Contemporary students' approaches to learning: a case study of the relationship between assessment and approaches to learning of education students at two English universities.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the approaches to learning of contemporary students at two northern English universities through a qualitative case study using data collected from individual semi-structured interviews with twenty undergraduates studying in the field of educational studies.

The research found that although students were unaware of the terms 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning they recognized differences between the two. They valued personal understanding, with their general intention being to use a deep approach, that is, an intention to understand for themselves what they are studying. Students' general approach to learning did not change as they progressed through a degree programme, yet engagement with assessment feedback, study practices and use of learning outcomes typically did.

Students' perception of assessment requirements was confirmed as being the key determinant of their approach to learning. Despite a desire to understand what they learn, contemporary students are instrumental in their approaches to learning and study practices, and where assessment does not count toward their degree classification are less likely to use a deep approach.

An original contribution to knowledge is the finding that instrumentalism combines with students' interest in, and enjoyment of, the topic studied. These are crucially important factors in their approaches to learning, and students preface the term 'understanding' with certain authoritative adjectives.

In the light of these findings the thesis offers recommendations for improving practice to better encourage a deep approach to learning.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research explores how 20 undergraduate students, studying in the field of education at two universities in the North of England, approach their learning and how assessment practices influence this. By exploring the views of contemporary learners in the changing context of higher education, the research sets out to build on and contribute to the existing knowledge base about approaches to learning and the relationship between these and assessment practices.

1.2 The origins of the research project: impressions about students' learning

As a university lecturer for over twenty years, I am interested in undergraduate students' engagement with learning, their study practices, and how they approach their learning. In 2012, as a result of a process of institutional restructuring, I found myself teaching undergraduates in a Faculty of Education, after having taught for the last ten years in an Adult Education/Lifelong Learning department, delivering work-based learning programmes and education for non-traditional learners. It seemed to me that some students I now taught had a different attitude towards learning than those I had previously taught. Some did not seem particularly interested in the topics they studied, nor to be interested in understanding the material for themselves. They seemed to engage in little study between

taught sessions, to be overly focused on what had to be done to complete the summative assessment, and uninterested in learning that was unassessed. At the same time, I experienced students who repeatedly made the same mistakes in their work, despite having been provided with summative and formative feedback. I became curious as to why this was.

This feeling was strengthened whilst facilitating a focus group with students prior to them completing the National Student Survey (NSS). One third-year discussing their experience of studying in the field of education at university had the following to say:

> *Generally, they didn't teach us, we had to find out things for ourselves. Isn't it the lecturer's job to teach us?*

Another observed:

> *The lecturers don't always tell us what we need to learn, we are left to find things out*.

These comments, which did not seem atypical of the group, suggested that their conception of learning was a behaviourist one; perceiving it was the lecturer's responsibility to provide them with knowledge (Adams 2006). I gained the impression that for some, personal understanding was not seen as important, nor one of their aims. This was interesting because the students were studying in the field of educational studies, and so it might be assumed that they would have an interest in the processes of learning. Shortly after the NSS focus group meetings, a second-year student openly challenged an in-class formatively assessed exercise with words to the effect that there was no point in doing it if it did not contribute to the grade they were awarded.

1.3 The impact of formative and summative assessment practices

> *"Why are we doing this if we're not being assessed on it?"*

The above comment, along with those from others in different groups I taught, suggested some students might be overly focused on the summative assessment of their learning and that the use of more formative assessment practices in class might not always be appreciated. This was interesting because the idea that formative assessment practices should improve student achievement and encourage engagement has become increasingly widespread, and is now commonplace throughout the higher education system (Boud and Falchikov 2006, Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet 2007, Beamont et al. 2011, Harlen 2012a, Wilson 2012). In spite of these positive goals for assessment, my students' comments hinted that some may be taking more of an instrumental approach. This phenomenon is not new (Gibbs 1992, Struyven et al. 2006). Instrumental learners will typically limit their learning to what they perceive is required by the summative assessment (Molesworth et al. 2009). Yet a perception amongst some researchers and educators that instrumentalism, with students only engaging in assessed work which is graded, has increased in recent years (Ecclestone 2010, Field 2012, Williams 2012), alongside claims that contemporary students are more focused on achieving a grade than with learning. Boud, for example, has identified that students asking "Will it count?" is commonly heard when asking them to complete a task (Boud 2014 p.15).

I began to feel that some undergraduates expected to be told exactly what to do, through specific, detailed and precise instructions for summative assessment tasks and through detailed and prescriptive formative feedback. The implication was that they may not have an intention to engage with and understand the material for themselves and, perhaps, they did not value formative feedback if it did not explain exactly what they needed to do to pass successfully. From their attitude, comments and behaviour I gained the impression that, for some, their focus from the start of a module was finding out what they needed to do to complete successfully the summative assessment, rather than actually engaging in learning and understanding the subject matter. I started to feel that, as

well as seemingly being uninterested in learning which was not summatively assessed, some did not have a curiosity to understand what they learnt. I therefore set out to discover if contemporary students valued understanding, whether they had a general intention to understand, what factors might influence them and the role that assessment played.

