2006:29)

## **References**

Abrams HG and Jernigan LP (1984) Academic support services and success of high-risk college students *American Educational Research Journal* 21(2), 21-274

Ames C (1984) Achievement attributions and self-instructions in competitive and individualistic goal structures *Journal of Educational Psychology* 76, 478-487

Ames C (1992) Classrooms: goals, structures and student motivation *Journal of Educational Psychology* 84, 261-271

Ames C and Archer J (1988) Achievement goals in the classroom: students' learning strategies and motivation processes *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, 260-267

Appleton JV and Cowley S (1997) Analysing clinical practice guidelines. A method of documentary analysis *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 25, 1008-1017

Archer J and Lamnin A (1985) An investigation of personal and academic stressors on college campuses *Journal of College Student Personnel* 26, 210-215

Archer L (2007) Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation *Teaching in Higher Education* 12 (5-6), 635-653

Archer L and Hutchings M (2000) "Bettering yourself": discourses of risk, cost and benefits in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21(4), 555-574

Archer L and Leathwood C (2003) Identities, inequalities and higher education, In Archer L, Hutchings M and Ross A (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. RoutledgeFalmer: London

Archer L, Hutchings M and Ross A (Eds) (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. RoutledgeFalmer: London

Aronson J and Fried C (1998) Reducing stereotype threat and boosting academic achievement of African Americans: The role of conceptions of intelligence. Unpublished manuscript In Dweck C S (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press p.37

Ashton H and Shuldham C (1994) An explanatory study of student's perceptions of the benefits of regular small group tutorials in a two year day release course *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 925-934

Ball SJ, Maguire M and Macrae S (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: new youth, new economies in the global city* London: Routledge Falmer

Bandura A (1977) *Social Learning Theory* New York: General Learning Press

Bandura A (1986) *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory* Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall

Bandura A (1993) Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning *Educational Psychologist* 28, 117-148

Bandura A (1997) *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control* New York: W H Freeman

Bandura A and Jourden FJ (1991) Self-regulatory mechanisms governing social comparison effects on complex decision making *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60 941-951

Bandura M and Dweck CS (1985) The relationship of conceptions of intelligence and achievement goals to achievement-related cognition, affect, and behaviour. Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University in Dweck C S (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press p. 2

Bastiani J and Tolley H (1979) *Researching into the curriculum (Vol 16)* Nottingham: Rediguides

Batty P (2004) Natfhe's anger at pressure to pass students *Times Higher Education* 6 August

Bean JP and Metzner B (1985) A conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate attrition *Review of Educational Research* 55(4) 484-540

Begley C M (1996) Using triangulation in nursing research *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 24, 122-128

Bensimon EM, Polkinghorne DE, Bauman GL, and Vallejo E (2004) Doing research that makes a difference *Journal of Higher Education* 75(1) 104-126

Bentley T and Hargreaves D H (2003) Learning futures: An English perspective on information and communication technologies in education, in O'Neil HF and Perez RS (Eds.) (2003) *Technology Applications in Education* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Biggs J B (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* Buckingham: Open University Press

Bishop W (1999). *Ethnographic writing research: Writing it down, writing it up, and reading it.* Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook

Black P and William D (1998) Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment *Phi Delta Kappan* 80(2), 139-149

Black P and William D (2009) Developing the theory of formative assessment *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21(5) 5-31

Blackwell L, Trzesniewski K, and Dweck, C S (2007) Implicit theories of intelligence predict achievement across an adolescent transition: A longitudinal study and an intervention *Child Development* 78, 246–263.

- Blanc RA, DeBuhr LE and Martin DC (1983) Breaking the attrition cycle: the effects of supplemental instruction on undergraduate performance and attrition *Journal of Higher Education* 54, 80-90
- Boud D (1988) *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning* London: Kogan Page
- Boud D (1995) Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary? In Knight P *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education* London: Kogan Paul
- Boud D (1999) Situating academic development in professional work: using peer learning *International Journal for Academic Development* 4(1) 3-10
- Boud D (2000) Sustainable assessment: rethinking assessment for the learning society *Studies in Continuing Education* 22(2), 151-167
- Boud D (2007) Reframing assessment as if learning were important, In Boud D and Falchikov N *Rethinking assessment in higher education: learning for the longer term* London: Routledge 14-25
- Boyatzis RE (1998) *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development* London: Sage
- Boyd CO (2000) Combining Qualitative and Quantitative approaches In Munhall PL and Boyd CO (Eds) *Nursing Research: A Qualitative perspective* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Boston: Jones & Bartlett
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, 77-101
- Braxton JM (2000) *Re-working the student departure puzzle* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press
- Brockbank A and McGill I (1998) *Facilitating Reflecting Learning in Higher Education* Buckingham: Open University



