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# **Questioning the machine: academics' perceptions of tensions and trade-offs in undergraduate education at one English university**

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# ABSTRACT

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Exploring the proposition that in our consumer society, undergraduate students are now denied the opportunity to transform into critical thinking scholars, this case study explores academics' beliefs about the purpose and shape of an ideal undergraduate higher education. Located in one English research-intensive university, research focuses on their perceptions of transformation as a concept, and how it is enabled or denied. Adopting a critical realist approach, the study responds to an absence of work on the effects of marketisation on curricula and pedagogy, and academics' shifting identities in national policy and local practice.

Academics' views link to tensions in a changing higher education system, where managerialisation and marketisation have been compounded by the emergence of a global knowledge economy, massification, a new digital age, and more recently, the global financial crisis and a conservative government. Within this, and setting the context for fourteen in-depth interviews, increasingly influential 'students as consumers' and 'student experience' discourses are explored through critical examination of national and institutional policy documents.

Using a presage-process-product (3P) model, the thesis links academics' aspirations for an ideal undergraduate education which develops knowledge and intellectual approaches grounded within a discipline (product), to elements that 'enable' or 'deny' in curricula and pedagogy (process), and the wider institutional environment, such as academics' roles, student numbers and quality processes (presage). Academics describe the ways in which they negotiate, subvert or overcome these elements. The study uses a suite of concepts including quality discourses, university psychosis, unregulated play, and models of knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy, to visualise tensions surfaced and disentangle the concept of transformation. In proposing a way forward, conclusions note the need for the university to overtly acknowledge trade-offs made, and to consider more deeply the impact of presage and process elements on academics, students, and the undergraduate education aimed for.



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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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## **Of what do we, the academy, stand accused?**

Once, under the guidance of the academic, the undergraduate had the potential to be transformed into a scholar, someone who thinks critically, but in our consumer society such 'transformation' is denied and 'confirmation' of the student as consumer is favoured (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009, p.277).

As a professional working in the strategic development and support of education in a research-intensive university, I am strongly drawn to assertions such as the above. This is one example of many similar claims which dominate critical literature around higher education (HE), reflecting the myriad vested interests in, and expectations of, HE today, many of which have been linked to increased market forces in HE and increasingly dominant neoliberal ideologies (Field, 2015, p.115; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.20). Such ideologies are defined as emphasising free market competition and individuals as economic actors (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.20), which, when related to the opening accusation in a teaching and learning context, manifest as value for money expectations, consumer choice and complaints, and notions of the use value of undergraduate HE as a product (Trowler, 2003, p.84; Marginson, 1997, p.13; Walford, 1988, p.49).

Having personally experienced higher education as life-changing, the suggestion that I was now inadvertently working towards a different, and by implication, more sinister agenda, immediately led me to ask if this was the case in my own institution. While commonplace, such accusations raise often-overlooked questions. For example, the statement alludes to an erstwhile 'golden age' for undergraduate learning and academia (Gilbert, 2000, p.32). If this existed, when did we lose this from our universities? How is it that we have come this point, and is this shift necessarily a problem? What are our aspirations for students in undergraduate higher education today? What exactly is implied by the term 'transformation'? For me, the accusation, and the accompanying questions it prompted, gave a strong rationale for undertaking an in-depth study which might delve into these questions and illuminate tensions and imperatives in my own professional role overseeing and supporting strategic developments related to learning and teaching.

Peters (2002) has noted that in striving to maintain intellectual cultures whilst also responding to demands of the economy, relations between 'knowledge', 'economy' and 'education' should be better mapped (p.100). And more deeply, gaps in work on the effects of marketisation on curricula, teaching and students' learning have been noted by other researchers (Singh and Little, 2011, p.36; Lambert, Parker & Neary, 2007,

p.528; Barnett and Coate, 2005, p.37; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p.265). Other iterations of this need by leading HE researchers appear across collections edited by Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon (2011) and Ashwin (2014).

Yet answers will not be straightforward as tensions in the accusation reflect ideological pulls and a shifting and complex socio-political and economic setting for HE. These often then present themselves as differences in opinion on the purpose of HE, often manifested through types of HEIs, their degree programmes, curricula, pedagogical approaches, including assessment, and institutional environment and leadership, and more recently, notions of student identity, achievement and employability. Alongside the rise of a marketised student experience have been arguments that there has been a massive reduction in the academic voice in national debates and policy making (Meth, 2013a; Alternative White Paper, 2011; Sabri, 2011, p.664; Sabri, 2010). However, it is academics, at the forefront of knowledge development and its translation through curriculum and pedagogy to students, who are seen as critically placed in both understanding the tensions to hand, and negotiating and effecting any shifts in practice and approaches (Trowler, 2001; Barnett, 2009; Luckett, 2009; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005).

Given the above, seeking to determine a possible path of research which might shed light on this area made academics the obvious group from whom to elicit answers. More specifically, the opening quote, combined with debates above, suggested research questions which might firstly seek to clarify aspirations of a higher education today, and at a deeper level, explore the implied impact of today's marketised environment on undergraduate higher education. This would include an attempt to uncover those elements contributing to the 'denial' of transformation mentioned in the opening quote as well as reveal those elements that might enable implied scholarly transformations. In terms of my working role, any findings would have the potential to act as catalyst for institutional debate and possible action.

Prior to outlining the path of research followed in this study, the following section summarises the shifting HE environment in England over the past 50 years, and linked to tensions described above, has a particular focus on teaching, learning and students.

## **Setting the scene: the changing HE environment and the rise of 'student as consumer'**

In a nationally commissioned landmark report, Robbins (1963) heralded major changes to the HE sector, recommending reforms for major expansion, and specifically articulating those objectives that should be 'central to any balanced' HE system. The report notes a 'plurality' of objectives of advancing learning and knowledge, and

acquiring skills for progress and competition, together with are those promoting 'general powers of the mind' and transmitting a common 'culture and standards of citizenship' (Robbins, 1963, p.6, para.25–28). Most notably, Robbins stated that none of the objectives should be sacrificed at the expense of the other (p.6, para.23).

In the late 1970s to late 1980s, the Conservative Thatcher Government, with its core ideology of privatisation and 'competitive capitalism' brought with it a drive for changed approaches to the management of public services, including market solutions for HE, and the need to show value for money and choice for consumers – students, industry and government (Walford, 1988, p.49). With the development of institutional performance indicators, efficiency requirements and a general drive for more business-like management structures, managerialist approaches became more prevalent (Trowler, 2003, p.50). Universities were also accused of not offering 'value for money' and being 'too academic' (Walford, 1988, p.52).

By the 1990s, key government messages related to skills for industry and commerce, and how HE might contribute to the UK economy. This was accompanied by increased regulation and assurance, highlighted as necessary 'for students and employers to obtain the full benefit of competition' (DES, 1991, p.24). In 1997, the Dearing Report (1997, no.78) recommended a graduate contribution be paid towards HE tuition, and following this, means-tested contributions were introduced in 1998. Furthermore, the importance of education as an investment in human capital and in producing 'new knowledge' was noted (DTI, 1998), and it was around this time that a new global economy, the 'knowledge economy', came to the fore (Giddens, 2001, p.376). This intensified competition between HE institutions (HEIs) who were urged to place employer relations and graduate employability high on their agendas (DfES, 2003; Lambert, 2003) and led to increasing tensions and debate regarding the purpose of HE as being skills and employability as opposed to something intrinsically valuable in its own right (Trowler, 2003, p.84; Rowland, 2001). HE had also by this stage seen the arrival of the digital age and information technologies, and in terms of participation figures, shifted from being elite to mass, to universal (Wolf, 2002, p.170).

The 2004 Higher Education Act heralded the introduction of variable tuition fees as well as new routes for student complaints, and new notions of students as paying customers. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2009 *Higher Ambitions* framework for HE is overt about the knowledge economy and the commercial role of HE in 'building Britain's future' on a global stage; this is particularly salient following the late 2008 global financial crisis and the onset of a recession. UK Vice-Chancellors, interviewed by Bosetti and Walker (2010), stated their fears that the core purpose of the university is threatened with value now being determined by 'economic measures and outcome' (p.6) and driven by economic pressures (Marginson, 1997, p.13). This sentiment is endorsed by Collini (2012) who argues that

intellectual enquiry is being overlooked in attempts to quantify contributions to economic growth.

Sustainability in this economic climate led to further revision of HE funding structures, and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government formed in 2010 oversaw the introduction of a new tuition fees regime for new undergraduates from 2012 (BIS, 2011a). The White Paper for HE (BIS, 2011a) thereby increased the focus on students as key customers, with a high degree of importance given to the role of students ('at the heart of the system'). Following recommended actions from BIS (2011b, p.5), the latest Green and White Papers for HE (BIS, 2015; BIS, 2016) include consumer protection and value for money as strong underpinning elements. With fees currently higher than ever before, institutional accountability to students as customers and transparency regarding value for money are urged by some as imperatives (Soilemetzidis, Bennett, Buckley, Hillman, Stoakes, 2014, p.9) and competition between providers in an HE market continues to grow.

Field (2015) refers to a turbulent combination of interrelated 'currents [which] threaten to counteract the passion many academics feel about their teaching' (p.115) as well as change the kind of transformation that is being aimed for. These are encompassed within a host of inter-related ideologies noted above in relation to the changing HE environment where the dominant ideology of new Public Management acts 'in concert with a host of related ideologies and pressures' (Field, 2015, p.115). These include academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004) and students as consumers and paying customers, and change relationships between students, academics and universities noted earlier. These are also reflected in the meaning and import attributed to the term 'student experience', where it increasingly features as a homogenised, measurable and marketable entity in policy documents, HE league tables and mainstream HE terminology (BIS, 2011; Sabri, 2010, p.197; BIS, 2009; DfES, 2003). This closely mirrors the increase in tuition fees (Meth, 2013a; Sabri, 2011, 2010; Neary and Winn, 2009).

Espoused changes at the level of policy have a slow, subtle and sometimes contradictory trajectory into practice. Because the 'student experience' is defined and measured on its success across areas as wide-ranging as estates, student skills and employability, there is a concern that the educational experience of students, and the underlying mission of HE and universities is being ignored in favour of this 'student experience' (Docherty, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2011; Sabri, 2011; Neary and Winn, 2009).

Tensions are noted in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2009 guide to UK HE, where in contrast to Robbins (1963), there is a shift in the balance of aims of HE. There is an overt statement on the need for HE to contribute to



national 'economic success', but an absence of Robbins' (1963) notions of developing 'powers of the mind' and 'common culture and citizenship' (HEFCE, 2009, p.3). Whilst Willetts (2013) in revisiting Robbins (1963) alludes to this balance of aims as a good thing, as later policy analysis shows, there is still little evidence in government policy or action that reflects this. Noting the above, it follows that undergraduate student learning needs to be located as a policy- and ideology-driven discourse.

### **Implications for undergraduate student learning and teaching**

As a backdrop to the opening quote, tensions discussed above are seen by many educational researchers as heralding the simultaneous destruction of a once healthy learning and teaching environment, and with it, the 'hearts and minds' of academics and students (Lynch, 2006, p.9; Trowler, 2001; Fairclough, 1993, p.153). Reflecting the shift in aims, not only is there a concerted drive to change the types of knowledge being produced, and the way in which it is produced (O'Connor, Lynch and Owen, 2011; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2003), but there has been a corresponding shift in what knowledge is taught, how it is taught i.e. curriculum and pedagogy, and critically, relationships between students and the academy (Ashwin, 2014; Muller and Young, 2014). There is a strong strand of critical comment and analysis about these developments which proposes that today's HE environment encourages instrumental forms of student engagement and pedagogies focused on 'having', with accompanying shallow learning cultures. According to critics, this is mirrored with a reduction in transformational approaches to learning and opportunities for 'being' – 'self-knowledge and satisfaction' which encourage learner independence and self-motivation as noted in Fromm's humanist philosophy (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.280; Barnett and Coate, 2005). There is a concern that within a consumer-led HE market, 'educators assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence' (Schwartzman, 1995, p.220). Returning to my current role, I have observed similar tensions in the undergraduate learning environment, where, in instances, a more instrumental learning approach towards learning, assessment and achievement placed against a backdrop of skills and employability imperatives appears to be in direct conflict to a deeper learning experience.

One problem in navigating current educational debates such as these is that they abound with 'either-or' spectrum endpoint terms which mirror those in the opening quote of 'scholar' versus 'consumer'. 'Consumable product', 'transaction', 'customers' sit at the opposite end of a spectrum to those reflecting what many see as part of an ideal HE learning experience - 'guided adventure', 'transformation' and 'co-collaborators' (Van der Velden, 2012; Dunne, Zandstra, Brown and Nurser, 2011; Govers, 2010) and largely missing in undergraduate student learning today (Docherty, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2009). In identifying what is present or absent, 'favoured' or

'denied' as intimated in the opening quote, these end markers have their uses. But in striving to fix what is deemed to be broken in undergraduate learning, as 'worn out polarities' they cease to be useful (Hodgson and Spours, 2009, p.12), and many authors now call for renewed work that takes us beyond these (Muller and Young, 2014, p.128; Barnett, 2011, p.39; Nordensvärd, 2011, p.158; Schwartzman and Ellis, 2011, p.60). I return to this below.

### **Where shall we look for answers?**

It probably goes without saying that academics are the key enablers or deniers of students' abilities to engage with knowledge in transformative or instrumental ways, both as curriculum developers of undergraduate courses and through pedagogical approaches (Cowden and Singh, 2013; Ashwin, McLean and Abbas, 2012, p.4; Barnett, 2009, p.438; Lockett, 2009, p.443; Trowler, 2001 p.191). Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) note that this 'internal culture of the university is likely to form a crucial mediating context through which the forces associated with commodification may be displaced, restructured or even subverted.' (p.278). For academics, there is a critical space when translating or 're-contextualising' disciplinary knowledge into curriculum and pedagogy where negotiation and 'selective appropriating' of disciplinary knowledge takes place (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p.273-274; Bernstein, 2000, p.9). Bernstein (2000) notes that these actions can be 'beneficial' but also 'dangerous' (p.33) because as with the end-point spectrum debate above, the act of negotiation and selection, and therefore judgement in this will depend upon the ideological interests of those making the judgement. Academics' practices will relate closely to their underlying beliefs and ideologies regarding the purpose of HE, learning, knowledge and their discipline (Kelly, 2009, p.33), yet they may be unaware of, and rarely interrogated about these.

Researchers note that because of the internal and external complexity of HE environments, it is only through careful negotiation and a critical engagement with pedagogical approaches and individual experiences as situated in this social and political setting, that the trend towards commodification of HE can be critiqued (Lambert et al., 2007, p.528; Gale, 2002, p.66; Nespors, 1994, p.135). Any investigation into the opening accusation must therefore focus on actors at the point of knowledge re-contextualisation, academics, their underlying, often tacit beliefs regarding HE, curricula and pedagogical approaches. The following section introduces the path of research followed to facilitate this.

### **Research focus and questions**

To explore this area more fully, but in a way which added value to my own professional working context with opportunities for future action, I undertook research in the

university in England where I currently work. The institution is part of a consortium of 24 Russell Group universities that identify themselves as research-intensive on the grounds of their investment in and commitment to world-leading research, and research-led learning environments. Closely linked to this identity, are institutional narratives of learning and teaching environments that promote cultures of inquiry and critical thinking (Russell Group, 2014). In addition to ongoing tensions between competing research and teaching agendas, and those relating to managerialisation in the university environment, in my day-to-day work I had noted tensions within learning and teaching which reflected the breadth of concerns above. A preliminary exploration of the changing HE environment, and concepts related to undergraduate student learning was undertaken in doctoral assignments leading to the proposal for this research (Meth, 2013, a, b and c; 2012, a and b), and this introductory chapter draws on those texts and ideas, bringing them to bear upon the research problem and questions developed.

With the opening quote as a provocation, and framed by the national and institutional HE context encompassing tensions discussed above, research focused on academics' perceptions and practices related to transformation in undergraduate student learning in one research-intensive university in England. Noting discussion above, the research needed to be particularly alert to the interplay between academics' beliefs on the purpose of HE, knowledge, curricula and pedagogic approaches, and within this, their views on undergraduate students' development and transformation.

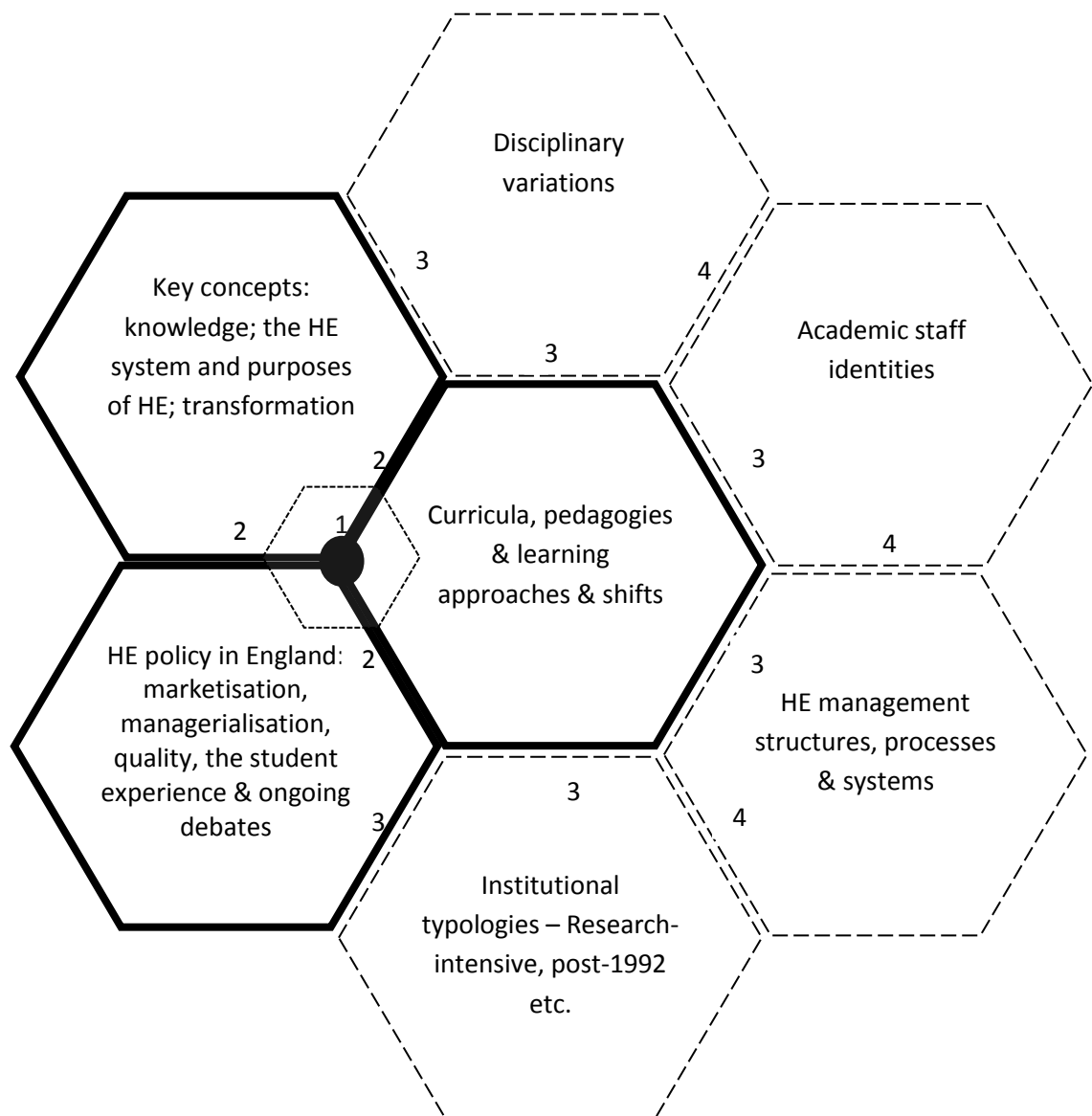
Drawing on the issues and research gaps discussed, the main research questions and sub-questions were outlined as follows:

*What notions of transformation for undergraduate students do academic staff at the University of X believe are enabled or denied within their current learning and teaching policy and practice environment?*

- *How is this manifested in their curricula and pedagogies, and do these necessarily reflect the academics' beliefs regarding the purpose of undergraduate higher education and knowledge?*
- *What are the implications of these perceptions for institutional policies and processes, and academics' practices through curriculum and pedagogy that might balance tensions within this setting?*
  - *What approaches are appropriate for the institution in light of its espoused mission and values?*
  - *In striving for balance, what further conversations need to be had, and by whom, to address tensions and enabling and denying elements uncovered?*
  - *What lessons are to be learned for the broader sector?*

## Setting and bounding the context through the literature

Using the research questions and contextual background above to identify key themes, O’Leary’s (2010) Venn diagram (p.78) was adapted to show the range of possible literature to be drawn upon (Figure 1) and created a space in which to focus the proposed research (O’Leary, 2010, p.74; Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur, 2006, p.23). Intersecting sides show the degree of relevance to the study based on the research questions, where ‘1’ indicates most relevant, and literature combining ‘curricula, pedagogy and learning’, the national HE context encompassing ongoing debates introduced, and ‘key concepts’ to interpret such contexts intersect.



**Figure 1:** Contextualising the research: diagram showing indicative range of literature themes (intersecting sides labelled according to degree of relevance to the study based on the research questions, with ‘1’ being most relevant).

This intersection tallies well with texts already introduced in context-setting above, and defines the research space and potential influences on institutional context, practice and policies.

The following section provides a brief introduction to the most relevant themes. Whilst it was important to provide some initial boundaries to the literature search in the early stages of research, constant examination of the literature with a degree of openness took place through the life of the research (O’Leary, 2010, p.73). Further detailed analysis and critique follow in the subsequent chapter which explores themes closest to the research questions in greater depth.

### ◻ ***Higher Education in England, ongoing debates***

Texts on changes in HE in England, and more specifically, the marketisation of HE, and the rise of the ‘student experience’ as an entity are prolific, and many have been referred to earlier in setting the context. Over the duration of this research project, the *Times Higher Education* has published almost weekly stories related to this area. Given what has been noted regarding polarization, I have needed to be cautious not to refer only to literature filled with rhetoric and hype. Texts by Williams (2013), Collini (2012), Docherty (2011) and Wolf (2002) have helped to frame the tensions and provoke thought, whilst works by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), Barnett (2011), Trowler (2003, 2001) and Power (1997 and 1994) have provided theoretically solid foundations from which to grow the arguments of this thesis.

National policy documents pertaining to Higher Education (BIS, 2016, 2015, 2011a, 2009; DfES, 2003) set the context for the research and draw themes outlined above together, reflecting the convergence of points at 1 on Figure 1. In moving closer to the site of research, many of these policy texts can be depicted as mirrored or ‘cannibalised’ (Ball, 1994, p.15) within institutional strategies for learning and teaching (not referenced for anonymity). Collectively, these reflect the socio-political environment at the time of production and the ways in which the government and university choose to present their identities and values related to undergraduate education (Prior, 2003, p.104). These documents therefore provide a window into how this particular educational agenda is being addressed, and are pertinent in seeking to identify any impacts on learning and teaching. An analysis of these documents with respect to tensions and debates noted follows in the subsequent chapter.

### ◻ ***Key concepts: the HE system and purpose, knowledge, and transformation***

Understanding key concepts that frame the research helps towards the situating within, or development of, a theoretical framework. In examining current tensions relating to knowledge production, and the relationship between HE, markets, industry and

governments, baseline concepts of Clark (1983) and Scott, Gibbons and Nowotnys' 'modes of knowledge' (Gibbons, 2006; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001; Scott, 1995) help to provide conceptual spaces. More scope to present a 'rich ecology' of transition and ever-changing complexity within HE is noted in models such as the triple helix of industry, government and HE interactions (Leydesdorff and Meyer, 2006, p.1447; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1998), and notions of flexibility are considered important when looking for conceptual representations of reality beyond static endpoints.

The works of Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015a), Muller and Young (2014), Young and Muller (2010) and Bernstein (2000) bring concepts of knowledge closer to the focus of this research project, linking beliefs and arguments around different forms of knowledge and disciplines to curricular and pedagogical manifestations. Furthermore, with respect to the research problem, these authors conceptually link knowledge, disciplines, curricula and pedagogies to ideological tensions in the HE system.

Central to the research question lies the need to unpack the term 'transformation'. Broadly speaking, although the power of HE and curricula to transform is noted by most researchers (including Williams, 2013; Docherty, 2011; Barnett and Coate, 2005), Illeris (2014a and b) notes confusion and overuse of the term as it relates to learning. There are also differences between academic and personal transformations, for example: transformation as applied to disciplinary knowledge acquisition of key 'threshold concepts' (Meyer and Land, 2005, p.373); transformation of learners' meaning perspectives and mental identity (Johanssen and Felten, 2014, p.43; Mezirow, 1990, p.12); of learner identity, but including an emotional, social and societal dimension (Illeris, 2014a, p.39); transformation of the social, cultural and political self, with an ability to then effect change on the world (Docherty, 2011, p.52); and transformation through skills acquisition for employability and the workplace. Lack of clarity around the term is intimately linked to tensions surrounding the purpose of HE, curricula, and relative values being placed on different types of knowledge, and, linked back to the opening quote, what might constitute scholarliness.

I therefore question blind, and what I see as somewhat naïve attempts to strive for a transformation which is so poorly defined, and seek to use the research to consider more deeply the type of transformation that academics believe to be most fitting to the core purpose of HE, and in particular, our university, and to question how best we might ensure that this is enabled rather than denied.

## **Curriculum, pedagogy and learning**

The breadth and scale of research proposed had the potential to become unwieldy and diffuse. Combining influential research on teaching and student learning by key educational researchers, including Marton and Booth (1997), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), Ramsden (1987), Biggs (1999) and Wenger (1998), Frielick (2004) provides a summary diagram of an institutional learning and teaching ecology. This captures all aspects of the system which might be touched upon, including students (their learning, prior experiences), teachers (their context, pedagogies), knowledge types and approaches, course design, evaluation and assessment, as well as where these occur on intra-interpersonal, departmental, or institutional levels. But it is Entwistle (2003) who more clearly delineates that cluster of concepts related to students' learning experiences which may be attributed to teachers and the teaching-learning environment, from those aspects related to students and their experiences. This captures more closely those aspects likely to emerge from the research, and includes beliefs held by academics about the purpose of HE, their conceptions of teaching, what they might expect of students, how they design and implement the teaching-learning environment, and how they select, present and assess courses. This provides a useful bounding for the research, which, given constraints of time and scale, cannot delve into the obvious complement to this research project, namely the crucial role that students themselves play in their learning and transformation, including bringing their own experiences, prior knowledge and approaches, and ability, motives and expectations (Johansson and Felten, 2014, p.21; Entwistle, 2003, p.1). Jary and Lebeau (2009) note the different ways in which students need to be engaged in higher education, including what they term the students' 'personal project' (p.701) which encompasses the value and use students' place on their studies, the level of their intellectual engagement and how integrated they are in university life.

### **Exploring the intersection of key themes**

At the intersection of the three key themes highlighted above, some educational researchers not only provide insights on the current situation, but suggest possible actions for change in today's super complex society. They suggest a change from what until now has been presented as a 'bitter zero sum game' of polar opposites that is not in the long-term interests of the university (Muller and Young, 2014, p.128). Despite their own strongly held views about the purpose of HE, both Barnett (2011) and Muller and Young (2014) have noted this as unproductive, and urge new ways of approaching this area which might lead towards a third position or 'future' (Young and Muller, 2010).

In a related vein, Ashwin et al. (2015b) note the critical role played by teachers as mediators between social contexts and their teaching practice, as well as the impact their decisions might have on 'transformative higher education experiences for students' (p.91). In the introduction to a special issue of *Higher Education* (2014, Vol.67), Ashwin highlights the lack of discussion and research on knowledge in HE, particularly as it relates to curriculum, and how students engage with different forms of knowledge leading to transformed understandings and identities. The intersection of context, concepts of HE, types of knowledge, interpretations of transformation, and curriculum and pedagogy, provide tentative beginnings for understanding transformation as a concept. This suggests that there may be a scenario that is more fitting for the world in which we now find ourselves, which takes the argument beyond polar opposites, for or against the market (Muller and Young, 2014), and is therefore appropriate to resolving the tensions highlighted through this research. In critiquing a wide range of research already undertaken on knowledge, curriculum and transformation, Chapter 2 elaborates conceptual spaces for representing and shedding light on these tensions, particularly as they relate to ideology and context.

In seeking a way forward to answer the research questions, in particular how they might link to tensions and concepts described above, discussion now moves to introduce the research design process followed and presented more fully in Chapter 3.

## **Introducing the research design**

A critical realist approach has been taken in seeking to answer the research questions. From the outset of the study it was evident that in order to capture academics' beliefs and perceptions, a classic case study approach situated in a broad interpretive paradigm should be taken (Bryman, 2004, p.50). This would allow for the qualitative capturing of detailed and intensive in-depth personal views and experiences (ibid.). The depth and richness this approach brings are noted in the two iconic case studies of schooling in Britain by Paul Willis (1977) and Stephen Ball (1981), both of which provide deep-level institutional analysis, using an interpretive approach which combines the social reality of pupils with the wider social context. Similarly, when faced with the social and ideological complexities of, and changes within the HE environment introduced above, I believed that the case study approach would bring additional space for examining not only the interplay of elements within the university, but also between the university and the external environment where boundaries may sometimes be



unclear (Jones, Trier and Richards, 2008, p.343; Stromquist, 2007, p.85; Yin, 2003, p.13).

The critical realist perspective acknowledges that interpretive approaches alone bypass elements such as broader context, my own values, and critical emancipatory intent inherent in the proposed research questions. This approach allowed for the capturing of both academics' realities, and the continual interplay between academics as agents and the surrounding structures. Furthermore, it answered my stated desire to identify solutions to tensions raised by academics and possible paths of action beyond the research. My journey towards methodological clarity in understanding and describing this approach is elaborated on in Chapter 3.

Researching at the institution where I work has involved straddling an insider/outsider research identity, sitting on a continuum as neither complete participant nor complete observer (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.457; Wellington, 2000, p.93). Whilst I am immersed in the strategic development of learning and teaching, as a non-academic, I am completely removed from academic practice and the day-to-day reality of academics. This stance has brought both pros and cons to the research, and the significant ethical implications of these for my approach, analysis and outcomes, including issues of positionality, power and representation will be explored in later chapters.

As a qualitative research process, research design and implementation of methods allowed space for my own critical reflection, as well as emergent sources of evidence, themes and angles (O'Leary, 2010, p.101). As a researcher new to the social sciences, this included my own growth as a researcher, and a maturing of ideas and methodological approach across the research journey, from project initiation, through data collection, to analysis and write-up. Denscombe (2010) has noted the importance of maintaining an exploratory approach to allow for fresh perspectives with the potential to combine a range of areas not yet explored in this way (p.189).

In this case study, 14 semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews with academics from across the university formed the dominant method of data collection. These were combined with my observations from across the case study site, and complemented by documentary evidence. As part of a critical realist approach introduced above, this combination of methods allowed for the simultaneous deep understanding of a range of academics' perspectives together with a richer picture of the university and wider HE

context. Chapter 3 describes more fully the intertwining of academics' perceptions and my own observations with theoretical concepts in moving from the findings chapters into deeper conceptual analysis within the final discussion.

Documentary evidence included details of each academic informant's disciplinary environment, their online academic profiles and the courses they teach, as well as journal notes of my own observations throughout the period of research. Whilst initially included as documentary evidence, institutional strategies introduced earlier have instead been analysed as part of context-setting for the case. The observed disconnect between this data and the reality of the academic informants, and hence my decision for this approach is elaborated upon in the subsequent chapter.

My day-to-day observations and personal insights from informal conversations and more formal meetings and internal conversations make an essential contribution to the case record. As an additional source of data, these both provided a developmental steer for the research, and brought richness and depth to the case study, where O'Leary (2010) has noted the importance of capturing reality in a case study rather than only the 'constructed case' (p.209). This data also allowed for the ongoing corroboration of emerging messages from interviews and subsequent analysis.

### **The EdD as a single in-depth case study**

Burgess et al. (2006) note that because EdD research tends to be small and localised, its chief contribution to knowledge is most often relevance and implications for the local setting under examination (p.7). As noted on Figure 1, disciplinary variations, academics' identities, HE leadership and management and institutional typologies have also been important in considering the research problem, introducing further nuance and context to themes arising in the research. Alongside a spread of disciplinary backgrounds across informants, these variations also introduce further depth and complexity to the case study, mitigating against the need for research beyond a single institution.

As a professional doctorate, the outcomes of this study are intimately connected to my everyday practice. Costley, Elliott and Gibbs (2010) note the value insider-researchers are able to bring in impacting on and effecting change beyond the research in their institutions. When I commenced this research in mid-2013, it was in the knowledge that the university learning and teaching strategy period was scheduled to end in mid-2016. Whilst I knew there would be a formal institution-wide consultation for a new strategy,

with the 'turbulent' higher education environment introduced earlier (Field, 2015, p.115), I felt that an in-depth examination considering HE's central mission, that of transforming students, was both timely and critical in terms of the important messages it might yield for the university. The contribution is immediately original in that no such study has been undertaken at the institution previously. At the very least, I hope to create an awareness of current tensions which have been noted by many authors above as little explored in the institutional practice context. The conclusion to the thesis reflects on how this has played out in reality. Furthermore, it notes the wider value of the study to the HE sector in shedding further light on an area where a gap has been previously noted. Potential transferability of the findings to other higher education institutions (HEIs) will also be discussed in the final section.

Before outlining the structure of the thesis, as alluded to earlier, because of the breadth of my professional role, and my chosen area of inquiry, this research could, on countless occasions, have strayed off course into myriad areas relating to teaching and learning. Bearing in mind the expectations of an EdD study in terms of shape and scale, as well as the need for focus in any research study if the outputs are to be clear, it was crucial to resist temptations to delve into the specifics of any one area. Instead, in seeking to identify enabling and denying elements in the system, as well as ways in which to achieve balance across the system, it was important to sustain a focus on the undergraduate education environment as a whole, including structures, processes and academics' practice.

## **Structure of the thesis**

Having introduced key literature and themes in this opening chapter, Chapter 2 expands on those themes featured within Figure 1 which serve to better contextualise the opening quote and research questions. This is done through national and institutional policy analysis and a deeper examination of the breadth of concepts in the research literature across areas of: tensions in the HE system related to undergraduate education; the role of academics; students' shifting identities; transformation; knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy.

To further ground the research and outline the research journey followed, Chapter 3, *Research Design*, positions the research in its methodological framework, elaborating further on the research as a case study, and my ethical and philosophical position. The

latter half of this chapter details the research methods used, including details of informant selection, interviews and my approach to data analysis.

Chapter 3 concludes by presenting a model for framing the subsequent three findings Chapters 4 to 6. Forming the main body of the thesis, these chapters detail concrete findings emerging from interviews with academics and also serve to answer the first part of the research questions related to academics' beliefs on the nature and purpose of HE, their perceptions of transformation as a concept and identification of enabling and denying elements in the HE system.

Findings are drawn together in the opening section of Chapter 7, *Discussion and Conclusion*, which then uses concepts from the research literature for a discursive analysis of abstract themes emerging from the data. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the value and limitations of the study and recommendations for possible courses of individual and institutional action, which include dissemination, debate and future possible research.

## **CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING CENTRAL THEMES**

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### **Introduction**

The introductory chapter outlined changes in the HE environment over the past half century, introducing tensions and the implications of these for undergraduate HE, academics and teaching, and students and their learning. Literature outlining gaps in research was used to develop the research questions, and following this, a complex learning and teaching environment was introduced as the site where academics will negotiate and seek to overcome tensions. Building on Figure 1 which set the context for the breadth of literature to be used across the dissertation, this chapter will focus on literature which elaborates themes closest to the research questions. These are also explicitly and implicitly expressed in the opening quote of the thesis and are:

- Tensions in the HE system, both internal and external, related to teaching, learning and UG education;
- Students and notions of shifting identities from scholar to consumer;
- The role of academics: measuring quality and performance; and
- Transformation, and within this, knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy.

Opening this exploration is an analysis of national and institutional policy documentation. It is noted that in being selective, there is the possibility of bias and not telling the whole story. Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) note that there are many ways to undertake policy analysis, and the method selected will depend on the context of the researcher, as well as the aims and purpose of the analysis itself (p.36). Here the focus has been bounded by the research questions and themes above. My approach will be described at relevant points through the chapter.

Framing core literature themes is that range of peripheral literature introduced in the opening chapter, such as academic identities, disciplinary variations, institutional typologies and institutional leadership and management. Together with literature relating to methodologies, methods and analysis, this will be referred to throughout the thesis as appropriate. As with the introductory chapter, this exploration draws on doctoral assignments presented in preparation for this research (Meth 2013a, 2013b, 2013c and 2012a, 2012b).

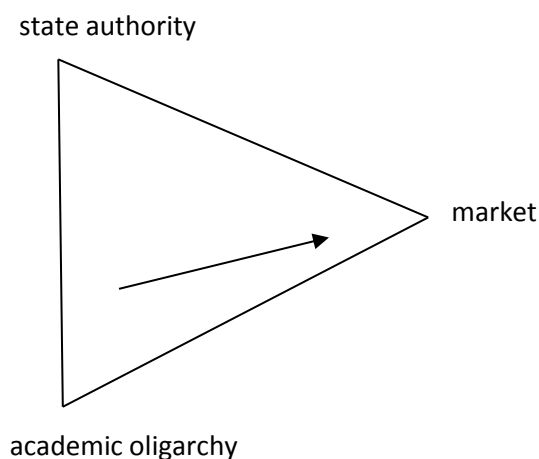
Following discussion of transformation, knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy, the chapter concludes with summary thoughts on balancing tensions in this setting and the

need to connect debates on economy, knowledge, education and student learning (Lambert et al., 2007; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Peters, 2002).

## Higher Education in England: tensions in the system

An initial indication of tensions in the HE sector, particularly in terms of use and value, may be gained by noting shifts in government departments with responsibility for HE in England over the past half century. The opening chapter outlined changes in the HE environment across this period, and during this time, the focus of government departmental ownership has moved from education to include employment, and then skills, innovation and business to July 2016 (Appendix 1). When the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) was created in 2009, the overt introduction of, and merging with business agendas, and loss of any mention of education or university in the title was seen as highly contentious (THE, 2012, p.12). With changes in Conservative leadership in July 2016, to offer a 'comprehensive view of skills and education', HE has moved back into the Department for Education, sparking fears that HE will now 'lose weight in government' because of its decoupling from business and industry (Morgan, 2016).

The 'triangle of coordination' (Clark, 1983) captures tensions in the HE system, and depicts the integration of three ideal types in the HE system, the state, market and 'academic oligarchy' (Figure 2, below). Salazar and Leihy (2013) note that most national HE systems show a direction of movement within the triangle from 'academic oligarchy' towards 'market', and this is overt in the introductory scene setting. This is consistent with the emergence of the global knowledge economy in the UK, as well as the progressive marketisation of HE (Jongbloed, 2003; Giddens, 2001; Walford, 1988).



**Figure 2:** The Triangle of Coordination (Clark, 1983, p.143) with simplified representation of the proposed direction of change in national systems (Salazar and Leihy, 2013).

In their theory of academic capitalism, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) note the increased blurring of boundaries between markets, the state and higher education (p.11) pointing to potential flaws in the simplicity of a triangle which presents elements at opposing apices whilst also preventing depiction of complexities at each apex. Salazar and Leihy (2013) propose a 'microcosmographia' of domains at each apex that allow for complexity (p.61). This is pertinent when proceeding with case study analysis where there may be 'tensions and incompatibilities between academics' interests in teaching and their students' learning, and university interests in growth and prestige' (Field, 2015, p.122). Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1998) outline a model not dissimilar to Clark's, the 'triple helix', which allows for an intertwining of industry, academia and government. Where the triangle was limited in its static endpoints, the triple helix allows for the presentation of a 'rich ecology' of transition and ever-changing complexities within the HE system (Leydesdorff and Meyer, 2006, p.1441).

Despite the lack of a perfect model, these conceptual spaces highlight tensions discussed across this chapter, where a pull from academic towards market ideologies is evident throughout. Following presentation of the interview findings, they are revisited in the final discussion chapter as part of conceptual analysis.

Tensions, debates related to marketization, managerialisation, and the student experience introduced in Chapter 1, may be critiqued through an interdiscursive analysis of national and institutional policy texts (Taylor, 2004, p.437). This method combines commentary on specific policy textual elements related to the changing undergraduate teaching and learning environment, with narrative on the wider discourse of HE, and acknowledges the value of combining linguistic and social elements in analysis (Mulderrig, 2011; Taylor, 2004, p.436). This focus is felt to be appropriate to the aims of the research questions and context setting required (Taylor et al., 1997, p.36), with the potential to reveal less overt, but possibly more illuminating messages from within policy texts.

### **National policy messages**

Key national policy texts in HE were introduced in Chapter 1, and their main messages summarised. Ball (1993) notes the importance of looking at cumulative policy effects over time (p.15). Linking this to the opening quote of the thesis which alludes to shifts in the identity of students, from 'scholar' to 'consumer' (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277), I have chosen to limit deeper policy analysis to the past 13 years. This is the period during which the discourses of student experience and commodification have grown alongside the introduction and increase of tuition fees (Meth, 2013a; Sabri, 2011). Texts are:

- The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003);
- Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy (BIS, 2009);
- Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011a);
- Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (BIS, 2015); and
- Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice (BIS, 2016).