Carrying out an initial literature search I found my experiences connected with the work of Torrance who used the term 'criteria compliance' (Torrance 2007 p.281) to identify that assessment procedures and practices, combined with extensive coaching, can completely dominate learning so that learning about the subject is replaced with learning about the assessment criteria. He describes a situation where understanding is displaced by procedural compliance with assessment. I found Ainley and Allen's argument that "displaying knowledge for assessment has replaced learning" (Ainley and Allen 2012 p.6) resonated with my experiences, as did Ecclestone's, who identified that for some students the assessment requirements can dominate their learning process to such an extent the assessment becomes learning (Ecclestone, 2007, 2010). It is important to note that both Ecclestone's research and Ainley and Allen's took place in further and adult education settings and with vocational learning programmes; the phenomena they identified would, however, seem increasingly to be permeating higher education (Richardson and Edmunds 2010).

1.4 Approaches to learning

Through further reading I became interested in the theory of approaches to learning. A substantial body of established work identified that students' conceptions of, perceptions, and attitudes and approaches are directly linked with the quality of their learning (Marton and Säljö 1976, Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Marton and Säljö 1984, Marton et al. 1993). This research identifies that the approach students adopt is linked to both their

conception of learning and their perception of the assessment requirements (Van Rossum et al. 1985, Howie and Bagnall 2012). Two approaches are identified, 'surface', that is, quantitative memorization and acquisition of facts, and 'deep', that is, an intention to understand the meaning of the material and requiring personal engagement with what is being learnt (Marton and Säljö 1976, Sadlo and Richardson 2003, Trigwell and Ashwin 2006). Theory about approaches to, perceptions and conceptions of learning theory has been, and remains, a dominant perspective in higher education for over forty years (Richardson 2000, Case 2007), particularly so within professional development programmes for new lecturers. As Webb argues, they are a key "'foundation stone' upon which much of the research, theory and practice of higher education has stood" (Webb 1997 p.195). Houghton asserts that the idea "students can and do take a deep or surface approach to their learning…is probably one of the most used bits of educational research in higher education" (Houghton 2004 p.2). These quotations indicate the importance and widespread influence of the theory.

The research on approaches to learning identifies that all learners are able to use a deep approach (Marton and Säljö 1976, Laurillard 1979, Marton and Svensson 1979), but that this is shaped both by their intention and their perception of the learning and assessment task. Assessment or, more accurately, the students' perception of the summative assessment requirements (Van Rossum et al. 1985, Richardson 2005), is thus identified as a key factor in determining students' approaches (Ramsden 2003). A deep approach requires a student to have an intention to understand the material, and students may have an overall *general* intention to use a deep approach. However, if they perceive the assessment does not require, or reward, this, then they may use a surface approach (Laurillard 1979). This suggests that some students may be instrumental in their approach (Torrance 2007).

1.5 The changing nature of higher education

During the initial literature survey it became apparent that much of the research on approaches to learning had been carried out prior to the expansion of higher education into the 'mass' higher education system (Trow 1973) of today. Profound and rapid structural changes have taken place in UK higher education provision over the last twenty-five years, with considerable expansion of provision and related changes in pedagogy and assessment practices, and these form a backdrop to exploring contemporary students' approaches to learning in this study. It is therefore important to consider briefly some of these changes.

Widening participation initiatives, such as the last Labour government's target of 50% participation, have led to increases both in the number of student places, the number of higher education providers, and greater diversity of student experience (Brennan and Patel 2008). In 1993 only 13% of 25 to 29 year-olds had a first or higher degree (Weale and Adams 2016). Today over 40% of the English population now enter higher education by the age of nineteen and 46% by the age of thirty (DBIS 2015, HESA 2018). The theory of approaches to learning assumes that personal understanding is an indicator of a deep approach. Yet the assumption that students in a mass higher education system have an intention to understand has been called into question (Haggis 2003, 2004, Richardson 2005). Personal understanding, it is argued, may no longer be a goal for many contemporary learners.

At the same time as this expansion, modularisation of programmes has accompanied significant and far-reaching changes in formative and summative assessment practices and official requirements to use clearly articulated pre-specified learning outcomes linked to assessment criteria. Learning activity is now more closely aligned with assessment tasks than previously (Turner and Gibbs 2010). End of module examinations are no

longer the most frequently used method of assessment, and students now typically may receive detailed tutor feedback on both a draft and final piece of work. The introduction and use of pre-specified intended learning outcomes arguably represented a change in focus from teaching to learning, and the adoption of more student-centred pedagogical approaches (Adam 2004, O'Neill and McMahon 2005). Prescribed, pre-specified learning outcomes are required to be explicitly linked to assessment tasks (Dillon and Coats 2005, QAA, 2011, 2012, 2013) and are now an intrinsic part of teaching and learning processes throughout higher education.