Brown DG (1993) Accounting for power: nurse teachers' and students' perceptions of power in their relationship *Nurse Education Today* 13 111-120

Bryan C and Clegg K (Eds.) (2006) *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* London: Routledge  
Bryman A (2001) *Social Research Methods* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Burnard P and Hannigan B (2000) Qualitative and quantitative approaches in mental health nursing: moving the debate forward *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 7, 1- 6

Busato VV, Prins FJ, Elshout JJ and Hamaker C (2000) Intellectual ability, learning style, personality, achievement motivation and academic success of psychology students on higher education *Personality and Individual Differences* 29, 1057-1068

Butler R (1988) Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation: the effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and involvement *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58, 1-14.

Butler R and Neuman O (1995) Effects of task and ego achievement goals on help seeking behaviours and attitudes *Journal of Educational Psychology* 87 261-271

Bynner J, Ferri W and Shepherd P (1998) *Twenty-something in the 1990's* Aldershot: Ashgate

Chambers R (1998) *Clinical Effectiveness Made Easy: First Thoughts on Clinical Governance*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press

Chamorro-Premuzic T and Furnham A (2004) A possible model for understanding the personality – intelligence interface *British Journal of Psychology* 95, 249-264

Church MA, Elliot AJ and Gable SL (2001) Perceptions of classroom environment, achievement goals and achievement outcomes *Journal of Educational Psychology* 93, 43-54

Coates H (2006) *Student engagement in campus-based and online education: university connections* London: Routledge

Cohen L, Manion L and Morrison K (2000) *Research Methods in Education (5th Edition)* London: Routledge Falmer

Collier T, Gilchrist R and Phillips D (2002) Who plans to go to university? Statistical modelling of working-class participation *Educational Research and Evaluation* 9(3), 239-263

Cook S (1999) The self in self-awareness *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 29(6), 1292-1299

Creswell J W (2003) *Research Design: qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)* London: Sage

Crisp B R (2007) Is it worth the effort? How feedback influences students' subsequent submission of assessable work. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 32(5), 571-581

Crook C, Gross H and Dymott R (2006) Assessment relationships in higher education: the tension of process and practice *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (1), 95-114

Cross KP (1996) Improving teaching and learning through classroom assessment and classroom research in Gibbs G (Ed) *Improving Student Learning: using research to improve student learning* Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development

Crotty M (1990) The perceptions of students and teachers regarding the introductory module of an enrolled nurse conversion course *Nurse Education Today* 10, 366-379

Dearing R (1997) *Higher education in the learning society* HMSO: London

Deci E, Koestner R and Ryan RM (1999) A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation *Psychological Bulletin* 125(6), 627-668

Delandshere G (2001) Implicit theories, unexamined assumptions and the status quo of educational assessment *Assessment in Education* 8, 113–133

Dellgran P and Hojer S (2003) Topics and epistemological positions in Swedish social work research *Social Work Education* 22(6), 565-575

Denny E (1991) Feminist research methods in nursing *Senior Nurse* 11 (6), 38-40

Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (2000) (Eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) London: Sage

Department for Education and Skills (2003a) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. London: DfES

Department for Education and Skills (2003b) *The Future of Higher Education* London: The Stationery Office

Department of Health (2003) *Tackling Health Inequalities: A Programme for Action*. London: The Stationery Office

Department of Health (2006) *Managing Attrition Rates for Student Nurses and Midwives: A guide to good practice for Strategic Health Authorities and Higher Education Institutions* Department of Health

Department of Health (2009) Nursing set to become all graduate entry by 2013 available at [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH\\_108359](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH_108359)

Diener CL and Dweck CS (1978) An analysis of learned helplessness: continuous changes in performance , strategy and achievement cognitions following failure *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, 451-462

Diener CL and Dweck CS (1980) An analysis of learned helplessness II: The processing of success *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39, 940-952

Dupeyrat C and Escribe C (2000) Orientations de but: Validation de questionnaire de Hayamizu et Weiner et relations avec les conceptions de l'intelligence *European Review of Applied Psychology* 50, 73-80

Dupeyrat C and Marine C (2005) Implicit theories of intelligence, goal orientation, cognitive engagement, and achievement: A test of Dweck's model with returning to school adults *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 30, 43-59

Dweck CS (1975) The role of expectations and attributions in the alleviation of learned helplessness *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31, 674-685

Dweck CS (1986) Motivational processes affecting learning *American Psychologist* 41, 1040-1048

Dweck CS (1988) Motivation In Glaser R and Lesgold A (Eds.) *The handbook of psychology and education* (Vol I, 187-239) Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum.