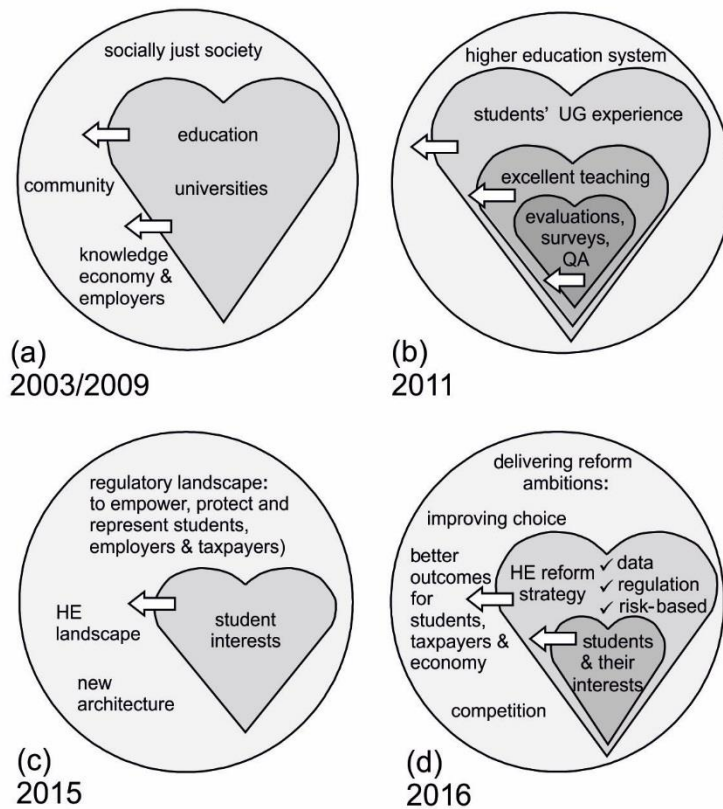
Changes in national responsibility for HE discussed are reflected in changes in policy authorship over the 13 year period. Policy documents have been examined as products with their own discourses as part of a 'policy ecology' (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p.155) where face-value content is not necessarily the most important factor (Burgess et al., 2006, p.77; Prior, 2003, p.26). Such analysis encourages a more creative consideration of how objects are referenced in the texts, the patterns of such referencing, and how they relate to the wider discourse (Prior, 2003, p.122). Using such an approach, changes in the HE system are tracked through an analysis of how the term and metaphor, to have something 'at its heart', is used within policies above.

### **Education was once at the heart of the system**

The graphical interpretation below (Figure 3) depicts the relative position and drivers of agendas as implied in respective policies. Within DfES (2003), education is 'at the heart of building a more socially just society' (p.68), and BIS (2009) similarly places 'universities at the heart of communities' (p.18) and 'universities as the heart of a knowledge economy' (p.23). These are interpreted as explicit statements on the pivotal role HE performs as a public good, for society, community and economy.

Use of the phrase 'at the heart of' escalates in BIS (2011a), which cites the need to 'discuss how we will put excellent teaching back at the heart of every student's university experience' (p.25). Notably however, all further references to the phrase relate to student surveys and evaluations at the heart of teaching quality, and quality assurance procedures at the heart of future arrangements (p.34 and p.37). These reveal a different message, where despite the inclusion of policy aims to improve 'the quality of students' academic experience' and 'increasing their educational gain' (p.25), there is no further discussion of students' educational experiences.





**Figure 3:** Diagram showing implied relationships and drivers in HE (as arrows), as inferred through text references to ‘heart’ in (a) DfES (2003) and BIS (2009), (b) BIS (2011a), (c) BIS (2015) and (d) BIS (2016).

Instead, recommendations related to quality monitoring by students through evaluations and surveys, public information, contact hours and staff teaching qualifications dominate. Students are presented as ‘powerful’ clients, and notions of universities at the heart of society, with students and academics (as partners within) are absent. Commenting on the policy, Hall (2011) aptly blogged that ‘students as consumers’ are now at the heart of the system rather than ‘students as humans’.

Seeing the ‘job as not yet complete’ (p.7), BIS (2015) builds upon BIS (2011a) with students remaining ‘at the heart’ of the system, to address ‘value for money’ issues for ‘students, employers and taxpayers’. As such, ‘student interests’ now lie at the heart of a new proposed architecture (p.38), so as to ensure students’ protection and satisfaction. As with BIS (2011a), whilst the stated aspiration is to return notions of teaching excellence and quality, measures are proposed in order to ‘avert disappointment in what [students] receive, poor value for the students and a poorer return for the economy as a whole’ (p.21). Similarly, but now with extravagant use of the term, BIS (2016) has students and their interests firmly at the centre. Ball (1994)

notes how it is possible from such a critical analysis, to propose how policy changes will affect associated social systems (p.2). In this instance, this technique lays bare details of changing expectations of HE and the perceived role and identity of students, and their relationship to education.

### **Rise of the student as consumer**

Moving beyond observations above, dominant words and themes in policy texts related to the educational experience of students, show the focus shifting from teaching, learning and standards as a separate chapter in DfES (2003) (also central to Robbins (1963) and DES (1987)) to notions of a broader HE environment in which the students are seen to have an 'experience' of HE. In terms of frequency analysis, dominant words in DfES (2003) are: teaching; standards; quality. DfES (2003) states that 'in an era when students are being asked to contribute more to the costs of their tuition ... their expectations of teaching quality will rise' (p.47), making a direct link between the financial transaction and students' expectations, and setting the scene for growth of a student consumer discourse in HE.

With an entire section titled 'The student experience of Higher Education' (BIS, 2009, p.70) and two sections pertaining to the student experience (BIS, 2011a, p.25 and p.33), both BIS 2009 and 2011a portray students as 'clients' (BIS, 2009, p.70) and 'consumers' (BIS, 2011a, p.68). As the 'most important clients of HE' (BIS, 2009, p.70), students' assessments of 'service' will be central to judgements of institutional success (p.70). Better course and employment information will drive student choice, and their expectations should shape courses, and drive adaptation and service improvement (p.70-79). The most dominant words and themes (by frequency) noted within these two policies are: quality; students as clients; student assessment of services (BIS, 2009) and consumer autonomy; employers and complaints (BIS, 2011a). Both BIS (2009) and (2011a) define the experiences of students not in terms of how they will learn in HE or how they will interact with their disciplines through educational dialogue with academics and peers, but as clients and customers with power to shape their courses and the future success of their institutions, with full recourse to consumer complaints. This brings a distinct shift in the power and significance of students' voices.

Educational researchers note the implications of these shifting discourses for HE curricula and pedagogies (Williams, 2013; Filippakou, 2011; Sabri, 2010; Barnett and Coate, 2005). Whilst the introduction to Chapter 3 in BIS (2011a) states that 'a good student is not merely a consumer of other people's knowledge' and outlines the need for HEIs to 'create a learning community where engagement of students is encouraged' (p.33), the dominant focus of the chapter, and accompanying recommendations, is on

student engagement only as evaluation and checking of institutional provision (3.1, p.33). Similarly, whilst the opening section on student charters discusses learning communities as partnerships between staff and students as being ‘most enriching’ (p.33), the text then discusses only one side of the partnership - student expectations, and the mandatory charter is no more than a service level agreement. Wisdom (2011) describes charters as a product guarantee and direct marketing response to the new fees regime (p.5).

The ‘market is [now at] the heart of the system’ (Campaign for the Public University, 2011). Wisdom (2011) also noted the ‘capacity’ of BIS (2011a) ‘to derail’ work on the ‘concept of being a student’ stating:

*‘we will forever be trapped in the unproductive and inappropriate discourse of students as customers consuming the education they are given’ (p.6).*

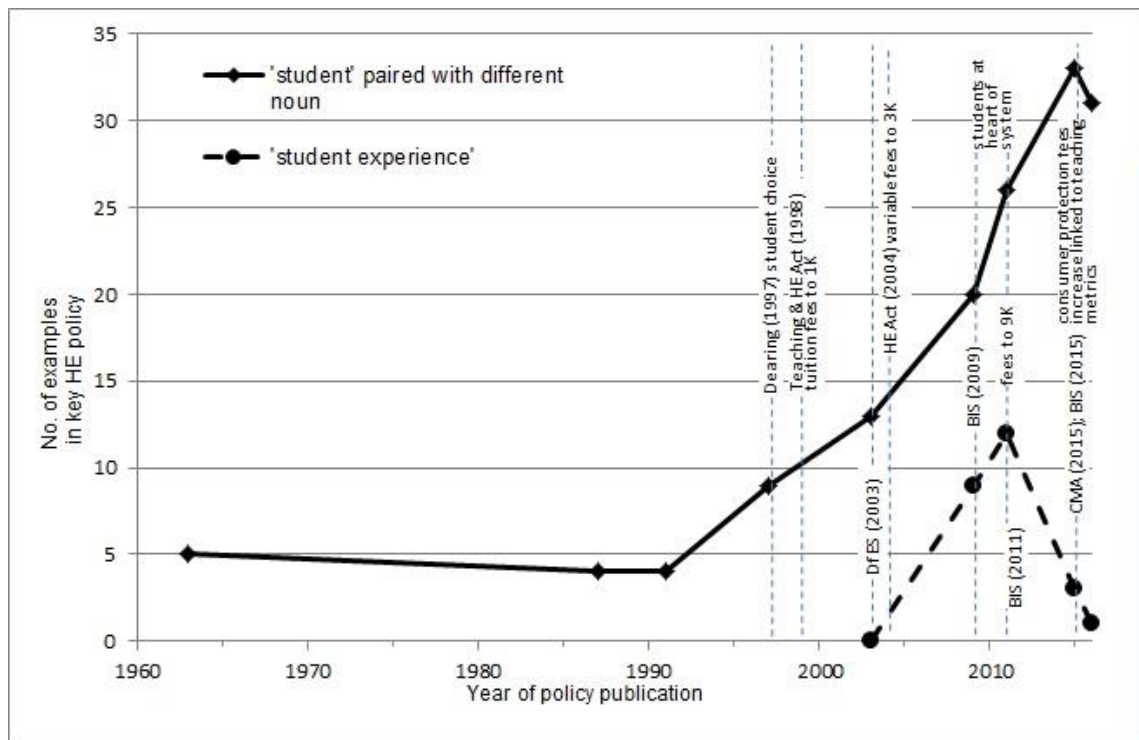
In 2015, guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority notes that under consumer protection laws, ‘Undergraduate students ... will be ‘consumers’ for the purposes of the legislation (CMA, 2015, p.12). The focus has shifted beyond the ‘student experience’ with a return to notions of teaching quality, excellence and standards, but with the frequent words in the document relating to students not as learners, but consumers, namely ‘protection’, ‘choices’, ‘interests’ and ‘satisfaction’ (BIS, 2015).

### ***Tracking the discourse related to students***

Occurrences of the words ‘student experience’ are noted as increasing across successive policies, with none in DfES (2003), nine in BIS (2009) and twelve in BIS (2011a). There is a notable shift from discussing different experiences of different students in education, to a singular entity, ‘the student experience’, where ‘student’ is used as an adjectival noun to describe a particular type of ‘experience’ (a noun) (Sabri, 2011, p.660). BIS (2015), acting as a consumer protection document which accompanies BIS (2011a and 2011b), changes this trend with only three mentions.

Looking back at national HE policy documents prior to the main texts under consideration, a related trend predating the arrival of the ‘student experience’ as an entity in national policy, is the proliferation of other nouns paired with ‘student’ over a period of about 20 years of national HE policy documents (Appendix 2). In a similar way that a range of students’ experiences are now portrayed as a singular ‘student experience’, DES (1987) refers to students’ achievements many times over, whereas by 2003, ‘student achievement’ is an entity in itself. Other such examples include ‘student choice’, ‘student complaints’ and ‘student feedback’. Tracking instances of

'student experience' in policies alongside instances of other nouns paired with 'student', a direct correlation between the two may be noted, with increases over time mirroring one another until BIS (2015).



**Figure 4:** Graph charting instances of the word 'student experience' and 'student' paired with another noun (Appendix 2) in key HE policies since Robbins (1963).

Whilst Sabri (2011) correlates growth of the term 'student experience' with the birth of BIS in 2009, my analysis provides new evidence of changing discourses related to students well before this in the late 1990s, reflected in a rise of other nouns associated with the word student predating introduction of the term 'student experience'. This earlier increase coincides with the time at which notions of student choice were introduced, accompanied by a policy recommendation for graduate contributions towards tuition (Dearing, 1997).

Following this, further increases are noted in DfES (2003) which proposed variable tuition fee introduction, again in 2011 with the introduction of full fees (BIS, 2011a) and yet again in BIS (2015) where the focus is strongly on consumer protection for students. Whilst Williams (2013, p.6) argues against Grayling's (2002) direct link between fees and student consumer status (in Williams, 2013), citing other social complexities such as media, institutional policies, peers and parents as key contributors, this study's correlation between new discourses related to students and increased fees is hard to ignore entirely.

It is worth mentioning that Williams (2013) observes how interchangeably the terms 'customer' and 'consumer' are used with respect to students (p.7), noting that the term 'customer' refers to the financial transaction or purchase of goods, whilst 'consumer' relates more to the use of a commodity or service. She feels that in most cases, it is students' behaviours related to a sense of entitlement being described, rather than an act of purchase, so chooses to focus on 'students as consumers'. I note that the terms are both used in this research, reflecting not only their use by other researchers (referenced throughout as appropriate), but also multiple messages emerging.

With these new discourses comes a change in the way HE, and in particular, curricula and pedagogy are framed. The changing discourse related to teaching noted above, brings with it increased scrutiny of teaching quality, and changing academic identities and student-teacher relationships.

### **Academics as teachers: 'scholarly dispositions' made 'explicit' and 'auditable'<sup>1</sup>**

In developing the case for research in Chapter 1, academics have been noted as central to, and yet invisible in policy debates and documentation (Coffield and Williamson, 2011, p.46). The alternative White Paper (2011) observes the substantial shift away from Robbins' (1963) intentions (p.14), with a removal of the 'student-teacher relation from the heart of the system' (Holmwood and McGettigan, 2011). Discourses of the student experience and students as consumers work jointly to displace academics as teachers from sector-wide narratives and debates about HE (Sabri, 2011, p.664; Sabri, 2010). Expectations of academics to contribute to the delivery of an excellent 'student experience' continue to increase and 'work that does not have direct and tangible benefits for students seems not to be worthwhile' (Sabri, 2010, p.197). According to Field (2015), this 'threatens to counteract the passion many academics feel about their teaching' (p.115).

Predictably, there have been strong critical refutations of the growing range of quality measures, both internal to the university, such as student evaluations and other quality monitoring systems, and external, such as surveys and the new national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016; BIS, 2015). Ball (2013) notes how the 'scholarly disposition [of academics] is now rendered explicit and auditable' (p.137). Attention is deflected from the core purpose of HE, and as with the student experience, focus is instead on a 'partial' and 'monolithic' view of HE which some argue results in 'exclusion and disaffection' of academics (Filippakou, 2011, p.15). In a similar vein, this 'blunts sensitivity' to the 'richness and importance of 'the *relationship* at its heart –

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<sup>1</sup> Ball, 2013, p.137

between student, teacher and subject matter' (Staddon and Standish, 2012, p.636), instead bringing a focus on information gathered about teaching as an activity (Ball, 2013, p.13). The more explicit academics are required to be about their teaching, the more the pedagogical space for students and teachers is reduced (Filippakou, 2011, p.25). These combined effects are seen as a classic symptom of audit cultures where measurements relate more to systems for teaching quality than the actual teaching itself (Power, 1997, p.102). The mismatch between quality measures proposed in BIS (2015) and actual teaching quality or measurements of students' learning has been noted by Gibbs (2016, p.14). Several researchers now note the complexities of teaching in an environment with opposing discourses of quality – one which is market-oriented and auditable, and the other which approximates more closely what educational researchers believe to be a transformational or intrinsic educational mission (Ashwin et al., 2015a, p.610; Craig Amernic and Tourish, 2014, p.11; Filippakou, 2011, p.25; Harvey and Knight, 1996, p.7).

Gill (2010) notes that education being reformulated in instrumental terms has meant increased working hours, 'function creep' and the requirement to do more with less, combined with pressures to continually be at the 'cutting edge' of academic practice (p.237). Skelton (2012a) elaborates on the impact of the 'quality movement' on teacher identities in a study also undertaken in a research-led institution (p.793). Here, academics are not opposed to accountability and quality measures, but they question the bureaucratic nature of demands, in some instances choosing to ignore or play the system. It is however the relative value and recognition of teaching as opposed to research that was felt to be damaging to teachers' identities (p.809) and a 'danger to pedagogy' (p.810). Given the context for this study, the research-teaching nexus is one which is likely to feature in conversations with academics. Skelton notes that BIS (2011) intentions to 'restore teaching to its proper place' are therefore not entirely unwelcome (ibid.). In moving to further increase the focus on teaching, BIS (2015 and 2016) also make overt statements about 'rebalancing the pull between teaching and research' (2015, p.12; 2016, p.15). However, as noted earlier, with a suite of potentially flawed quality and excellence measures, and the stated need to 'empower, protect and represent the interests of students, employers and taxpayers' (2015, p.62) and ensure better value for money (2015 and 2016, p.18) through improved teaching quality, a students as consumers discourse is sustained.

### ***Measuring quality or satisfaction?***

The past 13 years has seen the development of myriad student surveys linked to assuring quality in the HE sector. DfES (2003) recommended a new national survey to

help make students 'intelligent customers' (p.47) and enable student choice, and in 2005, as part of the quality assurance framework for HE, the National Student Survey (NSS) was launched (HEFCE, 2012). This increased competition between HEIs and fast became a key component of national and international league tables. Researchers have noted how problematic the use of NSS data can be, devoid of context, not necessarily measuring educational quality, but rather a set of enhanced experiences (Buckley, 2012; Furedi, 2012; Wisdom, 2011, p.5). Most surveys are unable to capture 'meaningful encounters' between academics, students and learning materials (Field, 2015, p.116), leading to confusion between 'learning' and 'teaching' as activities which have been operationalised as 'delivery' of a package to suit student customers, in particular, where 'learning' is now privileged over 'teaching' (McWilliam, 1996, p.369). Gibbs (2016) states:

'The Government must choose between obliging universities to give students what they want, even if it is counter-educational, and encouraging forms of provision which are known to be more educationally effective, whether students want them or not' (p.14).

In an environment of surveys, league tables and other performance measures such as module evaluations, academics' relationships with students and opportunities for critical engagement and feedback become less certain. They are seen as redefined through performativity, with both a continual desire to improve survey results that often lead to 'performative episodes' by academics which close down these critical spaces, as well as an anxiety against teaching in a way which might compromise survey scores (Ball, 2013, p.138; Sabri, 2013, 6.3). Whilst there is recognition that student evaluations of teaching through anonymous module questionnaires can be valuable as qualitative instruments for academics' development, it is felt that evaluations are not necessarily valid measures of quality. In particular, such measures become highly problematic when translated into quantitative evidence for other institutional processes such as promotions and performance management (Copeland, 2014, p.1; Smith, 2012, p.753).

The latest THE Student Experience Survey (2016), in addition to scores for 'high quality staff/lecturers', includes measures related to social life, extra-curricular activities and 'cheap shop/bar/amenities' (p.17). Ball (1994) notes how 'image and impression management are becoming as important as the educational process' itself (p.51) and institutional tactics in data 'massaging' to ensure high league table positions are seen as increasing, together with the potential for gaming, where satisfaction is not the same as quality (BIS, 2016, p.7). In a report for the University and College Union, Copeland (2014) notes that some universities use poor NSS scores to intimidate staff, suspend student recruitment and eventually cut courses (p.4).

Filippakou (2011) interprets the quality agenda as a network of ideological discourses, and highlights the interactions between national frameworks and HEIs. As such, in examining institutional contexts, it is crucial to see HEIs as 'actors in this field' and examine institutional positions in relation to national policy pressures (p.26). The chapter therefore now moves to consider how external shifts manifest in policy documentation at the case study site.

## **Situating the institution within external discourses**

Institutional documents closely reflect prevailing national ideologies at the time of their production outlined through policy analysis above. Ball (1994) notes how policy discourses intertwine across macro, meso and micro levels as 'cannibalized products of multiple influences (p.15). In analysing institutional policy, its creation, ownership and validity should be considered. Policies may be perceived as imposed, rather than generated by academic consensus, meaning they may or may not therefore be acted upon (Bryman, 2004 p.387; Prior, 2003, p.69). This complex relationship between knowledge generation and social power is typical in organisations, and it is noted that despite some institution's attempts to 'create a common unity around the ideological position taken' (Connors, 2015, p.155), academics may feel the impact of institutional strategy, but not necessarily share stated institutional interests (Field, 2015, p.122, May, 2001, p.43).

Following interviews with academics for this study, I reconsidered my original intentions to include institutional documents as part of the main case. Even prior to analysis, I perceived a complete disconnect between the two sets of data, and realised that whilst institutional documents were important to setting the context, they were inappropriate for answering the research questions. This decision will be revisited in the subsequent chapter. Whether academics do or don't subscribe to such documents, documents are the 'presentation of [institutional] self' (Prior, 2003, p.104) and as such, key evidence reflecting the changing internal institutional context, values and attitudes over a period of time (Burgess et al., 2006, p.77). This section examines documents with particular reference to themes of interest noted at the start of the chapter.

Four learning and teaching strategies between 1999 and 2016 are examined, with added reference to a corresponding set of annual reports and strategic plans dating back to 2002 (not referenced for anonymity). The strategies each have different structures reflecting changing authors, leadership and purposes at the time of their production. As insider-researcher, I acknowledge my close involvement in both the production and enactment of learning and teaching strategy documents post-2005, and



the need to approach the data critically and with this recognition (Mason, 2002, p.108). The complexities of my positionality are further discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Shifting institutional discourses**

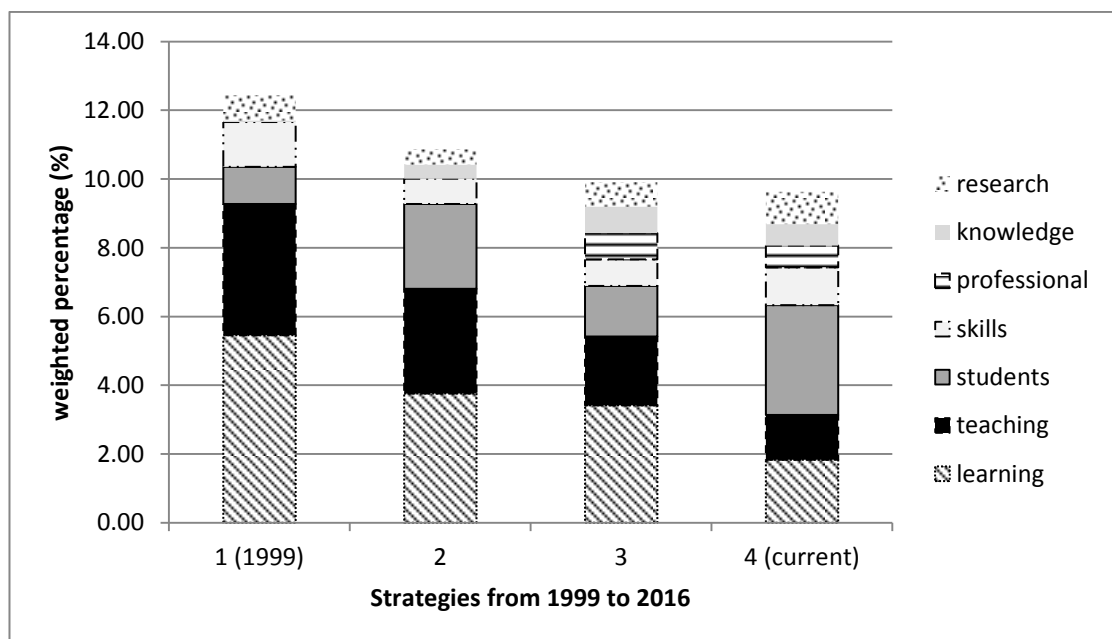
The institution's first learning and teaching strategy was developed in 1999 as a direct response to a national requirement that institutions have strategic frameworks in place in order to receive HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding. The strategy cites Dearing (1997) and an increased national focus on learning and teaching, and includes a commitment to increased institutional governance, structures and support to oversee quality and development of learning and teaching. It strongly reflects the national focus on skills and employability, widening participation, lifelong learning and regional partnerships, but also has a clear focus on high quality research-led programmes and a discipline and subject focus with 'provision of an intensive in-depth, analytical education'.

The second learning and teaching strategy notes DfES (2003) as a key driver, as well as 'the need to be responsive to students, to reward and promote good teachers'. The strategy is overt about its broadened scope to reflect all 'those matters that are normally thought of as 'learning and teaching', and an examination of content shows a change in the conception of education, through increased use of terms such as 'students', 'international', 'enterprise', 'technology and networking'. The stated aim is to develop an 'offer' which provides students with a range of educational opportunities related to research, skills development and preparation for employability. Together with increased requirements relating to targets and benchmarks, these collectively reflect national consumer and quality discussions elaborated upon earlier.

Intimately connected to production of the third learning and teaching strategy, are DfES (2003) and the new HE Act (2004) bringing in the option for institutions to charge variable fees up to 3K. The 'rapidly changing market place' in terms of student, employer and statutory body expectations is cited as a key external driver. There is another increase in areas covered by the strategy and what encompasses a 'student learning experience' - a clear offer is presented to students through an expanded suite of educational 'opportunities', including extra-curricular activities related to careers, employability, and enterprise. Within this strategic period, as part of the 2004-05 annual report, institutional documents start referring to the 'student experience' as an entity, pre-dating Sabri's (2011) national observations. The 2005-06 annual report heralds the introduction of a new institutional discourse relating to students. Where other aspects of students' experiences were previously presented separately to learning and teaching, or not at all, the section on learning and teaching now has little content about

learning or teaching at all. Rather, it covers student awards, scholarships, new personalised student services, student satisfaction and the new NSS, the University Health Service, enterprise and international collaborations, and notably highlights an internal survey which aims to improve all non-academic aspects of the student experience, including IT services, welfare and support.

This 'presentation of [institutional] self' (Prior, 2003, p.104) mirrors external shifts highlighted earlier in the chapter. Following this report, a new strapline, 'dedicated to the quality of the student experience', appears within the annual report under a header, 'achieving excellence'. The increase in elements other than learning and teaching as part of the 'offer' over time is reflected as a progressive decrease in combined key word frequencies in the learning and teaching strategies as weighted percentages of the total content (Figure 5, below). A substantial decrease in references to teaching and learning sit alongside an increase in references to students.



**Figure 5:** Weighted percentages of key word frequencies in four institutional learning and teaching strategies from 1999 to 2016 (gained through NVivo™ analysis).

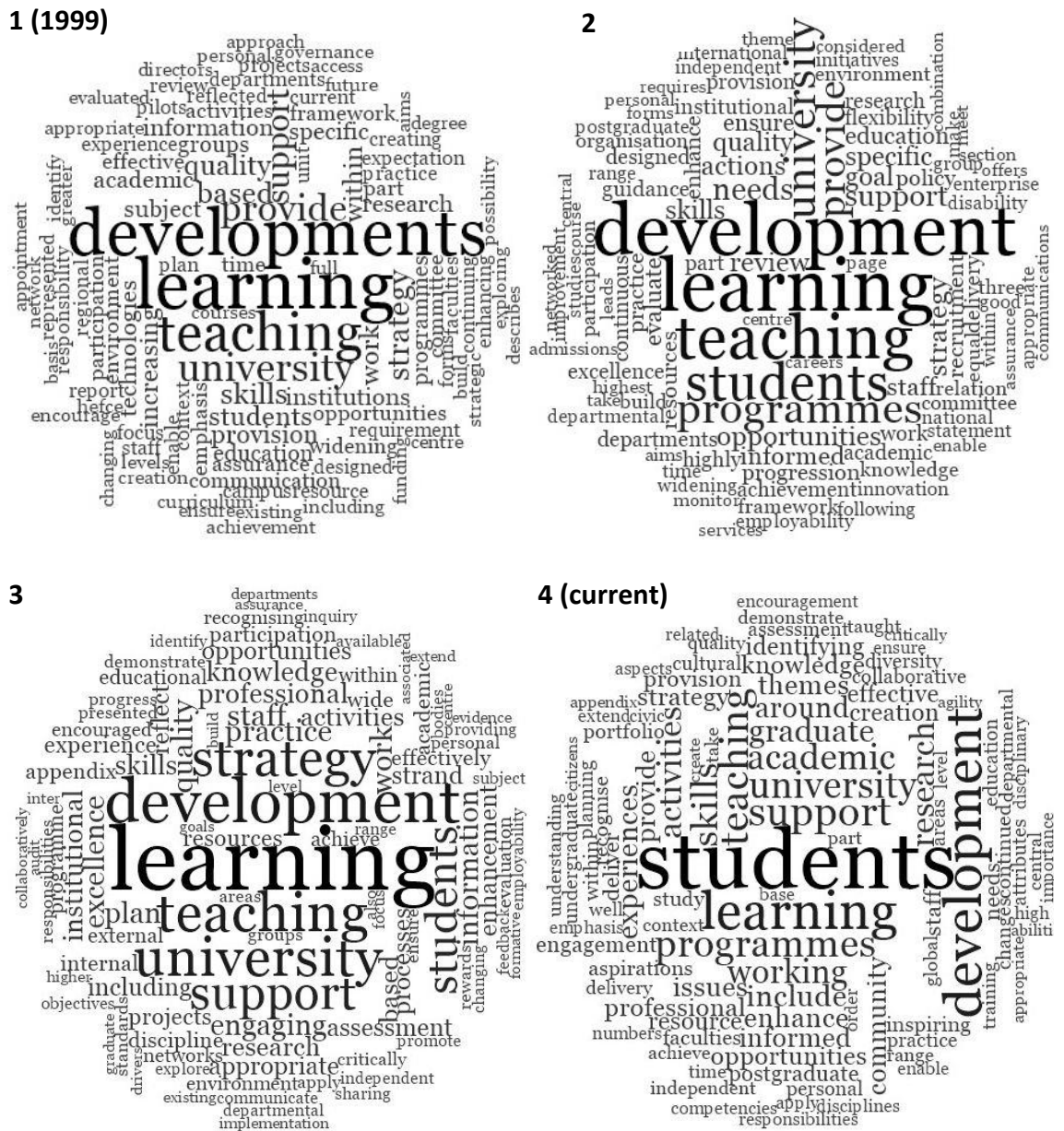
With DfES (2003) alluding to the NSS making students 'intelligent customers' and an environment of choice for students and competition in league tables being set, and given the term 'student experience' as an entity had not yet made an appearance in national policy documents, the question must be asked if HEIs, driven by their stated need to respond to 'the rapidly changing marketplace' and perceived 'student and

employer expectations', have exacerbated growth of a consumer discourse from within? This argument is consistent with Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) who argue that students are more 'captive markets' than 'empowered customers' and that HEIs strive for a 'homogeneity of product' to make themselves a 'more attractive consumption item' (p.280-284). As part of this, they also note the increasing expenditure on 'non-instructional services, buildings and personnel' (p.284), so clearly reflected in analysis of institutional documentation above.

Reflecting observations about surveys and league tables above, the importance placed on institutional rankings in league tables is seen to increase across institutional reports. Institutional strategic plans during this time also focus on improving the 'market share' of home and international students, and the need to deliver on promises associated with an 'offer' aligned to the 2012 introduction of full fees. Barnett (2007) notes how institutions' mention of 'students' so often relates to them as units of resource resulting in the 'objectification' of the 'student' (p.8). From 2011-2012 onwards annual reports boast a section entitled 'The student experience'. From this point forwards, aside from 2012-13, learning and teaching jostle for space with text on student support, services, skills development and extra-curricular opportunities.

### **Students at the heart of the institution**

The ascendancy of 'students' as a theme, and corresponding decrease in focus on teaching, is also noted in analysis of the current, fourth Learning and Teaching Strategy (Figure 5 above), where the word 'student' has become the most frequently occurring word. As a quick visual qualitative representation (Cidell, 2010, p.516), a set of word clouds illustrates this shift (Figure 6), mirroring what has been noted earlier regarding changes in national discourses related to HE. Immediately, the eye is drawn to the fact that now, students are 'at the heart of the system', teaching is less prominent, and there has been an increase in skills, experiences and activities, as part of a renewed offer to students. Like the strategic plan above, the strategy is overt that its development has been driven by the need to prepare for the new 2012 'fee regime' and sustain a high quality student experience.



**Figure 6:** Word clouds depicting changes in word frequencies across four institutional learning and teaching strategies from 1999 to 2016, created using NVivo™ software (100 most frequent words; 4 letters or more; The font size is proportional to word frequency). Place/institution name deleted from latter two diagrams.

At the time of writing, post-BIS (2015), consultations for a new institutional learning and teaching strategy have recognised the need for a strong focus on, and rebalance towards teaching. Whilst BIS (2015 and 2016) provide drivers for this repositioning, as insider-researcher and participant-observer, I note that prior to these, staff working in leadership roles related to teaching, both academic and professional, have sensed the drift highlighted above, already seeking to rebalance the institutional focus. The complexities of doing so within the current HE environment remain the focus of this research.

In summary, institutional policy documents have been shown to reflect strongly the changing national policy context. Earlier insights on how tensions play out in educational terms are likely to apply in this context, and interviews should be revealing in this regard. Whilst Mason (2002) cautions against superiority of one form of evidence over another (p.106), in the context of the research questions and the methodological approach to be outlined in the following chapter, it is the interview data that will drive development of the thesis, with documentary representation above to be revisited in light of interview findings in the final analysis section. This bounds temptations to undertake a larger-scale documentary analysis.

To complete the thematic framing of the research questions, discussion now moves to an analysis of the term transformation, and linked to this, knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy.

## **Transformation**

Closely related to the growth of the student experience discourse, is the increased use of the terms 'transformation' and 'transform' in higher education strategy and marketing discourses. A brief online search for them in relation to UK HEIs reveals their inclusion in a range of university policy and marketing materials. For example: a mission statement 'Transforming education, transforming lives' (University of Wales, Trinity St David); an institutional strategy 'Transformation for Excellence' (University of East London) and a Students' Union strategy 'Transforming students' lives and enhancing employability' (Warwick University). At the case study university, the term 'transform' appeared first in the current learning and teaching strategy through an overt statement related to the need for practical and professional skills development for graduates to transform lives, their own and those of others (direct quote anonymised). This mirrors an institutional strategic goal to provide opportunities for students to transform, through learning and other means.

Transformation into a 'scholar...who thinks critically' is mooted as the ideal in the opening quote of the thesis, but what is implied by this? Aside from alluding to 'critical thinking' and 'scholarliness' and notions of transformed future paths for students, most authors do not elaborate on what constitutes transformation in an undergraduate HE context.

### **Definitions**

Defined as 'a marked change in form, nature, or appearance' (Oxford Dictionaries online, 2014), and usually in a 'complete' and 'good way' (Merriam-Webster online,

2014), 'transformation' as it relates to students in HE, is almost constantly used in an aspirational light (see Copeland, 2014, p.4; Ashwin et al., 2012, p.4; Collini, 2012, p.187; Docherty, 2011, p.53; Sabri, 2011, p.664; Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277). Because of this, it becomes easy to use repeatedly. Illeris (2014a) notes 'a growing uncertainty' about the concept of transformative learning and 'imminent risk' that:

the concept gradually assumes the nature of a ... liquid signal or buzzword without any clear meaning ... a positive expression which can be used for whatever purpose to support any hidden interest (p.15).

What constitutes a positive change or transformation in undergraduate students will be completely dependent on how this is judged, including the interests and underlying ideological stances of those judging. Differentiating aspects of transformation which occur as part of the normal life-course, for example maturing and gaining confidence, from those specifically developed through HE is important. This might help to focus the research on that transformation which researchers are accusing universities of no longer effecting (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277).

### **Transformative learning**

Transformative learning theory, encompassing processes which bring about deep learning, has been defined so as to be distinctive from learning as assimilation, or more shallow, instrumental learning processes (Mezirow, 1997, 1990). Specifically, transformation is linked to a change in students' perspectives related to knowledge where students work through a series of processes that expose their current knowledge limitations and assumptions, allowing them to critically reflect on this with depth, analysis and integration of knowledge and ideas, and then engage in a new critical discourse with opportunities to present and apply new perspectives (Johansson and Felten, 2014, p.43; Perry, 1998, p.241; Mezirow, 1990, p.12). Students' deep level engagement with knowledge in this way is seen as essential for HE to be transformative, and is what sets a university education apart as being 'higher'. This is also linked to notions of scholarliness (Ashwin, 2014, p.123). For this to occur requires a critical combination of students being motivated to engage with the process, as well as good teaching within a suitable higher education environment to engender this engagement (Ashwin et al., 2012, p.7). Researchers have noted how HE elicits transformations by students being encouraged to 'leap forth' into strange, open-ended and challenging situations (Heidegger, 1998, p.159 in Barnett, 2011, p.47).

From the strict definition above, transformation infers a start and end point, and in HE, for some researchers, this is conceptualised as a suite of definitive threshold concepts within a discipline, implying a set of clear endpoints (Meyer and Land, 2005). Within

this process, learners may spend time in liminal 'stuck places' which can themselves be transformative while learners come to terms with conceptual challenges and new knowledge (p.375). Beyond transformation as deep engagement with disciplinary knowledge, other interpretations expand on more individual or social and outwardly-focused elements.

### **Beyond knowledge to individual growth and action**

Dirkx believes that deeper learning contains a strong element of personal subjectivity, integrating identity and inner experience with experiences of the outer world, which shifts the focus from disciplinary knowledge only (Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006, p.126). This transformation to a more 'inclusive' perspective where the view of oneself is broadened, is considered emancipatory (Johansson and Felten, 2014, p.43; Dirkx et al., 2006, p.124; Mezirow, 1990, p.18). Similarly, Illeris (2014a) draws on Mezirow's definition but adds emotional, social and societal dimensions (p.39-40). Furthermore, Illeris (2014b, p.160) notes that models which emphasise 'continuous growth and flexibility' have become more dominant, embodying the principles of lifelong learning, where learners continue to have the capacity to keep transforming i.e. more related to self and identity than knowledge. This tallies with Dirkx's (1998) view that there is no necessary beginning or end, rather a continued potential present in a learner (p.11).

There has been a rise in popularity of critical pedagogy since Freire (1970), and a push for education which emphasises consciousness-raising and leads learners to use their knowledge and education for action and the social good (Cowden and Singh, 2013; Mayo, 2013; Dirkx, 1998). Underpinning this, critical theory, 'an interdisciplinary way of knowing the world that is oriented towards both understanding and improving it' (Amsler, 2013, p.198), sees societal transformation effected through interactions between critical thinking and actions. Embodied within this transformation is part of the 'transformational learning' concept where students '...no longer merely interpret the world differently but actually do something substantive to change things' through social action (Docherty, 2011, p.52). Graduates are seen as playing 'a key role as transformative agents in society' (Harvey, 2000, p.3).

Dirkx (1998) notes instrumental interpretations of transformative learning which see changes as adaptation to the needs and demands of society (p.1), and this also links to wider tensions related to lifelong learning when interpreted as related to developing 'more productive and efficient workforces' (Field, 2006, p.3). This is interpreted by Barnett (2000) as part of the instrumentalist shift from 'transformation-as-emancipation to transformation-as-sheer-performance' (p.32). This links to shifts in quality discourses, as well as the marketing of educational institutions noted earlier, where

transformation as a concept is partly encapsulated in skills articulation for graduate employability. Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth (2011) confirm these polarities in their observation of 'individual transformations versus fickle and short-term consumer-related choices' (p.207). Beyond face-value issues with defining and using the term transformation, this returns the discussion to debates on the aims of education, whether for individual or social transformation (Mezirow, 1990, p.363) or with an added instrumentalist slant, and alludes to tensions previously referenced. These are in turn reflected in elements of undergraduate HE through which such transformations take place, chiefly knowledge, curriculum and pedagogies. Within these, the impact of external and internal pressures and the response to these by academics, as agents of recontextualisation prior to students interacting with the curriculum, is critical (Luckett, 2009, p.441). The following sections consider how these tensions are manifested across these elements.

### **Knowledge and disciplines**

Two modes of knowledge production were proposed by Scott (1995). In Mode 1, host institutions and scientists within them are autonomous, driven by disciplines with a narrow skills set, in a hierarchical organizational structure. Mode 2 knowledge on the other hand often addresses 'real world' problems (O'Connor et al., 2011), is socially produced and application driven, crosses disciplinary boundaries, and has many networks beyond institutions (Nowotny et al., 2003, p.179). Where Mode 1 is assumed to be the 'normative' mode of knowledge production, Mode 2 is seen as the deviant and product of a now neo-liberal marketised knowledge economy. In the shift from Modes 1 to 2, there has been a change in the 'social contract' where universities are seen as more responsive to societal needs (Gibbons, 2006; Martin and Etzkowitz, 2000, p.18).

References to the two modes tend to focus on HE innovation and research. However, noting the interconnectedness of research and teaching in an HE environment, Erasmus (2007) states that 'what is valid for HE research is also applicable to the core functions of teaching and learning' (p.28). Furthermore, Erasmus indicates that Gibbons' (2006) observation of engagement as a core value in a Mode 2 society provides a framework for those external-facing aspects of curricula and students' learning (p.26), the growth of which have been highlighted in analysis of institutional strategies above. This 'democratization of higher education' (Nowotny et al., 2003, p.188) is not dissimilar to shifts noted in interpretations of transformation above, towards outward-focused critical pedagogies.

Another way of conceptualising knowledge which reveals similar tensions, and also has close links to political and social interests in how knowledge is valued, is that of



conceptual 'know that/what' propositional or disciplinary knowledge as opposed to performative 'know how' practice based knowledge (Muller and Young, 2014, p.136). Barnett and Coate (2005) have noted increasing moves away from the former to the latter (p.92) in HEIs. Underpinning these definitions of knowledge, and closer to the research-linked interpretations of modes of knowledge, Bernstein (2000) notes disciplines as either 'singulars', with strong classification, where 'the apartness of things' is key, versus 'regions' with weaker classification which span the interface between fields of knowledge production and practice, more akin to Mode 2, promoting 'the togetherness' of things (p.26). Reflecting this classification, with the term 'pure' being more closely aligned to 'singulars' and 'applied' to 'regions', disciplines have been classified into 'hard, pure', 'soft, pure', 'hard, applied' and 'soft, applied' (Neumann, Parry and Becher, 2002; Becher, 1989; Biglan, 1973). In addition to a skills and knowledge basis from their pure counterparts, applied disciplines incorporate an applied skills dimension that emphasises application of knowledge in hard disciplines and reflective practice in soft disciplines' (ibid.).