Relating to approaches to learning, intended learning outcomes of credit-bearing programmes frequently include the word 'understanding' (Bennett 2006, COBE 2007) as do programme-level outcomes, and the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA 2001, 2015) stipulate that qualifications and academic credit should only be awarded for achievement of a module's intended learning outcomes. It could therefore be inferred that assessment tasks require students to demonstrate their understanding, that is, adopt a deep approach, and that students who successfully complete a module have used such an approach. Yet my experiences led me to question this assumption.

Alongside these changes, higher education has progressively become more accountable to government (Furedi 2002, 2011, Ransom 2011). With the raising of university tuition fees to £3000 following the 2004 Higher Education Act, and to £9000 after the 2010 Browne review, students have been increasingly depicted as consumers of education who are instrumental in their learning (Williams 2012, Brown and Carasso 2013). The positioning of the student as a consumer (Foskett 2011, Thompson and Bekhradnia 2012) may have led to some adopting a more surface approach to learning. Attard, for example, suggests that "the student as a constructivist student needs to be intrinsically motivated by a desire to

learn and to be open to challenge his or her own values" (Attard 2010 p.14), and as such, would be expected to use a deep approach. Yet:

> The paradigm of a student as customer is diametrically opposed to the notion of a student as a constructivist student. The student as a customer is largely a passive character who is driven by a rational-action scheme, where profit needs to return on an investment (ibid. 2010 p.14).

Following this argument some contemporary students are increasingly likely to adopt a more instrumental approach to learning.

New quality measures such as the National Student Survey (NSS) have been introduced as a means of monitoring learning and teaching, lecturers' practice and students' reflection on their experience during their time at university. The expressed aim of introducing the NSS was to provide data that helps potential students make clear and informed decisions about the most appropriate university for them to study at, based on the collective feedback from all final-year undergraduates (Ramsden et al. 2010). Since its introduction, it has become a highly powerful instrument, particularly in relation to shaping attitudes and practices in assessment. Of the twenty-seven questions in the current NSS questionnaire, four ask about students' experiences of assessment and feedback. Students' responses to these questions have consistently indicated the lowest levels of satisfaction (HEFCE 2011, HEFCE 2014). It is evident that contemporary students regard assessment and feedback not just as important, but as integral to their experience of, and success at, university.

For feedback to inform and improve learning, students have to use it (Yorke 2003, Wiliam 2011, Evans 2013). There are many and varied ways that students are furnished with feedback beyond the comments on their assignments, yet it is the formal written comments which learners predominantly focus on (Weaver 2006). It is thus interesting to explore how they utilise assessment feedback, as there is evidence that, despite

students wanting feedback and seeing it as an entitlement, they may not actually use it (Higgins 2000, Winter and Dye 2005, Crisp 2007, Carless et al. 2011).

In recent years greater emphasis has been placed on formative assessment, more innovative summative assessment practices than traditional examinations and essays (Bloxham and Boyde 2007) and on the provision of formal written feedback on assessed work (Yorke 2003). Yet the distinction between formative and summative assessment is unclear (Boud 2000, Yorke 2003, Taras 2007, Harlen 2012a) with the literature somewhat divided as to whether they are defined by assessment's function or process (Taras and Davies 2012). In parallel, there is evidence that some academic staff may be confused about the definitions and uses of assessment (Taras and Davies 2014) and have different views about its purpose (Murray and MacDonald 1997, McLellan 2004).

1.6 Development of the research question

Through the process of engaging with the initial survey of research literature I found that I now had more questions. The approaches to learning theory could be used to explain some student behaviour, yet much of the research had been conducted prior to today's mass higher education system and the many structural and procedural changes that have occurred. A key gap in knowledge seemed to exist. There seemed to be insufficient knowledge about contemporary students' approaches to learning, nor whether they valued understanding, or regarded this as being important. Nor did we know in sufficient detail the role that assessment and feedback played in their approaches to learning. I was particularly interested to find out if contemporary students valued understanding, or perceived it to be necessary or important, and to explore the extent to which assessment practices, including formally provided feedback, encouraged understanding, and how students' approaches may change

through their participation in higher education. I framed these interests through a main research question:

In the context of English higher education, what insights can be drawn about contemporary students' approaches to learning, assessment and formally received assessment feedback, at two contrasting universities?

This will be illuminated through four sub-questions:

1 How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning?

2 What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning?

3 To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding?

4 What changes take place in students' approaches to learning between the first and third year?

1.7 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter has provided an overview of the researcher's personal and professional reasons for engaging in the research project. It has framed a content for the study by explaining briefly the theory of deep and surface approaches to learning, the importance of assessment, and how higher education and assessment practices have changed since the research on approaches to learning was conducted. The perception that contemporary students may be more instrumentally focused on achieving a grade than

with understanding the material they are learning has been discussed and the sub-questions that, together, will illuminate the main research question have been presented.