Dweck CS (1996a) Implicit theories as organisers of goals and behaviour. In P Gollwitzer and J Bargh (Eds) *The Psychology of Action: Linking cognition and motivation to behaviour* New York: Guilford

Dweck CS (1996b) Social motivation: Goals and social cognitive processes In J Juvonen and K Wentzel (Eds) *Social Motivation* New York: Cambridge University Press

Dweck CS (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press

Dweck CS and Elliott ES (1983) Achievement motivation. In P Mussen and EM Hetherington (Eds) *Handbook of Child Psychology* New York: Wiley

Dweck CS and Leggett EL (1988) A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality *Psychological Review* 95, 256-273

Dweck CS, Chiu C and Hong Y (1995) Implicit theories and their role in judgements and reactions: A world from two perspectives *Psychological Inquiry* 6(4), 267-285

Easterbrook D, Parker M and Waterfield J (2006) Higher Education Academy Engineering Subject Centre Assessment: Choice Case Study. University of Plymouth available at <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/files/extranet/docs/SWA/LTSN%20CS.pdf>

Elliott ES and Dweck CS (1988) Goals: An approach to motivation and achievement *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, 5-12

Ellis L B (2003) Illuminative case study design: a new approach to the evaluation of continuing professional education *Nurse Researcher* 10 (3), 48-59

Elton L (1988) Student motivation and achievement *Studies in Higher Education* 13, 215-222.

Elton L (1998) Are UK Degree standards going up, down or sideways? *Studies in Higher Education* 23(1), 35-42

Entwistle NJ and Entwistle A (1991) Contrasting forms of understanding for degree examinations: the student experience and its implications *Higher Education* 22, 205-227.

Esterberg KG (2002) *Qualitative Methods in Social Research* London: McGraw Hill

Falchikov N (2005) *Improving Assessment Through Student Involvement* Oxon: RoutledgeFalmer

Falchikov N and Thomson K (1996) Approaches to studying and undergraduate well-being in Gibbs G (Ed) *Improving Student Learning: using research to improve student learning* Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development

Fazey D (1996) Individual differences in the autonomy related psychological characteristics of undergraduates In Gibbs G (Ed.) *Improving Student Learning: using research to improve student learning* Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development (187–199)

Fazey DMA (1993) Self-assessment as a generic skill for enterprising students: the learning process *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 18(3), 187-199

Fearnley S (1995) Class size: the erosive effect of recruitment on performance *Quality in Higher Education* 1(1), 59-63

Fielding N and Fielding J (1986) *Linking Data* Beverly Hills, California: Sage

Flick U (1998) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Applications* London: Sage

Friedlander J (1982) Innovative approaches to delivering academic assistance to students. *ERIC document ED220172*

Fritz C, Morris P and Bjork R (2000) When further learning fails: stability and change following repeated presentation of text *British Journal of Psychology* 91, 493-511

Furnham A (2001) Self-estimates of intelligence: Culture and gender difference in self and other estimates of both general (g) and multiple intelligences *Personality and Individual Differences* 31, 1381-1405

Furnham A and Chamorro-Premuzic T (2005) Individual differences and beliefs concerning preference for university assessment methods *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35(9), 1968-1994

Furnham A and Chamorro-Premuzic T (2007) Self-assessed intelligence and confidence for the acquisition of skills *Zeitschrift fur Personalpsychologie* 6 (1), 28-36

- Furnham A, Chamorro-Premuzic T and McDougall F (2003) Personality, cognitive ability, and beliefs about intelligence as predictors of academic performance *Learning and Individual Differences* 14, 49-66
- Gammon J and Morgan-Samuel H (2005) A study to ascertain the effect of structured student tutorial support on student stress, self-esteem and coping *Nurse Education in Practice* 5, 161-171
- Gellin A (2003) The effect of undergraduate student involvement on critical thinking: a meta-analysis of the literature 1991–2000 *Journal of College Student Development* 44(6), 746–63
- Gibbs G (2006) How assessment frames student learning In C Bryan and K Clegg (Eds.) *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* London: Routledge
- Gibbs G and Lucas L (1997) Coursework assessment, class size and student performance: 1984-94. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 21(2), 183-192
- Gibbs G, Lucas L and Spouse J (1997) The effects of class size and forms of assessment on nursing students' performance: approaches to study and course perceptions *Nurse Education Today* 17, 311-318.
- Gibbs G and Simpson C (2004) Does your assessment support your students' learning? *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 1(1), 1-31
- Gilchrist R, Phillips D and Ross A (2003) Participation and potential participation in UK higher education in Archer L, Hutchings M and Ross A (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion* London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Gipps CV (2005) What is the role for ICT-based assessment in universities? *Studies in Higher Education* 30(2), 171-180
- Goss JD and Leinbech TR (1996) Focus groups as alternative practice *AREA* 28(2), 115-123