### **Shifts in curricula and pedagogies**

In the institutional context, tensions in the value placed on types of knowledge, manifest themselves as tensions between values placed on certain disciplines, curricula and skills. Muller and Young (2014) note that basic disciplinary knowledge and curricula are in danger of being crowded out of the university by applied disciplines and 'know how' skills seen by some as more useful (p.128). It is felt that the shift towards performative curricula is being driven by 'economic profitability' (Nussbaum, 2010, p.135) and the dominant needs of both state and employers, and students' demands for employability skills (Muller and Young, 2014, p.135). A 2015 report prepared for McDonald's UK on the value of soft skills to the UK economy is one example of such demands. It notes that educational institutions 'have a role to play in helping students develop and present their soft skills, including teamwork, self-management and communications skills' (p.37).

Following this line of argument, from some standpoints, curricula have lost 'material that focuses on enlivening imagination and training the critical faculties' (Nussbaum, 2010, p.134), and now sit within inflexible and narrow curriculum frameworks, with fixed learning outcomes. There has been a shift 'toward material ... directly relevant to test preparation' with damaging effects on students' learning (Nussbaum, 2010, p.134). Here, we have 'put the learning cart before the horse' (Muller and Young, 2014, p.136) where learning in itself is seen as a kind of capital to be managed, accumulated and ultimately render students employable (Simons and Masscheleine, 2008, p.401). Returning to notions of transformation and education, Mezirow (1990) states that the common ground has to be an individual transformation prior to social transformation, which may then be in the form of action (p.363), while Illeris (2014a) notes that

'learning by changing, of necessity, presupposes that there is something to change that has been acquired by prior learning' (p.16). The 2012 Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration echoes this, noting the critical relationship between curricula, subject-specific skills and generic skills (p.31).

Problem-based and competence-based curricula sit within a suite of curricular approaches which seek to differentiate themselves from erstwhile traditional curricula and pedagogies, thereby claiming to be 'progressive' (Muller and Young, 2014; Case, 2011; Parker, 2003). One example is the competence-based General Medical Council (GMC) curriculum framework, *Tomorrow's Doctors* (2009) cited by Muller and Young (2014, p.135). Similarly, Case (2011) notes moves from traditional to problem-based curricula in Engineering where purely traditional curricular structures have become 'insufficiently responsive' to the range of students in today's massified HE system (p.13). Worryingly, she further notes that it is problematic to assume that knowledge can become more accessible simply by breaking apart the boundaries in traditional curricula. An increased focus on competencies and 'trainability' brings the danger that disciplines are weakened and 'genericised' (Ashwin et al., 2015a, p.612; Young, 2009, p.193). Case (2011) also suggests that a new progressive curriculum has large implications for academic identities and practices, and that it is likely that in the current 'situational logic' in the academy, academics lack the collaborative practices to properly 'pull off' such a curriculum shift (p.16).

As noted in previous sections, the presence of a market relationship has implications for the pedagogic relationship between student and teacher, where there may be changes in the relative engagement of the two parties (Barnett, 2011, p.48). Many students may feel uncomfortably challenged in the HE environment. Whilst this may dissatisfy the students concerned, Collini (2012), in line with Sabri above, notes that this is vital for real, transformational learning to take place (p.187). Highlighted earlier in the chapter, there is a danger in allowing student preference to drive changes in curriculum and pedagogy, because of the potentially flawed consumer-oriented survey and quality indicators (Gibbs, 2016; Collini, 2012, p.187). Nussbaum (2010) notes that the 'baneful shift in pedagogy' which now shies away from 'questioning and individual responsibility toward force-feeding for good exam results' (p.134), bring with it instrumental learning noted by Mezirow (1990) earlier (p.7). Mirroring Barnett's (2000) contrasting types of transformation noted above (p.32), Trowler and Trowler (2011) describe contrasting philosophies of student engagement as developmental and market models of student engagement. Earlier policy analysis has pointed to shifts towards the latter, with students as consumers and their choices driving the system (BIS, 2015; BIS, 2011a).

Beyond the student-teacher relationship, Nixon (2012) attributes requirements for standardised assessment and learning outcomes as 'bureaucratic' and part of a need

to satisfy 'externally imposed systems of accountability' which have little to do with 'what anyone in higher education seriously associates with learning' (p.147). Entwistle (2003) outlines the wide range of possible impacts on academics' teaching approaches introduced within the internal university environment, including internal quality assurance process and external agency's requirements (p.5). Whilst not directly linked to discussions on knowledge and curriculum, they have been noted as impacting negatively on learning, and linked to the same set of tensions associated with marketisation and managerialisation.

Pressures for universities to show how knowledge is useful and impactful, combined with the growing 'student as consumer' discourse, rising individualism and employability have heightened the dogma and rationale for 'progressive' curricula and constructivist student-centred learning approaches. Whilst a focus on students' experiences and shift towards student-centred approaches in response to sometimes poor transmission teaching methods is not entirely unwarranted, there is a danger that 'highlighting the 'student experience' has obscured the essential role that students' engagement with knowledge plays in the transformative potential of higher education'. (Ashwin, 2015a). Furthermore, Wheelahan (2009) notes that because constructivism and instrumentalism both hold commitments to experiential and contextual learning, confusion has arisen between the two (p.227), and the instrumentalist discourse has become more pervasive. This returns to debates related to transformation for action, and divided interests and intentions, whether for the wider societal good as promoted through critical pedagogies, or more instrumental individual or market gains.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter has aimed to set the context for themes closest to the research questions. Policy analysis has revealed changing values related to students, academics, knowledge and curricula, and competing interests highlighted in the Clark triangle (Figure 2) are shown to have an impact on knowledge, curriculum and pedagogies. The Marxist concept of commodification describes something that has a 'use value' being transformed into a product which has 'exchange value' for sale on a market, where social and human interactions are reduced to economic transactions (O'Leary, 2007, p.38). Discussion across this chapter has noted the rise of the student experience as a commodity, as well as a range of other consumer-related practices around and within HE, and an emerging instrumentalist discourse related to the concept of transformation. Collectively, these link to a shift away from deeper explorations of knowledge and learning (Nilsson and Wihlborg, 2011, p.114) and lack of consideration of education as a social good, to a narrower set of concerns about human capital development (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p.3). Here performative knowledge and students as employable graduates are seen as more useful. This

counter posing of 'traditional' and 'progressive' might be interpreted using Ball's (2013) notions of 'value displacing values' where moral and intellectual obligations have become subordinate to economic ones (p.139) and also leads one to the question asked by Bernstein (2000) 'in whose interests is the apartness of things?' (p.26). Wheelahan (2010) notes how voices advocating the importance of conceptual knowledge are 'delegitimized, devalued and excluded' in favour of knowledge, curricula and skills which are measured by their relevance to the workplace (p.6-7).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) note the long-standing coexistence, intersection and overlap of academic capitalism and public good knowledge regimes, and state that this is not necessarily problematic in itself. The problem lies in the ascendancy and increasing dominance of academic capitalism (p.29), noted in 'at the heart' analysis (Figure 3) and through other changes in national and institutional policy. The pedagogical challenge is to find a solution for 'heightening' the 'virtuous' aspects of marketization whilst ameliorating 'pernicious' ones (Barnett, 2011, p.50).

In addressing the research questions, this study aims to shed light on how aspects above have impacted on curricula and pedagogies. Importantly, in line with questions asked and solutions proposed above by key educational researchers, this research also seeks to explain the ways in which academics negotiate and resolve such tensions. Referring to spectrum endpoints peppered throughout debates about the purpose of HE, knowledge and disciplines, Muller and Young (2014) note that 'the starkness of the alternatives seemed in hindsight a false choice' (p.134) and that this separation is not in the longer term interests of the university (Young and Muller, 2010). That the agenda relates to one ideological site only, the market, means that those who are for or against the market will always have a fixed value-laden position (Barnett, 2011, p.39). In considering approaches to value conflict, Skelton (2012b) notes the solution proposed by Halpin (1999) of 'deliberative democracy', where 'less confrontational and more explorative and conciliatory' modes of interaction are proposed (p.267). Universities 'do not currently have the choice to opt out of the neoliberal regime' (Bessant et al., 2015, p.422), and the marketised environment does not look set to disappear. This suggests the need for an approach that might help to reconcile these positions, potentially creating a new space that can move on from, and beyond the market ideology. The research questions defined in Chapter 1 have steered this study to capture academics' views on a way forward for the university, including ways in which tensions discussed above might best be balanced. Chapter 3 now moves to describe the research process undertaken to achieve this.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN**

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Following introduction of the research questions and rationale for an in-depth case study approach in Chapter 1, and a critical examination of underpinning concepts in Chapter 2, this chapter outlines the research design for the project in two main sections. The first section lays the foundation for the research methods undertaken, through examination of the methodological framework within which the research sits. As such, it incorporates discussion of values, my methodological approach, and linked to these, notions of positionality, power, representation and ethics. The second section outlines the research methods used, incorporating informant sampling and selection, interviewing and participant observation, all viewed in terms of both planning, and reflections during- and post-experience. Ethical considerations introduced in the opening section are revisited within discussion of the methods. Following an outline of the data analysis, and as a natural endpoint to the thematic analysis process, the chapter concludes with an introduction to the main body of interview findings presented in the subsequent three chapters.

### **Values in the research process**

Work undertaken early in the EdD on the importance of values in the research process and how these relate to research paradigms, set the scene for my own grappling with these areas over the past five years. Greenbank (2003) notes how one's unconscious values have an effect on choice of topic, approaches and sampling, even before the data is analysed (p.792; May, 2001, p.56), and so it is that my personal and professional interests, as well as desire for action outlined in the introductory chapter led me to the topic area and research questions. Values enter the research process at all stages (May, 2001, p.51; Griffiths, 1998, p.107) and researchers should show ethical reflexivity, 'self-consciousness' (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006, p.151) and honesty in their beliefs, assumptions, judgements and value conflicts to ensure rigour in the research process (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006; Greenbank, 2003).

Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) endorse the need for researchers to consider implications of their research, but also highlight potential tensions not only in defining the research area and questions, but in being prepared to embrace tensions in values embedded in the research, as well as 'in the dilemmas of people' being researched and the researcher's role as a 'social and political agent' (p149). This also links to notions of power, positionality, representation and ethics discussed below and provides useful

guidelines across all stages of research, culminating in reflection of, and responsibility for, how the research will be used. Noting the value judgement in deciding what is 'worthwhile' researching, Griffiths (1998) states that often, researchers choose particular study areas because of the desire to critique, champion and act on certain causes, and the worth is built within a perception that the outcomes will have value (p.107). At the outset of this research journey, I did not fully appreciate the methodological tensions inherent within my research questions and the research process itself, nor did I recognise how deeply I cared for the subject area and my strong personal desire to effect institutional policy and/or practice change through this research. Through the research process, interviews, data analysis and synthesis of findings, as well as extensive reading and collegial discussion with academic and professional staff and students across the university, I am now able to better articulate this.

## **Elaborating on my methodological approach**

The opening chapter introduced my methodological approach, and this section seeks to describe the way in which I have come to be able to both identify and defend it, whilst also recognising its limitations. I describe the path I have followed in gaining an understanding of the approach taken over the duration of the research journey, including identifying methodological tensions within this as I reflected more deeply on the research questions and my role as researcher. This does not imply that my approach and research methods were inappropriate to the answers being sought, but rather reflects a lack of early recognition on my part of the need to reconcile methodological tensions and ultimately explain how these fit with my methodological stance. I attribute this to my status as a relatively immature researcher making the transition from a science background to social science researcher.

Given discussion on values above, and that paradigms are seen as a set of beliefs that guide action and reflect a researcher's values (Sikes, 2004, p.18), as a newcomer to social sciences research, I have felt a continued pressure to identify and explain the paradigm in which I am working, but feared my inability to do so. Knowledge of the two most frequently cited but polarised social science research paradigms, namely subjectivist (anti-positivist, qualitative, interpretative, constructivist, humanist) and objectivist (positivist, quantitative, scientific) (Cohen et al., 2011; Sikes, 2004; May, 2001; Layder, 1990; Burrell and Morgan, 1979), and their respective ontological positions on social reality, led to my perception of pressure to show complete

allegiance to one or the other, whilst also ensuring congruence with the research questions and path outlined.

### ***What reality is being captured?***

Knowing academics' critical role as social actors in negotiating tensions in the HE environment, I was clear from the outset that capturing a rich picture of their experiences and perceptions required an interpretive approach, with qualitative research methods which gave space to academics' interpretations and world meanings. I felt deeply the need to respect and capture their individual social realities, which translated into recognising the need for in-depth interviews as a research method. This rationale also tallied with conflicts in my positionality as insider-researcher and the need to separate my views from those of the academics. What I did not recognise at the time however, were the tensions between my genuine, but rather naïve belief that academics' perceptions existed in isolated reality, and elements of external reality inferred within the research questions, such as:

- locating the research within a complex HE environment with overt discussion of the continual interplay between a wide range of social structures and ideologies;
- specifically requiring academics to make links between their beliefs and these external structures and examining this interplay in moving to:
  - capture academics' reflexivity in negotiating what I had termed enabling and denying elements in the HE system; and
  - introduce a critical emancipatory angle to the research questions in striving to address tensions in the system, asking pointed questions of informants on how change might be effected.

### ***Whose voice?***

Furthermore, as research and interviews progressed, questions arose of confusion between my voice and academics' voices, where despite numerous steps in place at every stage to maintain distance and neutrality from the views of informants, there could be no denying the myriad points at which my own views, knowledge and context were brought to bear on the research. From the outset, the research was situated within a wide range of conceptual frameworks, many of which are outlined in the previous chapter, and these were used to set the context, define questioning and finally, influence the way in which I have conceptualised the findings. Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson (2002) note how 'concepts ... make it possible to transcend common sense and attain a deeper understanding and explanation of a more abstract character' (p.200). The balancing act between relative roles of

interviewee and interviewer (particularly as insider-researcher), and subsequent dilemma in letting values drive my research to ensure that research outcomes contribute to action and change, whilst at the same time, not allowing values to compromise or skew the research outcomes is recognised (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006, p.151; Tomlinson, 1989, p.158). Critical theory demands that value positions are declared and is overt about wanting to effect change through research, and critical social researchers see values and ethics as central to the research process (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006; Collier, 1994). Whilst tensions have emerged with a purely interpretative approach, I have been clear from the outset that a positivist approach with quantitative methods would be inadequate for recognising the 'social and contextual complexity' within the educational process (Greenbank, 2003, p.793).

### ***Wider structures and context***

Returning to the case study approach where one is able to '...retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events...' (Jones et al., 2008, p.343) whilst at the same time view complex situations involving the 'interrelated parts of an organization' and the 'interplay between an organization and its environment' (Stromquist, 2007, p.85), critical theorists argue the need to move beyond the two dominant and 'incomplete' paradigms discussed above, where political and ideological contexts are neglected (Cohen et al., 2011, p.31). It is noted that whilst the critical realist paradigm has humanist tendencies (Layder, 1990, p.9) and a weak social constructivism which endorses the use of qualitative methods such as interviews, it rejects strong social constructivism which denies the material reality of structures and mechanisms beyond that experienced in the empirical domain (Huckle, 2004, p.5-6). It is precisely this permission to bring humanist approaches to the research alongside contextual, structural and critical ones that allows me to better resolve the methodological tensions inherent in the study.

### ***Structure and agency; interplay and mediating concepts***

In striving to connect the complexities of the open and ever-changing HE system with academics as individuals, and as a key part of the research questions, examine the relationships between the two, in hindsight, I note that this research approach aligns with Bhaskar's (1993) interlinking of human agency and social structures (p.155). This framework permits a move away from the 'methodological individualism' I naively deemed possible, to acknowledging the constant interactions between individuals and social, cultural and material structures which might be internal or external to the university (Archer, 2007; Danermark et al., 2002, p.163; Bhaskar, 1998, p.208-209), and which were present in the framing of my research questions. Also recognising the



gap in research on the ways in which academics negotiate structural constraints in their pedagogy, Connors (2015) has used a similar critical realist framework as the foundation for in-depth work on this area.

In the interplay between structure and agency, despite the 'causal powers of structures ... as constraints and enablements', individual academics, as 'agents' have 'the capacity to suspend the exercise of constraints (and enablements) through their circumventory (or renunciatory) actions', and these will vary subjectively related to agents' reflexive deliberations (Archer, 2007, p.9-10; Archer, 2003, p.133). Archer (2007) further notes how 'agential responses' might vary greatly, ranging from 'evasion through compliance to strategic manipulation or subversion' (p.15), hence linking of action to structure through mediating concepts (Archer, 1998, p.371), and my proposed direct line of questioning on the ways in which academics feel an ideal undergraduate education is enabled or denied in the university reflects this stance.

With my methodological stance made more explicit prior to detailing the methods used for the research, I return to a fuller consideration of the implications of my role as researcher on the research process, informants and research outcomes. In order to do this, I draw on the concepts of positionality, power and representation used by Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, and Muhamad (2001) to explore ethical issues related to insider-outsider research. Thought is given to each concept in turn, with additional considerations then threaded in at relevant points throughout the chapter and thesis.

## **Ethics, positionality, power and representation**

### ***Ethical review as a vehicle for reflection and research planning***

Following submission of the research proposal, and further fine-tuning of the research questions, ethical consent to undertake the research was gained via the School of Education Ethics Review Panel. The ethical review process was a useful way to reflect on my positionality, and elements of power and representation in the research, and raised questions not only related to the research participants and their data, but in relation to the wider environment within which both the research and my day-to-day work are situated.

### ***Positionality***

My personal and professional backgrounds and multiple identities as both administrative staff and research student at the university play a large role in my positionality, introducing particular ethical implications. Will I be asking questions the

institution would not want asked, the answer to which if made public, could be detrimental to the institution (Sikes, 2004, p.28)? Given the potential impact of some of the more negative findings on institutional reputation, an embargo on the dissertation has been requested in the lead up to submission. Whilst I believe that all HEIs experience this area similarly and the data serves to enrich how we as a sector look for ways of resolving tensions faced, to further aid in participant anonymity, the institution has also been anonymised from the research.

At face value, this research may be interpreted as insider research. As a staff member of twelve years, I have intimate knowledge of the university environment and people within it. In this research project however, I have captured academics' voices, and given I have never worked as an academic I would, in this regard, declare myself a relative outsider. This is complicated by my close personal relationships with many academics, and by my past experience of working in an academic department. This means that I am privy to many anecdotal insights of academics' experiences, and feel that in some ways, I might know or be able to predict how academics feel about certain issues. I am however anxious to heed Denzin's (1970) caution against 'defending the values of those studied, rather than actually studying them' (p.188). In some ways, it is my insider understanding of, and empathy with academics' realities, combined with observations from my own professional role, that led me to this research topic. I feel therefore that my multiple identities mean I tread an inside-outside continuum which is unlikely to ever be clear cut (Thomson and Gunter, 2011).

It has been difficult working within the environment I am also researching. In many instances, I have felt compromised by being involved in institutional strategies and developments which I know academics find problematic, and I have struggled with being immersed in the research area day and night, with often little separation between my own professional work and academics' voices. My day-to-day work, combined with more active observation, has created fuzzy boundaries between research data captured through interviews, and my own knowledge and involvement in the case university. Observation is further elaborated upon in the methods section below. My reconciliation of methodologies above has helped to reduce these tensions for me, and I also recognise that as a professional doctorate linked to my working area, an interweaving of these areas is not wholly inappropriate, and that findings will and should naturally influence my daily work, thereby lending the research an occasional action research feel. This returns the discussion to the permeable relations between structure and agency. In some ways, as a professional administrator, the real value of the EdD might be considered to be the critical nature of the journey itself, rather than the conclusions and write-up. Most important is the fact that I make explicit that this is

the path I have taken over the past five years. This is further discussed within the section on observation as a method below.

### ***Power***

Straddling an inside-outside researcher identity, power dynamics will come into play as part of the interview process, and will vary from interview to interview. A range of factors such as my own identity in relation to the specific informant and their role, our moods on the day, and informants' perceptions and expectations of me and my research, will have an impact on how the interview plays out in reality, and hence the data obtained. This will be further discussed in the methods section on interviews below.

### ***Representation***

Common problems associated with case studies and the representation of data and informants' views, are those of validity and generalizability (Wellington, 2000, p.98). Issues of validity and generalizability are however often associated with quantitative positivist research approaches (O'Leary, 2010, p.29). As a subjective researcher using qualitative interpretivist and critical approaches, it is therefore necessary to consider what the indicators of credibility are for me. Given what has been noted above about the complex situations which may result in multiple 'truths' being captured, where there is a delicate balance to be struck between collusion and collegiality in working with informants (Davies, 2005, p.6), O'Leary (2010) further notes that it is not so much a question of research validity, as it is research authenticity. Authenticity, and ensuring an accurate representation of 'all truths' through rigorous and reflexive approaches will vouchsafe for 'justified, credible and trustworthy' conclusions (p.34). Furthermore, in answer to accusations that interpretative stances reduce necessary objectivity, Abraham (2008) notes that declaring one's values might then allow the range of possible scenarios and solutions to be broadened, thereby increasing objectivity (p.540). Authenticity is enhanced by clarifying how I have selected documents and interviewed informants, including potentially challenging voices and not merely the ones I believe will say what I might want to hear, as well as being open about my role in the interview and data analysis (O'Leary, 2010, p.198).

During data analysis and presentation of interview findings, I have attempted to retain a degree of separation to allow academics' voices to come to the fore, prior to further abstraction and conceptualisation. This is elaborated on below. Across the inside-outside continuum, there is always the potential to introduce personal bias, skewing or narrowing the lines of inquiry and findings. There is however room for 'making an impact from the inside' (Costley et al., 2010, p.5) using my personal insights to enrich

research explorations, and any personal account as participant observer presents an opportunity to strengthen the arguments, as well as to effect change (Potts, 2008, p.172). The key is that I am explicit about my positionality and actions throughout the research.

More important than generalizability, is the notion of transferability of what has been learned from the in-depth case (O'Leary, 2010). The richness of material obtained may serve multiple audiences and allow for multiple interpretations (Roizen and Jepson, 1985 cited in Wellington, 2000), and beyond my own critical action proposed, the onus is on the reader to determine what those are. Providing all truths, including my own, have been accurately represented, this is unproblematic. In terms of degree of transferability, as a case within a research-intensive HEI in England, the research has more potential specific transferability to other research-intensive HEIs than to, for example, non-research-intensive institutions. This does not imply however that there are not overarching messages and themes relevant to the wider HEI sector.

Issues of reliability and validity are encompassed within notions of triangulation (Cohen et al., 2011, p.197), which is discussed below within research methods. All the above observations have informed the ways in which I undertook the research, and are revisited as appropriate within subsequent sections.

## **Research Methods**

This case study uses semi-structured interviews as the dominant research method, combining this with observation across the case study site, the university, and complemented by documentary analysis. As noted above, given temporal relations and interplay between research interviews, data collection and subsequent analysis and write-up, and my immersion in the research environment in a professional capacity, methods have been formative, allowing space for emergent sources of evidence and themes (O'Leary, 2010, p.101) and a critical approach throughout.

Research literature, policy document analysis and participant observation helped to fine-tune themes of inquiry for interviews, and pilot interviews led to more detailed exploration of specific areas in successive interviews as well as subsequent exploration of themes observed by interviewees through participant observation and further reading. This has been the case not only through the research methods, but all the way through analysis of data, leading to research conclusions.

As a researcher new to the social sciences, the research process has been an intense learning experience. I have learned to recognise and try to mitigate the shortcomings of

my organisational skills and methods related to gathering and working with data, and have had to consciously take decisions along the way to ensure that methodological rigour is maintained.

The research proposal had included documentary analysis as a key method to bring richness to the interview data. In reality however, as noted in Chapter 2, as interviews and analysis of institutional documentation progressed, it became evident that whilst these set the internal and external context, a significant disconnect between academics and institutional structures was revealed, with a complete mismatch of language and themes. Noting my earlier caution that academics may feel the impact of institutional strategy, but not necessarily share in those interests (Field, 2015, p.122; May, 2001, p.43), as well as the discussion on representation above, I decided to present documentary analysis as separate to the findings chapters representing academics' perceptions from interviews. Conceptual similarities reflecting a changing HE environment ultimately emerged from both sets of data and this will be revisited in the final discussion and analysis Chapter 7.

In case studies, the value of combining research methods is noted, particularly for the purposes of corroborating the results of methods against one another as a form of triangulation (Burgess et al., 2006, p.77; Mason, 2002, p.33). My decision to separate interview data from institutional documentation brought into question the neat narrative on methods triangulation that I presented in my research proposal. Having read more extensively on triangulation however, I am now less concerned about this. I am confident that multiple interviews across the case study, as well as repeated use of the same questioning framework equate to what Denzin (1970) refers to as 'within method' data triangulation (p.301) of sources, where the findings of each successive interview corroborate one another. Connors (2015) has also used such triangulation where she has observed the 'same phenomenon arising in the data from different participants' (p.113). I have analysed interview data in such a way that themes which were most common across all interviews are brought to the fore. In cases where academics presented ideas not reflected by other academics, these have also been highlighted. Furthermore, observation, as a method throughout the period of research has proved invaluable in corroborating interview data. The possibilities of theoretical triangulation also exist for this study (Denzin, 1970, p.305), where research is situated within a range of theoretical concepts, and also brought together with other concepts emerging from the research data.

## **Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

Interviews are seen as critical for undertaking 'inward exploration' of informants' opinions (O'Leary, 2005, p.157). Semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews with academics have been the key method of data collection. Because the research questions pointed to specifics within academics' teaching, and the learning and teaching environment more broadly, it was felt that unstructured interviews would be inappropriate, with the potential to become narrative accounts (Burgess et al., 2006, p.75). Highly structured interviews were also not considered appropriate because of their potential to restrict any further exploration of the topic and in some senses then duplicate what a questionnaire might have achieved (Wellington, 2000, p.74). The semi-structured format provided a flexibility and openness to conversations, whilst having a guide to ensure coverage of specific areas. Experiences in interview proved the semi-structured format to be just right, enabling me as interviewer to cover all areas and receive clarification on points where necessary, whilst also allowing informants to expand on their thoughts when they wished to. Many other studies investigating staff perceptions of current debates in HEIs have used semi-structured interviews as their main method of research (Connors, 2015; Field, 2015; Bosetti and Walker, 2010; Jones et al., 2008; Stromquist, 2007), yielding unique and in-depth perceptions from informants.

### ***Informant selection***

For case studies in particular, when in-depth data is sought, sampling issues come to the fore in deciding how many informants to interview and what is considered enough to constitute a 'case'. In other case studies of HEIs, Bosetti and Walker (2010) interviewed ten informants, with purposive sampling to bring maximum variation, whilst Jones et al. (2008) and Stromquist (2007) each interviewed 14, ensuring maximum variation across disciplines, career stage and gender. Working more deeply, Connors (2015) captured the experiences of seven lecturers across three contrasting institutions. These tactics helped to ensure that the selection was representative. Balancing my own time constraints related to interviews, transcription and data analysis, with the need for a breadth of data to constitute a solid case and sufficiently answer the research questions, I aimed for 15 interviews. In the end, 14 interviews were undertaken, as by this stage, in addition to having received a number of rejections, I felt that data saturation had been reached (O'Leary, 2010, p.114), where themes and academics' ideas were starting to repeat themselves, and there had been adequate coverage across the subject areas. Until the data was analysed, I remained open to the option of additional interviews if deemed necessary.

Informants were drawn from the academic population which teaches undergraduate students, including ‘experienced insiders’ (O’Leary, 2010, p.170) handpicked for their experience in reflection and commentary on learning and teaching, for example as past or current institutional or departmental leaders of teaching. This purposive sampling, defined as selecting and using informants with specific purposes in mind (Wellington, 2000, p.59), also aimed for balance across disciplines, gender and career stage. I also actively sought out three informants who I knew to be outspoken and somewhat resistant to institutional rhetoric and developments in learning and teaching. In one instance, this entailed facing an academic who had previously strongly challenged the nature of my professional work, which introduced additional complex power dynamics to the interview. Given my insider status, to reduce bias and bring balance to the process and findings, four academics were randomly selected, provided they met the disciplinary, gender, career stage sampling criteria.

Literature analysis on disciplinary and knowledge classifications, combined with reflections related to perceived use value of, and threats to disciplines in the previous chapter, led me to include slightly more disciplines considered as pure and soft. Data in interviews from this area were also more diverse, whereas, the applied subjects were more uniform in views. Table 1 below lists the subject areas sampled with the code used for each informant in anonymising the data.

<b>Disciplinary coverage</b>	Hard	Pure	Applied
		Chemistry (H) Maths (T)	Engineering (G) Medicine (R) Speech Science (S)
	Soft	History (L) English (M) Philosophy (F) French (C)	Town planning (J) Law (V) Accounting (E)
<b>Gender balance</b>	6 females, 8 males		
<b>Career stage</b>	1 Lecturer 5 Senior Lecturers 3 Readers 5 Professors		
<b>Relevant roles</b>	4 past, current or future Heads of Department 6 past or current Directors of Teaching		

**Table 1:** Breakdown of sampling by discipline, gender, career stage and role with informant code indicated. Loose classification for disciplinary areas drawn from Neumann, Parry and Becher, 2002; Becher, 1989; Biglan, 1973.

It is recognised that the disciplinary split in the table above is an oversimplification, and that in reality there is more often a continuum and permeability between these (Nesi

and Gardner, 2006a and b; Neumann, Parry and Becher, 2002; Becher, 1989). For example, Becher (1989) noted how Biology in particular can sit anywhere on the pure-applied and hard-soft continuum (p.155), and this was reflected in conversations with academics around their curricula and academic disciplines. Similarly, Sociology might be seen as completely pure, or in the case of Social Work, more applied.

Throughout the informant recruiting and interview process, I was alert to issues of 'bureaucratic burden' (BERA, 2011, p.7), and was aware of the time sacrifice required to undertake interviews. I also exercised sensitivity in the timing of requests for interview. I had several rejections from potential informants due to time constraints and leave, and some academics approached did not respond at all. In many interviews, I had a real sense that academics' time was tricky to give. Referring to overwork, one informant referred to their need to say 'no' to more things, whilst two others were attempting to eat lunch while talking as they had not yet had time to do so, and these interviews were after 3pm. Three others had heavy colds and clearly struggled with being interviewed at all. Another informant gave me an interview at one hour's notice and was very clear that 45 minutes was all that would be given. Aside from the power dynamic set up by virtue of my gratitude and apologetic position, there was also the question of whether some informants felt compelled to agree to be interviewed because I was a colleague.

Interviews took place between October 2014 and January 2015. Participant information and consent forms were emailed to academics prior to interview, and hard copies were taken to the interviews for academics to sign (Appendices 3 and 4). As well as obtaining voluntary informed consent from informants prior to interview (BERA, 2011, p.5), as insider-researcher, I had to be clear in participation information about this being my personal research interest, and whilst closely aligned to current agendas and discussions, was not commissioned, and has no formal connections to any institutional agenda, or work being undertaken as part of my professional role.

### ***Questioning***

In planning the interview questions, I was drawn to the method of 'hierarchical focusing' (Tomlinson, 1989) where questions are placed in a framework and successive levels of questions are used only as prompts when questioning is not progressing. The 'art of second questions' helps to sustain active listening, as well as minimise the researcher's influence to avoid the danger of skewing the words of the informant (Kvale, 2007, p.63). Wellington (2000) has noted the potential for spontaneous prompts to introduce bias, and advocates careful probing for eliciting further details and clarifying points (p.79). Whilst referring to focus groups rather than interviews, Krueger



(1994) proposes five types of question that can be used: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending (p.54), and opening questions which were less related to the research helped to ease informants into the interview, potentially improving their capacity for being more forthcoming with their views. In line with a semi-structured approach, questions were theme-based, derived from the research questions outlined in the introductory chapter, but flexible in their ordering and focus, allowing for adaptability during the interview. The Tomlinson framework (1989, p.166) encourages a move from conceptual to contextual, and this was reflected in the questioning order (Appendix 5). As a critical endeavour, I took questioning a step beyond contextual into discussions of possible action.

Having a framework as well as built-in flexibility to questioning came into play where in some instances, following the introductory pre-amble, academics launched directly into their views on the area without any prompts, or in other instances, informants were reserved and did not initially provide expansive answers. This exchange with Academic C (French) who noted the framework shows the reality of how such frameworks might play out in interview:

*C: wow, what is that?*

*D: I won't ask you all of those [C: no]. It's just my question framework [C: oh wow, it's cool] so I can try and see where I'm going, or where you're going actually ... it's just prompts, but I'm happy for you to go wherever you need to go.*

*C: ok well, I may skip between them, yeah.*

*D: yeah, yeah, that's fine it's just for me to check that I've covered the things I need to.*

Comments in various interviews led me to alter my questioning style, for example, one informant queried why I was asking something in such a way, whilst another questioned my assumptions built into a question. In each subsequent interview, academics led discussions into new territory, introducing and unpicking new and important themes. Time was given for this expansion which proved invaluable in subsequent interviews and later thematic and conceptual analysis. This explains why certain sections in the subsequent findings chapters appear to have a dominance of quotes by particular academics relating to particular themes. I was heartened by most of the academics' deep interests in reflecting on this area, and a few noted how helpful it had been to have a space where they were able to reflect on the subject matter. For example, Academic C (French) noted '*it's making a difference just by actually going around and finding out, giving people a chance to talk about it to be honest*'. In hindsight, I recognise the critical approach academics took to the interviews, and quoting the phrase used by Academic T (Maths) which captures most academics' aspirations for students, they felt it important to '*question the machine*'. Whilst

interviews generally adhered to the questioning framework, with added space given for in-depth views, in some ways it felt as though the academics were synthesising and conceptualising the research with me through a guided dialogue.

This returned me to questions of positionality and honest representation of the data, and noting my comments related to methodological tensions, the reality that this research could never be purely interpretative and untainted was laid bare. This also then clashed with my intentions of using the questioning framework to minimise my influence. On balance I would say that the framework still served its purpose, and what felt like a natural dialogue in some instances, was in reality my comfort in the interview, whilst still deploying careful questioning, remaining conscious of not pre-empting academics' views, checking their meanings of words, and using the phrases and terminology which they used to continue questioning. Certainly my previous knowledge and experience was brought to bear on interviews, in the planning, participant selection, and also in the finer nuances of discussions. This was particularly evident in those periods just before and after the interview, often when the recording had been switched off, where potentially academics felt safer to say things, and also, had warmed to the discussion, so offering additional thoughts about the topic.

Discussions led to some academics feeling confused and uncomfortable with the contradictions they raised, and the implications of what they were saying. Examples include:

- *'You know, I haven't thought that way before and I'm surprised to find myself say that. ... I don't know, I'm puzzled by that. I'm worried now (laugh)'* (Academic M, English)
- *'God, shoot me down for saying this, Ok...'* (Academic N, Sociology)
- *'I don't know, because I feel I'm going into sort of ideological grounds that I'm not particularly comfortable with'* (Academic T, Maths)

Similar tentative 'thinking out loud' behaviours have been noted by Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2010) in interviews with academics related to curriculum and practice where they had previously not been given space to consider the questions in depth (p.622). Some academics also noted that other academics in their departments might have different views to them. Often they were referring to academics at later stages in their careers. Consideration of this will be picked up in the final discussion following presentation of the findings.

Aware of the skill required to conduct interviews and questioning, interviews were piloted with three close academic colleagues to test out the flow and appropriateness of the questions, and their length and clarity, as well as checking for my own bias and

assumptions about prior knowledge of informants. The second pilot acted as a critical friend and gave valuable feedback on interview style, for example time-keeping without making the informant edgy, the phrasing of text on the participant information sheet and interview questions.

### ***Positionality and power in the interviews***

Retuning to positionality and power, within interviews, depending on how informants perceived me they may have been more or less willing to open up in interviews. In my multiple identities as student researcher, mid-management administrator, fellow colleague, a potential threat or ally, a power dynamic would have been present in the interview. Gender and age differences may also have influenced both how I as the researcher behaved in the interview, as well as how the informants responded to me. If perceived as being in a position of power, my presence may have caused informants to be less forthcoming, or say things they thought I wanted to hear. There was potential for me to oscillate between feeling inferior in my role as administrator and therefore academically inadequate alongside an academic who holds the 'power' and research kudos, or feel empowered as one who is perceived to oversee and manage the agenda to hand, imposing the rules and policies. Though this would be a misinterpretation of my working role, it does not follow that informants did not still think it.

Beyond the feeling of imposing on academics' valuable time, I had many deeply uncomfortable moments when informants referred to negative things that I perceived as related to my working role, and work which I, as part of an amorphous administrative centre, was somehow responsible for. To illustrate this, added to my nerves as a new researcher, my intense gratitude at being granted an interview, and the power dynamic set up between student-academic and administrator-academic, comments such as '*I should learn to say no to requests more often*', '*I hate the forms in this place*', '*central initiatives imposed upon us*', brought guilt and increased what I felt to be a power differential. Whilst said with some humour, but nonetheless to make a point, one academic went so far as to say:

*for all I know, you might be a plant. Somebody might have sent you in.  
'We know [they have] terrible views, go in and find out exactly what they are'.*

Comments such as these served to entrench an unequal power dynamic in the interviews, but were to be expected given my role in the institution. Chapter 2 has noted my closeness to the production of institutional learning and teaching documentation, and debates about my positionality reinforce my decision to keep this separate from the interview data for findings analysis.

Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given to all informants when they were first approached, and again at the point of interview for signing. Participant data has been stored securely on a hard drive not accessible to anyone else, and individuals were anonymised in the findings at the point of transcription, and will continue to be so in any future research outputs. Quotes are attributed to academics' subject areas (coding system in Table 1), but in some cases where comments are more personal, I have withheld this to better protect anonymity.

### **Observations at the case study site**

Participant observation allows for a deep understanding of the people or organisation being studied through immersion on the part of the researcher into the situation being studied (May, 2001, p.148). In this instance, observations have been used as indirect data for 'member checking of insiders' who fall within the wider case study population, but are not part of the informant sample, as a way of enhancing credibility of the case (O'Leary, 2010, p.115). A continuum exists between complete participant and complete observer (Cohen et al., 2011, p.457; O'Leary, 2010, p.209; Wellington, 2000, p.93), and this will vary across settings. Throughout the period of research, in my daily work there have been countless possible observations, including conversations in formal meetings, internal conferences, institutional consultations and forums, and institution-wide messages from senior leaders. Across this range of settings, my status has fluctuated, ranging from passive and anonymous recipient of bulk emails, or conference presentations (observer) to more active participation in discussions at meetings and forums (participant) and instances in between these where in many cases, my inside-outside status and positionality have served as either structural barriers or enablers to the way in which interactions play out.

I have hand-picked data collected on multiple such occasions in an unstructured and passive way (O'Leary, 2010, p.210; Wellington, 2000, p.95) led by the research questions, and themes emerging from policy document analysis and interviews. Observations have been recorded at the time of capturing as a suite of initially handwritten or ipad-typed journal entries, and transferred later into a single document. Aware of the ethical dangers of covert observation (O'Leary, 2010, p.210), I have been sensitive as to whom I declared my interests, and considered carefully whether or not consent for this was required. At the outset, I made senior academic and professional service leads for learning and teaching aware of my research, but given the hundreds of interactions I have had with academics over the research period, and the fact that this data set is not part of the main body of case evidence or represented in the findings chapters, I did not declare my interests to other individuals. Noting the need to

'preserve the natural setting' and as a participant, not influence and contaminate the research setting (O'Leary, 2010, p.210), in instances where I found myself placed alongside one of the 14 informants, I have actively sought to distance myself from them, either by remaining quiet, or by physically removing myself.

I am conscious of the fine line between my observations as research method, or simply as gut feelings, but the potential value in these informal observations in gauging the 'ethos of an organization' (Wellington, 2000, p.94) and importance of seeing the 'real' case rather than the 'constructed research' case is noted (O'Leary, 2010, p, 209). As an additional source of data, these insights form an important record, bringing richness and depth to the case study, and corroboration of data obtained through interviews and documentary analysis. In numerous instances, observations echo and endorse findings from in-depth interviews, further contextualising and deepening the research outcomes. On reflection, this is unsurprising, given the extreme unlikelihood for there to be formal, overt or accessible documentation revealing academics' challenges in this environment. Rather, these views could only emerge verbally in meetings and other forums through discussions where academics were permitted or encouraged to air such views.

### **Documentary evidence**

It is important to consider not only pre-existing documents accessed for the case, but also those created by me as researcher (Wellington, 2000, p.118) for example my journal notes from observations and interview transcripts. In her study on institutional perspectives of internationalisation, Stromquist (2007) combined in-depth interviews with documentary analysis of institutional documents, and whilst analysing common themes across both, also allowed new themes to emerge through both methods. More recently, Connors' (2015) critical realist in-depth study of academics' pedagogical approaches in a marketised HE environment, has used documentary evidence to provide the context and structures within which academics' perceptions are situated, weaving the two together in later synthesis and analysis. As noted in both the previous chapter and introduction to research methods, my determination to adequately triangulate interview data saw early research plans for institutional policy documentation to sit alongside academics' documented perceptions, however, like Connors (2015) above, I ultimately chose to keep them separate until the final stages of data synthesis in Chapter 7.

Documentary evidence was collected for each informant, capturing details of their disciplinary environment, teaching and research. Whilst the majority of evidence was gained from internal websites prior to interviews, some additional items such as course

outlines were collected directly following interviews. In addition to feeling the burden of my requests to academics for additional information post-interview, which were sometimes met with sighs and weariness, after a few interviews, I realised that this additional information did not relate to interview discussions, and revisiting the research questions, noting observations above, it was clear that it was not what was needed. So whilst evidence gathered was used pre-interview by me to set the context of the interview, and forms part of the case record, not all evidence captured within the record has been presented in this final case study.

Reflecting what has been noted about my role as observer above, I have treated journal notes in a similar manner to institutional documentation, revisiting them in final discussion and analysis as a tool for corroboration and to add depth and currency to the overall case. Unlike other institutional and documentary evidence, as noted in the section on observation, this data introduced important validation of the interview data. Interview transcripts however, form the most critical documentary evidence, and following brief notes on research methods not used, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to discussion of the transcription and thematic analysis processes related to these, including how the findings are organised in subsequent chapters.