Chapter 2 **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter examines relevant literature on approaches to learning to illuminate the research question. This includes a review of the research on surface and deep approaches, and critiques literature on assessment, including material that emerged as relevant once data analysis began.

Chapter 3 **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter provides a justification for a qualitative methodology, explains the main method of data collection, namely one-to-one semi-structured interviews with students, and the thematic analysis process used to analyse the interview data. Ethical issues associated with the research are considered and discussed.

Chapter 4 **FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the key findings of this research, organised by the four research sub-questions and illustrated with representative quotes from the student interviews. Supporting quantitative information is provided to show how the data is representative.

Chapter 5 **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This chapter provides an analysis and discussion of the key findings of this research in relation to the research question, interwoven with connections to the literature review.

Chapter 6 **CONCLUSION**

This chapter concludes the thesis. It provides an overview of the research and its contribution to new knowledge, the implications for both theory and practice, with recommendations and suggestions for future research. A discussion of the researcher's research journey is provided.

Chapter 7 **REFERENCES**

Chapter 8 **APPENDICES**

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature to contextualise the research question:
in the context of English higher education, what insights can be drawn about contemporary students' approaches to learning, assessment and formally received assessment feedback, at two contrasting universities?

The literature was drawn from a range of sources to inform the study. Following the data collection and analysis process, further literature was identified and incorporated because themes emerged which required contextualizing. Four sub-questions to illuminate the main research question were developed during the literature review. They are (1) How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning (2) What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning? (3) To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding? (4) What changes take place in students' approaches to learning between the first and third year?

The chapter provides an initial historical overview and critique of the theory of approaches to learning. This leads on to a discussion of assessment, its role as a driver for learning, the relationship between formative and summative assessment and how these terms are conflated in both theory and practice and difficult to distinguish from a theoretical position. The concept of Assessment for Learning (AfL) is critiqued, as are the widespread claims for the influence of assessment feedback, particularly the influence of feedback on learning, student engagement with feedback, and its emotional impact on students. A discussion of the

term ‘understanding’ is provided as this is incorporated in the theory of approaches to learning.

2.2 Approaches to learning

This section provides an historical overview of the development of the theory of approaches to learning, drawing on the various explications and the critiques offered.

2.2.1 Learning: conceptions, perceptions, and approaches

Conceptions of learning, perceptions of the learning environment, and approaches to learning have constituted a solid body of research around pedagogy and assessment in higher education for almost forty years (Richardson 2000, Case 2007, Case and Marshall 2012). There is a strong argument that the theory is central to understanding how students learn, and how universities can improve teaching and learning. Ramsden argues that it is a “pivotal concept” in education (Ramsden 2003 p.40), whilst Gibbs argues that “all learning phenomena…take place in a context mediated by the perceptions of students and their teachers involving their conceptions and approaches” to learning (Gibbs 1995 preface).

2.2.2 Definitions

Working definitions for key concepts that inform the discussion are included in this section.

Approaches to learning are the strategies adopted by students in order to succeed at learning (Jackson 1994). The term ‘approach’ identifies both how the learner processes information and their intention. The approach students take to their studies involves “either an intention to make sense (a deep approach) or an attempt to reproduce (a surface approach)” (Gibbs

1995 preface). Although these references are over twenty years old they still provide appropriate working definitions.

Conceptions of learning describe what a person understands by the term 'learning', that is, their understanding of the process and the differing conceptions people hold about it (Entwistle and Peterson 2004). Perceptions of learning refer to how a student sees the requirements of a learning task, primarily, how they perceive the requirements of an assessment task (Marton and Säljö 2005). The perception of learning draws attention to the dominant role of assessment on learning tasks.

Together, conceptions, perceptions and approaches constitute the theory of 'approaches to learning'. The theory has a solid research base, with the distinction between surface and deep learning built upon "an extensive body of evidence on the effects of teaching and assessment on student learning" (Entwistle 1997 p.215) that derives from "a coherent body of empirical evidence which can be used to inform thinking about teaching and learning" (ibid. p.217). Yet it can be conceptualised as a simple theory, and there is an argument that it might have gained greater prominence than, perhaps, it deserves (Richardson 2000).