- Gournay K and Ritter S (1997) What future for research in mental health? *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 4, 441-442
- Grant H and Dweck CS (2003) Clarifying achievement goals and their impact *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85 541-553
- Greenbank P (2003) The role of values in Educational Research: the case for reflexivity *British Education Research Journal* 29(6), 791-801
- Guba E and Lincoln Y (1985) *Effective Evaluation: Improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responses and naturalist approaches* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Guba EG and Lincoln YS (1994) Competing paradigms in Qualitative Research In Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (Eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* London: Sage
- Hall JM and Stevens PE (1991) Rigor in feminist research *Advances in Nursing Science* 13(3), 16-29.
- Hammersley M (2000) *Taking Sides in Social Research. Essays on Partisanship and Bias*, London: Routledge.
- Harackiewicz JM, Barron KE, Carter SM, Letho AT and Elliott AJ (1997) Predictors and consequences of achievement goals in the college classroom: maintaining interest and making the grade *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, 1284-1295.
- Harper G and Kember D (1986) Approaches to studying of distance education students *British Journal of Educational Technology* 17, 212-222
- Hartley J and Chesworth K (2000) Qualitative and quantitative methods in research on essay writing: no one way *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 24(1), 15-24



Heckhausen J and Dweck CS (Eds) (1998) *Motivation and Self-regulation Across the Lifespan*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Heritage M (2007) Formative assessment: What do teachers need to know and do? *Phi Delta  
Kappan International* 89(2) 140-145

Hewitt-Taylor J (2002) Teachers' and students' views on self-directed learning *Nursing Standard* 17  
(1), 33-38

Heyman GD and Dweck CS (1992) Achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: Their relation and  
their role in adaptive motivation. *Motivation and Emotion* 16, 231-247

Heywood J (2000) *Assessment in Higher Education* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Higgins R, Hartley P and Skelton A (2001) Getting the message across: the problem of  
communicating assessment feedback *Teaching in Higher Education* 6(2) 269-274

Higgins R, Hartley P and Skelton A (2002) The conscientious consumer reconsidering the role of  
assessment feedback in student learning *Studies in Higher Education* 27(1) 53-64

Higher Education Academy (2008) The DIY Toolkit for Alternative and Inclusive Assessment  
Practices available at

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/events/annualconference/2008/Ann\\_conf\\_2008\\_Clar  
e\\_Ward](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/events/annualconference/2008/Ann_conf_2008_Clar_e_Ward)

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2001) *Strategies for widening participation in HE: A  
guide to good practice* 01/36 HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2002) *Performance indicators in Higher Education  
in the UK, 1999-2000, 2000-2001* Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England

Holloway J and Todres L (2003) The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence  
*Qualitative Research* 3 345-357

Hong Y, Chui C, Dweck CS, and Lin D (1998) A test of implicit theories and self-confidence as predictors of responses to achievement challenges. Unpublished manuscript in C S Dweck (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press 25 - 26

Hong Y, Chui C, Dweck CS, Lin DM and Wan W (1999) Implicit theories, attributions and coping: A meaning system approach *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(3), 588-599

Houltram B (1996) Entry age, entry mode and academic performance on a Project 2000 common foundation programme *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 23(6), 1089-1097

Innis K (1996) *Diary Survey: How undergraduate full-time students spend their time* Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University

Ivanic R, Clark R and Rimmershaw R (2000) What am I supposed to do with this? The messages conveyed to students by tutors' written comments, In Lea R and Stierer B (Eds) *Student writing in higher education* Buckingham: Open University Press 47-65

James D (2000) Making the graduate: perspectives on student experience of assessment in higher education in A Flier (Ed) *Assessment: social practice and social product* London: Routledge Falmer

Jeffreys MR (1998) Predicting non-traditional student retention and academic achievement *Nurse Educator* 23(1), 42-48

Jick TD (1979) Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: triangulation in action *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24, 602-611

JISC (2007). Transformation story: Re-engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) available at <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearningsfc/sfcbookletreap.pdf> accessed 04 07 08

Kelly GA (1955) *The psychology of personal constructs* New York: Norton

Kevern J, Ricketts C and Webb C (1999) Pre-registration diploma students: a quantitative study of entry characteristics and course outcomes *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 30(4), 785-795

Kimchi J, Polivka B and Stevenson J S (1991) Triangulation: operational definitions *Nursing Research* 40(6), 364-366

Kitzinger J (1995) Introducing focus group interviews *British Medical Journal* 311, 299-302

Knapper C and Cropley A J (2000) *Lifelong Learning in Higher Education* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) London: Routledge

Knight PT and Yorke M (2003) *Assessment, Learning and Employability* Maidenhead: SHRE and Open University Press