### **Brief commentary on methods not used**

Because the research questions sought to capture in-depth perceptions, it was not felt appropriate to conduct a questionnaire or survey. Whilst far more time-consuming, interviews reveal deeper informant insights, providing a more dynamic dialogue within which informants' meanings can be checked. Questionnaires often assume that people are aware of the subject and already hold beliefs and values around it. I believed that with a term such as *transformation*, there was potential for ambiguity, and early pilot interviews, and subsequent interviews showed this to be the case, where informants had not encountered the term being used in this way before. Other studies seeking to capture perceptions of the HE environment have similarly defended their choices not to use questionnaires (Cotton, Bailey, Warren and Bissell, 2009, p.722; Stromquist, 2007, p.85).

I was reluctant to conduct group interviews for this study. Knowing the personalities and status of those being interviewed, I was wary of one of the common pitfalls of group interviewing where one or two participants dominate the discussion or bring the increased potential for a pack mentality to come into play, where for example they all close up at the same time. Aware of the potential loss of personal views (Wellington, 2000, p.81), I felt that individual interviews would allow me to better build up a rapport with the informant.

## Interview transcription and thematic analysis

The main aim of data analysis is to 'move from raw data to meaningful understanding' (O'Leary, 2010, p.260). Interviews were transcribed by me from audio recording, initially typed directly into Word. Once I was more familiar with the NVivo™ software, I transcribed directly into NVivo™, which provides useful built-in timings to link the audio files to the transcription. I heeded Cohen et al.'s (2011) recommendation for early analysis to start to identify 'significant features' for future attention (p.539). This starts as soon as the researcher starts to look for patterns of meaning in the data or make observations (Braun and Clark, 2006, p.15), even as part of reflective notes on interviews, and transcription and data organisation (O'Leary, 2010, p.250). An example of notes made while transcribing the interview with Academic H (Chemistry) shows this process:

*Hiding places.... Hide and seek; places for staff to hide.  
Networks – getting them across to other side.  
Management – no places for students to hide – enabling.  
'me' versus 'we' ... reflecting changing ideologies? Public good – individual.*

And capturing similarities across interviews as I was transcribing the interview with Academic R (Medicine), my notes read:

*Similar comments to H around lack of creativity in teaching, lethargy/no change/ development in practice ...  
Similar to F and others. Ever increasing knowledge base which can't expect to cover...  
=V comment – wasting time dealing with bottom end (students in this case, staff in V's case).*

Whilst time-consuming, transcribing gave me an opportunity to revisit conversations multiple times as transcripts were checked and re-checked, bringing additional opportunities to consider emerging findings, as well as reflect on my research expectations, the interview process, and particularly, my performance as interviewer, and methods and concepts relating to my study (O'Leary, 2010, p.258).

As part of a qualitative process this also allowed me to feed themes back into the research process to refine angles of questioning and ensure I was gaining sufficient data from interviews. This tallies well with the critical approach taken.

### **First stage thematic analysis: free coding in NVivo™**

Thematic analysis is a 'theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data' and gaining a rich and complex understanding of one's data (Braun and Clark, 2006, p.5). First stage thematic coding of interview transcriptions was undertaken using the

NVivo™ 10 software package. My main desire to work with NVivo™ for at least the first phase of analysis, stemmed from my positionality and insider-outsider status. Earlier discussions related to methodology and my active role in the research come into play here. Rather than undertake manual coding, I consciously used NVivo™ to introduce some distance between my own and informants' voices, and when analysing the transcripts attempted to follow an inductive process in generating themes, called 'nodes' in NVivo™, from the data through patterns and repetition recognised words, phrases or themes (Lapadat, 2010, p.926). Themes are listed in Appendix 7. Lapadat (2010) notes that inductive approaches 'avoid the rigidity and premature closure' (p.926) which might be brought by deductive ones, and with the ever-present risk of driving the analysis towards themes I might wish to find, I used NVivo™ as a tool to step away from my closeness to the area and bring a level of abstraction to the initial coding process.

I am however aware that in selecting the nodes against which to code, there is nonetheless an element of bias, and note that 'themes emerging [only] from the data ... is too passive and denies the active role the researcher plays in ... selecting which are of interest and reporting them' (Taylor and Ussher, 2001, in Braun and Clark, 2006, p.7). Reflecting on my selection of nodes, I acknowledge that *a priori* themes (Lapadat, 2010, p.926) set by the research questions, the conceptual frameworks presented as underpinning this area in Chapter 2, and the interview questions, whilst I did not actively refer to any of them when coding, will have brought a deductive element to the analysis. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997 in Braun and Clark, 2006, p.7) note how 'misleading' it can be to assume that themes only reside in our data, stating that they 'if anything reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them' (p.205-206).

During first stage coding, I was constantly aware of the need to not introduce bias and sustain reflexivity in identifying themes and patterns from the data. In reality, this manifested itself in keeping an open mind and not making assumptions, for example, when an academic was talking about issues with 'student numbers', this could not, as one might be quick to assume, automatically also be coded to 'marketisation and consumerism' and 'HE funding'. Whilst I personally felt that there may be connections between these, and therefore a temptation to link them, this could only be the case where an academic had specifically done so themselves. One academic pointedly said later that HE funding was not the driver to increase numbers, and this needs to be clearly reflected in the findings rather than pre-labelled incorrectly and then bringing bias to the case. Because of the specific answers being sought, another example from across all interviews, was the temptation to label elements as being enabled or denied, for example, where data labelled 'research project' was said to be no longer present in students' learning experiences, this could not necessarily be construed as



'transformation being denied'. The academic had not stated that the activity was enabling transformation in the first place, or that things were any educationally worse off in its absence, and there may have been a strong pedagogical rationale underlying the change. Likewise, there was a need to not impose my assumptions about what constitutes a transformative experience for students onto analysis, and to honour alternative interpretations from academics in the data analysis. For example, in my coding notes from Academic S (Speech Science) I note:

*not coded up as transformation denied ... inconclusive, but note move to many workforce skills for NHS in curriculum.*

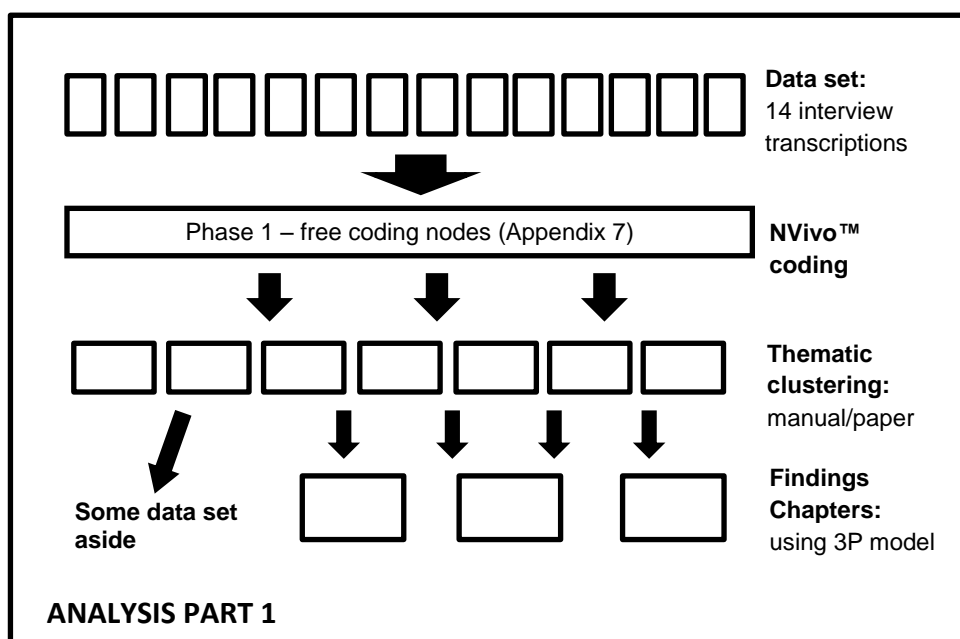
Discussion above about the research straddling inductive-deductive processes returns the chapter to methodological tensions covered in the opening sections; and here for example Braun and Clark (2006) note that thematic analysis does not have to subscribe to specific theoretical commitments (p.7) but can work to 'unpick or unravel the surface of reality' (p.9). A critical realist take on this comes to my aid in providing a more flexible explanation for the process I have followed. Rather than attempting to subscribe to induction or deduction, Danermark et al. (2002), outline an analytical process, not unlike O'Leary's (2010) organic overlapping cycles (p.25), which starts with a description of the complex situation being studied, including interpretations of individuals, then moves to separate these dimensions through analysis by describing the various individual aspects. Following this, through 'theoretical redescription', theories and concepts about structures and relations are used to compare, integrate and link the aspects in a new context of ideas. These are finally brought to bear on concrete situations and possible interactions with wider structures (p.109-110). In this way, allowing for concepts and theories to be used as an interpretative framework (Danermark et al., 2002, p.121), both Field (2015, p.118) and Connors (2015) have used a critical realist approach to undertake data collection and analysis in universities, with place for a combination of in-depth analysis of individual perceptions, alongside structural and conceptual considerations. Elaboration of analysis beyond the first stage will show how concepts intertwined with, informed or evolved from, interview data as analysis progressed.

Whilst immersed in coding as a repetitive and methodical process, where coding is separate to the research questions and driven only by informants' responses and repetition of specific areas, as a researcher, you do not always see the scale of patterns emerging during the coding process. Stepping back from the coding process, I was surprised at some themes emerging from interviews, and heartened that they appeared to be verifying that the NVivo™ analysis fulfilled its intended function at bringing a degree of separation between me and academics' valid observations.

## Moving beyond the first stage to further abstraction

Noting the cycles of analysis, abstraction and reconceptualization in Danermark et al. (2002) above, I will seek to elaborate on the stages of analysis that this research has followed. Following first stage thematic analysis, using coloured A4 sheets and nodes printed on strips, I undertook a manual clustering of the theme nodes to bring further coherency to the themes. It was at this stage that I took the conscious decision to discard some themes which whilst very interesting, were beyond the scope of the main research question which sought to identify enabling and denying elements in the system. It was also the case that some of these areas had not yielded sufficient consistent data. This data included academics' views on subject knowledges and types of knowledge, and students as co-creators of knowledge.

I then clustered data into *presage-process-product* categories, following the 3P model previously used by Biggs (1989, p.11) and more recently, Ashwin et al. (2015b, p.31) who proposes a 'systems' model of learning, and Ramsden (1998, p.8) who suggests a model for academic leadership in higher education institutions. This model provides a conceptual framework for linking academics' teaching practices and responses to the institutional environment, its culture, management and leadership, and external tensions, as well as their own aspirations for undergraduate higher education. The specifics of data clusters are outlined in the closing section of this chapter, which introduces the subsequent three findings chapters. Figure 7 below shows a schematic representation of stages of the analytical process leading to the findings chapters.



**Figure 7:** Schematic representation of the analytical process leading to the findings chapters (Part 2 is presented in Chapter 7, Figure 8, as part of the discussion).

Prior to moving into presenting these findings, it is important to note that they are by no means the final word on the topic: rather, the findings chapters have acted as another stage of analysis for the research. During thematic analysis, I had felt pulled between more tangible areas such as those identified in the literature and research questions, for example: funding; academic' roles; feedback; disciplinary difference; transformation enabled or denied; and what I perceived to be more interesting, but less tangible and more abstract conceptual themes such as: balance; space and freedom; choice; creativity; and value. Danermark et al. (2002) distinguish between defining empirical categories, for example, those gained through early stage analysis, and more abstract conceptualisations which seek to connect the empirical observations with wider mechanisms and structures (p.122). In my research journal notes I wrote: '*At this stage, phase 1 coding outputs seem so simplistic and a million miles away from theoretical models I was interested in delving into*'. Braun and Clark (2006) note the choices to make in deciding between an overview of the full data set, which may be more necessary in short dissertations, and the depth and complexity possible in more detailed accounts of one aspect (p.11).

Whilst it was possible to extrapolate discussions to broad concepts such as power and space at this stage, I was keen to capture what I have called the tangibles above in a finer-grained way first. I had openly voiced regret at what I felt was a '*boring recipe*' for presenting the findings, but in hindsight, I recognise the importance of this descriptive thematic stage and the richness of the data within it that bridge theory-practice boundaries. I am certain that themes within this part of the analysis, and presented in a 3P model, will appear as more tangible points of action for the institution. They will also be more palatable to those who might be minded to dismiss abstract-level concepts as either beyond their gift to address due to the massive implications for large-scale social and cultural shifts, or worse, as the jargon-ridden attempts of a doctoral candidate to theorise.

No less significant than tangible points of action however, and important as part of doctoral-level social science research, higher level abstraction is invaluable when seeking to identify overarching findings emerging from the research and conclude the study. Although data in the findings chapters has been presented within a 3P model, as intimated, a suite of exciting abstract themes emerged from the write-up process, and are presented in the final discussion chapter. This further level of conceptualisation arose from a linking between messages in the findings chapters and those less tangible themes originally felt to be present, in many instances by gut instinct and by word association, for example, space and creativity together with pre-existing research concepts from the literature.

O’Leary (2010) notes the importance of abstracting data back outwards (p.263), and this links to the final stage noted by Danermark et al. (2002, p.110) discussed above in outlining stages of analysis where abstractions are then brought to bear on the concrete case to hand, in this case, as implications for the university and wider sector in the final chapter of the thesis.

## **Introduction to the findings: the 3P presage-process-product model**

As introduced earlier, themed Chapters four to six are structured around a *presage-process-product* (or 3P) model. In keeping with the research questions, calls from researchers to further define what higher education should look like, and the associated notion that any action should be guided by such aspirations, Chapter 4 outlines the *product* being aimed for: what do academics at the university believe the purpose of an undergraduate higher education to be, and what changes would they expect or wish to see in learners by the end of this period? Following what has been noted earlier around shifting discourses in a marketised higher education environment, the irony of using the term *product* here is recognised. Whilst Oxford Dictionaries online (2015) provide a definition relating to outputs of commercial or manufacturing processes, the term is used here in relation to the alternate definition – ‘a thing or person that is the result of an action or process’, and from its Latin origin *producere* meaning to ‘bring forth’. With direct reference to the research questions, what then constitutes *transformation* of students within the product that is undergraduate HE? Interviews revealed tensions on a range of levels, and those considered external to the university but closely relating to how academics have answered these questions, are elaborated upon here.

Chapter 5 moves to examine institutional *presage* factors most affecting academics’ abilities to effect an ‘ideal’ education as defined earlier in Chapter 4. In particular, those internal environmental tensions perceived to be within the remit of institutional leadership and decision-making (Ramsden, 1998, p.8) are discussed. Johansson and Felten (2014) have noted how ‘transformative’ experiences for learners are likely to reflect institutional level environment and behaviours (p.4).

As noted previously, the site where tensions in *product* and *presage* will be played out, and therefore critical in terms of how these are then negotiated and in some instances overcome or subverted, lies more deeply within the internal university environment as

part of pedagogical approaches and individual academics' experiences (Lambert et al., 2007; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). Chapter 6 explores these *processes*, noting particularly how, in striving towards what has been defined as an *ideal* in Chapter 4, academics respond to tensions introduced earlier as potential deniers. The chapter further elaborates on processes seen by academics as enabling of an *ideal* undergraduate education.

Because of the breadth of areas covered across the three chapters, and fitting with the concept of a system or ecology, explorations are focused less on detailed concepts e.g. learning, knowledge, academic identity, and more on an overarching understanding of the setting. This reveals key sites of tension, as well as denying and enabling elements. Key messages from each chapter in this 3P cluster will be synthesised in Chapter 7 as a holistic capturing of all elements in the 3P model, and drawn into an overarching discussion with concluding thoughts.

Finally, a few points should be made that substantiate my choice of the 3P model.

Gage and Needels (1989) have summarised criticisms of early model adopters, with a central concern around implications of causality between elements presented as if in a closed system. This is not the intention. Rather, through the lens of *transformation*, the model is used to highlight and throw open the range of elements that academics feel are most relevant to the research question, and to allow for a holistic look at the environment in which academics are working. This complements the value noted earlier of in-depth case studies where fuzzy boundary interplays may be examined. Accusations have also related to the exclusion of 'teachers' own conceptions' (p.255) which is clearly not the case here since this research is situated within an interpretive paradigm.

Criticisms have also highlighted the need to consider 'reciprocity' in terms of students' contributions (Gage and Needels, 1989, p.261). Here I reiterate that, whilst students' previous experiences, motivations and engagement are noted as key to their 'transformation' (Ashwin, Abbas, McLean, 2014; Entwistle, 2003, p.7), in confining this research to academics' perceptions and actions, an in-depth examination of students' contributions is an area for potential future research. However, as academics have noted the importance of two-way interactions, Chapter 6, *process* does touch on students, with one academic noting that it is not possible to talk about their denying or enabling transformation in isolation from students' engagement, as this is the point at

which their 'transformation' is observed (Academic J). Just as causality cannot be directly inferred between elements, it likewise cannot be assumed that academics, their actions and teaching interactions can sit as wholly removed from students' contributions. Some academics have further noted that it is through these interactions that they themselves are 'transformed' (Academics C and N).

## CHAPTER 4: 'PRODUCT'

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### Introduction

The previous chapter has noted how conceptual clarity matured over the period of the interviews. Over time it became apparent that the concept of *transformation* formed a lens through which to explore academics' perspectives on undergraduate higher education, the university environment in which it is proffered (*presage*, Chapter 5), and their role in this endeavour (*process*, Chapter 6). Although other possible lenses such as 'marketisation', 'students as customers' or 'employability' might have been used, I feel that in choosing *transformation*, conversations stayed close to the powerful and implicit notion of what HE has always been about (Harvey and Knight, 1996). As such, they retained a focus on undergraduate education and academics' aspirations. Because of a research focus on elements which might enable or deny this, interviews surfaced tensions and threats in this environment, in particular, those affecting academics' abilities to deliver the undergraduate education they would wish. External tensions are introduced here, and threaded throughout the chapter, and the subsequent two chapters delve more deeply into how these manifest themselves internally, through both management and academic practice.

In most instances, conversations on the purpose, nature and shape of higher education bled into discussions on transformation, with academics' views on transformative learning experiences, drivers for transformation and characteristics of transformed students, and the shape and purpose of an undergraduate higher education mirroring one another. These are expanded upon below together with a range of other observations about the concept of transformation. The chapter concludes with an exploration of tensions around use of the term transformation. One academics' critique of the term early in the series of interviews leads to the recognition that tensions are not dissimilar to those highlighted earlier as part of student experience discourses.

### Exploring the purpose of undergraduate higher education

Academics noted the range of views on the purpose of undergraduate HE which reflect the vested and sometimes conflicting interests of universities, economic aspects, including government, industry and employers, parents and students and society. These echo those explored earlier in Chapter 2 (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001; IHEP, 1998; Clark, 1983). Most academics interviewed were not averse to notions of education for education's sake, but most of them also alluded to the reality of today's

world, with increased social and financial pressures, and given these, in particular, the importance of employability for graduates.

## **Society**

The value of educated, critical, engaged, thinking, questioning individuals to society was noted by most academics. One academic has noted the broader contribution that those with HE qualifications have to make to society:

*So, both my sisters I guess did university degrees. ... and they, did a few years in their job, and then they had kids and so became housewives. And you can say, 'well, that's a complete waste of money, you know, why educate people', not in this case women, but I mean, but generally, why spend that money? But you know, the perspective is, what we have is a much better educated population ... it seems more healthy for society to be educated, and that that education doesn't have to have the purpose of just going into corporations of whatever.*

Echoing these sentiments, Academic J (Town Planning) noted:

*I think it's important for society to have people who are critical and engaged, and educated about society, which is where I think social science is really brilliant.*

It may be noted that the value here is not being placed in the disciplinary knowledge graduates are bringing to society, or a specific career path, but rather in their intellectual approaches to life and society, and Academic T (Maths) summed up well how this is enabled through the discipline:

*we churn out, or we are supposed to produce graduates who have that mathematical critical skill ... set in their head, and they can analyse arguments, ... they can see when someone is... trying to hide something from you ... so it's a level of ... pedantry if you like, which you wouldn't get in most other disciplines. ... it's a ... very specific ... way of thinking, and I think it's important that society is provided with a certain amount of these people to go into ... industry or politics, or whatever, and ... add to the mix.*

## **Economic pressures**

Comments revealed two angles from which financial pressures on HE impact on academics' views about purpose. For the first, reduction in overall national funding for HE for both research and teaching elements, and the need to show value for funding is seen to impact on how academics' view the purpose of UG HE. Secondly, financial pressures directly on individual students relate to high fees, and the need for them to leave education as employable, to be able to repay large loans. Academic V (Law) said:



*... an ethical sense that we need to be able to put our hands on our heart and say 'you know, it's not 9000 pounds a year, because by the time people have borrowed money to live, and if you've got yourself into debt for 40 000 pounds ... we need to be able to put our hands on our heart and say 'we delivered you a product that we can be proud of'.*

And Academic J (Town Planning) stated:

*I don't want to say that people shouldn't go to university and do like a BA in English and just to get educated, 'cause ... I think ... that is beneficial as well for people to have an enquiring mind, but I think for a lot of people, the fee structure and the financial burden of university ... is a big reality that they weighing up in their heads, so I don't want to say that I think they should just come to university just to learn and expand their minds because I don't think that's fair really ... I don't know if they can afford to think that themselves.*

Whilst comments above reflect academics' needs to justify a usefulness to HE, Academic M (English), questioned the need to contemplate purpose at all:

*to say what's the purpose of an undergraduate degree is in a sense to beg the question. Undergraduate degrees are a thing we do. And they have quite a rich range of purposes or outcomes or products.*

However Academic M then continued to mull over the fact that *'if things are going to take public funding, they have to have a purpose ... you know, there has to be some demonstrable reason for doing it'*. Regarding a shift in research funding priorities which impacts on what is taught, Academic L (History) noted that academics have *'intellectualised'* these external pressures to show *'usefulness'* of a subject, asking *'well what is our role in society?'*

The need to emphasise to parents that their children would be employable upon graduation was raised often, and Academic J (Town Planning) noted:

*we do emphasise the big career thing because often at open days that's what parents want to hear 'cause they panicking about money and they want to know their kid's doing something useful*

Regarding students' expectations around employability Academic C (French) emphasised the use value of intellectual approaches and thinking:

*Well, if you've come here with an instrumentalist view, you're probably in the wrong class, because you know, learning about [detail removed for anonymity], is not going to necessarily land you that job yeah? But what it might do is open your mind to lots of different ways of thinking, which might actually decide that that you want a different job. So it might transform you in ways that you weren't prepared for.*

But academics also felt that love (Academic L, History), passion (Academic J, Town Planning) and interest in the subject areas are important (Academic F, Philosophy),

and believed that students at the case university generally bring these elements rather than more instrumental attitudes.

### **Employers, industry and accrediting bodies**

Allied to financial and economic tensions, but more directly towards the use value of HE, further pressures around graduates as employees arise from employers, industry, accrediting bodies and government. Reflecting academics' views above that intellectual approaches are key, Academic T (Maths) noted:

*this sort of philosophy that seems to be coming from various places, ... the media, or the government or something, about ... we should be handmaidens to industry ... we should churn out people who are ready to slot into the ... corporate machine, and I think our job is to do precisely the opposite' ... it's to churn out people who will be ... thinkers ... who are skilled, but will question the machine, which I think that's an obvious tension.*

Academic G (Engineering) noted that industry '*literally do want somebody who can walk out of here straight into a graduate level job and just do it*', and Case (2011) has noted an intensification of employer expectations on engineering education (p.3).

It was noted that industry, employers and accrediting bodies sought a range of graduates' knowledge, abilities and skills, some of which might better be provided by other types of HEIs with different purposes, in particular, non-research intensive ones.

Academic H (Chemistry) said:

*if you go out and look at some other courses elsewhere, for example just up the road, [university name]'s chemistry course is very applied, very much more applied. But that's the market they've got. They have a lot of employers that want to have OK graduates that are capable of what I would describe as technical roles ... instead of the core stuff being decorated with all the sexy fluffy stuff that we kind of do, at the cutting edge, they'll decorate it more with hands-on applied stuff.*

This is further elaborated on in the section following on shape and nature of undergraduate higher education.

### **Lifelong learners and the individual**

A consistent message from academics related to the concept of lifelong learning. Academic C (French) noted about education: '*It should be something that feeds you for the rest of your life. ... it shouldn't be seen as a closed process, you know, you finish your degree and that's it*'. Conscious of tensions within the lifelong learning discourse noted in Chapter 2 as linked to instrumental agendas and workforce development (Field, 2006, p.3), academics' views tended to reflect somewhat broader sentiments. These linked closely to their views on the value of education and learning to society.

This said however, related to views around purpose and use highlighted above, a sense of the importance of students as individuals and an increasing focus on their individual development and opportunities was noted.

### **Balancing multiple purposes**

When asked about the balance of possible purposes, most academics noted what they felt to be a necessary combination of purposes, reflected in this comment:

*You want people to go out of here as responsible citizens, you want them to be able to contribute to the economy, you want them to be able to look after themselves, and yeah, I don't know any discipline where it's gonna be a case of, you can just exist in an ivory tower. I mean, what you gonna reflect on? How long can you just reflect on things in abstract? (Academic E, Accounting)*

Nor should it be assumed that in every instance, external influences are not allied to academics' aspirations. For example, Academic G (Engineering) noted that in 'developing the engineers of the future', drivers are not necessarily only financial and industry-related, but often have a strong social and human underpinnings.

Notions of tensions, purpose and value in UG HE are threaded through this and subsequent chapters, as the thesis delves more deeply into the university environment.

## **The nature and shape of undergraduate higher education**

A consistent set of messages around academics' aspirations for the nature and shape of undergraduate education emerged through interviews. The strongest of these was the need to ground undergraduate higher education within a disciplinary context, i.e. the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, all academics voiced clear views on working with knowledge content through academic approaches to learning and inquiry, what one academic termed an '*academic background*'. Aspirations linked to: institutional typology, the university being research-intensive as opposed to '*technical*' or '*post-92*'<sup>2</sup>; the disciplines themselves; and in some instances their status as applied or professional. The section concludes with discussion on views around the balance of elements seen as critical to students' undergraduate education, including a discussion on skills as part of this.

### **Disciplinary contexts and 'specialised knowledge as a basis for university curricula'**

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<sup>2</sup> HE institutions given university status following the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* for England and Wales

All academics cited the disciplinary context as the most crucial element of undergraduate learning. Academic T (Maths) noted that the prime role of undergraduate higher education is to give students an '*academic background as core*', '*You know, so, you come here to do a maths degree, so they should learn, maths*'. Academic L (History) noted:

*it's important that all of this happens in a discipline ... because it grounds it ... it allows them to gain expertise ... even though the point isn't to take the body of knowledge away, there's no denying that in mastering that body of knowledge, the students attain and recognise themselves attaining an expertise. ... it's only when you've got that that you can then achieve the higher level skills of independent thinking.*

Exploring notions of a disciplinary core more deeply, a range of ways in which that content knowledge is approached and worked with through curricula came to the fore through interviews. These reflect disciplinary classifications described in Chapter 2 (Neumann, Parry and Becher, 2002; Becher, 1989; Biglan, 1973). It is possible to elaborate on subgroups identified by authors above citing direct quotes from the data:

Views from the hard, pure disciplines had a strong focus on volumes of quantitative knowledge of the discipline needing to build cumulatively. For example:

- *... you're building, it's a very sort of incremental discipline* (Academic T, Maths); and
- *You have to have that core before you can do the applied ... I think I would go out on a limb and say that our course is pretty pure, it's not very applied. Elements of it are, but not a huge amount* (Academic H, Chemistry).

In contrast to this, academics from those disciplines generally classified as soft, pure, make less emphasis on incremental knowledge gain than those in the hard, pure. Whilst citing the importance of '*certain things students should have to get to grips with*' in terms of curriculum and '*tough*' texts, Academic C (French) also noted that '*there is a very dynamic connection with the subject material*'. The comment from Academic L above alludes to the point as being not so much about '*[taking] the body of knowledge away*' as to '*grapple*' with it deeply (Academic F, Philosophy), and Academic F said:

*I think the Arts in general want to push the line that... we want to help people think, and get skills and academic skills ... but Philosophy [has] always been particularly driven for that because it's about analytical skills, arguing, it's what we want our students to do, is learn to do philosophy well, rather than learn facts and learn particular stuff.*

So for academics from the soft, pure disciplines, the focus was primarily around how students work with a '*body of knowledge*' to develop scholarly approaches (Academics L, History, and M, English).

Hard applied disciplines reveal their hard underpinnings, tools and techniques for external environment application:

*So we don't teach any pure science at all. There are some elements of it mixed in, but ... engineering is a distinct subject aside from those areas. But a lot of it is tough ... first year's quite mathematical, second year's extremely mathematical, that's where it peaks. After that point you're starting to apply the knowledge you've learnt. (Academic G, Engineering)*

And having taught on a range of professionally-oriented medical courses, Academic Y (Biological Science) commented that:

*[for] their future career ... there's a certain amount of knowledge that they have to have that I have to get across to them, ... because they need to know how certain things work, if they're going to use certain techniques.*

And as with the hard, applied disciplines, soft applied disciplines revealed a focus on professional practice, protocols and procedures with underpinning elements of soft pure knowledge. The combination of these elements was reflected by Academic J (Town Planning):

*They get ... a big social theory module in second year ..., which they all find very difficult, and they get other theoretical modules, ... they learn about political theory and social theory, and they're forced to think about how that relates to everyday stuff because they do all of the applied modules as well, where we expect to see that level of understanding. So I think we do both.*

Professional protocols and procedures elements reflected strongly:

*we have to offer people with a qualifying law degree ... there's much of a kind of core. Historically at least, there has been very much a sense that you must not come out not knowing, the rules of contract formation. (Academic V, Law)*

Academic E (Accounting) acknowledged the disciplinary roots and applied status of accounting:

*If one wanted to think about what accounting is, it's much more of a craft than an academic discipline. Historically, accounting has been super-imposed on economics. So, any theory that existed historically, came from economics.*

Academic E also noted the importance of not only the 'context of the discipline', but the need to understand 'different theoretical content' and arguments, and the need to 'introduce other sets of ideas' to question assumptions within the discipline. It may be noted from the above quotes that the more applied disciplines considered a solid foundation of knowledge and theoretical concepts in the pure science and social science elements to be critical, though the relative proportions of these varied.

## Academic approaches

Linked to views of disciplinary knowledge as central to UG HE, and setting aside differences of disciplinary classification, views on academic approaches, *traits* (Academic M, English) or *skills* (Academic H, Chemistry) were common through interviews. Many of these may be noted already in the quotes above, and a summary of these elements noted by most academics as desirable has been captured well by Academic F (Philosophy) who noted:

*I think the purpose is to get them thinking really well, and arguing well and writing well, and being ... scholars in some sense, or at least good thinkers.*

This was endorsed by academics from applied disciplines:

*My view is that higher education doesn't matter what discipline you're studying, an undergraduate programme should actually provide the skills of critical analysis and the capability to communicate an argument, a well-constructed argument, and reflecting critically on the applicability of that. (Academic E, Accounting)*

These elements are similar to those noted as important as part of academic writing within what Nesi and Gardner (2006a) termed 'pure academic-research traditions of university education' (p.13). At least half the academics interviewed also discussed reading as central to students' learning. This is expanded upon in Chapter 6.

Thinking emerged as a prominent theme with it being seen as important in terms of providing an intellectual challenge: Academic M (English) said:

*It ought to be challenging in the sense that it should push you beyond what you think you can do and what you think you can cope with intellectually. You know, we often pay lip service to the idea that it should challenge your thinking. Now I don't know to what extent we always manage to challenge students' thinking, or get them to challenge their own kind of thinking. But that's sort of the ideal.*

Whilst there was a common element of gaining knowledge, learning how to critique and question assumptions and knowledge at every turn, and developing the ability to be 'comfortable with not knowing' (Academic S, Speech Science) were seen as important, akin to the concept of 'healthy uncertainty' as a part of deep learning (Forrest, Judd and Davison, 2012).

In summary, it was highlighted by most academics that these elements could not be developed as independent from a discipline, and as noted in the quote earlier from Academic L (History), as a result of this, 'higher order skills of independent thinking' can then be developed. This critical pairing is further evidenced in quotes from others:

- *we're pushing them theoretically and pushing them to, to both have a, a really kind of core understanding in their subject, but also have a critical mind* (Academic J, Town Planning);
- *so you develop critical thinking skills by developing those disciplinary sort of skills* (Academic T, Maths); and
- *[only after developing a] strong core [can you] start to push them a little bit more ... get them to be more creative, which is what you really need to do to become a successful organic chemist* (Academic H, Chemistry).

### **'Education' versus 'training' or 'instruction'**

Reflecting debates around the purpose of HE cited, several academics distinguished between 'education' and 'training' or 'instruction'. Bamber (2012, p.104) notes that tensions between these terms manifest themselves as tensions between 'academic norms and discourses, and professional practice' and this issue was more prevalent for those academics from applied disciplines with professionally accredited curricula. Academic R (Medicine) highlighted the importance of 'education' with an '*underpinning scientific basis, ability to critically reason, appraise... able to adapt and change with changing needs of healthcare*', which was seen as different to 'training' which might '*churn out doctors in half the length of time*', and Parker (2003) notes that 'training should never be offered as, or charged for as, education' (p.530).

Most academics noted that it was the depth of theoretical and conceptual knowledge as well as academic approaches that set degrees at this university apart from those offered at for example, post-92 universities. There, academics noted a higher proportion of practical and technical elements. Referring to an institution nearby, Academic T (Maths) said:

*which is a lot more ... related to industry and vocational things... and we're more sort of 'pure'. It sounds strange when I'm saying it now, it sounds ... elitist in some sense, but I don't mean it in that sense.*

and Academic H (Chemistry) noted that such universities:

*will turn them into a very different beast ... at the end of it in terms of a student, they would be much more technical based, which I don't think is neither a good thing nor a bad thing, it's just a different thing, where we like to think we are turning out more researcher-based material.*

Neither academic above saw a tension in these differences, pointing out that different institutions had different aims, and that different skills sets were thought to be appropriate to different types of higher education. In another instance it was noted that similar courses in other research-intensive universities opted to include lower proportions of theoretical elements in courses of the same name (Academic J).

## Skills

Noting tensions around the skills agenda as aligned to the current marketised environment and introduced in Chapter 2 (Muller and Young, 2014; Urciuoli, 2008), it is worth briefly exploring academics' use of the term *skills*. Extracts above show skills acquisition as important to undergraduate higher education, yet the majority of academics used this term to refer in particular to those academic approaches already listed. These were often pitted against a range of what may be termed non-academic skills, variously referred to as generic (versus discipline-specific), soft (versus hard), and employability and transferable skills. Academic M (English), although noting that the '*language of skills*' can be quite '*utilitarian*', also notes that it can be useful in expressing what has been achieved educationally. Urciuoli (2008) noted how skills terminologies 'cover a range of disparate practices, knowledge, and ways of acting and being 'so much so as to become denotationally indeterminate' (p.212).

Confusion with the terminology is shown in this example from Academic H (Chemistry):

*So confidence and direction are two things that we would need to do. OK, it's the usual stuff about knowing the nuts and bolts about the degree that they're studying, but those are taken as granted I would say. I personally would like to see more of... what can I describe them as?... like generic skills, but, generic skills which are there to be able to, that they could look for themselves, so you know, not so much the usual like presentation skills and whatnot, but research skills that they could use. So you know ... I haven't seen this kind of problem before, I'll go and look in a book and see if I can find it'.*

Research skills are here inferred to be generic skills. Many would term *direction* and *confidence* as being more generic skills acquired alongside a maturing process, but here they are used with reference to academic inquiry. Academic L (History) has also used *confidence* in this way:

*they might get a real sense of self I suppose that comes from the confidence in being able to navigate this huge body of knowledge, assess it, criticise it, come to your own conclusions about it, but then come up with your own original independent ideas.*

Another example, *presentation skills*, which is often classed as generic (take Academic H's quote above) is in this instance used as more academic by Academic J (Town Planning) who noted:

*they're very confident and skilled and they understand the difference between doing just a little random mickey mouse descriptive presentation, they know what's required of them in terms of the depth.*



## Balance

Notwithstanding confusion around terminology, how, and in what proportion the elements above are combined is seen as critical to the UG education aimed for, and this relates to what HEIs see as the purpose of education and the value placed on these elements. A combination of disciplinary knowledge that is part content and part conceptual, as well as skills needing to be part of the education is discussed at length by Young and Muller (2010). The view that it is not all about content was endorsed by most academics (noted earlier) and Muller and Young (2014) note the need for the starting point to be 'specialised knowledge as a basis for university curricula' as without the in-depth disciplinary material, there can be no deep-level conceptualisations (p.138). Relating to this, Academic L (History) commented:

*It's got to be a degree in something. It can't be a degree in transferable skills. The skills mean nothing unless you've got some content.*

All academics noted that growing skills and impact agendas had emerged from increasing tensions around use value of the disciplines, driven by student expectations, employability and research funding. Whilst they did not object to academic skills developed in disciplinary contexts, they noted conscious efforts to ensure that the disciplinary environment is not overrun with overtly labelled employability activities and generic skills acquisition. Linked to this, tensions were highlighted relating to competency-based curricula defined by accrediting bodies and curricula driven by outcomes alone, as well as a shifting the balance of elements within most curricula. Examples of these shifts are cited in Chapter 6, *Process*.

The increasing pressure for staff to better signpost, and students to better articulate and reflect on skills, so as to acknowledge their use value for future employability, was mentioned by several academics, and this links to Urciuoli's concept of a commodifiable 'worker-self-as-skills-bundle' (2008, p.211), as well as notions of the increasing importance of students as 'individuals' noted earlier.

Tensions above could be interpreted as a push for education towards more applied and 'soft' characteristics, and these will be further explored in the final discussion chapter (Fox, 2002, p.140). Fox further notes how much easier, and therefore attractive it is to quantify the skills agenda, versus long term benefits of HE (p.141). Whilst most academics interviewed were not themselves opposed to this shift in balance, some alluded to academics in their departments who were concerned e.g. '*I'm sure if you asked X and X they would be appalled.*' (Academic J, Town Planning) and '*I know there's some people who would have completely different view to me*' (Academic Y,

Biological Science). It was suggested by Academic Y that the balance may have already '*gone a bit too far that way*'.

## **'Transformation' as a concept**

### **Introduction**

Academics' aspirations for the nature and shape of undergraduate higher education have been noted above, and as part of these, their views on changes they would wish to see in students during this period. This is irrespective of whether the term *transformation* was used to label changes or not.

Regarding use of the term *transformation*, whilst most academics had not used it much before, they believed it was an appropriate term for describing changes they would wish to observe taking place in students during their undergraduate study. Given its aspirational nature and uncertain definitions highlighted in the literature review, this is unsurprising. For a few academics who challenged use of the term, there was a sense that it was a '*big claim*' to make (Academic N, Sociology), that could be construed as '*glib or possibly even arrogant*' taking on a sense of '*Ah, come here and we will transform you*' (Academic M, English), and taking the dictionary definition quite literally noted that '*it suggests that you've absolutely changed from one form into another*' (Academic N, Sociology). Academic F (Philosophy) cited similar concerns with how the term is used:

*Yeah, I'm ... comfortable with the term as long as it's fairly ... fluid ... one thing about the transformation is...[you] don't know whether things are ... just a curve, so you just ... get better at some things, doesn't sound very sort of transformative.*

### **Interpretations**

'Transformation' as a concept has been interpreted by academics as being '*multi-faceted*' (Academic L, History) and fluid, and potentially pertaining to academic, personal and emotional aspects. This is summed up well by Academic C (French):

*higher education ... should be a space in which they can make the most of it, and transform themselves in lots of different ways. It doesn't have to be just educational, and it certainly shouldn't be reduced to that sense of leaving with a degree that gives you a job ... It should be something that feeds you for the rest of your life. ... it shouldn't be seen as a closed process, you know, you finish your degree and that's it.*

Academics noted there was fluidity in:

- timescales for transformation, with no specific start and end points, but occurring across the life course, linked to lifelong learning sentiments. Several academics felt that individuals' transformations start before coming to university, for example, Academic R (Medicine) stated:

*I would argue that the transformation has actually commenced before they get to medical school, because they have had to develop ... and articulate a number of the qualities as a given as I said. ... They've started on that 'I want to be a doctor, and have the qualities',*

and the point was made by many, however, that transformation is not only within those three to four years, but can also be 40 years later (Academic N, Sociology) and sometimes understood retrospectively. Overall, there was a sense that transformation as a concept was something larger, in both timescale and characteristics, than an undergraduate higher education experience in itself.

- the pace of transformation, as Academic L (History) has captured it:

*I think it might happen incrementally, but I also think, being a historian, that change happens in lots of different ways. ... there's slow glacial change, but there's also short term step changes. And I think that whole thing adds up to something that's transformative. So I absolutely do believe in the penny dropping.*

- It being '*different for different students ... sometimes the experience might be very transformative, and sometimes it's not*' (Academic L, History).

During a pilot interview, one academic felt my questioning implied a homogeneity to students' transformation, and recalling criticisms of the student experience as homogenous, I therefore adjusted my approach, ensuring space to explore a range of possible *transformations* in interviews. Academics noted a range of factors influencing whether students are transformed at university or not, including the degree to which students are able to, or choose to engage intellectually in their 'personal projects' (Jary and Lebeau, 2009, p.701; Dubet, 2000, p.99). This linked to Academic M (English)'s point that academics cannot take responsibility for or lay claim to all changes seen in students, and usefully revisits the boundaries of this thesis being around those aspects within the sphere of academics', rather than students', influence.

It was noted that many opportunities outside HE could lay claim to transformational experiences, and that HE was merely '*one of a number*' that could do that for you (Academic M, English), and citing examples, Academic N (Sociology) commented that '*some of the biggest, greatest, most wonderful transformations have taken place*

*despite, not because of the educational institution*'. I therefore moved to focus discussions on time spent in undergraduate education, as opposed to a period of time spent elsewhere.