2.2.3 The genesis of the approaches to learning theory and the distinction between surface and deep approaches.

The theory of deep and surface approaches originated with work by Marton and Säljö (1976) which, along with later work by Biggs (1987) and Entwistle (Entwistle and Waterson 1988, Entwistle 1988, 1989) established the theory in the field of education. Marton and Säljö set out to "explore qualitative differences in what is learned and to describe the functional differences in the process of learning" (Marton and Säljö 1976 p.10) which led to qualitative differences in learning outcomes. The use of the term 'learning outcomes' in this context did not refer to pre-specified intended

outcomes as used in higher education today, but rather to overall student achievement. Marton and Säljö's research summarized a series of studies with students who were asked to read a text, having been told they would be asked questions about it afterwards. They categorized students as two distinct groups; those who tried to comprehend the whole of a piece of work and those who tried to remember the facts and identify what they anticipated, or believed, they would be tested on. The two categories were labelled as "*deep-level* and *surface-level processing*" (ibid. p.7, emphasis original).

Surface-level processing involved using reproductive conceptions of learning where the student was "more or less forced to keep to a rote-learning strategy" (ibid. p.7). Deep-level processing involved the student being directed towards the intentional concept of the material, that is, to comprehend and understand what the author was saying, rather than memorizing. Marton and Säljö equated process and learning strategy, that is, the process was demonstrated by what the student *did* to learn. Where a surface approach was used, the student had little, or no, personal engagement with the work, seeing it as an external imposition. Deeper approaches came from the students' intention to understand, and led to better quality learning outcomes (Marton 1975, Säljö 1975).

Analysis of Marton and Säljö's data by Svensson (1977) suggested that more than process was involved. The term 'approaches to learning' was introduced to signify how both process and the learners' intention were combined (Entwistle and Peterson 2004). Further studies by Säljö (1979) found that students tried to adapt their learning to the demands implicit in the assessment questions, that is, their approach was influenced by the assessment task. When given questions requiring factual answers, they adopted a surface approach, yet when provided with questions requiring answers indicating understanding, a deep approach was not always used; some did, some did not.

Although students' approaches were influenced by the assessment task it was easier to induce a surface approach than a deep one (McCune and Entwistle 2011). Students with a general intention to understand, would use a surface approach when the curriculum had a heavy workload or a high number of assessments (Gibbs 1992, 1994, Gow et al. 1994) or when they perceived that an assessment task was irrelevant or induced anxiety (Fransson 1977).

Building on the work, Säljö identified five conceptual approaches to learning. These were presented as a hierarchy through which learners could progress (Säljö 1979 p.16). This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Säljö's hierarchy of learner progression

(1) a quantitative increase in knowledge	Surface
(2) the memorizing of facts	Surface
(3) the acquisition of facts and methods which were retained and used as necessary	Intermediate
(4) abstraction of meaning	Deep
(5) an interpretive process aimed at understanding reality (seeing something in a different way)	Deep

Two clear approaches had been identified; surface, a quantitative memorization and acquisition of facts, and deep, the intention to understand the meaning of the material (Biggs 2003). Marton and Säljö offered a hierarchical representation of *conceptions* of learning through which students may move; they were seen as being qualitatively different stages. They did not describe cognitive developmental stages. A learner could use a deep approach in one context or task and a surface in another (Marshall and Case 2005), yet students typically had a *general* intention to either understand or to memorize, based on their conception of what learning involved.

2.2.4 The importance of student perception

Laurillard (1979) confirmed Marton and Säljö's earlier findings, identifying clear evidence that how students approached a learning task could be classified according to whether they adopted a surface or deep approach. Students whose conception was that learning involved increasing knowledge and memorising facts set out to do that, adopting a surface approach. Whereas those whose conception involved understanding, typically adopted a deep approach. Yet their strategies were context dependent, based on perception of the context (Houghton 2004, Richardson 2005). Students would change their approach dependent upon their perception of the assessment task (Van Rossum and Schenk 1984, Van Rossum et al. 1985). If they believed memorization was required, a surface approach would be adopted, if they believed understanding was required, a deep one was taken. Approach was consistent within the same task, but different tasks were approached in different ways, because students perceived the requirements to be different.

Students' perceptions of how a learning task was assessed were inherently linked to the learning approach they took. Yet this worked both ways, as Struyven et al. explain:

> Students' perceptions about assessment, have considerable influence on students' approaches to learning. Yet, vice versa, students' approaches influence the ways in which students perceive assessment (Struyven et al. 2002 p.1).

Students had a *general* tendency to adopt a surface or deep approach, yet it was their *perception* of the summative assessment requirement that determined their approach to a specific task, not the actual requirement (Meyer and Parsons 1989, Meyer et al. 1990). Ramsden summed this up by stating that "variability in approaches…coexists with consistency" (Ramsden 2003 p.51). The implication is that if a student misunderstands the requirements of an assessment task, perceiving that memorization is

required rather than understanding, they may use a surface approach when a deep one is required. Later work by Richardson confirmed that approaches varied across different parts of a programme of study and may depend on students' level of interest (Richardson 2007). This is important because the literature on approaches to learning rarely considers the role of interest as a factor.