Knight P (2002) Summative assessment in higher education: practices in disarray *Studies in Higher Education* 27(3) 275-286

Knight P (2006) The local practices of assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(4) 435-452

Knowles MS, Holton EF and Swanson RA (2005) *The Adult Learner* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) London: Elsevier

Koch T (1998) Story telling: Is it really research? *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28(6), 1182-1190

Koch T and Harrington A (1998) Reconceptualising rigour: the case for reflexivity *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28(4), 882-890

Krause KL and Coates H (2008) Students' engagement in first year university *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 33(5), 493-505

Kreuger R (1994) *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) London: Sage

Kroke A, Boeing H, Rossnagel K and Willich S N (2003) History of the concept of 'levels of evidence' and their current status in relation to primary prevention through lifestyle interventions *Public Health Nutrition* 7(2) 279-284

Kuh GD, Kintzie J, Schuh JH, Whitt EJ et al (2005) *Student success in college: Creating the conditions that matter* San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Lamb GS and Huttlinger K (1989) Reflexivity in Nursing Research *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 11, 765-772

Latchem, C. and Hanna, D.E. (Eds.) (2001) *Leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning* London: Kogan Page Limited.

Lea MR and Street BV (2000) Student writing and staff feedback in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach In Lea M and Stierer B (Eds) *Students writing in higher education: New contexts* Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and The Open University

Leathwood C (2005) Assessment policy and practice on higher education: purpose, standards and equity *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 30(3), 307-324

Leathwood C and Hutchings M (2003) Entry routes into higher education: pathways, qualifications and social class In Archer L, Hutchings M and Ross A (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Leggett EL (1985) Children's entity and incremental theories of intelligence: Relationships to achievement behavior. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Boston, In Dweck CS and Leggett EL (1988) A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality *Psychological Review* 95, 256-273

Leitch A (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills: final report*. London: The Stationery Office

Levy SR and Dweck CS (1997) Implicit theory measures reliability and validity data for adults and children. Unpublished raw data, Columbia University, In Levy SR, Stroessner SJ and Dweck CS (1998) Stereotype formation and endorsement: The role of implicit theories *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(6), 1421-1436

Levy SR, Stroessner SJ and Dweck CS (1998) Stereotype formation and endorsement: The role of implicit theories *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(6), 1421-1436

Light G and Cox R (2001) *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* London: PCP Publishing

Lincoln YS and Guba E (1985) Post-positivism and the naturalist paradigm In Lincoln YS and Guba E (Eds) *Naturalistic Inquiry* London: Sage

Litchfield J (2001) Supporting students who fail: a review of lecturers' practice *Nurse Education in Practice* 1(3), 142-148

Maag M (2006) iPod, uPod? An emerging mobile learning tool in nursing education and students' satisfaction *Proceedings of the 23rd annual ascilite conference: Who's learning? Whose technology?* 483-492. Sydney: Sydney University Press. Available at [http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney06/proceeding/pdf\\_papers/p92.pdf](http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney06/proceeding/pdf_papers/p92.pdf)

MacFarlane B (1992) The 'Thatcherite' generation of university degree results *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 16, 60-70

- Mahler S, Neumann L and Tamir P (1986) The class-size effect upon activity and cognitive dimensions of lessons in higher education *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 11(1), 43-59
- Malone S (2003) Ethics at home: informed consent in your own backyard *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16(6) 797-815
- Maltby J, Day L and Williams G (2007) *Introduction to statistics for nurses* London: Pearson Education
- Mauthner NS and Doucet A (2003) Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis *Sociology* 37(3), 413-431
- May T (2001) *Social Research: Issues, methods and process* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) Buckingham: Open University Press
- McSherry R (1999) Evidence based healthcare: its place within clinical governance *British Journal of Nursing* 8 113-117
- Medawar P (1963) Is the scientific paper a fraud? *Listener* 70 12<sup>th</sup> Sept
- Meece JL, Blumenfeld PC and Hoyle RH (1988) Students' goal orientations and cognitive engagement in classroom activities *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, 514-523
- Meldrum M (2000) Brief history of the randomized controlled trial: From Oranges and Lemons to the Gold Standard *Hematology/Oncology Clinics of North America*, 14(4) 745-760
- Melton R F and Zimmer R S (1987) Multi-perspective illumination *British Journal of Educational Technology* 2(18), 111-120
- Meriel Hutton B (1998) Do school qualifications predict competence in nursing calculations? *Nurse Education Today* 18, 25-31

Merriam SB (1988) *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Miller CMI and Partlett M (1974) *Up to the mark: A study of the examination game* Guilford: Society for Research into Higher Education

Miller RB, Behrens JT, Greene BA and Newman D (1993) Goals and perceived ability: impact on student valuing, self-regulation, and persistence *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 18, 2-14

Mitchell ES (1996) Multiple triangulation: A methodology for nursing science *Advances in Nursing Science* 8(3), 18-26

Mohl G (1996) Innovative Assessment available online at [http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/mowl\\_fr.html](http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/mowl_fr.html) accessed 18 May 2007.