## **What makes 'transformation' in Higher Education unique?**

### ***Intellectual independence***

When asked what was different about transformation through a university experience, Academic F (Philosophy) noted:

*I think intellectual independence really. Ability to tackle the intellectual projects and with a ... clarity of mindedness ... it's not ... personal independence, that's not what I meant so much, it's ... intellectual independence.*

And Academic M (English) noted:

*a certain sort of confidence [which is] partly about three years of knowing them better, three years of life experiences [but also due to] something that happens in the course that is part of that process. ... what I'm recognising is an academic trait, you know, something that's ... to do with that area of learning.*

Quotes above reflect views in the previous section on what is being aimed for in UG HE, in terms of deep engagement with the knowledge of a discipline and what have been termed *academic approaches*, with skills and employability currently stemming from this base rather than driving curricular developments.

### ***Professional identity***

For some professionally accredited courses, academics were overt about students' development of a professional identity, and this was particularly the case in medicine and speech science, two courses which are NHS-funded, unlike engineering, accounting and town planning. This is a different perspective on 'transformation' and reflects the fact that these courses are aiming for an accredited, employable 'end product', alluded to in the opening section of this chapter.

### ***Maturing as learners and individuals***

All academics noted that most transformations connected to students growing older and maturing. Where undergraduate programmes extended to a fourth year, academics observed a large developmental shift between third and fourth years. Academics noted how with increasing maturity, students grew as learners in how they think and act:

*I would think of this period as still being with adolescence, albeit late adolescence, and it's an incredibly important time in someone's life. ... I*

*think the process of coming here and being involved in something, and in coming to certain realisations is also incredibly important (Academic S, Speech Science).*

Academic J (Town Planning) has noted that *'thinking about what stuff they're into in the world and what they're passionate about ... goes hand in hand with maturity'*, and this is not dissimilar to Academic H (Chemistry)'s notions of students finding *'confidence and direction'* and Academic M (English) who used the word *'individuate'* to describe how students *'come into focus'* as learners and in relation to the course. Notions of time and space necessary for this growth are revisited within Chapter 6.

Alongside intellectual endeavour are seen personal transformations. Academic N noted:

*I think personal change is ongoing all the time. ... many of those transitions are more easily defined, and probably more important to students than the actual educational.*

Citing Freud, Academic S (Speech Science) linked transformation to *'freedom as a human'* which *'comes from awareness of one's own motivations'* and noted:

*it's the gaining of awareness for, 'why is this happening at this point, and what it might mean in terms of things that have happened to me before and in the future?' So coming to do something like a degree has to be transformative. ... in terms of the content, the material, the thinking, the subject, reaching a point of ... personal paradigm shift ... some level of reflexivity.*

Drawing these together, Academic J (Town Planning) summed up well the facets to transformation seen through students' undergraduate years:

*They develop these passions and ... quite intense knowledge and interests in particular subjects. So you see that coming through, which is also how I would tie back to your idea of transformation. ... They're grown up, they're more serious, they have knowledge, and they have an ability to be critical, and conceptual.*

### ***Transformation into a 'scholar' versus 'scholarship'***

Since the opening quote of the thesis (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277) addresses the idea that transformation into a scholar is increasingly being denied, it is worth noting academics' perceptions of *scholar* and *scholarship*.

Academic M (English) commented: *'scholar's not such a fashionable word'* and Academic L (History) said: *'I quite like the word. It's very antiquated isn't it?'* Academics generally felt scholar was not a word that was used *'in the context of UG students'* (Academic L) or if it was used in this way, it needed to be *'in the broader sense ...*

*someone who's able to do their own research and thinking with a body of knowledge'* (Academic F, Philosophy).

When further explored, Academic M's sentiments that *'the adjective's quite appealing in the way that maybe the noun isn't'* were reflected in more comfortable use of the terms *'scholarly'*, *'scholastic'* and *'scholarship'*. Academic M said: *'I don't look at the third years and think 'look at these scholars'. I tend to think of them ... going through a process of engaging very very deeply with something'*. This reflects other academics' views that *'scholarly'*, *'scholastic'* and *'scholarship'* are broadly similar to academic approaches, cited earlier. A preference not to use the noun also links to tensions discussed earlier around setting up polar opposites such as scholars versus consumers where the reality is not as clear-cut (Muller and Young, 2014).

Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*we probably aren't producing many scholars ... I'm not totally sure that's a bad thing ... you've gotta ask why we would want to produce scholars in the first place and what those people would go into?*

This alludes once more to notions of use value ascribed to education. Other academics agreed that *scholar* was not something necessarily attainable by the majority of students.

### ***Transformative and transformational learning***

It is worth highlighting that concepts of transformative or transformational learning were not specifically raised by me during interviews and were only mentioned by one academic, Academic R (Medicine). Academic R felt that the concept was integral to *'transformation into a professional identity'* as a *'healthcare professional'*. However, merging what academics said about the nature and shape of UG HE, disciplinary grounding and academic approaches with their views on transformation in UG HE, I interpret their perceptions as falling within the range of transformative learning pedagogies outlined by Dirkx (1998) and linked to constructivist teaching approaches. These also sit within notions of Parker's (2003) *'transformational curricula'* which move beyond potentially divisive *'traditional'* or *'emerging/progressive'* end-spectrum curricula introduced in Chapter 2, to more *'messy, open'* intellectual interchanges involving greater degrees of critique, criticism and critical reflection of knowledge, problems and concepts (p.539). Pedagogic approaches will be explained further in Chapter 6, and models above revisited within the final discussion. That academics' interpretations of *'transformation into a scholar'* more closely resemble the *'traditional'* curriculum described by Parker (2003), further highlights issues associated with using the word *'transformation'* in multiple *'aspirational'* ways.

## Discourses of 'transformation'

Relating to tensions around the purpose, nature and shape of HE, academics noted conflicts in interpreting 'transformation' as a concept. Academic N (Sociology) noted that parents' interpretations may potentially be at odds with those of academics:

*parents are concerned that if that much money is being spent, they want their son or daughter to come out with something that does transform them, that turns them into a highly employable graduate. But is that the sort of transformation that we talk about as academics? Maybe some academics.*

As noted earlier, whilst academics' beliefs about the purpose of HE and its shape are generally built into notions of transformation, transformation as a concept is felt to be something much larger than this. Academic V (Law) said: '*my sense of 'what's the value of doing a degree?' might not be quite the same as my answer to what we mean by a transformative experience*'. Academic V defined transformative experiences according to the breadth of individual opportunities available to students beyond the discipline or '*student horizons*'. Not dissimilar to this, bringing together skills and transformation, Academic N (Sociology) noted:

*I think the emphasis has been very much on learning things like transferable skills, so it's transforming people so that they can have a set of skills, they can use them in the wider world, they can identify and articulate those skills. Is that actually transformative? I don't know.*

These comments reveal tensions around interpretations of transformation, potentially in conflict with providing the UG education academics aspire to, and requiring that students gain something over and above their education that might lead them to a range of pathways beyond university. There is a distinct message around use value as part of transformation, returning to Academic M's comment that the definition is '*utilitarian*', with Academic V (Law) going so far as to term these additional things a '*package*' of additional opportunities, and Academic N alluding to skills as quantifiable.

As also noted in Chapter 2, Academic N (Sociology) linked common usage of the term 'transformation' by universities to the marketised HE environment, noting their need to articulate transformations as '*incredibly special*' (original emphasis) '*added extra*' '*all-singing all-dancing*' experiences. For the first time, to my knowledge, this university introduced a strapline offering 'transformation' to prospective students as part of the summer 2015 recruitment drive. Academic N noted that education '*has to be about something more than a glamorous good experience with a transformative something or*

*other at the end*, akin to what Docherty (2011, p.53), refers to as 'selling education as kitsch'.

*I really strongly believe this is market forces. ... It's there to make us buy a product, to make us feel good. To make us feel this is the answer. ... you can't marketise the heart of learning (Academic N, Sociology).*

Academic N further noted that in packaging and selling transformations, the real message about the value of HE, that '*sometimes learning isn't pleasant ... it is about having a go, and sometimes getting it wrong, and practising and slogging through stuff, and feeling uncomfortable and working hard and sweating*' is either completely diluted or lost. '*Transformation is too big, it's too grand a word. ... that's critical skills, not transformation ... that's learning, it's not transformation.*'

## **Conclusion**

Because of the confusion in both scale and substance around the discourse of transformation, subsequent chapters and discussion will set aside the term *transformation*, and notwithstanding disciplinary differences, refer instead to the undergraduate higher education that academics wish to see, and within this, change they would wish to see over that time, as what I characterise as the '*ideal*'. It may be assumed that within this *ideal* are academics' notions of a transformation taking place.

Whilst the *ideal* seeks to develop scholarship and scholarly approaches, in many instances using pedagogical approaches that approximate transformational learning and curricula, it is not felt to be equivalent to producing a scholar. Returning to the opening quote of the thesis, neither of course is it felt to be equivalent to transforming students into consumers. Reflecting scholar-consumer end-points discussed in Chapter 2, external pressures on the HE environment have been noted throughout the chapter, in particular tensions in defining purpose, use and value depending on the stakeholder. With these tensions as a backdrop, chapters five and six move towards a deeper examination of the internal environment (*presage*) and academic activities (*process*), with a particular focus on those elements which are seen to deny or enable this *ideal*.



## CHAPTER 5: 'PRESAGE'

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*Someone, one of my colleagues described our teaching as 'factory teaching' [laughter], and one can ... see that to a certain extent. You know, we have huge numbers of students, and a pretty tight ... pretty horrific actually, staff-student ratio. And when you get into that situation, I can understand what they're meaning by that, because you can't deal with the academic ... level that you want to deal with ... we just don't have the resources to be able to equip them [students] I think. That's the issue in a nutshell. (Academic H, Chemistry, original emphasis)*

Whilst interviews revealed a rich internal picture about the university, following the previous chapter's exploration of a hypothetical *ideal* and tensions relating to this in the external environment, this chapter will focus from the outset on a deeper examination of specific points of tension. In this regard, the quote above includes the two important themes emerging from interviews and subsequent thematic analysis as the largest internal threats to academics delivering the *ideal* (product). These are:

- student numbers, and related to this, as part of recruitment, cohort diversity;
- academics' roles, relating to increased time pressures due to administrative workload and high student numbers, resource, recognition and reward for teaching.

Following discussion of these two elements as overt symptoms of the tensions, the chapter moves to discuss academics' views about the other dominant themes in the internal university environment which emerged from thematic analysis, namely roles played by university management (implying any academics, professional staff in management roles and structures) in determining these elements. In labelling this chapter *presage*, there is a sense that the elements outlined above are perceived as beyond academics' control, though it is recognised, of course, that this may be subjective, particularly for academics holding positions which might be considered to have institutional influence e.g. heads of department, directors of teaching.

The narrative has shifted from more abstract and broad aims of UG HE, towards the lived daily experiences of academics, though this chapter is still relatively removed from how academics, as individuals, face and might seek to overcome, mediate or subvert tensions in their teaching. This will be explored in Chapter 6, and together with this, students as individuals, their expectations and learning interactions in the academic environment, will all be touched upon, as opposed to discussion around students here which relates only to their recruitment.

# Students

## Student numbers

One of the most prevalent elements denying the 'ideal', and raised as a problem by every academic bar one, was excessively high student numbers.

Academic Y (Biological Science) noted that:

*the tension is dealing with increased student numbers and still giving them a good, well if you want to call it transformation, still giving them a good experience, and I know that there are some people in this department who feel that we are not giving the students as good an experience as we used to. I, I don't think that's true actually. I think we are.*

Whilst Y above felt that students are still getting a 'good experience', Academic G's (Engineering) views were more in line with those of other staff noted above:

*the way it probably comes out is that because our student numbers have grown to a point where we can't do the really good teaching that would allow all of the students to transform.*

In most instances, high student numbers were linked to the need for the university to bring in more income. Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*I know that smaller group teaching is much better, it's much easier, but that's definitely not the direction the university's going in, and ... I can never see that retreating... 'cause I think the financial pressures will just never allow that.*

In two instances, the growth in student numbers was ascribed to employer-related areas: industry demand which cannot be met, in the case of engineering, and changes to the EU working time directive in the case of medicine, meaning medics can no longer work '100/120 hours' (Academic R, Medicine).

Examples have been given by academics of how high student numbers impact negatively across a spectrum of teaching-related activities, including lectures, seminars and laboratories, supporting students, and general close intellectual interactions. In many instances, the social element of learning has become difficult. Conversely, examples were cited of the educational benefits to be gained by lower student numbers and Academic G (Engineering) noted the benefits of smaller group teaching:

*I still have 30 or 40 and you can interact with them, you can help them, you can get them to tell you what they think and what they know about the topic. And I can still do things where I put them in groups ... If I had a class of 100 [which some modules do] I couldn't, there's absolutely no way I could do that*

Academic C (French) made a similar point, noting that when trying to run workshops 'numbers help us in a sense that most of our option groups are relatively small' and that it is important to have them 'range from 10 to 20, maybe to 25 students' as an 'ideal size' which you 'can do a lot with'. When numbers were 'at their highest, they've been 170 in final year [it was] huge and difficult to cope with'.

Increased numbers have led to more prescriptive laboratory sessions where students no longer have the freedom they used to. Academic G (Engineering) noted:

*That was fine then because there were 30 ... Now there would be 100 plus and we can't do that. And I think if anything is restricting our ability to trans..., or help the students transform themselves, is that we can't do some of the good things we used to do, ... It's like, 'here's your equipment, do this, this and this, and then get the results and analyse them'... I guess it's about giving them the freedom to put a stamp on their learning and if you've got high numbers, you can't do that in a module. You just don't have the space or resource or time.*

Adequate time to provide sufficient support and feedback to high numbers of students was raised often. Given the attention student dissatisfaction with feedback receives through the NSS, this is noteworthy. Academic H (Chemistry) noted the sheer impossibility of giving students enough support with their learning:

*I think it ... reels it back down into the time you've got available to see the students and to go through the stuff with them. ... Multiply that by the size of the class and it's eating days out of your time. And they need the support obviously, because when you go through stuff with them, you can see that they're very clueless about some stuff and basics.*

And Academic T (Maths) discussed the impact on feedback in particular:

*our fourth year numbers have ... doubled since I started teaching this course ... I feel they don't get as good a course as they did get, 'cause I would ... discuss the work with them ... it's quite a different thing between getting written feedback and sort of oral feedback, you know when you actually go through stuff with them, and you don't have the opportunity to do that in the same way with large numbers.*

### **A 'barrier' to intellectual interaction and 'intimate conversations'**

An emerging cross-cutting theme is around the negative effect of high student numbers on students benefiting from being part of an academic community. Some examples cited were:

- Relationships with researchers, arguably one of the benefits of students being in a research-intensive university have been affected:

*There are more medical students. That means they get less. When you had 100 medical students, it was much easier for you to be known as an individual and*

*to develop relationships with researchers. There's now 230/250 (Academic R, Medicine).*

- Being able to have *intimate conversations*, ensuring students are on the right track, and intellectual interaction with academics, have all been affected by increased student numbers. These three quotes are typical of this view:

*The most tragic example I think would be just the reality of what you can do with 13 people versus 170 or 180. I mean, it's not rocket science to, to understand that. So ... I think there's a real issue around smaller numbers and ... having those more intimate conversations, and I guess checking (Academic J, Town Planning).*

*we're having problems finding ... enough staff to be able to interact with the students in groups (Academic Y, Biological Science).*

*So thinking about the one on one which obviously you might have got a lot more of when it was smaller ... they don't get a lot of that. ... so are they losing out? Yes I think maybe having the bigger group means that they get ... inevitably, I s'pose inevitably they do get less (Academic F, Philosophy).*

Academic H (Chemistry) has noted an increase in barriers between students and academics: *'Maybe it's about breaking down barriers? Maybe by having such a large student population they're just divorced from the academics?'*, and suggests a rethink around what is needed for our type of institution, research-intensive, but not of the Oxbridge model:

*Perhaps this is where those original Oxford models and polytechnic models we talked about at the beginning do work you know. Polytechnic model - it's usually small, they're usually smallish departments, people are very familiar with each other. Those barriers are broken down. In the Oxford environment, you have your tutor. You are that tutor for those students for years, and again, the barriers are broken.*

Whilst noting that the effects of high student numbers on teaching are 'complex and contextual', Gibbs and Jenkins (1992, p.16) cite a similar range of teaching activities and face-to-face student-staff interactions affected by high student numbers, and Gibbs (2010) has noted the impacts on student learning outcomes from large class sizes (p.19). High student numbers were more consistently prevalent for some academics than others, and one academic felt this more at postgraduate taught (PGT) than undergraduate level. Some academics have seen numbers fluctuate over the years, expressing relief that they were not currently at their highest, but also noting with trepidation that they were set to increase again.

### ***Cohort diversity***

Related to recruitment, cohort diversity was raised by a number of academics in terms of life experiences, nationality and disciplinary backgrounds. The value brought by diverse cohorts to learning and intellectual debate was commented upon by several

academics, in particular where classes had fairly homogenous cohorts. Academic M (English) said: *'it would probably be better if it were more diverse ... people who teach the same topic at Queen Mary have a much more diverse cohort in the first place and there's a sort of different starting point.'* Academic M cited an example of a class with only one international student in it who provided a challenge to other students: *'the rest of the group were a little bit shocked almost. You know [whisper] 'you can't say that about...', and it was interesting 'cause we started to talk',* and it took the debate in new and challenging directions. This tallies with Johansson and Felten's (2014) view that university environments with diverse cohorts will bring challenge and new ideas, increasing the likelihood of 'interrupting the familiar and comfortable' (p.22) and in line with what is being sought as the *ideal* defined in Chapter 4.

In departments with large international student numbers, the difficulties of teaching international students, in particular where cohorts had large numbers from one country only were noted. Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*The biggest downside for teaching is numbers ... and also ... classes with lots of Chinese students is a huge, monumental, massive problem ... seminar group discussion is very difficult at the moment, and it's, it's partly an international student issue, but it's also a numbers issue.*

Internal and external economic drivers, and pressures relating to commissioning bodies and management were seen to have an impact on this area. It was noted by Academic R (Medicine) how competency-driven curricula can force homogeneity into cohorts:

*you select for diversity and then you bring them here and try and squeeze them into this narrow box of ticking all the GMC competencies and you drive out that separation.*

Academic F (Philosophy) discussed the value that students from a range of disciplines bring to the classroom, and cited one department which was a key feeder of high quality students yet decided to stop feeding students to their courses, citing accreditation as the barrier. Academic F feels that:

*administratively it wasn't worth the trouble ... it was the extra effort to put in to work out, and to keep on top of the dual, they just decided against it.*

## **Academics**

### **Changing roles and 'pressure on academic time'**

In addition to the pressure of increased student numbers, most academics noted the impact of increases in administrative and teaching-related processes on their roles. Academic N (Sociology) said: *'So it seems to me that most months there's a new*

*admin role that pops up.* Because of this, *'pressure on academic time increased dramatically, with the result that some of the stuff that academics just used to do'* is no longer done (Academic V, Law). Academic J (Town Planning) noted:

*there's just non-stop requirements of things, and again that comes back to what I was saying earlier about the public management stuff. Just the form filling, the evaluations, the... I don't mean the modules, we do that anyway, but just of, of everything. It's just constant reflection and dadadadada new systems, new procedures.*

Referring to summers as a *'freer time'*, Academic J went on to note that *'if you ask any academic who's been around for a while they'll, they'll say that that's gone.'* And Academic L (History) also noted that *'older' academics 'comment on younger members of staff just being busy. Just being busy busy busy. ... What it is that they didn't do that we do?'*

Examples of activities which academics highlighted they no longer find the time for include:

- *things like teaching preparation, ... [get] very squashed as well* (Academic L, History)
- *how much time you invest in marking and feedback ... I don't engage with it [feedback] as well as I used to* (Academic J, Town Planning)
- *I think because of the way things have developed in the scholarship ... I really need to take my course in a different direction* (Academic V, Law)
- *The stuff that involves passion because you're reading, you're doing the research, and you're bringing that into the classroom and not worrying about badging it as, you know group work, interactive skills, transformative experience, whatever* (Academic N, Sociology)
- *I'd really like to engage with this, I've seen that at a conference, I've seen someone do that, I'd like to bring that in* (Academic H, Chemistry)
- *the capacity to do that ... deeper more intellectual learning* (Academic J, Town Planning)

These activities, as well as more student-facing intellectual interactions noted as so critical to the *ideal*, such as student reading groups, plays, moot court activities with Law students, student-generated discipline-related activities in the local community, were variously termed:

- *'the bits that count'* by Academic C (French), who noted how they have been *'squeezed to the margins'*;
- *'the stuff that essentially we are here to do'* (Academic N, Sociology); and
- *'just something you do, because you think it's part of academic life'* (Academic V, Law).

These examples link directly to the loss of intellectual interactions discussed earlier. Citing sociologist Erving Goffman, Macfarlane (2015) has noted the large amounts of time invested in such 'backstage elements' associated with teaching.

Academic N (Sociology) noted that it is not only the requirements, but the pace at which they are introduced, meaning '*that we never have time to consolidate, to sit down and properly reflect.*'

### **Acknowledging 'the bits that count'**

Academics cited concerns about investment in, and recognition and reward for teaching, particularly in relation to research activities. Whilst most academics interviewed felt that research was a critical and complementary activity to teaching, they frequently noted that disciplinary research was pitted as a competing endeavour.

In terms of being hampered from delivering the *ideal*, academics noted an underlying lack of acknowledgement of contributions to teaching, or formal acknowledgement in workload allocation frameworks (WAF), as well as acknowledgement of the reality faced in juggling competing priorities. Most academics were of the view that only certain bits are counted, and that these are not necessarily the bits that count for enabling the *ideal* education.

Academic V (Law) gave an example of an activity that counts, but was squeezed out because it was not counted:

*I have seen a pressure on academic time increased dramatically, with the result that some of the stuff that academics just used to do..., I mean I think one of the reasons why moots<sup>3</sup> died a death here was because they just, they were just things that people historically did out of the goodness of their heart ...*

*they are the things that are not audited, you know, 'cause no-one ever really notices. ... there are things that managerialism doesn't pick up and doesn't measure. And the more that you take up people's time with [rustles a pile of papers] forms, the more that they are less inclined to work on these other things.*

Academic C (French) made a similar point, noting that many activities are not '*measured on a workload model*' but are '*marginalised*', and that means '*working much longer hours than you ever anticipated. It's on my time, you know, it's two hours I shouldn't be doing, I should be writing an article, or more likely actually just processing some dull as ditch-water paperwork*'.

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<sup>3</sup> Moot court extracurricular activity common in law schools for students to prepare for real courtroom situations

*that was much more possible at a time when people felt they had some spare time. No one ever gets credit for that, no-one ever gets promoted for it ... I think those are the sorts of things that managerialism's killed. (Academic V, Law)*

Macfarlane (2007a) has noted that student-related activities, which might include those listed above fall at the bottom of an institutional hierarchy of 'service activities', bringing poor reward and 'limited recognition' (p.267).

### **Staffing and contractual elements**

The crucial role played by management in problems relating to staff on fixed term and what are termed 'teaching only' as opposed to academic contracts was noted. It was felt that valuing staff through secure academic contracts had a direct impact on students:

*we generally make pretty much everybody who comes in on contract ... X works very hard to make them permanent and I think that leads to value in the teaching, ... and to transforming the students. It really, really has an impact on the student, because the person is invested (Academic J, Town Planning).*

This investment relates to how much time teachers might need to spend preparing lectures and doing the bits that count, and the importance 'to give someone the security that it's worth doing that' (Academic J) is noted. A counter-example to this was given regarding a different department:

*they are really struggling with their teaching at the moment ... they just don't have the staff, and so they're bringing in all these short term people who are not specialists in that subject, so, I would say that that affects the students' transformative experience (Academic J, Town Planning).*

Pressures on academic life, the changing profile of academic staff, increasing division between research and teaching roles and increased casualization of staff due to pressures from research audit, publication and funding has been noted by Macfarlane (2007b. p.7). The potentially negative effects of sessional lecturers and fractional contracts on students' learning have been noted by McCaig and Taylor (2014, p.39). Some academics have also noted the need for a balance of staff disciplinary interests in academic departments to better support students academically (Academic E, Accounting), and to bring what Academic J (Town Planning) referred to as 'pure' sociological elements to an applied discipline.

Most academics noted the importance of teaching feeding off disciplinary research and vice versa, and hence the importance of sustaining numbers of academics who teach and do research, rather than using teaching-only roles to solve pressures arising from



student numbers. Academic Y (Biological Science) expressed concerns in sustaining research-led teaching:

*I don't think it's happened in this department yet, but I'm worried that it could tip into it, is that if there's an over-emphasis on teaching, and we have a lot of staff who, for whatever reason, are unable to do research anymore, ... who can't get research funding anymore, ... that's going to be a problem because they won't be able to run the research projects, you know, they won't be delivering research-led teaching if they're not actually doing any research.*

### **Research and teaching tensions**

Whilst research was noted as integral to teaching, pressures to attract funding and publish research deemed to be of value in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) were noted, particularly in terms of value placed on these activities in promotion cases as opposed to teaching:

*some of your peers ... they've been at Chair level three, four years before me, and I think that's because ... quite often that I do more ... in the 'we' sense as opposed to the 'me', and ... that's a reflection of our system that we have at [this university], is that if you do think more of the 'we', thinking of the department, ... then things suffer ... But we do get very fixated on research being the promotion criteria, and that can be then hard to bring back. (Academic H, Chemistry)*

Academic H has alluded to what Power (2014) noted as 'rising individualism' alongside the decline of what might be characterised as academic citizenship, something that relies on voluntary and invisible activities. Here internal and external HE culture has pushed academics to only do what is measurable for their own or their departments' benefit, most often in research publication or income terms. Academic N (Sociology) noted how research priorities are now pushed more aggressively in the faculty, with knock-on effects on teaching and who is doing the teaching:

*there's a degree of feeling of unfairness, 'cause others in the past got those grants and didn't have any slack. We're losing teachers because they're being bought out. So we're buying in temporary junior staff. ... they're all good and fantastic and committed and the students love them. But a sense of you know, whooo, that the centre isn't holding onto things.*

The quote also references points about teaching-only contracts made earlier. Academic H (Chemistry) noted some recent positive shifts, but highlights the continued need to remain aware of this potential imbalance:

*I think that's something we are starting to address in the last couple of years, ... [it] used to be the case when there was only one member of staff who ever got promoted for their teaching excellence ... but now there is a slight transformation there, and it's good I think*

## **The struggle of the juggle**

Whilst citing acknowledgement for teaching and the bits that count as problematic, particularly compared with research, academics remain passionate and committed to these activities and quotes above indicate this commitment. The biggest struggle is the balancing act across the academic role, and this is described well by Academic H (Chemistry):

*there are always in my mind, three typical components to an academic post. There's the teaching, there's the research and there's the administration. And it's nice to be able to balance each of those equally. I s'pose what I dislike about it, is that sometimes the balance gets shifted and it's really hard to bring it back. ... So, you've gotta free yourself up some time, and I think that's the big enemy ... finding the right amount of quality time to be able to do the things you want to do, and do them well.*

Most academics expressed frustration at trying to function with competing demands, and Academic N (Sociology) noted:

*I worry that the emphasis is on, certainly in our faculty at the moment, it's on grant capture and publications. But then I am also aware that people feel overwhelmed by a 15 point learning and teaching strategy<sup>4</sup>. And you've got the two together, and we're sitting in our offices thinking 'ahhhhhh', sometimes you're just in a state of complete inertia not knowing which agenda to tackle first.*

Power (2014) has also noted this complexity and diversity of expectations on academics' roles, and posed the obvious question: 'how can you possibly be good at all those very different things?' Whilst not necessarily seeing employability and marketing activities as conflicting with the academic agenda, balancing these new and additional activities with other academic activities: '*comes at a price for academics ... the job's much harder to deal with because of the extra layers of pressure that are on top of the job ... it's definitely not as thorough as you would want it to be at all*' (Academic J, Town Planning).

And this sentiment is echoed by Academic Y (Biological Science) who noted the difficult balance:

*We're having to work much harder to do it. Which means that at least for those of us to whom teaching is important, we're probably spending a higher proportion of our time on teaching at the expense of research, is my honest answer.*

### **'Imagine a university in your head...'**

*If you said to someone on the street 'imagine a university in your head, ok. What's in it?' And they're not gonna say, 'a really good finance*

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<sup>4</sup> Academic N was referring to a faculty-level strategy.

*department, I hope they've got a cracking HR. I hope their computer services are good'. You know, they're gonna say 'students and teachers'. So why don't we start there and the way that we would empower, certainly the teachers is by giving them a say, a direct say in how that university is run. (Academic C, French)*

Coincidentally, Academic C prioritised those two most prominent elements identified through thematic analysis, 'students' and 'teachers'. These have been explored above in terms of tensions in *presage* factors relating to both. The quote also points to tensions in management, value and voice relating to professional services versus teachers. The following section seeks to look behind the symptoms discussed, at views of institutional management and decision-making relating to teaching, and notions of voice will be revisited as part of emerging themes.

### **The internal environment: possible causes behind the symptoms**

In addition to concerns about student numbers and academics' roles, thematic analysis of the data showed that the internal university environment, including how it is managed, financially and more broadly, was seen as a key factor in enabling and denying the *ideal*.

In terms of problems discussed above in relation to student and staff recruitment and numbers, academics noted the two main drivers stemming from management as being financial elements, and increased systems, processes and initiatives relating to quality of teaching.

#### ***Financially-driven decision-making***

The majority of academics noted how financial pressures in higher education nationally, with massive increases in student fees and intensified pressures on research funding, have had knock-on effects to broader institutional and departmental actions relating to finance and management. Academics expressed concerns about the way in which financial imperatives drove management decisions above all else, in particular, as completely separate to, or without consideration of the impact of financially-driven decisions on teaching and the *ideal*. Examples cited by academics relate to student and staff recruitment, already discussed above, as well as areas such as how disciplines are valued, portfolio development i.e. what programmes are developed and offered, and service teaching<sup>5</sup>.

The tension between financially driven management decisions and striving for the *ideal* is noted in student recruitment activities by Academic E (Accounting):

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<sup>5</sup> The teaching of a disciplinary area is provided by an academic department outside of the department where the main academic programme resides.

*business schools ... often feel that they are cash cows in terms of drivers towards moving away from a more critical understanding, rounded, transformative, transformed student. I think people would see the drivers for that coming from ... institutions [who] are quite happy to accept loads and loads and loads of students around particular programmes.*

Most academics felt that management 'make the right noises' (Academic C, French) around valuing disciplines equally, though Academic C noted how:

*those right noises don't always translate into an ethos that allows ... the arts and humanities to be valued on an equal footing with some of the other subjects... I think if the university buys into an instrumental policy for higher education then arts and humanities will be a second class faculty. ... that's the big danger that the ethos of the university becomes driven by all those things which will diminish the experience of all the students, not just those in arts and humanities.*

One academic gave an example of a new Masters programme, introduced with little academic staff consultation and a poor understanding of staff expertise, placing unreasonable expectations on academics:

*this thing come from nowhere dropped on us ... The numbers mean that everyone has to supervise dissertations. It's unfair to both my colleagues and to the students to have [x discipline] people with one set of really developed skills and forms of knowledge supervising dissertations in other areas.*

In a different example of financial decisions being taken without consideration of the impact on the *ideal*, Academic G (Engineering) noted changes to service teaching for the department:

*We did it all in house until quite recently, but we were making such a huge amount of money out of teaching. I think the way our head ... put it was that [we] would rather we paid other people to do our teaching for us rather than have a load of our money creamed off by the central university to prop up other departments. So we were forced to use [X] department[s] to teach ... Neither are particularly enthusiastic about doing what we ask them to do and making sure our students get what they need to learn.*

In examples above from Academics E and G, impacts of such decisions have been dealt with in hindsight through firefighting strategies which are felt to be less than ideal. Academic G has noted that '*some of them we simply haven't got to the bottom of and we won't. ... there are quality issues, assessment issues, there are all sorts of problems*'.

### ***Under-investment in teaching***

Relating to the discussion on finances above, in many instances, the *ideal* was seen as threatened due to underinvestment in teaching, often in contrast to investment in research. Reiterating the view that it is academics who teach and research that bring

value to the *ideal*, Academic J (Town Planning) noted the need to have ‘*control over the budgets*’ so as to have more people available to ‘*reduce the pressure*’.

There was no consistent case of under-resourcing across departments interviewed. Rather, the point was made that departmental leadership plays a key role in this area, a point also made by Gibbs (2012, p.20), and hence the possible fluctuations in this problem with fluctuating leadership. Macfarlane (2007a) notes how ‘power relations within the immediate department or academic unit determined who would be required to perform the most disesteemed forms of service’ (p.267). This was seen earlier in Academic J’s (Town Planning) comments around the role of HoD in ensuring staff reward and contractual arrangements, and a leadership view that all academics should teach (Academic Y, Biological Science). Both J and Y pointed out that this was not necessarily the case in other departments, and Academics N (Sociology) and H (Chemistry) noted problems relating to this. An example of the positive impact of new leadership was given by Academic R (Medicine) who cited a shift to increased investment in leadership of teaching. Noting a previously ‘*long period of underinvestment in the support for the medical school*’ Academic R observed that:

*as a consequence ... there was a lot of, it’s often easier to just deliver the lecture rather than think more creatively about how you can get them to learn something. So a lot of what I would call disempowering of the students ... to take charge of their own learning.*

In addition to the educational impact of underinvestment noted above, Academic R commented on how this played out structurally, and where there could have been management intervention around the way in which roles were defined and work allocated:

*there were less and less people involved in the teaching, though I prefer the word ‘learning’ of the medical students, because of all the other pressures and the number of people who had designated time within their job plans, whether it’s university or NHS time.*

Coupled with high student numbers, underinvestment in staff who teach then translates into excessively high staff-student ratios, and as with Academic R above, Academic E (Accounting) noted the negative impacts of this on achieving the *ideal*:

*We have huge numbers and we’ve been under-resourced. ... we’ve had staff-student ratios of something like 40 to 1. ... when you’re operating with those sorts of numbers, actually inculcating the types of forms of thinking and skills that you want the people to develop, it’s very very difficult. ... if you’re talking about that transformation of students and a different type of student experience.*

The impact of high student numbers and staff-student ratios has been discussed earlier in this chapter, particularly in terms of the negative effects on sustaining intimate conversations between academics and students.

### ***Increased systems, processes, initiatives***

Sections above have highlighted academics' perceptions of an 'unremitting diet' (Macfarlane, 2007a, p.268), of systems, processes and initiatives relating to teaching and the management of teaching, and the impact of this escalated and intensified activity on academics' time was also noted.

Academics cited a range of reasons for this, including the need to improve teaching quality, driven from within the academic department or beyond, as well as other influences external to the department and university driving imperatives to enhance particular areas of teaching, such as feedback to students, assessments and curricula. In the case of imperatives to develop teaching, for example in the area of feedback, these were seen to be driven by underperformance in league tables such as the NSS, while curricular changes and initiatives were felt to be driven by marketing needs related to perceived student expectations and those of accrediting bodies and employers. Skelton (2005, p.36) linked increasing performativity measures to the 'needs of the economy' and ensuring 'systems efficiency'. In terms of the impact of these changes, academics saw both positive and negative sides, and these are discussed in the section following.

### ***Improving teaching quality, systems and scrutiny***

Many academics saw the need for some form of quality management, and cited examples where there had been a need for the introduction of systems as an additional scrutiny to tackle unacceptable teaching practices. Academic V (Law) noted:

*the things that cross your radar are when people have made mistakes in their exam papers. The things that cross your radar are when the students come and complain and you look at the feedback, and they have been given two or three words of feedback. Just not OK. And the members of staff in question know it's not OK.*

In unpicking the statement about academics being so 'busy busy busy' (cited earlier), Academic L (History) highlighted '*moves which have absolutely increased teaching quality and increased other kinds of things too. So information that's available for students, you know, marking criteria, transparency*'. Academic L noted that '*aside from the teaching, the delivery of courses*' had improved over time. Similarly, Academic F (Philosophy) felt that whilst there is more '*bureaucracy*' and did not '*mean all the bureaucracy's a good thing [laughter]*' there is now '*structure and a kind of efficiency*

*that, on the whole, is a good thing*'. This was observed in comparison to *'back then [when it was all] just a bit haphazard really..., in a way that's not necessarily good'*.

Whilst quality management was felt to have had positive impacts, most academics saw contradictions to this as they then also noted negative impacts on quality and the ideal as they defined it, including the bits that count alluded to earlier. Academic V (Law) said: *'I'm sure you could find people in this building who could legitimately point to new systems and processes that are taking up their time, that are destructive of innovation'* and Academic J (Town Planning) felt that quality of teaching had decreased, due to *'volume of work ... the procedural elements'*.

Academic V (Law) elaborated on how the aforementioned example of unacceptable feedback then plays out in reality:

*we then design a new feedback form which then is actually slightly more annoying to fill in than the old practice of just writing comments on the script as you go. Why don't we just keep to writing comments on the script as we go? Well, if everyone was doing their job, of course you would.*

Giving another example around exam paper setting, the problem and the impact of trying to remedy it is encapsulated by Academic V:

*the need to put in a system in place to make sure that doesn't happen. ... will then inevitably mean that the ... process takes longer ... you need to have a committee that's broad enough ... Now that takes up people's time. And the more time you take up, the more it is that the, that sort of ground up innovation can be killed.*

And the difficult question faced is then:

*to what extent does managerialism stifle transformative experience? ... if you mean certain things by transformation, then the answer might be yes, but you have to understand that what's driving some of that managerialism is some really unacceptable practices that ... don't meet any definition of transformation (Academic V, Law).*

### ***Centrally-imposed initiatives***

In addition to external pressures from employers and accrediting bodies noted in Chapter 4, many academics referred to tensions around institutionally-imposed teaching and curricular changes. Driven by internal strategy as well as the requirements of accrediting bodies, pressures to constantly review curricula impact on academics' time, as well as on pedagogical approaches and curricula:

*I think we have curriculum that's constantly under review. ... So it affects things by us trying to fit into modules, or into a student timetable, elements that will address the learning and teaching strategy, that will kind of make sure we tick as many of those learning and teaching boxes as possible. (Academic N, Sociology)*

Academic F (Philosophy) cited a range of such initiatives, noting the importance of *'resisting anything other than the academic in a sense. Always feeling there's too much else taking over'*, and gave reasons why in striving for the *ideal*, it was important to resist them:

*you've gotta have space to develop. ... so you ... worry when there's more and more ... formalised stuff that they have to do ... they have less space to develop their own inspiring ideas*

### ***Apparent versus real demands***

Endorsing comments above about the amount of time that systems take up without necessarily much added value, Academic L (History) also discussed the area of feedback to students, perceiving *'a disjuncture between ... the apparent demands of this amorphous anonymous student body and the real demands that an actual student on my Level 2 option is really making.'* Academic L said:

*you have systems that are introduced... sometimes it feels as if those innovations are coming from somewhere else outside the department. ... lots of man hours in committees, designing it, writing it, and then you set aside two hours for forty students and three of them roll up. ... it might be that that perceived demand is not as huge as we might think.*

Academic S (Speech Science) suggested that departmental and institutional requirements relating to feedback have been introduced *'because it needed systematising into a tangible product that could then be well, 'here's a response, to the fact we've got NSS problems, and students here's what we're gonna do for you'*.

Noting a similarity between quality management systems in the university and the NHS, and their frequent disjuncture with reality, Academic S concluded:

*I just think it's about showing you've done a process rather than anything, yet has all these inadvertent consequences of actually changing the shape of the object you're meant to be assessing. I think the NSS is a classically good example.*

Interestingly, Academic V (Law) had also made this point about the side-effects of audit activities, and Power (1997) has noted how *'performance and quality are in danger of being defined largely in terms of conformity to such process'* and really represents a form of pragmatic *'muddling through'* issues (p.143).

Marketing activities were also perceived as sometimes disconnected from reality, and this was highlighted in the previous chapter as pressures to play to student and parent expectations, for example through recruitment messages where education is marketed as a *'glamorous good'* endeavour. Related to this, Academic C (French) felt that efforts



to push employability into the curriculum are 'a very small tail wagging a big dog' which then produce 'a very constraining false notion of employability'.

Framing questions around the real impact of the growth of activities noted above, Academic V (Law) has urged deeper level consideration of the 'trade-offs' in implementing new systems, process and initiatives.

## Emerging themes

### Considering the trade-off

*Would there be an argument that, actually, all of these forms and all of these processes, and all of these procedures, actually on balance, do more harm than good? Was it better in a world where you had, you know, 80% of people behaving in a really professional manner without the forms and then just using their spare time productively, and not having to account for every second in the workload allocation policy framework, ... and having 20% of the time, students being taught by people who couldn't be bothered to change their exam, turned up late, eat their lunch, speak to them in an inappropriate fashion, teach them things that are 20 years out of date? What's the trade-off there? The problem is we are not very well geared up for saying 'Oh well, actually it's a trade-off that we're gonna make, because any attempt to fix the 20 percent does more harm than good' (Academic V).*

The question above on trade-off of the impact of quality management processes on academics' activities could equally be applied across other activities discussed. For example, Academic L (History) noted a trade-off in the impact of high student numbers and increased administrative paperwork on students who seek one-to-one interaction and feedback: 'they'll see me surrounded by the forms that I'm doing and, or they'll see 10 other students, and they'll just think '[Academic L] is just too busy'. And I think that's a shame.'

Clegg et al. (2010) have noted the potential 'opening up to neo-liberal practices' when such activities are brought under the 'normative gaze of the institution' (p.624). Academics cited arguments for and against the appropriateness of putting the bits that count into WAFs, and Academic C felt that WAFs may stifle innovation:

*then you run the risk of saying well, how is it then going to be measured on a workload model? Which would then involve form filling, it would start to quantify it, which in a way would take away a lot of the pleasure of it, and that sense of discovery*

This echoes the view of Craig et al. (2014) who note how often formal audit systems sidestep the 'messy reality' of such academic activities (p.17).