A key point is that both conceptions and approaches are seen as linked to the way the student *perceived* the context of learning (Haggis 2003, Marshall and Case 2005, Case and Marshall 2012). Students with a general intention to understand would use a surface approach if they believed that an assessment task rewarded memorization. The linked phenomena of conception of, and approach to, learning, together with perception of the learning environment, were integral to the outcome. Deep approaches usually, but not always, led to better learning outcomes (Ramsden 2003), yet surface approaches were more strongly linked to poor learning than deep ones to effective learning. The reason for this was that surface approaches usually prevented a student from achieving outstanding work, whereas deep ones did not necessarily *guarantee* work would be outstanding, because grades, marking and degree classification systems are not always reliable indicators (ibid.).

2.2.5 Strategic or achieving approaches

In the interests of a common language, Biggs adopted Entwistle's surface, deep and strategic processes, developing Study Process and Learning Process Questionnaires. This led to an 'approaches to learning' model which categorized five different approaches: (1) Surface, (2) Deep, (3) Achieving, (4) Surface-achieving, (5) Deep-achieving, (Biggs 1987). The 'achieving' approach was labelled as being 'strategic' by Entwistle, yet was seen as an approach to *studying*, not to overall learning, (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Biggs 1987, Entwistle 1987, Entwistle 2001). Here the

intention was “to do as well as possible in the course, guided by an awareness of assessment criteria” (Entwistle and Peterson 2004 p. 416). The strategic approach to studying is that of the more instrumental learner. Conceptually it differs from surface-deep approaches because it describes how students organise their learning, not whether their intention was to understand or memorize (Vanthourneot et al. 2014).

Further research found the results could be culturally specific, with factor analysis showing that a strategic approach was less evident than had initially been identified (Volet and Chalmers 1992). In addition, it was not fully authenticated as a distinct approach to learning (Gow et al. 1994, Vermunt and Vermetten 2004). Research by Richardson concluded it was ambiguous (Richardson 1994, 2011) and was, instead, identified as being the students’ ability to switch between surface and deep, rather than a distinct approach. After further research (Biggs et al. 2001, Tan 2011), the strategic aspect was removed from the theory.

The fact that some students may adopt a strategic or more instrumental way of studying is not contested, but it is not a formal element of the theory. It is, however, often referred to as a distinct approach by some, particularly Entwistle (see Entwistle 2000, Entwistle and Peterson 2004, Entwistle 2009). Strategic learners are those who are highly motivated to achieve and instrumental in their approach (Entwistle 2000). What matters most to them is not whether they memorize or understand, but achieving a high grade.

The defining features of approaches to learning are now broader than Marton and Säljö’s original work and have emerged from an interplay between both qualitative and quantitative interview studies and quantitative questionnaire surveys (Entwistle 1997, Aiskainen and Gijbels 2017). The term ‘surface approach’, which the early research labelled as being one restricted to using rote learning, has subsequently been taken to

include students who narrowly focus on the syllabus, to learning without personal engagement or reflection, a course being regarded as separate pieces of unrelated information, and routinely memorising facts without contextualising them (Entwistle and Peterson 2004).

2.2.6 Criticism of the theory

Despite its influence, the theory is not without criticism. It is therefore important to consider counter arguments.

2.2.6.1 Elitism

Haggis (2003, 2004) argues that the approaches to learning theory has successfully created a generalized description of the goals of an elite higher education system. She suggests the concept of a deep approach is an articulation of elitist values and aspirations, and that personal understanding and meaning are no longer valid or appropriate goals for many contemporary students to aspire to. Marshall and Case (2005) agree that while this, it is not a reasoned or justifiable position. Although some students might not *aspire* to understand, this does not mean the academy should not aim for this, because higher education is called 'higher' for a reason. Although disagreeing with Haggis, they recognize the validity of some points, particularly those about research findings being taken and used out of context. They suggest problems are with the way the theory has been interpreted and used, rather than with the theory *per se*.

My perception, as an educator and facilitator who uses a constructivist pedagogy, is that Haggis' argument that personal understanding may no longer be valid, seems antithetical to constructivist teaching practice, where personal engagement with learning is necessary (Jones and Brader-Araje 2002, Olsegun 2015). It is also the case that a surface approach may not adequately prepare contemporary learners for employment after

graduation. Harlen and James, for example, argue that a deep approach means something is:

> Actively understood and internalised by the learner. It makes sense in terms of the learner's experience of the world and is not simply a collection of isolated facts which have been memorised…it is linked to previous experience and so can be used in situations different from that in which it was learned (Harlen and James 1997 p.368).

Although perhaps a generalization, graduate employers typically value those who can understand and apply theory in different contexts and situations over those who have memorized a topic (Peg et al. 2012). The argument that personal understanding may no longer be valid is not persuasive if one of the aims of a university education is to contribute to future employability.