Mueller C and Dweck C (1998) Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 33-42

Mueller CM and Dweck CS (1997) *Implicit theories of intelligence: Malleability beliefs, definitions and judgements of intelligence* Unpublished data In Dweck C S (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press

Murray-Harvey R (1993) Identifying characteristics of successful tertiary students using path analysis *Australian Educational Researcher* 20(3), 64-81

National Union of Students (2008) *NUS Student Experience Report* available at [http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/350/NUS\\_StudentExperienceReport.pdf](http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/350/NUS_StudentExperienceReport.pdf)

Nicholls J, Pataschnick M and Mettetal G (1986) Conceptions of ability and intelligence *Child Development* 57, 696-645

Nicol D (2007) Principles of good assessment and feedback: theory and practice. Keynote given at REAP International Online Conference: Assessment design for learner responsibility May 29-31 <http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/REAP07>

Nicol D (2008a) Transforming assessment and feedback: Enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year. Scottish Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education available at [http://www.reap.ac.uk/public/Papers/QAA\\_DN\\_Paper\\_final\\_08.pdf](http://www.reap.ac.uk/public/Papers/QAA_DN_Paper_final_08.pdf) accessed 04 07 08

Nicol D (2008b) Assessment for learner self-regulation: Enhancing achievement in the first year using learning technologies. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 34(3), 335–352

Nicol DJ and Macfarlane-Dick D (2004) Re-thinking formative assessment in HE: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice Higher Education Academy <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/assessment/senlef/principles> accessed 04 07 08

Nicol DJ and Macfarlane-Dick D (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice *Studies in Higher Education* 31(2), 199-218

Nieweg M R (2002) *Learning and assessment: the training and the match. A comprehensive approach to curriculum design*. Paper presented at the Learning Communities and Assessment Cultures Conference, University of Northumbria 28-30 August 2002

Nieweg MR (2004) Case study: innovative assessment and curriculum redesign *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 29(2) 203-214

Northway R (2000) Disability, nursing research and the importance of reflexivity *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 32(2), 391-397

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2002) *Requirements for pre-registration nursing awards* London: NMC



- Nursing and Midwifery Council (2004) *Standards of Proficiency for pre-registration nursing education* London: NMC
- Nursing and Midwifery Council (2008) *The PREP Handbook* London: NMC
- Ofori R (2000) Age and 'type' of domain specific entry qualifications as predictors of student nurses' performance in biological, social and behavioural sciences in nursing assessments *Nurse Education Today* 20, 298-310
- Ofori R and Charlton J P (2002) A path model of factors influencing the academic performance of nursing students *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 38(5), 507-515
- Oppenheim AN (1966) *Questionnaire design and attitude measurement* New York: Basic Books
- Orsmond P (2004) *Self- and peer- assessment: guidance on practice in the bioscience* Teaching Bioscience Enhancing Learning Series. Leeds: Higher Education Academy.
- Orsmond P, Merry S and Callaghan AC (2004) Implementation of a formative assessment model incorporating peer and self-assessment *Innovations in Education and Training International* 41(3), 273-290
- Orsmond P, Merry S, and Reiling K (2005). Biology Students' Utilization of Tutors' Formative Feedback: A Qualitative Interview Study. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 30(4), 369-386
- Orsmond P, Merry S and Reiling K (2002) The use of exemplars and formative feedback when using student derived marking criteria in peer and self assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 27(4), 309-323
- Page S and Meerabeau L (2004) Hierarchies of evidence and hierarchies of education: reflections on a multi-professional education initiative *Learning in Health and Social Care* 3 (3) 118-128

Pajares F (1996) Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings *Review of Educational Research* 66(4), 543-578

Paley J (2002) Caring as a slave morality: Nietzschean themes in nursing ethics *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 40, 25-35

Parahoo K (2006) *Nursing Research: Principles, Process and Issues* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Parlett M and Hamilton D (1972) *Evaluation as illumination: a new approach to the study of innovatory programs. Occasional paper 9* Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Centre in the Educational Sciences

Parsons C (1980) The new evaluation: a cautionary note In Lawton D *The Politics of the school curriculum* London: Routledge, In Crotty M (1990) The perceptions of students and teachers regarding the introductory module of an enrolled nurse conversion course *Nurse Education Today* 10, 366-379

Pintrich PR and DeGroot V (1990) Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance *Journal of Educational Psychology* 82, 33-40