The financial trade-off, in terms of fee income and staff salaries and reward, against the educational impact of high student numbers, insufficient teaching resource and recognition, and large international student cohorts could be considered. Two overt examples of this are:

- Changes to laboratory sessions noted earlier by Academic G (Engineering): *'we can't do some of the good things we used to do ... because we have to take lots more students to get lots more money'*
- An interview extract with Academic J (Town Planning):

*J: 'the international cohort which does seem to have an impact on our group work and our seminar, like the gelling of the group.'*

*DM: 'and the rationale for having a cohort, an international cohort that's large?'*

*J: 'money'.*

For all academics, the daily trade-off between research and teaching activities has been noted. Continuing discussion of this juggle, Academic N said:

*They get you whatever, whichever way, whatever you do, you're not doing enough in the other. They'll identify some area where you're not doing enough. And I think it's demoralising departments, it's demoralising staff.*

Trade-off may be interpreted as the relative value placed on activities, and the potential defining of values in relation to financial or market terms, in particular where audit and measures are used as a 'form of image management' (Power, 1997, p.143). This links to discussion of value placed on different types of educational activities discussed in Chapter 4. Whilst Academic V (Law) discussed trade-offs relating to managerialism above, an overt educational trade-off may also be interpreted from changes discussed by Academic V in Chapter 4 where students are now offered what might be characterised as a package of opportunities, which might be transformative in terms of expanded student horizons but no longer match academics' notions of an *ideal* UG education. Also bound within debates on value, are academics' sentiments of feeling pulled by accountability to stakeholders. These themes are returned to in subsequent chapters.

### **Managing for failure?**

*There's a difficult balance because you've gotta make a decision as to how much unacceptable practice do you let go, with a view to allowing your colleagues who are doing a really good job the space to do their job. ... it's very difficult to say 'we think you ten people are a cause for concern so we're gonna manage you differently to all these other people', so you end up designing systems, putting systems in place that do basically manage for..., I mean, basically the big problem that university management faces I think, from top to bottom, is how do you manage for*

*success and not for failure? ... And on the teaching and learning side, I must say, it is particularly difficult (Academic V, Law).*

The quote above relates to individual performance management, but Academic L (History) cited a similar example relating to the management of teaching processes in academic departments:

*Everyone has to do the same [when] it's quite clear that some departments do it brilliantly.*

Discussions above lead to questions on what might constitute success, in particular, how a quality UG education is defined by the institution. Because whilst academics noted overall improvement in teaching quality and systems, support and information for students, they simultaneously noted a decrease in quality defined as the *ideal* education. Is there a mismatch, as posed by Power (1997, p.144-145), between what is being audited and the original goals of the institution? This then leads one to ask what is currently being audited, the unanticipated outcomes of these processes (ibid.) and how these might be adjusted to include an audit of the trade-off being made across activities?

### **Academic voice and dialogue**

A thread that may be extracted from discussions above relates to how much agency, as voice, dialogue, space and control, academics feel they have in the running of their departments and the institution. Academic N (Sociology) noted:

*What I hate, is I think, increasingly, the university then doesn't allow us to get together with that critical voice, but it makes us wary of each other. ... fear of making that critical voice. And having so much to do that we can't get our heads above water to think about what to do with that. Why the hell aren't we getting together? Why haven't we got together at many points over the past three years and gone 'enough! This is just too much! Just stop!?' You know, but we haven't have we?*

Academics have cited decision-making without consultation, questioned the introduction of systems and initiatives, often '*from somewhere else outside the department*' (Academic L, History), and urged greater dialogue with other academics. Comments around managing for failure, the '*trade-off*' and defining quality, all point to a need for '*greater communication, but especially democracy ... individual voice*' (Academic C, French) which is '*much more organic*' and that '*start from different places.*' (Academic L, History). This draws one back to Academic C's (French) comment about '*imagine a university in your head...*' that the university '*should be informed by the people who work in them, and not just at managerial levels*'.

## HE as a 'unique' sector

The degree of agency that academics have relates to how the university and its departments are managed. Several academics noted that HE needs a different model to run it, as '*ultimately we're a creative industry ... [but] people like audit*' (Academic V, Law), and Academic C (French) noted that:

*even if you're looking at it crudely and economically, it's still one of the most vital and powerful sectors in Britain. And it's that because it's different ..., not because it works like other forms of industry or other forms of commerce ... When you start importing ideas from outside academia to run it, you risk destroying that uniqueness which makes it viable.*

The corporate and competition model of institutional management highlighted above is observed by Slaughter and Rhoades (2000, p.78) who describe academic managers' 'current preoccupation' with this style and its 'measurable outcomes'. They further note that academic managers are perfectly placed to 'develop alternative conceptions of where public higher education needs to move' (p.78).

Most interviews concluded with discussion about addressing the tensions and moving forwards, but also alluded to a loss of voice and autonomy for academics. Measures of performance, quality, and success were in many instances perceived to be mismatched with those valued by academics.

*I don't think we did a proper audit of what happens, what's been successful, what hasn't, where's the need, who's saying there's a need?* (Academic L, History).

Querying the sometimes meaningless measures, and alluding to questions about who controls 'the field of judgement around quality' (Ball, 2003, p.216), Academic S (Speech Science) said: '*you wonder whose interest any of it is*'. This links neatly to the discussions on conflicting interests and values related to the purpose of HE in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 6: 'PROCESS'

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### Introduction

To recap, Chapter 4 introduced academics' beliefs on the purpose of UG education, what that education should look like, and a range of external tensions related to delivering what is now termed an *ideal* education. Chapter 5 outlined tensions internal to the university setting, presage factors which academics felt impacted most upon their ability to enable the *ideal*. In the majority of cases, these were a step removed from their direct teaching interactions with students, and beyond their gift to negotiate.

This final chapter in the 3P cluster of findings chapters will delve more deeply into the *process* of this education, and the site where external and internal tensions noted in previous chapters impact directly on academics' teaching and students' learning. A set of recurring tensions are noted, some of which have already been previously noted in Chapter 4, for example students' expectations relating to economic tensions, employability and students as fee-paying customers. There is also a complex set of student-related tensions which academics partly attribute to their previous secondary-level educational experiences, as well as wider societal shifts, manifested in areas such as technology and knowledge dissemination. Also externally driven, but internally negotiated and delivered, quality management processes related to teaching highlighted in Chapter 5 were felt to introduce further constraints.

Deeper considerations of tensions in *process* will be divided into those impacting directly on curricula and content and those relating to pedagogical interactions, academics' teaching and students' learning. Examples will show how these play out in the educational environment and importantly, how academics, and in some examples, students, respond to these tensions. The chapter concludes by outlining aspects of *process* which academics see as enabling of the *ideal* and returns to arguments introduced in Chapter 5 relating to balance, trade-offs, time, freedom and space.

### Curriculum

Tensions impacting on curriculum and content have been introduced in Chapter 4. Many of these relate to the use value of disciplines discussed in Chapter 4, and what Fox (2002) has referred to as a 'weasel word, 'relevance'' (p.140) and linked to student expectations, employability and research funding. Academics have cited ways to overcome these, for example by circumventing non-negotiable curricular boundaries of

accredited provision to provide the *ideal* education. In some instances, academics have been unable to overcome tensions, resolving them by accepting an increase in modules and learning opportunities seen to link to real-world applications and employment, and these will be highlighted below.

### **An increasing knowledge base**

Academics in some disciplines alluded to the continued growth of factual knowledge, and having to make key curricular decisions on what is included. Describing this shift, Academic R (Medicine) noted that *'we are much more now around ... underpinning science principles, and can you find the answer'*. Decisions are also affected by the demands of other stakeholders for example employers and Academic H (Chemistry) said:

*The danger with ... a traditional subject that encompasses a hundred plus years of knowledge, you've gotta cram that into a small amount of a degree window, while that knowledge is ever increasing. ... you've gotta make a key decision. ... Because employers ... want to know you've got core capabilities and ... that you still know some of the new stuff that's coming out. And that's an increasing challenge for us.*

Academic H further noted the importance of discussing the impact of these choices, potentially through curriculum reviews *'in a science which is ever expanding'* to *'[look] at what we teach and why we teach it'*. Whilst Academic T (Maths) also noted difficulties with an ever expanding pool of mathematical knowledge, it was felt that because of improvements in teaching quality, *'there's a lot of people teaching mathematics who ... [give] students a much better ... access to the knowledge than they got 30 years ago'*.

### **Research and impact**

Shrinking national funding for research, and the need for academics to meet a specified range of metrics for the national Research Excellence Framework (REF), including research impact, as well as a general shift towards disciplines perceived to have less value in market terms being underfunded, have introduced many tensions into the university environment (Nussbaum, 2010, p.6). This has impacted on undergraduate curricula, which given the close links academics felt their disciplinary research should and do have with their teaching, is to be expected.

Referring to changes in science research funding, Academic Y (Biological Science) noted a reduction in *'blue skies'* and *'speculative'* research funding and an increase across the biologies and medicine in *'support [for] research which is very applied.'*

Allied to this, Academic Y noted that there has been an increase in applied content, and students ‘*these days ...*

*they've got an eye on careers and jobs ... and ... they're more interested in applying the knowledge. ... so we do teach them that ... But I hope that even when we're teaching them the applied stuff that we're still teaching them ... the basic science is important ... I'm sure my other colleagues are always at pains to point that out to the students.*

Despite negative views related to shifts in research funding, academics felt that there is value in addressing real life issues in curricula, and felt it was important to debate the value of different disciplines in addressing these real life issues. Speaking for the Arts broadly, Academic C (French) noted that: ‘*a lot of the other disciplines ... recognise that ... we do address ... real life issues, we might do that in really roundabout ways ... I think that is of interest to them*’.

Academic H noted how ‘*research is evolving*’ and ‘*feeds through into the teaching*’, reflecting ‘*trends in the outside world ... one area where it [the curriculum] has changed is management*’. Academic L (History) elaborated on how shifting research agendas then play out in the undergraduate curriculum:

*as professional historians ... we've intellectualised those pressures, and we're asking 'well what is our role in society' and if we're going to do this, which we sort of agree we do have to do ... how are we going to do it, why should we do it? ... And of course whenever we talk about anything in our discipline, we then put that in the curriculum.*

Pressures for academics’ research to evidence impact are closely linked to expectations from students and employers regarding the usefulness of their degrees for life and employment beyond universities, and Academic L (History) continued to expand on this:

*This is then translated into what the ‘role of a history undergraduate in wider society’ might be and ensuring ‘they leave having just done a module which is called ‘The uses of history’ and ‘they are asked to reflect on ‘well what have you done in the last three years, and why does it matter? ‘It’s not about employability in any explicit way.*

### **The real world and employers**

Academic L (History) noted that the department ‘*put on a programme of events which are about skills and careers*’ and grouped them into ‘*something which we call a module ... but it’s not credit bearing.*’

*So there's an expectation that they will go, but if they don't, it doesn't matter to their progression. We try and make it clear that it's serious, but we don't embed it explicitly into the history modules.*

Although History is seen to deal with the pressure to provide employability skills through a module that *'doesn't matter'* to student progression, Academic L pointed to evidence that employability is embedded within core curricula and expected within teaching:

*There's also an onus on staff to try and help the students identify [employability skills] when they do an undergraduate dissertation. You can use phrases like 'well you've just managed a project. ... You tested some different project designs, you checked the feasibility, you went and did a little pilot, and now you're writing up your report' .... I don't think that does any harm.*

Academic J (Town Planning) noted the value in pure, theoretical content which can be more *'abstract and conceptual'* and the *'potential for it to have a practical change'* in the workplace:

*we emphasise ... it's a difficult course ... and ... push them theoretically ... [we're] s'posed to be preparing the students for their jobs in the real world... [and] some of them don't see the relevance ... for their future careers ... but I think that's a risk you just have to take ... you justify it because you think it has a worth, it has a value ... we get feedback from employers that are students are very ... conceptual and smart ... that they're really much better thinkers than many of the other graduate employees that they hire*

Academic C (French) felt that the point of reference should be from the disciplinary angle and academic approaches developed within that, and presented *'in terms of deployability ... what those individuals ... can roll out themselves in any given situation.'* Noting that *'the working world demands different sets of skills ... much more group work... communication and articulation and presentation in a way that it didn't necessarily do before'*, Academic N (Sociology) elaborated on different approaches now used to develop specific skills in students, because in the past, teaching did not *'draw on all their skills'*.

Academic E (Accounting) expressed concerns for the way in which some skills and employability initiatives were relatively ignorant of students' academic needs, where *'the content ... being taught in our first year ... [is] around employability issues rather than ... skills of critical analysis'*. This tension in the skills agenda was noted in Chapter 4.

Academic J (Town Planning) did not see the employability agenda as *'necessarily opposed'* to the academic one, sentiments echoed by most academics. It was felt more important to ensure a balance between curricular elements, particularly in professionally accredited degrees, noting the importance of underpinning pure elements discussed in Chapter 4, as well as skills within academic approaches



discussed. Ultimately, most academics did not believe that the main driver for curricula should be employability, and Academic J (Town Planning) concluded by saying: *'I never ever think about the employers when I'm teaching them. I think about teaching them something exciting and important and that's really what motivates me'*.

### **Accrediting bodies**

Linked to employability discussed above and also introduced in Chapter 4, some courses are *'much more constrained because of the accrediting body'* (Academic J, Town Planning). But in negotiating these constraints, Academic J highlighted opportunities to *'get away with teaching whatever we want [through] option module[s] ... not core to their programme'*. The department recognised the importance of academics teaching their research areas in such modules and Academic J felt that this *'makes for much better quality teaching, because it's exciting and you're pushing the students forward with debate'*.

Likewise, in terms of balancing elements in the engineering curriculum, Academic G noted *'[it's] a really difficult balance to find because we are quite fixed in the areas we have to teach them because we have to meet ... accreditation requirements which are mainly about knowledge and not necessarily so much about the skills side'*. This returns the discussion to notions of balance in the curriculum.

Academic S (Speech Science) elaborated further on views introduced in Chapter 5 regarding the constraining effects of both NHS, as the commissioning body, and university requirements:

*Our first year undergraduates have to do a swathe of ... training on things like safeguarding, and information governance, and ... how to wash their hands and how to pick up a box in a way that doesn't hurt their backs .... and that has to fit in their level one experience alongside things like [named curricular initiative]... It drastically changes the ... learning experience ... It has ... implications for progression ... what sort of a degree is that where if you don't attend a session on washing your hands you fail your first year? Well that's the one we've got ... And it has to be that way, because the commissioners have said.*

Academic R (Medicine) discussed how the GMC's *'competency driven curricula... [ensure] that doctors who graduate are all uniform, that they can all do a minimum level'*. Muller and Young (2014) note that the GMC curriculum focuses on what students can *do* as a set of competencies, rather than what they *know* as conceptual knowledge (p.135), and Academic S's comment above also alludes to this focus on competencies, using the word *training* rather than *education* in listing them, a difference highlighted in Chapter 4. Academic R notes the curricular impact as *'losing the breadth'* where previously the balance between theoretical and practical content

discussed earlier would have been better. The impact for students is seen as *'dampening down ... achieving potential'* and a move from achieving the *ideal* (Academic R).

Also alluding to the need for breadth beyond accreditation requirements, Academic V (Law) noted how courses have *'historically been fairly constrained by the demands of the profession'* and cited the *'challenge'* of *'getting across that body of knowledge whilst giving space for teaching people to think, giving people these opportunities so they see the world as a much bigger place'*. Because of accreditation needs, *'a large proportion of the content of the degree ... at least in terms of topic headings, is out of your hands'*. This comment indicates some potential flex beneath *'topic headings'*.

### **Increased 'student horizons'**

Driven by a combination of perceived narrow curricula due to accreditation, student demand, and employability, several academics discussed the diverse range of paths students might follow after graduation, including employment and research. They noted a need for curricular choices to be expanded to provide as broad a spread of opportunities as possible for students. Termed by Academic V (Law) as a *'package'* of opportunities to allow for expanded *'student horizons'*, Academic T (Maths) referred to the need for a curriculum which catered for students who are not *'the ideal'* student *'who comes here because they're really excited about maths and they want to learn lots of maths ... We try to provide things that would be useful for say, students who not necessarily mathematically strong, but would say, go on to be maths teachers or something'*. Some of these options link directly into areas of employment, such as work placements, for example teaching in schools, or working with external companies. Academic Y (Biological Science) highlighted a similar expansion in provision from laboratory- and research-focused project modules to a range of other opportunities for students, noting that students are happier with this new format:

*an awful lot of them are not ... going to go into science, ... I think we do have to think of things that are going to suit all of our students ... So there's an element of you're teaching them what they need to know. But a lot of it is that, you hope to inspire them ... you want to ... foster that, and even if they don't use it in the future.*

Both Academics Y and T noted some academics' concerns about drift away from *'a hard core way to do science'* (Academic Y) and *'resent[ing] the fact that our students aren't all like that [mathematically strong]'* (Academic T). Of the students, Academic Y also said: *'I can see that they might find the applied stuff easier than the more sort of theoretical stuff.'*

Beyond the two science examples above, in addition to flex within current accredited modules mentioned earlier, Academic V (Law) detailed a range of new extra-curricular activities and opportunities for students, for example working with other staff as *'role models'* or gaining real-life experience. Academic E (Accounting) also noted the need to cater for a range of students by providing *'different programmes ... [and steering] ... people through pathways where they can get better support'*.

## Summary

Interviews revealed a similar set of pressures on curricula to those identified by Roberts (2015, p.544), as well as the active role academics play in then negotiating these. What concerns academics is the potential threat of the wide range of new elements to core aspects of curricula, in particular, softer skills elements, and their ability to sustain provision of extra opportunities in addition to core disciplinary content. This returns the discussion to the struggle of the juggle, noted in Chapter 5. Additionally, several academics noted a need for caution in allowing students dictate what is taught. This was also related to concern regarding a shift towards in some instances, instrumental expectations, and movement away from notions of academics as experts in defining the curriculum. Academic E recounted an exchange with one student:

*'I'm paying 9K for this' and there's an element of 'well so what? That doesn't mean I have to tell you exactly what's gonna be on the exam paper ... I think that there is a challenge at this time, for there to be a co-ordinated response 'OK, you may have to pay for education' and whether one agrees with that or one doesn't agree with that, is neither here nor there. 'But actually what you're paying for is an opportunity to participate in education, and it's not to define the form of that education'.*

Noting students' sometimes immature understandings of disciplinary areas, Academic C (French) said *'ill-informed student preconceptions cannot be what drives what we teach'*. Academics felt that this did not contradict their views around the need for dialogue and openness in the classroom, and Academic C noted how the classroom brought the necessary structures to turn such preconceptions into *'tools for learning'*. Interestingly, this links to observations made in Chapter 2 that the national policy rhetoric does not recognise this notion of student voice, instead driving students' voice as consumers and complainants. This leads the chapter into discussion on tensions in pedagogical relationships, and nearer to the closing section on academics' beliefs on teaching to enable the *ideal*.

## Within the pedagogical relationship

Beyond the curriculum, within the pedagogical relationship between academics and students through teaching relationships and in the learning environment, academics identified a range of factors enabling and denying of the *ideal* which stemmed from internal and external tensions highlighted.

### Academic approaches

Reading, a key academic approach linked to critical thinking and how students work with disciplinary knowledge, was raised by at least half the academics interviewed as a problem area. Within this apparently narrow sub-theme, interview data revealed rich examples of the impacts of a range of tensions on the pedagogical relationship and students' learning. Highlighting problems related to reading, Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*I don't think that they read enough ... there's something about the assessment-driven nature of ... education ... which has affected reading, has affected their willingness ... to immerse themselves in a wider thing.*

Academics N (Sociology) and F (Philosophy) also suggested that students read far less nowadays. Academic N said: '*they're not doing the reading ... many of them can't, because they're working to supplement their 9000 pound grant.*' They echoed Academic J's sentiments about the importance of the process of working with knowledge and having to sift through its validity:

*they haven't got ... the sense of ... structure of ... journals ... By following links and being spoon-fed all the references ... they can end up at the end of undergrad degree ... just not having done that ... scholarly side ... they're ... missing a skill of ... finding things and dismissing them ... finding a different angle, judging relevance for themselves.'* (Academic F, Philosophy)

Taken together, the three quotes above highlight a complex set of issues which relate to technological developments, students' motivations, expectations and financial pressures, as well as assessment and the nature of the education. Perceptions of changes are complex, with several academics going on to question whether students actually read less nowadays. Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*if I think about my own undergraduate [studies] ... I was often the only person who would go and read one extra thing ... I always get frustrated with colleagues who get very uppity about the reading ... colleagues ... who ... may themselves have been the ... anomaly ... in their own class 50 years ago.*

Academics felt that it might be more the case that *'if you give them an article to read ... the likelihood is that only about 15% will attempt to read it'* (Academic E, Accounting).

Technological developments in accessing and sharing knowledge were thought to increase this problem. Academic N (Sociology) noted that *'students need to read, but ... they don't learn. They go online and they find a summary.'* Introductory texts and summaries are now far more easily available to students and change the way students work with knowledge:

*if you're just reading through an introductory text, that maps it out for you. ... it's controversial that mapping ... they should not think that that is how it is* (Academic F, Philosophy).

Academic G likewise noted that *'the idea of going to a library and opening a book ... to a lot of them is quite alien now. If they can't look it up on google or Wikipedia it's not important'*. Comments link not only to ease of access to recommended academic texts, but also to other kinds of hybrid and non-expert knowledge which may be considered less academically valid and worked with in new and different ways (Beetham and Oliver, 2010, p.160).

### **Students' expectations**

Academics felt that students' expectations of their educational experiences played a large role in the nature of the pedagogical relationship and their learning, and in some instances impacted negatively on academics' ability to deliver the *ideal*. Examples have been cited above in relation to curricula, particularly linked to financial tensions and employability. Academics linked students' expectations of their learning to previous learning experiences at school and a lack of independence in *'A-levels where ... you're processing information in a ... somewhat less independent way.'* (Academic F, Philosophy).

Academic G (Engineering) noted a need to *'dumb down'* a core module for first year students because of a *'culture shock'* of *'having to go away and think about something and find information and decide which bits of knowledge they've been picking up are appropriate to solve a problem'*. The point was made that students had previously at school *'always been given all the information they needed in one form or another'*. Academic G noted that because students were unable to independently gather information, it *'had to get pulled in the end ... which [was] a real shame'*.

Related to academic approaches discussed above, students' expectations of quicker access to knowledge were discussed. Academic F (Philosophy) said:

*They just press the button and ... everything's just there ... they are in general happier if it seems easier and you're spoon-feeding more ... you're vulnerable to them not realising what's good for them ... it's not blaming them ... in an ideal world they don't need to know..., as long as we know and we're confident what's good for them.*

Beetham and Oliver (2010) noted the influence technology has had on students' approaches to their studies, where 'accessibility, rapid feedback and ease of use are features of learners' daily experience of technology which they may transfer to expectations they have about knowledge and learning' (p.163).

Academic H (Chemistry) felt that other lecturers' practices of spoon-feeding where students are given '*copies of all the PowerPoint slides in a booklet right at the beginning of the lecture course*' did nothing to '*get the students' engagement*' and was educationally unhelpful. Smith (2008) notes that whilst students' expectations of spoon-feeding might be blamed on their '*underdeveloped conception of learning*' (p.715), like Academic H, she feels that academics are responsible for guiding students' learning and attitudes to learning. So whilst '*students complain[ed]*' about taking more notes, Academic H noted that typical feedback from them often said '*have to write a lot, but learn loads*'. But Academic G (Engineering) believed that '*some of them don't want that freedom anyway, they really want to be told what to do*'.

Academic F (Philosophy) linked spoon-feeding directly to student evaluations, where some academics fear receiving poor evaluations from students if access to readings and summaries is not made easy:

*so in relation to evaluations, ... that's ... a tension. Do you just make things easy for them even though you think they'd benefit by it being a bit harder? ... It does ... seem perverse to not give them the reading... when the library does it so nicely and it could be just so straightforward.*

Academic J alluded to potential '*generational*' issues relating to cultural, social and technological changes in what and how students today access knowledge:

*I stand in front babbling to them about referencing books, and then I think 'well, there is a real generational issue there around ... what they are actually accessing'. And part of me feels like ... we[are] all just burying our heads in the sand about what we're telling them to read, when in reality they're just absolutely programmed to not do that anymore. (Academic J, Town Planning).*

### ***A new generation?***

Labelling today's students as '*Generation Me*', Academic R (Medicine) commented that they '*are different, and you avoid that at your peril*'.

*Generation Me ... there's lots that is challenging in them, but there's a huge amount within Generation Me who have immense self-belief, and*

*how you tap into that positively [is important and] you avoid at your peril if you don't acknowledge the fact that they learn differently, and they multitask.*

Academic R discussed one teaching session using technology, and noted student expectations relating to this: *'it was a medium that they're used to, that immediacy'*. Academic R felt the use of technology in teaching was necessary for a new generation of students:

*it was a very different type of session because it really tapped into the generation 'me' ... I was changing stimulus every microsecond ... they weren't facebooking or whatever, I was making them use the devices to participate in the session and to share with each other. ... it was absolutely amazing.*

Twenge (2009) has similarly noted how 'generational changes' have increased the need for interactivity in teaching (p.398).

Linked to discussion on the impact of generational changes on education, Academic M (English) commented that students nowadays are far more comfortable discussing ideas relating to feminism than previously and said: *'it's easier than it used to be, because they ...have a purchase on the topic ... that's a better interaction than we used to have'*. Academic F (Philosophy) made a similar point about philosophy now being more accessible as a discipline. This then changes how curricula and pedagogical interactions manifest themselves in the learning environment.

### ***Outcomes and attainment***

Many students were felt to come with high expectations related to assessment grades. Academic H (Chemistry) noted that *'students are very very hung up, or we make them hung up on modular exam results, they just, '100%, I've gotta get for this paper, a certain percent in this module'*. Linking students' grade expectations, and their sometimes skewed understandings of what is expected of them academically, Academic J (Town Planning) gave an example of a student who had done little work throughout his degree, *'failed loads and loads of things'*:

*He says to me I'm really really keen to get a 2:1'...'yes, yes, yes, I played too much [sport] ... I know that now, but do you think I'm gonna get a 2:1?'. I mean, just do the maths on his aggregate ... they're just delusional.*

Academic Y (Biological Science) noted attempts to resist students' expectations of grades attached to learning: *'in this department we try to resist it, but we found in the past that we ... give them essays for practice'* but students *'won't take it seriously unless we attach marks to it'*. The department was unable to overcome this and

*we end[ed] up attaching ... small numbers of marks to things that ... they should be doing ... for the enjoyment of it, or for practice. (Academic Y, Biological Science).*

## **Assessment**

Aside from students' own expectations and motivations, inflexibility relating to types of assessment, and the linking of assessments to fixed learning outcomes were raised by academics as limiting delivery of the *ideal*. Academic H (Chemistry) felt that few students take an approach of '*I haven't seen this kind of problem before, I'll go and look in a book and see if I can find it*',

*... because ... the setup that we have at [this university, is] very much more, 'Here's the lectures, here's the exam. Here's the lectures here's the exam'. There's nothing in between.*

The opening quote to the section on academic approaches from Academic J also cites assessment-driven learning as narrowing down what students are prepared to engage in, having knock-on effects to students' reading. Relating to assessment, Academic Y (Biological Science) felt that:

*we're so focused on performance and exams ... increasingly these days, ... the students don't want to get engaged in anything unless it's assessed ... You can see it from their point of view because they're worried about their class of degree, and that's going to affect their jobs ... it's a shame.*

Academic C (French) also noted the limiting effect assessment criteria have on students' learning and originality, seeing assessment as:

*a factor which limits in some way, those sparks ... [where] ... you are bringing to bear on what they've done, criteria which might not necessarily have gone into ... what makes a given question and a given idea original. It's just their ability to actually put that down on paper in a set format, hasn't maybe done them justice. But you only give so much credit to that sort of originality you might have helped encourage them to have.*

## **Student support**

Chapter 5 highlighted academics' views on the negative impact that increased student numbers and workload pressures have on their ability to provide academic support. Some academics have however noted an overall increase in personal and pastoral support for students. Alongside the increased '*structure and efficiency*' discussed in Chapter 5, Academic F (Philosophy) noted that in the past:

*students were much less likely to know what was expected of them.... they [were] s'posed to work it out for themselves, and they could go horribly wrong in working that out and that would just be ... unfortunate.... We don't want them at sea in that way, so we want to be able to obviously guide them and help them.*



Academic S (Speech Science) agreed with this sentiment and noted that '*the new [support] system is ... complicated, but much more positive. It has more ... of a ... pastoral leaning, more protection for individuals who need protecting*'. Noting the impact of increased support, which includes improved management and organisational systems around this, Academic F (Philosophy) said previously it was a case of '*sink or swim*' and whilst students would have '*potentially [had an] excellent transformative experience as long as [they were] swimming*':

*you can't ignore the ones who would have sunk ... very few of our students fail or do very badly ... because there's so many ... mechanisms in place and they're given so much guidance really. ... if they put any effort in ... not many of them write third class essays ... and that's partly because ... they're given so much.*

### **Considering the trade-offs**

Leading on from this, a parallel set of trade-offs to those noted in Chapter 5 relating to academics' activities have been observed by academics in relation to students. These note the impact of increased support systems and constraining curricular and assessment structures on students' learning and the *ideal*. In relation to increasing student support, Academic S (Speech Science) noted that:

*there's always the flip side ... if you have a kind of system that's very much student centred, there does exist the opportunity to get through a degree without really going through some of the changes that I think are important*

Academic S noted the importance of students facing '*academic adversity*', being challenged and making mistakes and said: '*many of them though will get through the degree without that happening, and they're the ones I ... worry about*'. The importance of academic challenge as part of learning and academic approaches has been highlighted through comments in sections above, and balancing levels of challenge and support has also been noted as critical by Johansson and Felten (2014, p.32). In addition to the negative effects on students who are the recipients of sustained support, with academics giving increased attention to failing students, the amount of time they have to support other students is then reduced. Academic R (Medicine) noted the need for '*shifting the philosophy from '90% of your time [being] spent dealing with the bottom end*'.

*... The evidence is, these students who fail this number of times, it is not fair. Let them go, let them go ... can we please spend 90% of our time on everybody else ... our top end coming out of the top, and all of the people here being the best doctor they can be.*

Providing a visual representation of the trade-off in moving away from 'sink or swim', Academic F (Philosophy) said:

*so it's like it's more [sound effect and hand signal with one hand high up and flat and another low down and flat, bringing two together to the middle] ... evened out.*

Defending the notion that all student performance is pulled to a middle ground with under-performers now buoyed up and previously high performers brought down, Academic F said that '*the very top people [are] ... not significantly worse off ... not everything's pulled to the middle... but ... if there's an easier path, you will have a lot of students who take it.*' Academic S made a similar point that '*it doesn't happen for all the students. ... Some students ... still approach their degree in the same way that I had to.*'

Trade-offs relating to curricular decisions have been noted earlier. For example, Academic R (Medicine) commented on the constraining effect of the accrediting body and the '*dampening down*' of what might be termed '*achieving potential*' in students, and other academics have noted specific attempts to counter-balance such constraints. Likewise, academics recognise the gains and losses in perpetuating spoon-feeding approaches and using assessments and mark systems in particular ways.

Returning the discussion to notions of balance in negotiating tensions and the need to ensure that changes do not lead to denying the *ideal* completely, Academic S cautioned that:

*[the group of] students for whom there is a defence sitting there so they don't have to engage with things for whatever reasons are troubling, that could get larger that group if we're not careful. Because I think there will become a critical point where the systems and our approaches to working with students tips over into being less helpful. And I'm wondering if we're actually sitting on that point in some ways now.*

This brings the chapter to a need to consider those aspects of *process* which academics feel are best able to counter-balance pressures denying delivery of the *ideal*.

## **Enabling the *ideal*: space, freedom and openness**

Returning to academics' aspirations for the *ideal* outlined in Chapter 4, processes which enable the critical combination of disciplinary context and specialised knowledge, with academic approaches to working with that knowledge, are noted in discussions

above as requiring space and freedom. These manifest in a range of ways for both academics and students, and are described below.

### **Space as time for growth and development**

Chapter 4 introduced academics' perceptions of how students might mature as learners and individuals with time. Students' prior schooling experiences were felt by Academic G (Engineering) to '*slow down*' the pace of development, meaning that now it might '*take longer*' for students to '*achieve*' academically. Many academics highlighted a step-change in students' development from third to fourth year and that educationally, it was possible to do more with students in the later years of their undergraduate degree. Related to this, time spent abroad on exchange was noted by several academics as bringing valuable space for students to develop. Academic C (French) described exchanges as '*massive maturing, enriching, transformative, frightening but also thrilling experience, in varying measure*'.

There was recognition that it is not only students who develop with time. Academic C noted how '*classes ... also have an impact on teachers .... some things that the students say in class will open your eyes too, and that can be transformative ... it can be two way*'. Several academics noted how their teaching had improved with time, making them more confident in their ability to deliver the *ideal*. Academic M (English) said: '*I sometimes cringe a bit at what I was probably doing ... when I first started it was like a rabbit in the headlights*'. It is important to remember this as an important but perhaps overlooked variable when discussing the complexities of the pedagogical environment.

### **Authenticity and authentic encounters**

Academics' honesty and openness about the pedagogical relationship was felt to be important. This included academics acknowledging their own learning and knowledge limitations, as well as what students bring to the relationship. Endorsing a necessary two-way flow in intellectual interactions, Academic N (Sociology) said: '*I would worry if colleagues didn't learn from the classroom. I'm constantly nicking ideas off students*', and Academic G (Engineering) noted with respect to the example cited earlier on group peer learning '*we're all learning something*'. Academic C (French) highlighted the importance of opening up conversations beyond a '*straightforward exchange*' of knowledge:

*I do know a lot more about these subjects than they do, but then ... they might have better questions because I'm immersed in it all the time and can't see the wood for the trees. ... that re-learning process is incessant for us ... it's quite humbling ... as an experience.*

Academic C (French) also noted the importance of being open to students' contributions even 'when students ask sometimes very naïve questions', saying:

*... it's naïve only in the sense that it would be easy to dismiss it on the grounds of some sort of historical or factual comeback, but ... I'd like to think the students would be encouraged by seeing you prepared to accept even a comment which ... might seem fairly crude or naïve or ingenuous, that you can actually ... turn and say 'well actually, that's probably a very good way of looking at it' ... Sometimes students will say something that might appear flippant, but isn't, and building on that is very useful.*

Moving somewhat deeper into the classroom dynamic, Academic M (English) cited an example of 'two stroppy girls' who did not want to be in a certain module and the need to '[overcome an impulse] to get into [an] ... adversarial' interaction. There was a need to '[take] seriously their lack of interest ... their resistance to the topic' and say 'all right, well I'll listen to you' and that's authenticity to me. It's about dropping the 'I'm the teacher, don't scowl at me.'

### **Freedom and space to learn and engage**

Related to comments about improvement in teaching and teaching methods, in some ways, the constructivist/dialogical approaches dominating today's HE classroom (Ashwin et. al., 2015b, p.24; Fox, 2001, p.23) has manifestly introduced notions of space into the classroom. Academic N (Sociology) noted that previously:

*we taught in ways that were probably less imaginative, where it was read a paper and come in and discuss it, and now we find different ways of teaching with them and making them engaged. ... but different ways of getting them to engage that then make them hungry to read.*

Careful pedagogic responses to issues cited earlier relating to students not reading may be seen in two academics' considerations of the issue. Academic J (Town Planning) said:

*I always structure my higher level classes around readings ... sometimes difficult readings. But then I set aside a good amount of time in class, in groups to get them to talk through those readings with each other ... I think I have a relatively good success rate with reading. But I'm asking them to read very little, but they read it. ... my colleagues who give them pages and pages and pages of readings, they have no joy whatsoever ... so there's a real compromise there.*

Academic F (Philosophy) acknowledged that abridged texts might have a role to play, and noted that it was more important to have open conversations with students '*[to] treat them the right way*' and recognise their shortcomings and purpose as introductory. This is similar to the comment cited earlier by Academic C who cited turning problematic '*preconceptions*' into '*tools for learning*' and the need to open up deeper intellectual conversations relating to why knowledge is worked with in certain ways. Academic E (Accounting) felt it was important to put thought into how students might best learn, noting how important it is '*to think of other ways ... to draw those things out and to get people to think critically, and it's only in tutorials where you can actually see their response. In lectures, it's almost impossible.*'

This revisits the theme noted in previous chapters on the productive learning spaces generated through smaller option groups, degree pathways, workshops and tutorials, where academic interactions are possible. It links notions of the need for physical space (and time) to pedagogic space and freedom, and certainly where excessive student numbers have been highlighted, shows a close connection between the two. Academic G (Engineering) said: '*where I put them in groups ... they're teaching each other ... I just give them the topic and say 'give us a 7 minute presentation on it, you can decide what goes in ... it's about giving them the freedom to put a stamp on their learning*'.

Similarly, Academic H (Chemistry) noted:

*[after] gauging what the understanding is of the tutorial group ... I will then diversify, or digress and get them to ... think about other things ... I think that's an important thing to do because it stimulates their enthusiasm, it gets them thinking ... I don't see the point of going over stuff again and again.*

### ***Risky and risk-free teaching and learning***

Raised as an important element in Chapter 4, notions of '*students' willingness to risk different ideas in class*', '*points of dissent*' ... '*which will actually stimulate debate*' Academic C (French) commented that '*you could probably sit quite mute through a lot of your degree if ... you're canny enough on [some] courses*'. Creating '*that ability [for students] to go down new routes of thinking*', for example through free essay questions where they can define their topics and angles of interest and '*seize on*' the chance to '*explore something different*' was felt to be important. Academic C (French) said:

*I think ... that you can make the teaching riskier ... if you defined it in terms of risk, the institution would run a mile.*

but notes that *'people ... give themselves more room for manoeuvring in fashioning courses which allow you to explore things in the ways that [they'd] like, [by suggesting] it's being driven by the students ... that they want these opportunities, therefore we should set them up.'* This is an overt example of how academics might seek to subvert constraints present.

Referring to constraints brought through imposed and regimented curricular structures, Academic F (Philosophy) commented that students need space to develop *'for their own inspiration'*, and Academic C (French) noted that space could be created *'in a single stroke of the pen by getting rid of learning outcomes'*. Regarding the kind of education these constraints produce, Academic C noted:

*if I knew what the outcomes of a course would be before I taught it, then I probably would be less interested in teaching it. I might want to teach a different class that wouldn't produce the same results. ... it's not a sort of battery farm, it's not a production line.*

This comment tallies with that noted earlier relating to the *'dampening down'* effect of competencies made by Academics R and S. Academic C (French) noted:

*I understand why you want some parameters, but I think learning outcomes is a particularly poor one. [You would want] more of an open-ended discussion going on in classes, and you're not expecting students to walk away with tick tick tick tick tick tick, because ultimately, no one goes back to the ... forms to make sure that the students are leaving class with what you've promised them.*

Referring to the problem of assessments and grade expectations, Academic C hoped *'that the student's experience of doing something different has value in itself that they won't attribute to the mark of 62 that they got for it when they could have tried to bank something and got a 64'*. Commenting on the power of student evaluations, Academic C then proceeded to note that *'if you get a student questionnaire or NSS that says the opposite, then your course is sunk'*

### ***Research, dissertations and projects***

Disciplinary research was seen as integral to enabling the *ideal* education. This was both from the angle of academics' own and other current research infused in their teaching, as well as students undertaking their own research as part of their degrees through dissertation and project modules.

In terms of academics ensuring that research feeds into teaching, Academic J's earlier example of circumventing accreditation requirements through option modules is an

example of a dedicated research-focused module, where *'for those ... teaching ... it's really exciting ... some of [them] are the only people who are in the world looking at ... those elements in those ways. And the students I think can feel that excitement'*.

Beyond this dedicated research focus, and somewhat more naturally, Academic C (French) noted the *'virtuous circle'* between research and teaching:

*I like the way they feed into each other. I like the sense that teaching a second year class on [complex subject area] is also a spur to do more research on it, so you can actually become a better teacher about that particular thing ... there are some ... pedagogical drivers for it as well in terms of wanting to be able to communicate better, aspects of your research which really interest you.*

Combining themes above related to students maturing in their final years, with the need for more risky spaces to enable development of academic approaches - develop and try ideas, read around the discipline, and grow and present arguments - most academics highlighted the critical function of research, dissertation and project modules to enabling the *ideal*.

Academic G (Engineering) noted how final year projects *'linked to research which is going on ... so they can get involved in proposing new ideas for things'*, and Academic F (Philosophy) noted that project modules were important in counteracting the general lack of reading, giving students a chance to *'research it for themselves ... find their own articles'*. It was also noted that final year projects were a chance for students to work closely with supervisors and have meaningful academic interactions which brought time and space for working through for example, issues related to credible sources of knowledge and academic judgement and critique. Returning to Academic H's (Chemistry) comments in Chapter 5, the importance of breaking down barriers in the academic community was highlighted:

*Just bring everybody together somehow, both maybe socially and academically, and then I think you cultivate an environment where people will want to learn about research methods and things that are going on.*

Academic G linked the expertise and knowledge gained from these modules to students' future endeavours following graduation:

*the students who are delivering good final year projects, who've developed something new ... are the ones you can see going out and doing very well in industry, or if they decided to stay and do more academic research, they would be very good there.*

### ***Guerrilla teaching***

Another example of relatively risk-free, but risky (as academically exciting) teaching described as '*guerrilla teaching*' by Academic C (French), included extra-curricular academic activities such as reading groups and plays. Academic C noted how '*guerrilla teaching*' was '*like a seminar without the ... dead hand of assessment weighing over it*'. This educational space and freedom manifests itself in '*students feel[ing] liberated to say things they wouldn't otherwise, cause they don't feel they're being judged on it*' and '*they get into it ... they've got loads of great ideas ... and it's just a wonderful experience*'. This guerrilla approach then escapes the limitations noted earlier of assessment criteria, bringing space for originality and removing from students any expectations and/or need to achieve particular grades.