2.2.6.2 A cliché

Sadlo and Richardson (2003), Richardson (2000), and Webb (1997) all argue that the theory of approaches to learning has become so embedded that it has become a cliché which has been over-promoted by university staff development networks and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). They argue that, because the theory is not a complex one, it has been relatively easy for educators to adopt it without question. Sadlo and Richardson (2003) maintain that there are significant variations in students' approaches, even when their variations in perceptions of the assessment have been allowed for.

The argument that HEFCE, university staff development networks and lecturer training and education programmes have taken findings and promoted their use, or over-simplified them is persuasive. It broadly concurs with Chambers' suggestion that the theory has been taken out of context and frequently misinterpreted to label a student in essentialising

ways as being a surface or deep learner (Chambers 2002). The theory does not claim a student can be labelled in this way; only that they have a *general* tendency to adopt a surface or deep approach and may use a particular approach in a particular context (Aiskainen and Gijbels 2017). However, the concern that approaches vary, even when differences in students' perceptions of their course have been taken into account, does not contradict the theory, as students may retain a general intention to either memorize or understand.

The suggestion that the research has been used out of context is valid. The term 'deep approach' is, not infrequently, changed to 'deeper learning' or 'deep learning'. There are numerous internet sites about 'deep learning' with material far removed from the theory of approaches to learning. There is also a growing movement in American schools for 'Deeper Learning', which has no clear relationship to the research on approaches to learning, and is primarily about the development of core-skills and competencies for life.

2.2.6.3 Assessment and a deep approach

Criticism of the role of assessment as a determinant of students' approaches to learning has been made (see Beattie et al. 1997, Webb 1997, Struyven et al. 2002, Struyven et al. 2006). In 2009 Joughin argued that, despite it being over thirty years since the work of Marton and Säljö, there was still no clear indication that forms of assessment, *per se*, could induce a deep approach, and that initiatives to encourage them to adopt one had met with limited success (Joughin 2009a).

It is generally accepted that the pedagogical practices of individual lecturers have some effect on a student's approach (Parpala et al. 2011, Richardson 2011). Yet Joughin (2009a) argues that we do not have any real detail on the ways in which assessment interacts with what Ramsden

(2003) describes as students' overall orientation to study, or tendency to adopt a particular approach, irrespective of content or teaching. Joughin (2009a) argues that although assessment is a defining feature of the research on approaches to learning (Struyven et al. 2002) the research may have only allowed teachers to reduce poor, rather than informing good, pedagogical practice, thereby helping educators to identify what *not* to do to encourage a deep approach, not necessarily what *to* do. Joughin's argument does not, however, negate the research, because that which helps to reduce poor practice should improve students' learning experience.

2.2.6.4 A deep approach and achievement

The claim that a deep approach leads to better student achievement has not always been confirmed empirically (see Trigwell and Prosser 1991, Crawford et al. 1998, Zeegers 2001), with research showing mixed and contradictory results. This can be seen in a small-scale study by Beckwith, who concluded that "Approaches to learning were unrelated to assessment performance" (Beckwith 1991 p.17). The study was, however, limited because it only considered student responses to multiple-choice questions, an assessment strategy more typically associated with memorization and reproductive learning and, unlike essays, where a deep approach would be more likely to be adopted (Scouller 1998), the majority of students may have been expected to use a surface one (Watkins and Hattie 1985, Hattie 2012). Although there is an argument that examinations using multiple-choice question can be used to assess understanding (Haladyna 2004), this may only be possible if they are combined with another type of assessment (Driessen and Van der Vluten 2000).

Schmeck and Grove (1979) found that a surface approach led to higher achievement when an examination was used for assessment. In contrast, Diseth and Martinsen (2003) found that although a deep approach did not

lead to higher achievement, a surface one was a significant predictor of lower achievement. Newble and Hejka's (1991) research with students assessed by examinations found that those who adopted a more strategic or instrumental approach achieved better results. This was also shown by Ward's later research (Ward 2011). Identifying that a deep approach was not related to higher achievement, Newble and Hejka explained their results were due to examination-based assessment, along with an overloaded curriculum which effectively forced students into a rote learning and memorization.

It also seems that the different findings as to whether or not a deep approach leads to better achievement may relate to discipline, and depend on the type of assessment used (Gijbels et al. 2005), with the natural science subjects, medicine, and law typically tending to require greater use of memorization. Where examinations are used for assessment, a deep approach may not be as effective for learner achievement as memorization (Marton and Säljö 1976, Entwistle and Entwistle, C. 1991, Willis 1993, Enwistle and Entwistle 2003).

2.2.6.5 Cultural differences

Surface and deep approaches may be ethnocentric and over-emphasize Western perspectives of learning, as these prioritise and value understanding over memorization (Ryan and Louie 2007). Western educators have typically dichotomized processes of understanding and memorization (Leung et al. 2008). Yet while the delineation between surface and deep as being specific approaches may be culturally specific (Ryan and Louie 2007), the literature infers that surface approaches are in some way inferior, and should be avoided. Both Yorke (2006) and Howie and Bagnall (2012) have expressed concern that the theory assumes a deep approach is 'good' and a surface one 'bad', despite evidence a surface approach can lead to some learners achieving highly (Leung et al. 2008).