Polit DF and Beck CT (2006) *Essentials of Nursing Research: Methods, Appraisal and Utilisation* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) London: Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins

Quality Assurance Agency (2001a) *A framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency

Quality Assurance Agency (2001b) *Benchmark statement: Health Care programmes: Nursing* Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency

Quality Assurance Agency (2006a) *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 6 Assessment of students* Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency

Quality Assurance Agency (2006b) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit: Assessment of students* Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency

Race P (2001) *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A practical guide to learning, teaching and assessment* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) London: Kogan Page

Raimondo H, Esposito L and Gershenberg I (1990) Introductory class-size and student performance in intermediate theory courses *Journal of Economic Education* Fall, 369-381

Ramaprasad A (1983) On the definition of feedback *Behavioural Science* 28 4-13

Reay D (2001) Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education *Journal of Education Policy* 16 (4) 333-34

Redfern SJ and Norman IJ (1994) Validity through triangulation *Nurse Researcher* 2(2), 41-56

Rhodewalt F (1994) Conceptions of ability, achievement goals, and individual differences in self-handicapping behaviour: On the application of implicit theories *Journal of Personality* 62, 67-85

Richardson JTE (1994) Mature students in higher education 1: A literature survey on approaches to studying *Studies in Higher Education* 9, 309-325

Richardson JTE (1995) Mature students in higher education: II. An investigation of approaches to studying and academic performance *Studies in Higher Education* 20(1), 5-17

Richardson M (1997) Participatory research methods: people with learning difficulties *British Journal of Nursing* 6, 1114-1121

Robins RW and Pals J (1998) Implicit self-theories of ability in the academic domain: A test of Dweck's model. Unpublished manuscript, In Dweck C S (2000) *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press p.35

Roedel TD and Schraw G (1995) Beliefs about intelligence and academic goals *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 20(4) 464-468

Rosenthal R (1966) Experimental effects in behavioural research New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, In Crotty M (1990) The perceptions of students and teachers regarding the introductory module of an enrolled nurse conversion course *Nurse Education Today* 10, 366-379

Rotheram B (2007) Using an MP3 recorder to give feedback on student assignments *Educational Developments* Issue 8.2, June, pp.7-10, London: Staff and Educational Development Association

Rowntree D (1987) *Assessing Students: How shall we know them* London: Kogan Paul

Russel J, Elton L, Swinglehurst D and Greenhalgh T (2006) Using the online environment in assessment for learning: a case-study of a web-based course in primary care *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(4), 465-478

Rust C (2002) The impact of assessment on student learning *Active Learning in Higher Education* 3(2), 145-158

Rust C (2007) Towards a scholarship of assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 32(2), 229-237

Rust C, Price M and O'Donovan B (2003) Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 28 (2), 147-64

Ryan GW and Bernard HR (2000) Data management and analysis methods in Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (2000b)(Eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) London: Sage

Sadler DR (1989) Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems *Instructional Science* 18, 119-144

Sadler DR (1998) Formative assessment: revisiting the territory *Assessment in Education* 5(1), 77-84

Sadler-Smith E (1996) Approaches to studying: age, gender and academic performance *Educational Studies* 22(3), 367-379

Salkind NJ (2008) *Statistics for people who think they hate statistics* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) London: Sage Publications

Salmon G (2000) *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online* London: Kogan Page

Sancho JM (2006) Evolving landscapes for education *International Federation for Information Processing* 195, 81-100

Sarros JC and Densten IL (1989) Undergraduate student stress and coping strategies. *Higher Education Research and Development* 8, 47-57

Savin-Baden M (2004) Understanding the impact of assessment on students in problem-based learning *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 41(2), 223-233

Schunk DH (1982) Effects of effort attributional feedback on children's perceived self-efficacy and achievement *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74, 548-556

Schutz S (1994) Exploring the benefits of a subjective approach in qualitative nursing research *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 20, 412-417

- Scott D (1997) The researcher's personal responses as a source of insight in the research process *Nursing Inquiry* 4, 130-134
- Shipton SP (2002) The process of seeking stress-care: coping as experienced by senior baccalaureate nursing students in response to appraised clinical stress *Journal of Nurse Education* 41(6), 243-256
- Slade M and Priebe S (2001) Are randomised controlled trials the only gold that glitters? *British Journal of Psychology* 179, 286-287.
- Snyder B R (1971) *The Hidden Curriculum* New York: Alfred A Knopf.
- Soltis-Jarrett V (1997) The facilitator in participatory action research: les raisons d'etre *Advances in Nursing Science* 20(2), 45-54
- Speer S A (2002) What can conversation analysis contribute to feminist methodology? Putting reflexivity into practice *Discourse and Society* 13(6), 783-803
- Spinath B and Steinsmeiser- Pelster J (2003) Goal orientation and achievement: the role of ability self-concept and failure perception *Learning and Instruction* 13, 403-422
- Squirrel G (1999) *Widening Participation into HE: Issues for Inner Cities* Bristol: University of Bristol
- Steele CM and Aronson J (1995) Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68, 797-811
- Stenhouse L (1975) *An Introduction to curriculum research and development* London: Heinemane
- Educational Books, In Tobin K (1999) Teachers as researchers and researchers as teachers* *Research in Science Education* 29(1), 1-3
- Sternberg R (1997) *Successful Intelligence* New York: Plume