## **Conclusion**

The wide range of tensions that impact on both curriculum and teaching as part of process and discussed throughout this chapter have been summarised well by Academic S (Speech Science):

*running any degree programme is incredibly complicated. There's just so many factors at play ... there's ... individual personalities and drives and motivations which may often be in conflict, and then there's the students who come in with their own stuff which can be very individually different, and then we've also got ... additional external drivers. ... every department's got someone knocking at their door. OK, we have issues like around having to do what the NHS says, but what we don't have is parents worried about what their kids are going to do with the degree afterwards. So, different challenges being generated in different places.*

An example which illustrates the reality of undertaking these negotiations was given by Academic N (Sociology) who commented on a curriculum '*that's constantly under review*' and the need to '*to fit into modules, or into a student timetable, elements that will address the learning and teaching strategy, that will kind of make sure we tick as many of those learning and teaching boxes as possible*'. Academic N said:

*sometimes ... we say we're doing them and we don't. Sometimes we just revisit our modules and rewrite the articulation of that module, so that language appears in the module description ... Sometimes it involves actually working up a new module that puts those things in, or we identify a module in a different department or we identify services ... that might*



*help students to identify those things and put them in the HEAR<sup>6</sup> profile and CVs.*

This comment explicitly reveals the site of mediation between institutional, faculty or departmental demands highlighted in Chapter 5, demands which in reality may or may not be met. It also reveals academics as a crucial mediator in determining what and how students will be taught. Roberts (2015) has noted this pivotal role played by academics where their responses to policy requests will be based on whether they believe them to be beneficial and/or fit with their educational beliefs (p.552).

There are limitations to some of the actions academics take towards ensuring the *ideal*, as many are not mainstream elements of students' educations, and are therefore difficult to sustain and ensure continued provision or uptake of. This includes option modules and guerrilla teaching, and less overt tweaks in assessment, learning-outcomes structures, including exciting and risky modules that could be '*sunk*' by a bad NSS rating. Referring to optional research-focused modules noted earlier, Academic J (Town Planning) said: '*we can risk it because it's optional ... 'I always think you have to be conscious and aware of the pros and cons, you can't try and pretend that a ...10 credit module [can] do everything*'.

The fact that such modules sit under the radar of formal structures, where space and freedom are to be found, is seen as valuable to academics in enabling the *ideal*. Academic C (French) noted that attempting to introduce guerrilla activities into a workload allocation model would '*run the risk of then being quantified and measured, audited and destroyed as a result*', and a similar excuse might be predicted from Academic J above if encouraged to place the activity within the gaze of the accrediting body.

Ironically, with academics feeling forced into a position of risk-taking, offering those activities deemed too risky by current audit and quality measurements outside the formal (internal and external) audit and quality structures, delivery of the *ideal* is now more threatened or at risk as the activities cannot be assured to take place, or be formally 'counted'. As testament to this real risk and somewhat galling for academic departments, Academic C noted that activities discussed above are '*used for things like open days ... to draw people in*' but noted the tenuous status of these teaching activities and the high risk associated with advertising them as if they were the norm:

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<sup>6</sup> Higher Education Achievement Report issued to students entering university from September 2012 onwards and provides a combined record of all academic and extra-curricular achievements and activities.

*I do feel that we run the risk of ... standards breaches ... we're advertising ourselves as being this all-singing all-dancing department, but it's running on goodwill.*

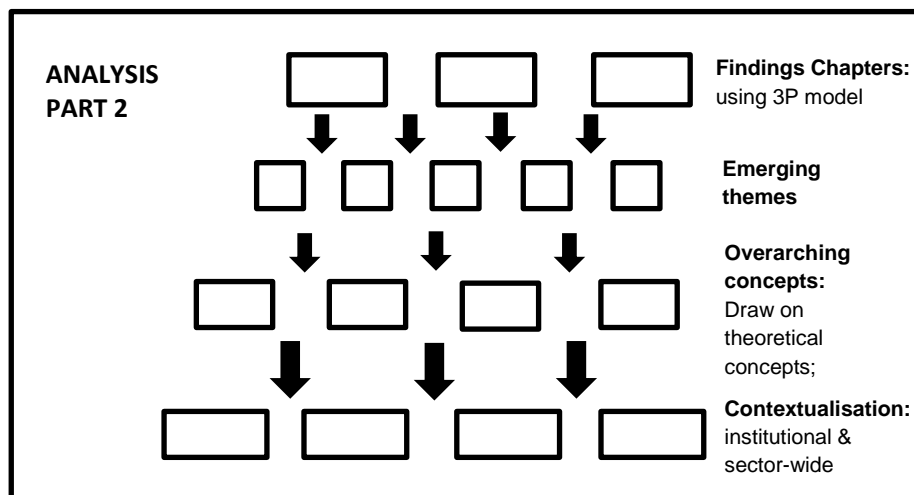
In conclusion, much of the chapter reflects those elements academics see as *ideal* in an undergraduate education and discussed in Chapter 4. This has been taken further in terms of how it might then be achieved, and how, in the face of tensions, academics respond. Seen as a thread through the two preceding findings chapters, notions of freedom and space are proposed as critical to all aspects of undergraduate education and to enable the *ideal*. These points will be picked up as part of the themes for discussion in the final chapter.

# CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

## Introduction

In bringing the thesis towards closure, this final chapter starts with a brief overview of key concrete and abstract themes which have emerged from the findings. These go part-way towards evidencing how the research questions have been answered across the findings chapters, specifically those related to academics' beliefs about the purpose of HE and the nature of transformation and the key enabling and denying elements for what I have termed an *ideal* undergraduate higher education. As noted previously, findings Chapters Four to Six were important analytical stages in themselves, drawing out further abstract, less tangible themes for discussion here. Part 2 of the schematic representation of stages of my analytical process (Figure 8, below) shows how this final discussion merges findings with theoretical concepts from the literature to address the remainder of the research questions, namely how tensions in the university might be visualised and addressed, and what lessons might be learned from the study by the university and sector.

The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the study itself, including methodologies employed, its contribution to research, strengths and weaknesses, and possible actions in moving forwards.



**Figure 8:** Schematic representation of the analytical process beyond the findings chapters (Part 1 presented in Chapter 3).

## Key emerging themes

It is useful to recap the key emerging themes from the chapters, within which reside the rich data presented across the three findings chapters. As already alluded to in discussion on thematic analysis in Chapter 3, I have identified two different types of themes as emerging from the data, namely concrete, and more abstract, less tangible ones, and these have been treated in slightly different ways.

### Summarising the concrete themes

A matrix cross-tabulation of thematic coding was created using NVivo™ (Table 2, below). The table incorporates key concrete elements highlighted by academics, clustered within presage-process-product themes, and presented against key themes under exploration as part of the research questions, namely the purpose of HE, transformation as a concept, and the *ideal* as enabled or denied. In using this data analysis tool, I am conscious that, as with my earlier approach to policy analysis, this is undertaken as a qualitative exercise rather than an attempt to present findings from a qualitative study in a quantitative way. Where intersection values are high, there was a strong overlap of the two relevant areas in the interviews. These have been highlighted in academics' views across the findings chapters and are annotated on the table as a summary of key points. Caution taken to avoid my skewing of interpretations during the coding process was elaborated upon in Chapter 3.

Across the majority of concrete themes, it should be noted that most tensions raised by academics may act as either denying or enabling of the *ideal*. For example, student numbers have been highlighted as detrimental to the *ideal*, but when kept sufficiently low to allow for meaningful academic interactions, these become enabling. The same could be said for leadership and management approaches, staff roles, reward and recognition, and processes and systems related to learning and teaching. The other common element shared by these areas is that they fall within the gift of the institution as a whole to manage. In some instances, institutional mediation/buffering is less possible, for example where external pressures impact on curriculum and pedagogy. These include direct and strong impacts in instances such as courses which rely upon external accrediting bodies and employers to endorse professional or vocational curricula, delivery and standards. It is not the case, however, that non-professional courses are therefore protected from external pressures, and previous chapters highlight pressures related to changing research funding and recognition, the skills and employability agenda, and student and parent expectations, which may or not be financially/employment linked. How the institution is able to act as mediator/buffer against them to ensure (and assure) the *ideal* education is key.



## **Introducing less tangible abstract themes**

The methods section in Chapter 3 noted that a suite of less tangible themes started to emerge during interviews, transcription and analysis, and these crystallised further across the three findings chapters. Abstract themes which interweave with one another include:

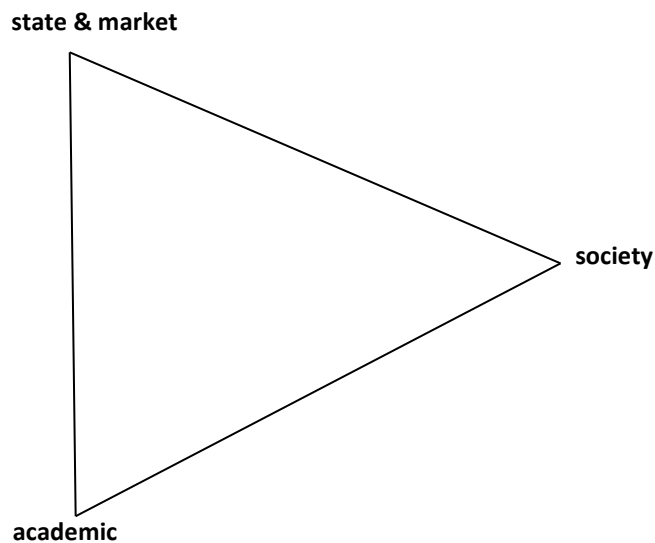
- **notions of interests, value and use:** from examining the purpose of HE and students' transformations, through to how institutions manage and reward teaching, and how academics work with knowledge, curricula and pedagogy;
- **accountability, risk and trust:** of academics and their practice, and also linking to academics' changing roles and identities amidst tensions related to institutional notions of accountability and risk and also interest and value;
- **space:** as time and freedom from commitments, structures and rules for developing ones teaching, and to allow for creativity and risk-taking, and also encourage the same in students.

Unlike with concrete themes, for example, student numbers, where it is fairly straightforward to examine the phenomenon to hand, explanation and analysis is less straightforward with more abstract themes. With a set of themes which do not fit as neatly into a 3P model, or emerge as clear-cut through matrix analysis above, it is necessary to return to higher level concepts introduced in Chapter 2. These situate the themes as part of dominant ideologies in HE, and 'patterns of thinking' which in turn, reflect 'the practices of social, cultural and economic relationships' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.193) and underpin the definitions of quality in HE (Filippakou, 2011, p.26). As part of a critical realist study, this also returns the study to notions of the wider structural domain which academics are constantly required to negotiate (Archer, 1998). Where the first part of the research questions was answered through the findings chapters, a deeper examination of the more abstract concepts leads to answering the latter part of the research questions related to balancing tensions, and solutions in moving forwards.

## **Using wider concepts to visualise tensions**

Key concepts are pivotal in visualising abstract themes noted above with respect to state and market ideologies, and the impacts of these on pedagogies and

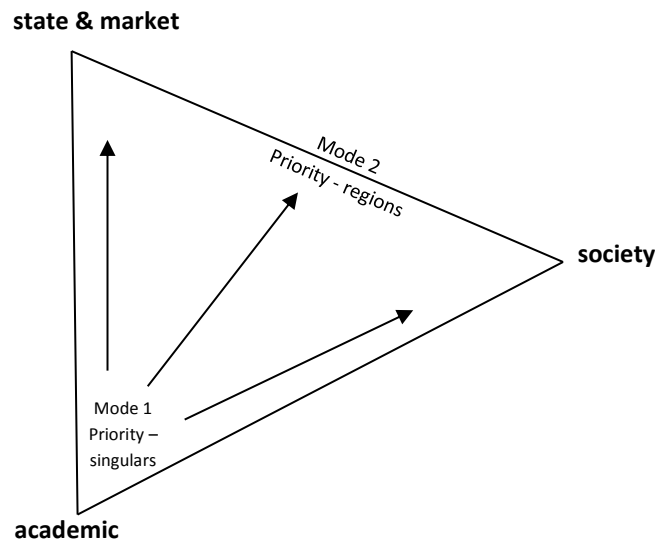
practice. The Clark triangle was introduced in Chapter 2, and whilst Clark constructed the triangle with apices of academic, state and market, I have amended the apices to be 'academic', 'state and market' and 'society' (Figure 9 below). This follows both the merging of state and economic agendas noted by academics interviewed and other researchers (Abbas and McLean, 2007, p.725; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.11), as well as comments made by academics regarding the distinct societal purpose of HE. On an educational level, this framing explains better the ideological pulls on purpose, knowledge, curricula and pedagogy which emerged from interviews and were cited in Chapter 4.



**Figure 9:** Amended Clark 'Triangle of Coordination' (after Clark, 1983, p.143) reflecting competing tensions emerging from interviews.

### **Knowledge and the disciplines**

Whilst it was agreed that disciplinary knowledge should be the starting point and crucial grounding for undergraduate education, the majority of academics noted a need for undergraduate education to develop more than disciplinary knowledge, particularly in the context of high fees, employability and notions of lifelong learning. The shift towards providing more than disciplinary knowledge is manifested in pressures on pure mode 1 disciplines to move into mode 2 experiential knowledge options, represented in Figure 10 below.



**Figure 10:** Amended Clark triangle showing the direction of changes noted in undergraduate disciplines (after Clark, 1983, p.143; Bernstein (2000); Scott, 1995)

These were observed as a growing range of applied options for students in their final years, seen in Chapter 5 in Maths and Biological science as things that are *'useful'* for those who are not scientifically as strong (Academic T, Maths) and will not continue to *'go into science'* (Academic Y, Biological Science), and in History curricula changing to reflect *'the role of history ... in society'* (Academic L, History). As reflected in the research literature on concepts of knowledge, and discussed by academics interviewed, and as the apices of the triangle intimate, shifts are a function of dominant interests, be they state, market, wider society, or individuals, students, or parents. For disciplines which were already defined as Mode 2 or applied (Table 1, Chapter 3), and also on the 'hard' side, such as Engineering, Medicine and Speech Science, these were observed as experiencing pressures of *'dumbing down'* (Academic G, Engineering) and often unwelcome pulls towards competency-based curricula.

### **Curricula and pedagogies: the concept of contained play**

I have interpreted observations related to curricular and pedagogical tensions introduced by systems, processes and structures internal and external to the university, as exemplifying the concept of 'contained' or 'regulated play' proposed by Docherty (2011, p.56). Just as systems, rules and processes are noted as bringing 'structure and organisation' to children's play-groups (ibid.) and 'censoring and restricting types of play deemed undesirable' have brought order to playgrounds (Kozlovsky, 2008, p.171), so too has a similar impact of constraint been observed through interviews conducted and more widely in HE, and noted



in Chapter 2. An increase in regulation and containment has been noted over the past 40 years, stemming from the late 1970s' conservative push towards efficiency and managerialisation in HE, but later exacerbated by the growth of a global knowledge economy and increased marketisation of HE (Trowler, 2003, p.50; Walford, 1988, p.49). In this environment, rather than being concerned with 'explanation' necessary to provide a space for the creativity of academia, Davis (1999) notes that 'politicians, industrialists and administrators' are concerned with 'busyness' (p.5) and there is a persistent 'struggle for control of a definition of reality' (ibid. p.8).

Notions of quality were introduced in the opening chapters, with particular emphasis on the problematic ways in which it is defined through survey and evaluation metrics and the incoming Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2016; BIS, 2015; Ashwin, 2015b; Smith, 2012). Messages from this research related to regulated or contained, as opposed to unregulated play, parallel the competing discourses of quality introduced in Chapter 2, where auditable, technological, market-orientated notions of quality (Ashwin et al., 2015a; Craig et al., 2014; Filippakou, 2011) closely exemplify the environment described by academics interviewed, and conceptualised here as regulated play (Docherty, 2011). Within this environment, the space and freedom deemed necessary by academics to provide an ideal education are constrained, and extending the metaphor to the characteristics of soft-play areas, bounded as well as cushioned.

### ***Curricula***

This study has shown how knowledge and curricula are driven by a range of interests, including external accrediting and commissioning bodies, research agendas, student, parent and employer expectations related to skills and employability, and institutional or departmental attempts to market such components. Abbas and McLean (2007) have noted the link between what counts as valid and what counts as good quality (p.728) and how much perceptions of value vary, depending on the power structures and social and cultural systems and who makes the judgement (p.724). As the findings chapters noted, curricula may be judged on their use value, for society, or more instrumental individual, employer or state economic purposes, and reduce the space for disciplinary content. In a slightly more nuanced way, the findings have shown how curricula and content are contained and constrained, not only overtly through external bodies and employers in some instances, but also through institutional structures and systems, for example student evaluations, surveys, workload models, information for students and centrally imposed initiatives, that drive curricula away from space for originality and 'unregulated play' towards rigidity.

Pressure to provide real-world experience is not only within curricula, but is seen as pressure on academic departments and the university to provide extra-curricular opportunities. Academic V (Law) noted that these '*additional opportunities*' were critical to a certain type of '*transformation*' which provided greater opportunities for students beyond study. These shifts were also shown in the changing institutional discourses related to teaching, and seen in the context-setting analysis of institutional learning and teaching strategies (Figures 5 and 6, Chapter 2). A new institutional discourse to this effect is now also championed within and by a Students' Union 'Academic Life' plan which believes that the '*purpose of university isn't just about the course, but is about everything else beyond this. ... It's the university's role to help students to succeed in any way they want to*' (Students' Union Education Officer, 07/01/2016 pers. comm.).

Recently, BIS (2016) has stated that employability is the most important element to graduates, and defines good teaching broadly as including 'learning environments, student support, course design, career preparation and 'soft skills', as well as what happens in the lecture theatre or lab' (p.11) effectively endorsing a requirement for universities to sustain multiple functions. Docherty (2011) notes how within the environment of contained play 'the activities of learning and teaching become simply one among the now wide-ranging 'suite' of facilities that constitute a specific institution's 'offer' as it is called' (p.61), which supports observations made above and in institutional documentary analysis.

### ***Pedagogies***

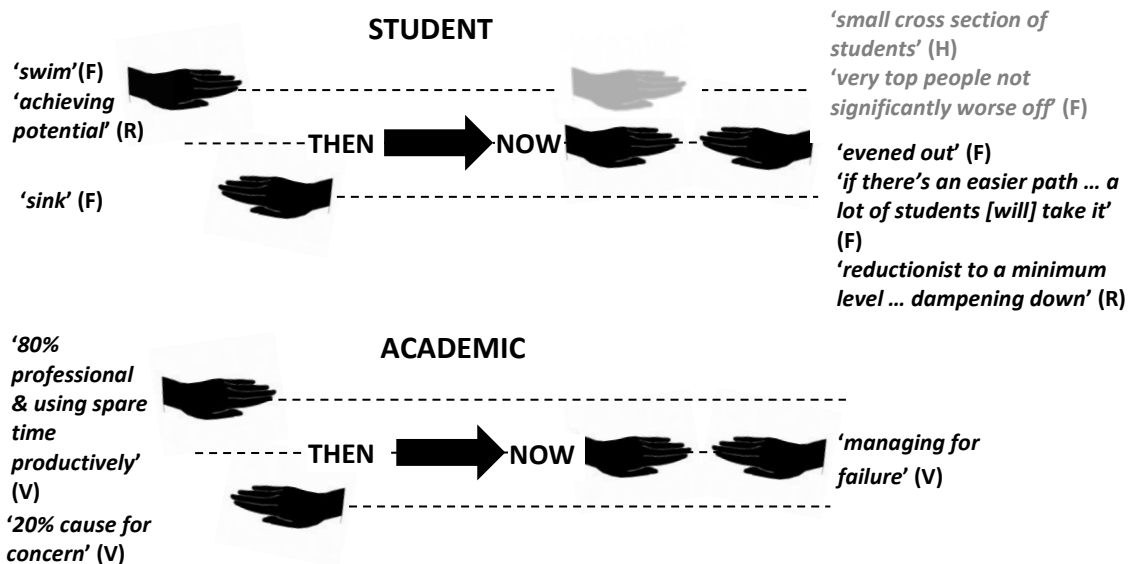
Related to pedagogies and practice in an HE context, academics were largely positive about '*order*' having been introduced where previously it was '*more chaotic*' (Academic F, Philosophy), and satisfied that '*unacceptable practices*' (Academic V, Law) and poor teaching are addressed, resulting in an overall improved standard of teaching. Within the context of contained or regulated play, for both students and staff, under-performance defined by institutional and national measures is minimised through increased processes for performativity, yielding a more consistent 'regulated' educational product and bringing with it less institutional risk in market, product and consumer terms (Docherty, 2011, p.50).

Counter messages from academics, however, about the impact of systems, processes and audit as requirements for 'explicitness in teaching' (Filippakou, 2011, p.25) and internal and external stakeholders' requirements, have revealed the negative impacts of constraining space and freedom for creativity, innovation and meaningful academic interactions, academics' teaching and students' learning within the pedagogical relationship. Whilst the need for some structure,

support, organisation and assurance of quality was recognised, and instances have been cited where students have better access to knowledge than before, detrimental effects of these activities have been noted in relation to both academics (in Chapter 5) and students (in Chapter 6). Interpreted as driven by a combination of managerialism and marketisation factors, negative effects on an *ideal* education are exemplified in comments such as Academic R's (Medicine) 'dampening down' of performance, and Academic C's (French) comment in Chapter 6 that processes to 'quantify', 'measure' and 'audit' also 'destroy'. Messages parallel those seen in the playground/playgroup metaphor above and are expanded on below.

**Impacts of contained play on 'scholarly dispositions'<sup>7</sup> of academics and students**

Using the comment and hand signal made by Academic F (Philosophy) on student performance being more 'evened out' nowadays (Chapter 6), changes highlighted by academics are captured diagrammatically in Figure 11 below.



**Figure 11:** Graphical representation of the impacts of environment of 'contained play' on students' learning and performance (top) and academics' performance (bottom) using the hand signal made by Academic F (Philosophy) and comments by Academics F, H (Chemistry), R (Medicine) and V (Law).

Comments about students' learning and level of achievement noted in Chapter 6 by Academics R (Medicine) and F are equated with those raised by Academic V (Law) about academic performance noted in Chapter 5. For both, academics have observed that a lot of time, systems and support are invested to ensure a baseline performance, thereby ensuring that students and staff have less

<sup>7</sup> Ball (2013) notes how 'more and more of the scholarly disposition is rendered explicit and auditable' (p.137).

opportunity to fail. But this has resulted in a general '*dampening down*' of performance overall, apart from a very small minority who are able to sustain high performance for one reason or another.

McWilliam (1996) notes how the regulated HE environment is now 'sanitised' and brings with it the 'safety of blandness' (p.373). Issues highlighted in this study related to curricula, student support, quality processes and staff performance management all exemplify what McWilliam (2004) refer to as a 'softness malaise' in HE (p.158). Academic R's comment noted in Figure 11 regarding '*reductionist*' curricula and pedagogies bringing learning and students' outcomes to a minimum level echoes comments by Fox (2002) who attributes shifts 'to the lowest common denominator' to student expectations, and notes the 'dire consequences' of this for HE (p.133). Dominant ideologies embodying concepts of regulated play, quality discourses, notions of trust, interest and control, and constraints on academic performance, teaching and students' learning, have been linked to government 'desires to control the academic community' rather than 'its quest for top quality higher education' (Trow, 1993, p.102). This is also interpreted by Enders (2013) as a search for 'output legitimacy' within a capitalist democracy (p.62).

#### ***Psychotic behaviours: negotiation, overcoming, subversion or acceptance?***

Noted as part of the literature on quality in Chapter 2, there are negative impacts for those working in this environment who attempt to answer opposing ideological discourses. In this study, academics interviewed have indicated that what is needed in terms of the *ideal* education is not always supported, recognised or rewarded by university and external structures and processes, either in relation to their own teaching practice or to the ways in which students learn. The reality of tensions experienced by academics has been discussed in the findings chapters, and I have interpreted the pulls identified above through competing discourses related to quality and 'play'.

The environment and practices described within the university in this study exemplify concepts of 'university psychosis' (Craig et al., 2014) and schizophrenic behaviours (Shore, 2010), where there is a disconnect between what is aimed for by different institutional stakeholders, in the case of this study, academics, as opposed to wider institutional and external stakeholders. In having already critiqued the casual use of labels in the thesis, I recognise the importance of using the terms 'psychosis' and 'schizophrenia' with care, and do so in relation to definitions regarding 'loss with reality' and 'inconsistent contradictory elements' (Oxford Dictionaries online, 2016). I also note that the proportion of academics experiencing unacceptable levels of stress continues to rise, notably in relation to

work demands, change management, management support, relationships and role clarity (UCU, 2014, p.1), and it may be that in highlighting such disorders that a connection between such elements may be better recognised.

Drawing on elements described in Chapter 6, the ways in which academics negotiate this disconnect and tensions considered by them to deny the *ideal* include:

- conscious choices over what is included in curricula, for example, ensuring the balance of disciplinary, theoretical knowledge with applied knowledge and the presence of research elements, dissertations and projects;
- bracketing off content seen as threatening to the *ideal* into modules that 'don't matter' to progression;
- inserting optional modules where limited by accreditation bodies and flexing within accredited modules at levels beneath those formally reported;
- offering additional options and pathways to provide wider opportunities;
- offering guerrilla teaching outside formal structures; and
- ensuring freedom, space and openness are part of pedagogical relationships.

The metaphor of play can be extended to include the gaming necessary in this environment noted by Craig et al. (2014) in terms of 'effort applied' to manage the outward appearances of auditable quality (p.8) whilst still ensuring that quality of education defined by academics as *ideal*. This research has evidenced how academics persist in striving for the *ideal* whilst simultaneously answering to what is required from various stakeholders. Notions of gaming have been seen in how academics choose to play the system, for example Academic N's (Sociology) comment noted in Chapter 6 related to multiple process-related requests: '*sometimes ... we say we're doing them and we don't*' and in academics' comments related to the use of surveys at institution-level for cutting courses, and at departmental level for performance management. Academics have also observed gaming in students trying to straddle these opposing quality agendas, meeting rigid assessment criteria, whilst also showing originality in thought and approach. Academic C (French) noted that: '*the better students can combine both. They recognise there's a bit of a game to play*'.

In line with psychotic behaviours that this environment induces and juxtaposed with direct attempts to subvert the environment of 'contained play', academics have also acknowledged that there are practices which might in some instances

deny the *ideal*, but in which they continue to be complicit. Beyond mere acceptance, in some instances academics noted how they actively sustain such practices. As Chapter 6 discussed, these include:

- increased support mechanisms for those students who might otherwise fail;
- attaching marking schemes to learning activities as incentives for students;
- using technology to give students better access to knowledge;
- accepting and working with the constraints of programme structures and assessments; and
- spoon-feeding across a range of learning activities.

In this regard, Filippakou (2011) expresses concern that some practices and underlying ideologies start to become natural, and in certain instances, academics might start to internalise the values embodied in them (p.22).

### ***Accountability***

Within the concept of psychosis and conflicting quality agendas, this research surfaced academics' confusion about accountability. Trow (1996) notes the range of interpretations of accountability when HE is linked to society through the market, related intimately to the range of interests present (p.310). The findings have shown how academics genuinely care for their students' academic development, well-being and future successes, with a natural sense of moral accountability. This is however skewed by tensions and competing interests discussed, particularly related to how much and what type of support and care is provided, and how this is balanced (Barnett, 2011, p.47). Bowles (2008) has noted how a market ideology and market incentives can negatively affect individuals' intrinsic motivations and this notion can be applied to both academics' and students' attitudes towards education (p.1605). Describing accountability as a 'double-edged sword', Trow (1996) notes how 'efforts to strengthen it usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust' (p.311), and increasing performance and accountability measures noted across the interviews are indicative of this.

The marketised quality discourse (Craig et al., 2014, p.11; Staddon and Standish, 2012, p.640) has led academics in this study to feel accountable for not only the educational experiences of their students, but also for students' expectations about value for money, and the debt they will carry. In the interviews, academics expressed discomfort at recognising the tensions and contradictions at play in their own views, seen in expressions of anxiety, surprise and guilt at '*getting on sticky ground here*' (Academic T, Maths), or '*making a positive argument for*

*privatisation of higher education*' (Academic M. English). An example which shows one academic's recognition of the ideological struggle at hand, but also identifies the need for accountability came from Academic N (Sociology) who said:

*God, shoot me down for saying this, Ok, so Margaret Thatcher came in and said 'we have to hold ... the welfare state accountable'. She was an awful woman, she killed the welfare system, but I understand that central argument ... we hadn't really explicitly articulated what we thought were the functions of that system, whether or not it was operating correctly, and whether or not it was the best way of doing it. Now the model she chose, the market model, I think is the wrong way of doing it, but it has been like that in education. So the fee has forced us to think more consciously about those elements of education, to articulate them, to build them into students' educational experience. (Academic N, Sociology)*

### ***Visualising ideal curricula and pedagogies within competing ideologies***

The *ideal* described by academics espouses notions of 'unregulated play' and encompass notions of space, time and freedom. Referring back to 'guerrilla teaching' introduced in Chapter 6, where Academic C (French) noted that it is not that academics are '*trying to encourage whacky originality at every turn*' but rather the space for '*a dialogue, ...discussions ...critical commentary [of the subject matter]*', Docherty (2011) is similarly not suggesting that the university become a site for 'frivolity' (p.56). Instead, he notes how unregulated spaces allow for the 'routines of mindless production, the mechanization of life' to be 'disrupted' 'in order to produce time; and that time is where thinking – and thus also learning – can take place' (ibid.). Kleiman (2016) has recently defended the need for 'guerrilla tactics' in national arts education noting that whilst regulations are being fulfilled and targets met, 'the space for creativity, non-conformity and eccentricity has been closed down'.

Matching notions of unregulated play, academics' aspirations for the *ideal* link more closely to a quality discourse variously described by researchers as 'intrinsic' (Craig et al., 2014, p.11), and 'alternative ... with a focus on transformation' (Ashwin et al., 2015a, p.610; Harvey and Knight, 1996, p.7). The majority of examples cited by academics for enabling the *ideal*, whilst espousing some values of what Parker (2003) defines as 'traditional curricula', also fall within more 'progressivist pedagogies', thereby straddling the polarised 'progressive' and 'traditional' endpoints introduced in Chapter 2.

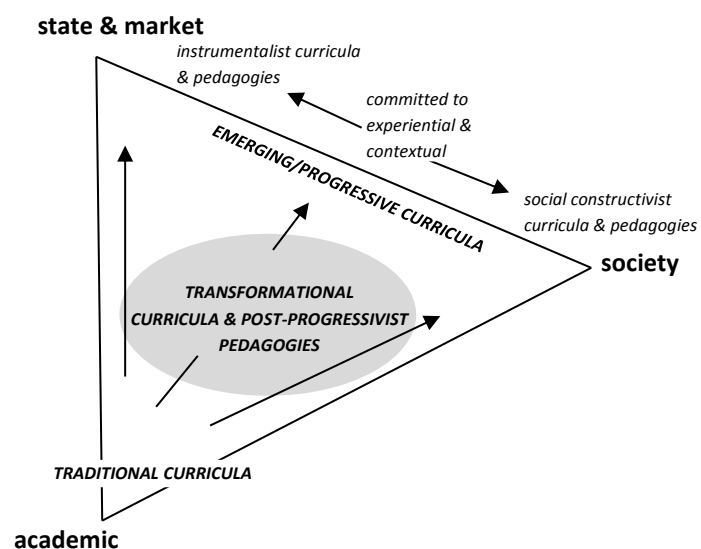
Parker (2003), who sees the polarisation between traditional and emerging/progressive curricula as divisive and unhelpful, proposes transformational curricula which are neither traditional nor emerging, but seek to preserve the best elements of both without throwing the 'knowledge' baby out

with the bathwater. This definition fits more closely the *ideal* proposed by academics. The introductory chapters noted the absence of academics as expert, not only in policies, but also in the classroom, by virtue of shifting pedagogies and students' expectations, and this study highlights academics' views that academics should feel assured in knowing what is educationally good for, and expected of, students. Academic C (French) summed up the pedagogical balance well, saying:

*I'm a huge fan of that equality of intellect in the classroom, but I do not think we should be led by what students want, because they're voting on something they don't know anything about. They're coming from a point of inexperience and ignorance. You wouldn't do that in any other profession. You shouldn't really do it in education either.*

Watkins (2007), whilst discussing primary school education, also calls for a move away from conceiving education in terms of a binary of traditionalism and progressivism towards an alternate, more enabling 'post-progressivist' pedagogy (p.779). This pedagogy 'reasserts the valuable position of teachers in classrooms and their role in enabling students to acquire effective, creative and critical capacities' (ibid.).

Building on the visualisation of knowledge using an amended Clark triangle above, Figure 12 (below) shows competing curricula and pedagogies conceptualised in this space according to underpinning ideologies inferred through the literature.



**Figure 12:** Amended Clark triangle linking pedagogical and curricular models proposed by researchers to underlying ideologies to create a conceptual space for the *ideal* (shaded) (Wheelahan, 2009; Watkins, 2007; Parker, 2003, p.539).



Notably, *ideal* curricula and pedagogies discussed by academics, sit not at the polarised endpoints or sides of the triangle, but within the triangle, thereby embodying a more balanced approach to knowledge acquisition suggested by Muller and Young (2014). This might better identify 'both what a contemporary democratic society needs and the role the university is best suited to perform as a fundamental institution of such a society' (p.138). This is conceptually not unlike Barnett and Coate (2005), who note the importance of curricular balance in terms of knowing (or having), being and acting (p.77). Here, through 'a commitment to providing all students with a space within which to develop capabilities necessary to flourish as receptive and critical learners' (Nixon, 2012, p.147), the outcomes of a transformative learning experience will be a combination of academic skills, employability skills, increased social confidence and changed perception of self and how one relates to society (Ashwin et al., 2012, p.6).

As with knowledge, curricula and pedagogies above, it is possible to use the amended conceptual spaces above to visualise the range of interpretations of transformation.

### **'What transformations are we looking for here?'<sup>8</sup> Revisiting the *ideal***

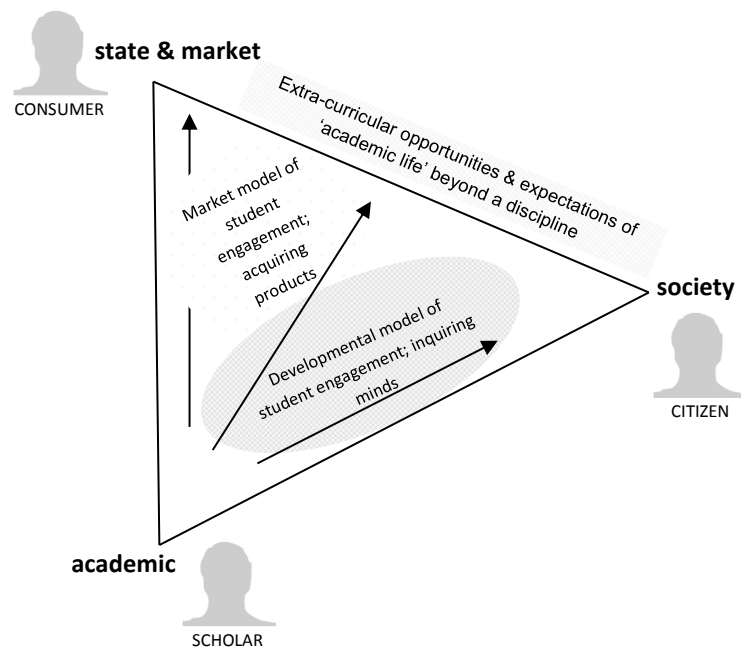
Findings presented in Chapter 4, and research literature in Chapter 2 highlighted tensions in definitions and use of the term transformation. Whereas most academics interviewed were entirely comfortable with the term, and Academic R (Medicine) saw it as integral to students' professional identity upon graduation, Academic N (Sociology) instead linked it to the 'student experience' and 'students as consumers' discourses discussed in Chapter 2 as part of a marketised HE environment. Noting that this research has revealed an increase in marketised aspects of both the student experience and transformation discourses, I was intrigued to come across a reference by Pine and Gilmore (1999) who overtly describe both an 'experience economy' and 'transformation economy'. They define the 'experience economy' as a progression beyond the 'service economy' (p.189) where businesses should 'experientialize' their goods to realise higher economic value from those goods, noting that in the 'educational realm', active participation is required from customers (students), where they 'personally affect the performance or event that yields the experience' (p.30).

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<sup>8</sup> Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth, 2011, p.207.

This in itself is not dissimilar to what has been discussed in Chapter 2. However, the authors also describe a 'pinnacle' economy beyond the experience economy, the 'transformation economy'. Pine and Gilmore (1999) believe that where repeated experiences risk homogeneity, transformation offers individualised experiences for each customer where the customer becomes the product, and each product is a 'distinct economic offering' (p.197). Combined with Sabri's (2011) accusations of a homogenised student experience (p.657), this adds gravitas to observations in this research of growth in use of the term 'transformation' associated with a marketised HE environment. It also validates Academic N's (Sociology) discomfort with the term, where the institution has '*made explicit those narratives ... so that they [students] will stand out at interview*' and returns the discussion to graduates as products and workers graduating with a suite of badged skills, the 'worker-self-as-skills-bundle' (Urciuoli, 2008, p.211) introduced in Chapter 4, and comments from academics such as '*we are not training up job fodder ... submissive workers ... for the next ... generation*' (Academic C, French).

Recognising links between discourses of transformation and other marketised discourses, and returning to the term transformation being a 'floating signifier' (Illeris, 2014a, p.15) noted in Chapter 2, it is clear that there are significant problems associated with using the term. I propose that caution should be exercised in using the term, and when it is used, the university are clear that it is not being used as a part of an 'all-singing all-dancing' offer (Academic C, French; Academic N, Sociology) through marketing campaigns such as those highlighted in Chapter 2. Rather, in moving forwards, it is important to have a full awareness of competing ideologies and definitions related to transformation. Using the amended Clark triangle presented earlier, it is possible to represent these as inferred both by academics interviewed and other researchers, together with the tensions noted in the system (Figure 13, below).



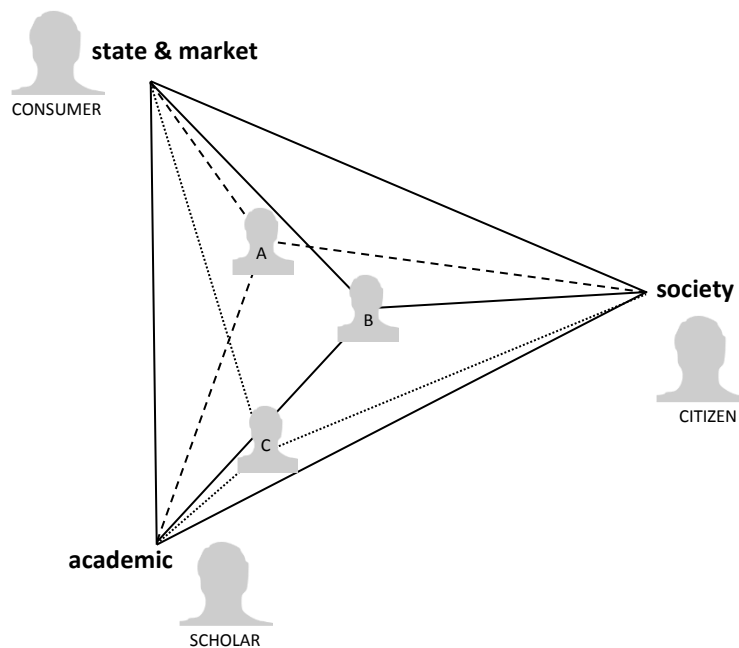
**Figure 13:** Amended Clark triangle showing the range of transformations possible using competing models of student engagement and endpoint identities (Schwartzman and Ellis, 2011; Trowler and Trowler, 2011; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009, p.277; Needham, 2003).

Academics' aspirations for students are most closely represented by the darker shaded zone which encompasses the developmental model of student engagement proposed by Trowler and Trowler (2011), as well as notions of inquiring minds, as opposed to acquiring products proposed by Schwartzman and Ellis (2011). As with shifts in knowledge, disciplines and curricula noted from interviews (Figures 10 and 12), university aspirations for students are noted as moving towards the experiential element of extra-curricular opportunities beyond the discipline, evidenced through academics' comments, the analysis of university strategy and the SU academic life plan cited earlier. Tending towards the 'self-as-skills-bundle' (Urciuoli, 2008), additional opportunities deemed necessary by some academics as part of '*packages*' in an institutional offer were felt to have strayed from a more academic '*exciting*' interpretation of transformation towards more individualised notions of increased '*student horizons*' and '*life prospects*' (Academic V, Law). These match observations by Docherty (2011) as typical of the environment of contained play, and also those of Clegg et al. (2010) where extra-curricular activities are now audited as part of the 'normative gaze of the institution' (p.624).

### *Scholars, consumers or citizens?*

Annotated on Figure 13 at the apices are the graduate identities, where 'consumer' and 'scholar' were drawn from the opening quote of the thesis and used as a provocation for the research questions (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009, p.277). With my addition of a society apex, and combined with other researchers' definitions and academics' views on the purpose of an undergraduate higher education, the end-point identity for 'society' has been termed 'citizen'. Representing the breadth of tensions highlighted by academics interviewed, Needham (2003) notes complexities in defining citizenship, differentiating between two opposing models, namely 'citizen-consumer' and 'participatory citizen' (p.15). The former is 'self-regarding' and incorporates those aspects noted in this research related to market ideologies, such as instrumental attitudes, and voice as complaint, in contrast to the latter as 'community-regarding' where voice is exercised through discussion (ibid.), also matching Academic V's (Law) aspiration for '*ethical citizenship*' in Law graduates. Needham's interpretation endorses my decision to introduce the society apex, thereby establishing a similar continuum between this and the state/market apex. The interpretation also tallies with policy analysis presented in Chapter 2 related to changes in use of the phrase 'at the heart', where shifts have been noted in national discourse towards 'citizen-consumer', and evidenced through interviews with academics.

Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth (2011) highlight the potential for 'identity work' through transformative learning to shift students from any consumer identities they might arrive with (p.207), and this mirrors Academic C's (French) comment in Chapter 6 that '*ill-informed student preconceptions*' might be worked through as part of classroom dialogue. Recognising the constant flux in tensions highlighted, and academics' comments about the range of possible transformations, together with the constraints of fixed end-points in a triangular representation noted in Chapter 2 (Salazar and Leihy, 2013), it is proposed that rather than seeing any students' transformations as pre-defined, there is constant oscillation within the triangle. This will depend on the interplay of tensions, including all presage and process elements identified, and students' own personal projects (Jary and Lebeau, 2009, p.701) and will lead to a fourth potential point for each 'individual' as the apex of a pyramid, noted by Academic R (Medicine) as an essential way of viewing tensions which then bring students' identities and aspirations into the picture, annotated on Figure 14 below.



**Figure 14:** Amended Clark triangle showing a range of possible student identities and transformations between the fixed end points of scholar, consumer and citizen.

Whilst any combination of the three end-points is potentially possible in the internal space of the triangle, and shifts have clearly been noted, Chapter 4 also observed that academics expressed an awareness of the need for balance in curricula, ensuring a solid academic grounding which also sustains critical and intellectual approaches. Institutionally, the *ideal* deemed desirable by academics in this study sits within a space more closely aligned to scholar and citizen end-points. Using what this research has shown about enabling and denying elements within curricula and pedagogies, it is possible to visualise the triangles presented (Figures 10, 12, 13, 14) overlain in a range of combinations as required. This would serve to illustrate the connections between competing ideologies in which notions of interest and value are embedded, and curricula, pedagogies and institutional aspirations for its graduates.

One example of an academics' awareness of balance, and negotiating possible pressures from all apices of the triangle, came from Academic J (Town Planning) who expressed students' desires to have '*a job where they are really making places better ... helping them to develop economically...or reduce inequality*', but at the same time noted the importance of not '*pushing a kind of ... social progressive agenda down their throats without them being critical*' saying:

*I think there's lots of things ... about the left for example, that they shouldn't be critiqued themselves.*

Several academics, including Academic J, queried why the university would want to produce only scholars, and Academic Y (Biological Science) made the valid point that given massification of HE, it was likely that just as many scholars are still produced today. Given the higher numbers of students now in the HE system, and the multiple expectations of universities, it is the case that there is now a far larger pool of students who might not necessarily meet the academics' definition of 'scholar'.

Most academics believed that there are still many students matching notions of scholarship and academic approaches, '*grappling*' with knowledge and going '*through all that hard thinking*' (Academic F) by virtue of the undergraduate education given. They also felt that the quality of teaching delivery and processes is now far better than it ever was, and that students have better access to knowledge today. Academic L (History) noted:

*I think students at [university name] get a much better all-round transformative experience than students in some other institutions, and that's because I think [university name] actually does huge amounts for them ... we have great central services, and then there's a lot to say about the city itself. So that's, I think that's really important, but as I've said, the discipline is absolutely crucial.*

## **Sustaining multiple discourses: living with psychosis**

Academics interviewed have noted that tensions should not be '*opposed*' (Academic J, Town Planning) or '*compartmentalised*' (Academic R, Medicine), so as to allow for a balance between pure and applied elements, particularly in professional disciplines, for ensuring scholarly approaches whilst also making students employable.

Rather than an 'anti-skills, anti-applied knowledge, anti-professional' approach (Muller and Young, 2014, p.138) can we return to the plurality urged in Robbins (1963)? This preserves the place of conceptual and theoretical knowledge in curricula and retains some sense of reified 'transformation' to a scholar in the disciplines whilst also educating graduates with performative skills to thrive in a consumer-led environment (Muller and Young, 2014, p.138; Shay, 2013, p.564; Wheelahan, 2010, p.16). An email from the Vice-Chancellor to all university staff in June 2014 echoes this question asking:

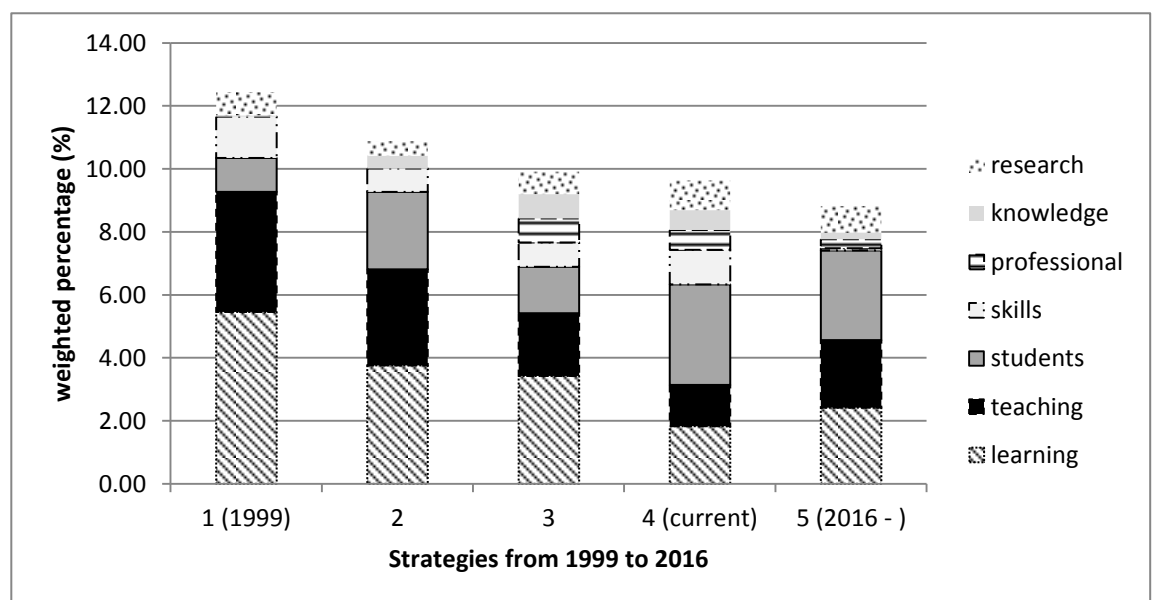
*Do we have to leave the Russell Group to be useful?*

Whilst competing ideologies have been shown to induce university psychosis, these also highlight the demands for universities to sustain multiple functions. In order to move beyond 'worn-out polarities' in a marketised environment and so

dominant as a basis for conceptual models used above (Hodgson and Spours, 2009, p.12), the thesis concludes by using key messages from academics interviewed to propose a more deliberative, exploratory and conciliatory mode of action for the university (Halpin, 1999 in Skelton, 2012b, p.267). This has already been intimated as an oscillating space open for negotiation within the amended Clark triangle.

The first step for the university is to acknowledge the reality of the situation, supported by the evidence emerging from this research and related literature, and then consider carefully how best to sustain multiple discourses and underlying ideologies, encompassing multiple responsibilities (Nixon, 2012, p.147; Barnett, 2000, p.33) with as little compromise as possible to the *ideal* education.

During the closing stages of this write-up, a new institutional learning and teaching strategy has been developed, and Figure 15 builds on Figure 5 (Chapter 2) to capture its key elements. In terms of sustaining multiple discourses, where policy analysis and interview data have revealed a progressive increase in additional elements to be delivered as part of students' educations, this trend has continued. This is noted in Figure 15 as a further decrease in the combined most common elements.



**Figure 15:** Weighted percentages of key word frequencies in five institutional learning and teaching strategies from 1999 to 2016 (gained through NVivo™ analysis).

The increased focus on teaching noted earlier is reflected in Figure 15, and word cloud analysis of the new strategy (Figure 16 below) gives a sense of additional themes in the strategy related to both opportunities internal to the university, and those external to it illustrated through increased frequency of words such as ‘partnerships’, ‘international’, ‘engaged’, ‘work’ and ‘sustainability’.



**Figure 16:** Word cloud of the 100 most frequent words of 4 letters or more in the new institutional learning and teaching strategy, created using NVivo™. Place/institution name deleted.

Given that most academics interviewed intimated that the balance is becoming unsustainable and has ‘gone a bit too far’ (Academic Y, Biological Science), there is an immediate question of the level of tensions that can be tolerated before it becomes clear that the university is unable to offer an *ideal* undergraduate education. In sustaining multiple purposes, how might the university address the fact that it sits at a tipping point? Can it continue to ensure that all learning is not ‘dampened’ to mediocrity, offer a new wide range of additional opportunities for students, whilst also protecting space for undergraduate scholarly approaches and disciplinary depth? The remaining component of the research questions to be addressed is therefore, in moving forwards, what actions might be taken by the university to address the tensions identified?



## **Moving forwards**

### **Acknowledge tensions and trade-offs**

Discussion above has shown the complexity of multiple tensions and ideological spaces that exist in the university, and how these impact upon the academic endeavour in providing an *ideal* undergraduate education. There is no single answer to resolving these tensions. As noted in the closing section of Chapter 5 by Academic V (Law) and alluded to by most academics interviewed, it is my belief that the university should not only surface such tensions, but also acknowledge how pervasive these are, and embrace the need to consider the trade-offs that it is prepared to make in terms of these elements. As intimated above, this will be a question of institutional ideological choice, and hence how competing values and interests manifest as levels of accountability, risk and trust, and how much space and freedom are given to enabling the *ideal*.

### **Decide what constitutes risk**

Noted in the previous chapter, but considered important enough to highlight again as part of this final discussion, is the irony that the many educational activities noted by academics as key to delivering the *ideal*, are being taught in subversive contexts, outside what Clegg et al. (2010) refer to as the 'normative gaze' of the institution (p.624). McWilliam (2004) notes the countless steps taken by universities to guard against waste of resources, failure of students and declining standards (p.152) related to dangerous risk-taking.

In many instances, academics noted that pedagogic space is to be found outside the bounds of audit and systems, and examples noted in previous chapters include extra-curricular academic activities, option modules, and space for originality introduced into classroom dialogues and assessments. Making full use of such exemplars in marketing materials, the institution recognises the innovation in, and value of such activities, yet they sit outside the bounds of formal audit, thus removing the ability of institution or accrediting body to guarantee what they would class as part of a quality education for students. In terms of the current climate of heightened consumer protection, this unwittingly introduces additional risks to the institution.

### **Look for new 'mechanisms for higher level reflection'**

Power (1997) has noted the need for 'mechanisms for higher level reflection on instruments of control ... [and] on the consequences of audit arrangements' (p.144). He proposes deliberation as part of an 'organizational learning process rather than an empty ritual of verification' (p.145). This includes considering how closely the institution's actions are oriented to its original goals, in this case, the

*ideal* education aimed for, and debating the ‘complex bundle of gains and losses’ (Power, 1994, p.9) in aspiring to this. In suggesting approaches for deliberation that will not compromise one’s values, Lambert et al. (2007, p.528) and Naidoo and Jamieson (2005, p.278) have noted the need for critical engagement in, and negotiation of, all pedagogic and curricular elements between all institutional stakeholders. Similarly, Enders (2013) notes the need to face underlying ideological elements and cultivate openness and accountability in the institution, as well as be overt about possible causes of distrust (p.67). To facilitate institutional discussions, this study has developed a 3P model with key points for deliberation which can work in two directions:

**PRESAGE ← PROCESS ← PRODUCT**

*The university could start by debating and defining the ideal UG education aimed for, and what might be ‘at the heart’ of our education and university. Conceptual models and spaces proposed in this research may then be used to define how one might go about ensuring this through curricula and pedagogical approaches (process), and establishing the right environment to support this (presage).*

Or the conceptual models presented may be used to debate the current situation in the university and how this might impact on process and product.

**PRESAGE → PROCESS → PRODUCT**

*Acknowledge tensions:*

- *academic, economic/state & society pulls*
- *Conflicting quality discourses*
- *Environment of contained play & psychosis*

*Surface enabling and denying elements and consider:*

- *the trade-offs one might be prepared to make, be they educational or economic*
- *the non-negotiable elements and how to protect them.*

*Recognise the tensions inherent in curricular and pedagogical choices and negotiations.*

*Understand the impact of presage factors on:*

- *curricula*
- *academics and teaching*
- *students’ learning*
- *students’ identities*

*Noting the academic, citizen, and consumer apices, recognise that students as individuals with their own ‘personal projects’ might oscillate in the space between these.*

*Understand the impact of the choices we make as an institution on:*

- *the ideal UG education*
- *students’ transformations, and how we might choose to define these.*

In line with academics' comments, reflections should be undertaken with the university's specific context and identity in mind, and caution should be exercised in assuming or expecting commonalities with, for example, Oxbridge or post-92 universities. Drawing on academics' accusations of one-size-fits-all approaches, academic departmental and disciplinary contexts should also be considered. Academic L (History) said that there is '*no point in having... innovations introduced [where] ... everyone has to do the same... it's quite clear that some departments do it brilliantly ... it's just got to be much more organic and it's got to start from different places*'.

Chapter 5 concluded with academics' comments on the need for collective critical dialogue in the academic community, and Davis (1999) sums up the need for collective reflection by academics, noting that:

The purpose in preserving collegiality is to keep alive and in training our model of a self-scrutinizing and self-regulating body of scholars (p.8).

## **Conclusion**

As a set of qualitative findings, although sampling was as representative as possible given time and space constraints, the interview data presents a snapshot of the university, and not necessarily the full spread of views present. I have presented views where they were dominant across the group interviewed, or in instances where they were an exception, have indicated as such. In terms of observed differences across the informants, a number of academics inferred that older colleagues were more resistant to change, and certainly across the sample set, younger academics interviewed seemed more accepting of multiple purposes and accountabilities whilst referring to older colleagues who were not so. As noted by Wellington (2000) in terms of generalizability, in addition to my selecting and presenting data fairly, the onus then rests upon readers to judge and assess validity (p.99) and resonance in relation to their own context.

Whilst interviews have captured the voices of only 14 academics, in my role as participant observer, I have noted their views echoed repeatedly by hundreds of other academics at the university in both formal and informal settings over the period of this research. These have ranged from committee and consultation meetings to internal conferences and day-to-day collegial discussions. To sustain a focus on the perspectives of academics interviewed, and keep the research bounded, I chose not to overload the dissertation with these observations. Rather, I believe that the rich, intense and sometimes shocking statements made by academics interviewed bring reality and weight to tensions that Gill (2009) has

noted so often remain 'hearable as a moan' rather than being formulated as part of a formal analysis and demand for change (p.229). All too often, expressions of tensions are dismissed in this way. For example, the UCU Workload Survey (2016) outlines increasingly severe pressures on academics due to areas highlighted in this study, including students' expectations, student numbers and the widening of academic duties (p.6). In line with Gill (2009) above, I believe that such 'moans' are often expected by management from trade unions as a matter of course, and that there is therefore immense value in an academic study that can show moans as not only real, but also in terms of the impacts on teaching, education and students underlying them.

Returning to the methodological approach, the combination of an interpretive approach which gathered deep-level data on the reality of academics' experiences, with a critical approach in seeking academics views on resolving tensions, creates a space which brings together academics' agency with the structures around them. Alongside noting that 'a case study should be enjoyable and interesting to read', Wellington (2000) considers it vital that audiences are able to relate to the case and learn from it (p.96). I feel that a critical realist methodology has brought the framework and space to present findings in ways that the key audience, institutional decision-makers and academic leads for learning and teaching, are able to relate to in moving forwards. As part of the critical methodology I have provided pointers on a way forward for the institution, but steered away from passing heavy critical judgements on the situation. I believe that the need to sustain openness for future dialogue tallies with messages from academics interviewed, and also my positionality as a non-academic staff member.

Regarding positionality, in considering whether I would have done anything differently in commencing doctoral research, I would recommend thorough consideration of the difficulties of researching in one's own institution, and tackling a topic so close to one's working role. Whilst I believe the research has proved invaluable, I note the continued personal and professional strain it brought.

In terms of my role as an interviewer, it is worth noting that whilst most academics had not heard the term 'transformation' used in this context, some became so comfortable with the term that they started to insert it into conversation, some noting this as being a result of my introduction of the term to them. Given critiques of the discourse presented, this felt deeply uncomfortable and also showed the risks of introducing new terminology as potentially authoritative because of my institutional role. I do now worry that informants may start to use the term having heard it from me. To follow up interviews with

academics, a summary of emerging findings was emailed to them in May 2016 (Appendix 8) together with draft versions of all three findings chapters, which also included a caution about using the term 'transformation'. To date, only two informants have replied with thanks, with one commenting that the results looked interesting, and both noting that they would read further when they had more time. Noting observations regarding informants' abilities to give time to this study, and the immense pressures on academics' time revealed through the findings, I believe this to be the main reason for lack of response.

### **Contribution of the study**

In setting the context for the research, policy analysis has extended previous research by Sabri (2011) and Williams (2013), interpreting the rise of 'student experience' and 'students as consumers' discourses in new ways. From the interview data, a new discourse of transformation has been proposed as linked to these discourses and the marketisation of higher education.

In-depth understandings have been gained of tensions and changes across the breadth of the undergraduate education environment and the experience of academics within this, as well as insights into how external and internal tensions impact directly on curricula and pedagogies. For the case university in particular, but likely to be common across other universities, a cluster of elements has been noted as enabling or denying an *ideal* education. Adapting a range of conceptual models, the study has developed new ways of visualising tensions and surfacing the choices to be made, as well as ways of considering the potential impacts and trade-offs in making those choices. The 3P model has applicability for not only the case university, but for all higher educational institutions as a way of reflecting on what is aimed for and the context and tensions to hand in trying to achieve this.

It is recognised that the strength of this research encompassing the breadth of the undergraduate higher education environment in one model, also opens a weak point to the study in the subsequent danger of finding too many rich themes, with an inability to provide sufficient analytical depth on these individual aspects. As noted at the start of the dissertation, my choice to take this angle was felt to be appropriate to my professional role as a higher education administrator working across this entire area. I feel that this breadth of understanding across the whole system will be of great value not only to me in my working role, but to other academic and professional support colleagues across the university, in particular, those with leadership roles related to learning and teaching.

### **My role in taking action related to the research findings**

Noting my desire for an emancipatory angle to the research, it is important to return to my belief that much of the value of this research has already been realised during the period of study itself. This has been not only in close conversations with academic informants who recognised the benefits of deep-level reflection for their own practice and identity, but more consistently in the daily actions I have taken in feeding findings into discussions as part of my working role, for example on student evaluations, diversity in student cohorts and supporting international students. Recently, on a wider level, I took my findings of the shifting institutional learning and teaching priorities and environment to discussions on the final drafting of the new institutional learning and teaching strategy. Cautious not to influence the way in which it was drafted following an extensive consultation, I only introduced my findings as an observation to senior colleagues after the final drafting was completed. It was useful to reflect with colleagues on where, how and why these changes had come about and recognise overtly the tensions to hand. Observing from my analyses that teaching had been brought back into balance with what was previously an agenda overloaded with a focus on students, it was noted by one senior academic manager that '*we're on the right track*' (pers. comm., May 2016). This heightened awareness of the competing tensions and multiple purposes is likely to help frame future cross-institutional discussions.

In terms of future actions, interviews yielded sufficient data on some areas which due to space, were not expanded on, but might be examined in more depth in the future. These include detailed evidence on the impacts of student numbers, comments related to assessment and feedback; these linked to notions of scholarship, reading and students accessing texts. As noted from the outset, the study focused on academics, and there is certainly place for an equivalent investigation of students' perspectives of tensions in their learning and motivations.

I intend to present summary research findings to academic and professional colleagues who are in leadership or developmental roles related to learning and teaching at the case university. Beyond the institution, looking more widely across the HE sector, the research has potential for conference and publication dissemination across a variety of audiences, in particular, at the focal point of the research context outlined in the opening sections of this thesis, where leadership, policy, theory and practice meet.

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# Appendices

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## **Appendix 1: Government departments with responsibility for HE in the UK pre-1964 to present**

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Government department with responsibility for HE</b>
Pre-1964	Ministry of Education
1964 – 1993	Department of Education and Science (DES)
1993 – 1995	Department for Education
1995 – 2001	Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)
2001 – 2007	Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
2007 – 2009	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)
2009 - 2016	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
July 2016	Department for Education (DfE)

Government departments with responsibility for HE in the UK pre-1964 to present (BIS, 2009a; HEFCE, 2009; Gordon & Lawton, 2003; Lowe, 2002) from Meth, 2012a

## Appendix 2: Words appearing in key national HE policy documents since Robbins (1963) preceded by 'student' as an adjectival noun and defining an entity

Policy reference	Words paired together with 'student' to describe an entity e.g. student choice, student complaints	No. of pairs
<b>Robbins (1963)</b>	accommodation finance maintenance numbers quality	5
<b>DES (1987)</b>	demand maintenance numbers support	4
<b>DES (1991)</b>	awards demand numbers profiles	4
<b>Dearing (1997)</b>	achievement choice experience living_costs loans numbers record_number requirements support	9
<b>DfES (2003)</b>	achievement choice complaints demand feedback finance funding image loans numbers support survey views	13
<b>BIS (2009)</b>	background choice complaints destinations employability expectations experience feedback fees involvement learning numbers participation places recruitment representation satisfaction support voice welfare	20
<b>BIS (2011)</b>	academic_experience achievement allocation charter choice complaints data demand engagement evaluation expectations experience feedback finance grants loans numbers placements places representative services support surveys views welfare workload	26
<b>BIS (2015)</b>	academic_experience achievement applications body champion choice commitment_to_learning complaints effort engagement expectations experience fees finance funding information intake interest lens lifecycle learning_experience loan numbers outcomes population protection representatives satisfaction study success support views voice	33
<b>BIS (2016)</b>	choice complaints complaints_body completion_levels demand engagement entry_requirements experience finance finance_offer finance_support intake interest loan_book loans loans_company number_controls numbers opportunities_fund outcomes performance protection_plan protection_requirements recruitment_levels retention_levels satisfaction success support support_system support_regulations survey	31

## Appendix 3: Participant information sheet

### Participant Information Sheet – November, 2014

***Exploring tensions in the concept of ‘transformation’ as it applies to undergraduate students and their learning: academic staff perceptions and practices in a research-intensive university in England.***

You are invited to take part in a research project exploring academic staff perceptions of the concept of ‘transformation’ as it relates to undergraduate students and their learning. In relation to this, I am interested in hearing about what and how you teach (curricula and pedagogy), as well as your hopes and aims for your undergraduate students. This will relate to your views on the purpose of undergraduate higher education. This research is being undertaken for my Doctor of Education (EdD) thesis at the University of Sheffield, and is scheduled to complete in December 2015.

#### **The project and its significance**

I want to explore more deeply, the concept of ‘transformation’ as it relates to undergraduate students and their learning in this university. ‘Transformation’ tends to mean very different things to different people.

Within the current higher education environment, which is perceived as dominated by managerialism, consumer-led approaches and a ‘student experience’ as a marketable and measurable entity, there are accusations that a ‘transformative’ experience for students is now ‘denied’.

As academics are central to the development and delivery of higher education, your views on this tension would be invaluable in developing a deeper understanding of curricula and pedagogical approaches that are assumed to either facilitate or deny ‘transformation’. This will also relate to your views on the purpose of an undergraduate higher education, and disciplinary and applied knowledge acquisition. The research has the potential to yield important insights into the concept of transformation as well as broader messages for departmental, institutional and national educational policy, strategy and practice.

#### **Your participation**

As one of approximately 15 academics covering disciplines across all faculties and career stages, your insights are crucial within a broad range of views on this topic. Identified through my working knowledge of the institution and documentary evidence, the people I would really like to take part in this study have expressed views on, or interest in higher education/learning and teaching/institutional developments through their academic roles.

Being part of this project will involve one face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour. In addition to this, at the end of the interview, you will be asked to provide, or direct me to any other sources that reflect your views e.g. written texts, module or group-work outlines, departmental or personal web pages. This will be combined with interview data and institutional/departmental documentary sources already gathered to gain a deeper understanding of your perspective and approaches, thereby contributing to a series of in-depth ‘mini-cases’ to make up the ‘case study’.

Whilst I am also a colleague, in this instance, I would like you to consider me as a student researcher - should you choose to withdraw from this research at any stage, it will have no effect on our normal working relationship.

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep, and asked to sign a *Participant Consent* form. After signing the form, you will still be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

### **Possible benefits for you**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for participating in the project, I hope very much that this work will shed light on the learning ethos, environment and opportunities at the university, and importantly, what form of learning and learner 'transformation' academics perceive to be important in their disciplinary contexts. There is also the potential for overarching messages for the higher education sector to emerge.

### **Ethical review**

This project has been ethically approved via the School of Education's ethics review procedure in accordance with the procedures and guidelines at the university. The University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee monitors all such applications and the delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the university.

### **Recording and use of data**

The interview will be audio recorded, and recordings will be anonymised when transcribed, prior to analysis. All your responses, including any quotes will be fully anonymised. The electronic recording will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. To ensure this, all data will be kept on a password protected computer, only accessible to me or my supervisor. Any USB sticks used to store and transfer information will be kept in a secure, locked location. Because of the relatively small sample size, to ensure your anonymity, detailed descriptions of you and specifics of your work that may lead to the uncovering of your identity will be avoided.

### **Outcomes**

Results from the project should be available in electronic format in early 2016, where after I will aim to make them available to you. The institution will remain anonymous and you will not be named in any reports or publications. Because of the scale of the subject matter, data collected during the course of the project may be used for additional or subsequent research, however your continued anonymity is assured.

### **Complaints procedure**

If you feel that something is wrong, or have a complaint to make regarding either the research, research process or outcomes, you should contact me as soon as possible to discuss this: Deanna Meth [edp11d@m@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:edp11d@m@sheffield.ac.uk) . If I can't address your complaint, or you feel that I have not addressed your concern sufficiently, you can contact my supervisor, Prof. Kathryn Ecclestone at [k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk) . If a complaint is still not handled to your satisfaction, you may contact the University's Registrar at [registrar@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:registrar@sheffield.ac.uk)

### **Contact for further information**

For more information on this project, you should feel free to contact me, Deanna Meth at [edp11d@m@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:edp11d@m@sheffield.ac.uk) or alternatively, further information may also be obtained from my supervisor: Prof Kathryn Ecclestone, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2JA, [k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk) or phone: 0114-2228117

## Appendix 4: Participant consent form

Participant Consent Form – November, 2014

**Title of Project:** *Exploring tensions in the concept of ‘transformation’ as it applies to undergraduate students and their learning: academic staff perceptions and practices in a research-intensive university in England.*

**Name of Researcher:** Deanna Meth

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated  *‘November, 2014’* 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.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Deanna Meth  
Lead Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

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

Copies:

*Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project’s main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.*



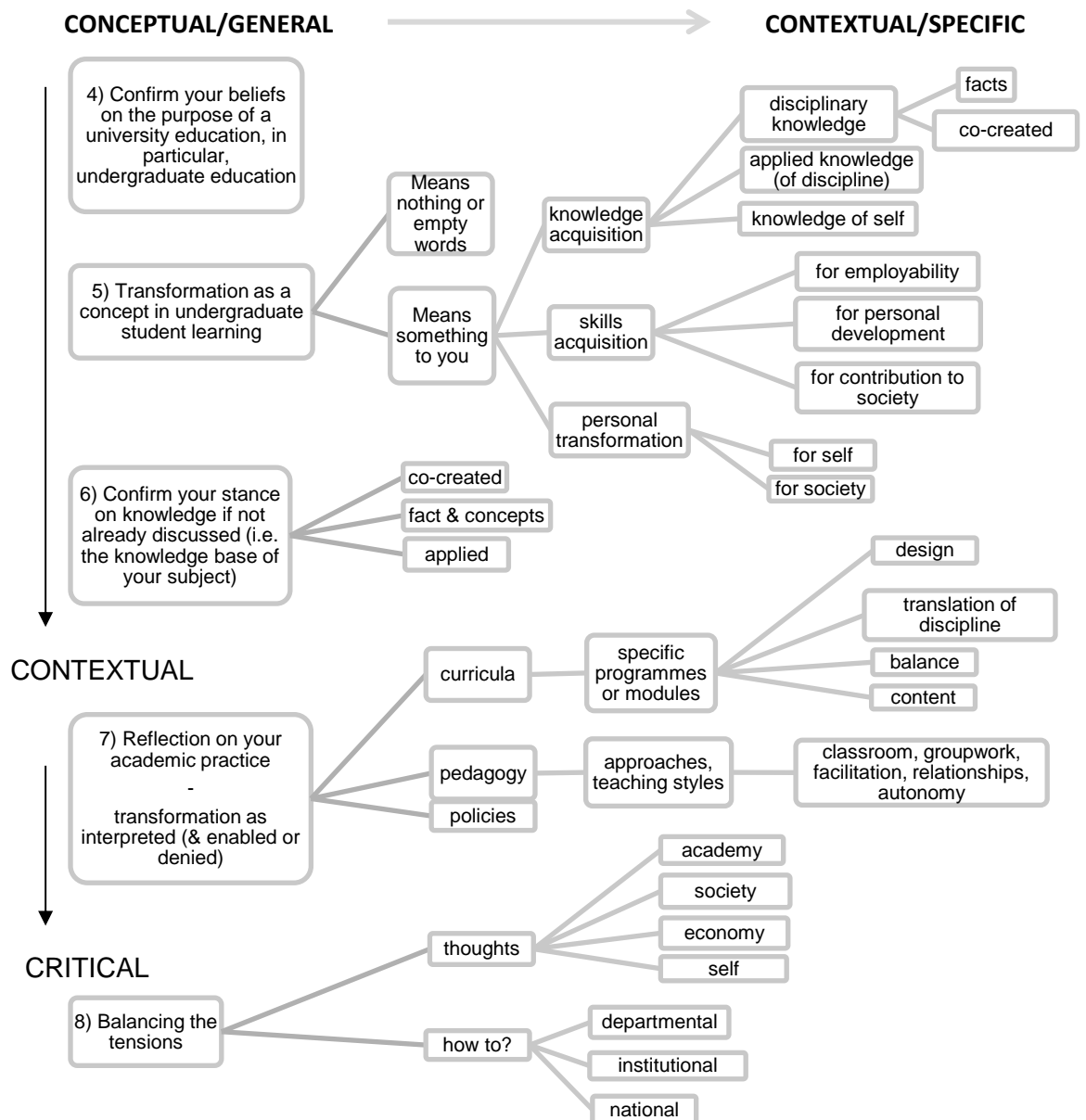
# Appendix 5: Interview questioning framework (following Tomlinson, 1989)

**PRE-AMBLE:** thank you; recorded & transcribed; confidentiality; anonymised (analysis & outputs); 1hr

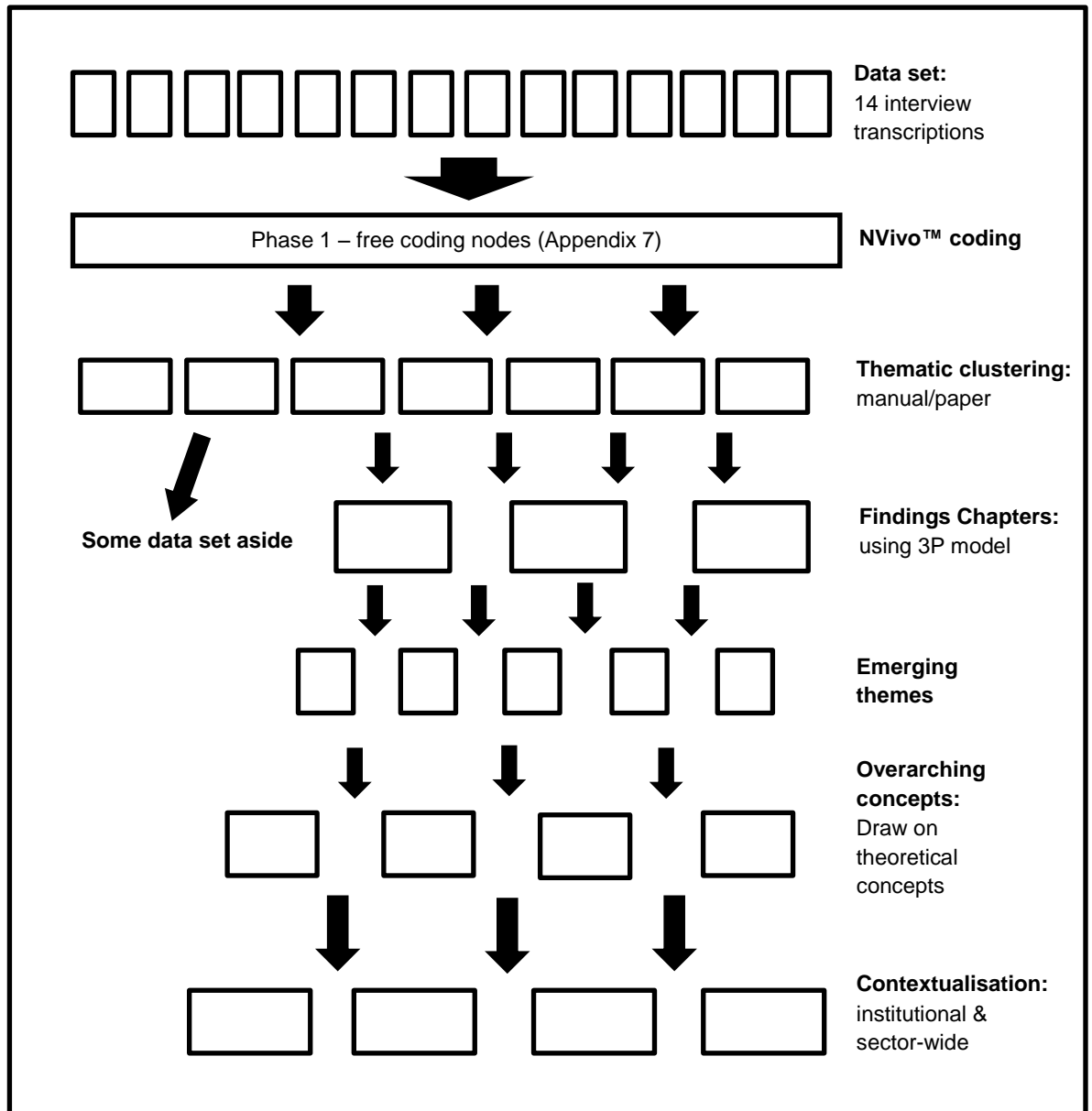
**PROJECT AIMS OUTLINE:** as in participant information sheet

## OPENING QUESTIONS

- 1) How and when you came to work in higher education
- 2) Describe your current role at the university (post & discipline/speciality)
- 3) Anything particular that you enjoy or dislike about it?



## Appendix 6: Schematic diagram illustrating the research analysis process.



## Appendix 7: Thematic Data Analysis: Phase 1 – free coding nodes from NVivo™10

External environment
transformation denied
transformation enabled
academics - role
teaching styles & approaches
value, notions of
students - diversity & characteristics
academics - research
purpose of HE
transformation - interpretations
changes noted
knowledge
disciplinary differences (& similarities)
students - changes in over years
curriculum
employability & careers
skills
learning
academics - route into academia
knowledge - co-creation
students - research
student numbers
HE - funding and finances
HE - management
HE - environment
students - attitudes perceptions & learning motivations
knowledge - applied
ways of thinking
students - motivations to do HE
academics - attitudes and responses
my research methods - interviewing
academics - speaking out
teaching-research

academics - workload and time
assessment
marketing recruitment league tables
quality and QA processes
institutional typology
society wider world
academics - admin workload
students - evaluations and complaints
feedback
balance
technology & digital & systems
instrumental approaches
students - grades
students - hiding
learning outside the university
PSRB accred and prof requirements
students - maturity
students - potential
students - evaluations - NSS
students - reading
academics - reward and recognition
marketisation & consumerism
students - international
'centre' of the university
students - driving choice
space for teaching
scholarship
students - parents
students - contact time
managerialisation
learning outside formal curriculum
students - english language
transformation - of academics
my thinking aloud



## **Appendix 8: Emerging findings from EdD research: email to academic informants, 21 May 2016**

Many thanks once more for giving me your time and views as part of my EdD research. Now that I am in the write-up stages, as promised by way of follow-up, this email provides a summary of my research findings to date.

Attached to the email for your information are:

- a copy of your interview transcript
- a draft abstract for the dissertation
- draft copies of the three findings chapters.

### **Recap of research intentions**

Research questions arose from my concern regarding accusations that in this marketised higher education (HE) environment, 'transformation into a scholar who thinks critically' is now denied in undergraduate (UG) higher education. Recognising academics as central to this area, interviews explored your views on the purpose of UG HE, leading into discussion on your perceptions of the concept of 'transformation' as it relates to undergraduate students and their learning, as well as aspirations for undergraduate students. Related to this, discussions covered views on tensions, both internal and external to the institution, and curricular and pedagogic practices felt to enable or deny transformation.

### **Interview process and analysis**

Fourteen interviews were conducted with academics between October 2014 and January 2015. Interviews were transcribed from audio recordings, and first stage thematic analysis of the data was undertaken using NVivo. Findings, outlined below, were grouped using a 'presage, process, product' (3P) model. In addressing research gaps, and the lack of sector-wide discussion on what education we are aiming for, *product* has been used as the starting point to define what academics aspired for in UG HE education. There follows an exploration of internal environmental factors (*presage*) felt to most influence the achieving of these aspirations. The final findings chapter focuses on *process*, including curricula and pedagogy, and academics' practices in negotiating those elements which enable or deny the UG education aimed for. The richness and depth of the discussions we had were invaluable in helping me to synthesise the concrete findings into a coherent message, and also to think more conceptually about findings e.g. related to notions of value, use, interest, space. An extract from my draft methodology chapter acknowledges the key role academics played in introducing new concepts to me, and synthesising what was being observed:

*Whilst interviews generally adhered to the questioning framework, with added space given for in-depth views, in some ways it felt as though the academics were synthesising and conceptualising the research for me through a guided dialogue.*

A summary of key points from the three findings chapters, *product*, *presage* and *process* is presented below. Draft versions of each chapter have been attached to this email for your information. The final analysis and discussion chapter is currently in preparation, and emerging thoughts are also outlined below.

#### **Chapter 4: 'Product'**

Academics noted the range of views on the purpose UG HE which reflect vested and sometimes conflicting interests of universities - tensions in relation to economic and social aspects and pulls from stakeholders including government, industry and employers, parents and students, and society.

Whilst most academics were comfortable with the term 'transformation', others expressed concerns which pointed to its use as part of a new marketised discourse. Coupled with confusing interpretations in the research literature, I have recommended using the term with caution, and in the thesis, have proceeded by referring to that education which academics' aspire for UG students as the *ideal*.

The *ideal* approximates that education expected of a research-intensive university where:

- UG education should be grounded within a discipline
- critical/intellectual academic approaches are developed through deep engagement with the discipline

A distinction was drawn by several academics between education and training or instruction, linking to tensions in the skills and competencies agenda. Where disciplines were considered to be more applied, academics took pains to emphasise the necessary underpinning of pure elements.

#### **Chapter 5: 'Presage'**

The largest internal threats to achieving the *ideal* relate to:

- student numbers
- academics' roles, excessive workloads, and balancing teaching, administrative and research elements within these; recognition for teaching; contractual elements, in particular teaching-only roles and fixed-term contracts

Internally, sources of threats are perceived as financial drivers, institutional and departmental management, and systems and processes around quality. It is recognised that these link to wider pressures in the external HE environment. The direct impact on learning and teaching, and in striving for the *ideal* is seen in:

- intellectual and one-to-one interactions with students
- 'the bits that count', reading groups, face-to-face feedback and intimate discussions
- less attention to marking and assessment and feedback
- less preparation for lectures and seminars

- time for deep intellectual engagement in bringing up-to-date research to bear on teaching

A common thread emerged on time spent ‘managing for failure’ in both students and staff, and the implications of this for students’ educations and staff roles. One academic noted ‘the trade-off’ made in the university around these tensions, and the need to consider this more deeply and this was alluded to by many other academics.

## **Chapter 6: ‘Process’**

‘Process’ is a deeper examination of the site where external and internal tensions noted in *product* and *presage* play out in academics’ teaching and students’ learning, seen in curricula, content and pedagogical interactions, and the chapter includes the ways in which academics negotiate, juggle and subvert tensions.

For curricula and content, tensions relate to:

- An increasing knowledge base
- Changing research funding environment, the impact agenda reflected in shifting curricula
- Linked to this, relevance and use value, and students’ employability
- Accrediting bodies
- Increased opportunities for students, broadening their ‘horizons’

Within the pedagogical relationship issues noted relate to:

- academic approaches, in particular students reading, and working with disciplinary knowledge, linked to technological developments, student motivations/expectations, financial pressures and assessment.
- students’ expectations, linked to their previous learning experiences, financial tensions and employability, technological developments, and wider generational shifts.
- these in turn linked to discussions on evaluations and academics’ practice, outcomes and attainment, assessment and the changing nature of student support.

As in the previous chapter, notions of ‘trade-off’ were present, where academics noted the importance of academic challenge and occasional failure, and the ‘dampening down of potential’ through excessive support structures and constrained curricula and pedagogies.

To enable the *ideal*, a common theme of space, freedom and openness emerged as:

- space as time for growth and development (in years, experiences e.g. exchanges)
- authenticity and authentic encounters between academics and students

- freedom and space to learn and engage
- risky and risk-free teaching and learning
- research, dissertations and projects
- 'guerrilla' teaching

The irony was noted by a few academics that activities which would be deemed risky by the institution, but are considered by them as critical for an *ideal* education, are frequently marketed by the institution. But in reality, many of these run on good will, are not rewarded, and sit under the radar of workload and quality systems, thereby introducing a greater risk to the institution.

### **Draft emerging key messages**

Key findings are to be presented through a set of concepts drawn from the research literature These include:

- *Discourses of quality*: technological/market-oriented/auditable as opposed to alternative/intrinsic
- *University psychosis*: teaching within conflicting visions of HE
- *Contained and unregulated play*: impacts on space, creativity, teaching, thinking, and learning
- *Tensions in the HE system*: 'Clark triangle' adapted for knowledge, curricula and pedagogies

Combining elements from the 3P model with the concepts above provides a way to show tensions in the university and the impacts these have on staff roles and identities and undergraduate education.

### **Draft recommendations for action and future work are likely to include:**

- The need to carefully examine and define what it is we are aiming for in UG HE at this university
- Recognise the factors considered to introduce tensions to delivering what academics feel is the 'ideal' i.e. enabling and denying elements and the 'trade-offs' made
- The need for academic-led institutional conversations in addressing the points above

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any further comments related to this work, and thank you once again for giving your time so generously.

Best Regards

Deanna.