Stewart DW (1984) *Secondary research: Information sources and methods* Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications

Stiggins R and Chappuis J (2006) What a difference a word makes: Assessment FOR learning rather than assessment OF learning *Journal of Staff Development* 27(1) 10-14.

Stipek D and Gralinski J H (1996) Children's beliefs about intelligence and school performance *Journal of Educational Psychology* 88(3), 397-407

Taras M (2001) The use of tutor feedback and student self-assessment in summative assessment tasks: towards transparency for students and for tutors *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 26(6) 605-614

Taras M (2002) Using assessment for learning and learning from assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 27(6) 501-510

Taras M (2003) To feedback or not to feedback in student self-assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 28(5), 549-565

Taras M (2006) Do unto others or not: equity in feedback for undergraduates *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(3), 365-377

Taras M (2008) Summative and formative assessment: Perceptions and realities *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9, 172-192

Tedlock B (2000) Ethnography and ethnographic representation In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, London: Sage Publications

Terenzini PT, Pascarella ET and Blimling G (1996) Students' out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development: a literature review. *Journal of College Student Development* 37, 149-62

- Thorpe M (1998) Assessment and 'third generation' distance education *Distance Education* 19(2), 265-286
- Thurmond VA (2001) The point of triangulation *Clinical Scholarship* 33(3), 253-258
- Tierney M (1994) 'On method and hope' in Gitlin A. (ed.) *Power and Method*, London: Routledge.
- Tinto V (2005) Epilogue: Moving from theory to action In Seidman A (ed) *College student retention: formula for student success* 317-333 Westport: American Council on Education and Praeger Publishers
- Tobin K (1999) Teachers as researchers and researchers as teachers *Research in Science Education* 29 (1), 1-3
- Tobin G A and Begley C M (2002) Triangulation as a method of inquiry *Journal of Critical Inquiry Into Curriculum and Instruction* 3(3), 7-11
- Tobin G A and Begley C M (2004) Methodological rigor within a qualitative framework *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 48(4), 388-396
- Trotter E (2006) Student perceptions of continuous summative assessment *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(5), 505-521
- Tse S, Blackwood K and Penman M (2000) From rhetoric to reality: use of randomised controlled trials in evidence-based occupational therapy *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* 47, 181-185
- Tuckett A G (2005) Part II: Rigour in qualitative research: complexities and solutions *Nurse Researcher* 13(1) 29-42
- United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (1999a) *Fitness for Practice* London: UKCC



United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (1999b) *Entry to training requirements for pre-registration nursing and midwifery programmes Annexe 1 to Registrars letter 3/2001* London: UKCC

Waterman H (1998) Embracing ambiguities and valuing ourselves: issues of validity in action research *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28, 101-105

Weaver M R (2006) Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(3), 379-394

Webb EJ, Campbell DT, Schwarz RD and Sechrest L (1984) The use of archival sources in social research In M Bulmer (Ed) *Sociological research methods – An introduction* London: MacMillan

Wellington J, Bath-Maker AM, Hunt C, McCulloch G and Sikes P (2005) *Succeeding With Your Doctorate* London: Sage

White J, Williams WR and Green BF (1999) Discontinuation, leaving reasons and course evaluation comments of students on the common foundation programme *Nurse Education Today* 19, 142-150

Wicks M (2001) Figures provided to the House of Commons on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2001

Williams J (1997) (ed) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education* Buckingham: Open University Press

Wojas O (1998) Feedback? No, just give us the answers *Times Higher Education Supplement* 25 September

Wright CM, Frew TJ and Hatcher D (1998) Social and demographic characteristics of young and mature students in Australian universities *Nurse Education Today* 18, 101-107

Yorke M (2005) Increasing the chances of students success, In C Rust (Ed) *Improving Student Learning 12. Diversity and Inclusivity* (35-52) Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

Yorke M and Longden B (2004) *Retention and Student Success in Higher Education* London:  
Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press

Yorke M and Knight P (2004) Self-theories: some implications for teaching and learning in higher  
education *Studies in Higher Education* 29(1), 25-37

Zuber-Skerritt O (1992) *Action research in higher education: Examples and reflections* London:  
Kogan Paul