The negative labelling of a surface approach is not a formal element of the theory, but there is an inherent assumption that a deep approach is better than a surface one. This relates partly to student achievement, and also to the belief that engagement with what is being learned and a desire to understand for oneself are more meaningful and personally fulfilling than processes of memorization.

Although it may be a stereotype, there is strong evidence that learners from a Confucian and Asian heritage use memorization and rote-learning heavily, and achieve high-quality learning outcomes (Kember 2000, Donald and Jackling 2007, Bilgin and Crowe 2008), with memorization and understanding not seen as dichotomous. Rather, the division is between mechanical memorization, that is, rote-learning with no understanding, and that of memorization to achieve, reinforce, and support the development of understanding (Hess and Azuma 1991, Marton et al. 1994, Richardson 1994, Kember et al. 1999). Work by Tan with Malaysian students, for example, identified that when memorization was a culturally ingrained approach, it *could* lead to understanding (Tan 2011). More recently Kember (2016) has posited that approaches to learning may not be dichotomous but a continuum between what he labels as 'pure surface' and 'pure deep', and that East Asian students may be able to maximise their learning through the use of an intermediate approach.

The use of rote-learning and memorization may not be restricted to learners from a Confucian heritage. Purdie and Hattie (2002) maintain they are used by students in Western educational settings. Lublin similarly argues that all learners use rote-learning, and suggests "rote learning can be deployed intelligently to further our higher-level educational aims" (Lublin 2003 p.5). A body of research has found that a form of surface rote learning is a valuable and necessary part of the learning process in non-Western cultures (see Beaty et al. 1990, Purdie et al. 1996, Dahlin and Watkins 1997, Kember 2000, 2001, Purdie and Hattie 2002, Watkins and

Biggs 2005). Entwistle and Entwistle, for example, found that processes of 'committing to memory' and of 'rote learning of details' both contributed to the production of personal knowledge, and "a deep intention can involve rote memorization, while a surface approach at university level will include understanding" (Entwistle and Entwistle D. 2003 p.19). Entwistle and Peterson suggest that "In many subject areas (such as languages, geology or zoology), rote learning is a crucial part of developing understanding" (Entwistle and Peterson 2004 p.416). Memorization may be the starting point for later, higher conceptions of learning (McLean 2001), and can help understanding (Beattie et al. 1997).

It may therefore be the case that memorization and rote-learning are used by *all* learners, particularly in the initial stages of learning a subject, and for key-concepts, definitions, and foundational knowledge before they can move on to further understanding. This recognizes that the two processes may not be as distinct as the theory assumes and also acknowledges the attribution of cultural differences as too simplistic.

2.2.6.6 Ambiguity about 'understanding'

The approaches to learning theory's use of the term 'understanding' may cause ambiguity due to its subjective nature, and is therefore problematic. Knight and Yorke (2003) for example suggest there is uncertainty as to what counts as understanding, whilst Entwistle and Nisbet argue that discussing the meaning of 'understanding' is problematic because:

> It proves to be multifaceted and used to describe instances of rather different things…it can refer to an end-point or outcome of learning…When we come to academic understanding itself, its meaning will differ depending on who is experiencing it. University teachers may be referring to understanding as a target to be achieved, while students are more likely to be describing experiences of reaching their own personal understanding (Entwistle and Nisbet 2013 p.2).

The term ‘understanding’ is an example of an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie 1956). It is something *impossible* to define conclusively but perfectly possible and rational to discuss and justify people’s adoption of one interpretation rather than a competing one. Essentially contested concepts are “not resolvable by argument of any kind…nevertheless [they are] sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence” (Gallie 1956 p.169). Because it is an essentially contested concept, what understanding is and involves is subjective, with differing interpretations. It therefore follows that this may also apply to an individual’s precise interpretation of what a deep approach to learning involves.

Entwistle and Entwistle, C. (1991) argue that the term ‘understanding’ may be interpreted differently and students may mean quite different things when they use terms such as ‘learning’, ‘memorizing’ and ‘understanding’ to describe how academic tasks are tackled. That the term ‘understanding’ may be open to interpretation is important, not only in the context of students’ approaches to learning but also in higher education’s use of intended learning outcomes. An educator’s belief about what understanding involves may be different to a learner’s. It follows that students may believe they are demonstrating understanding, yet it may not be in the breadth or depth required. If a prescribed learning outcome uses the term learners may interpret it differently, and not recognize that a deep approach is expected. A small-scale study by Entwistle and Entwistle, D. (2003), for example, found there were different types of understanding between students using a deep and surface approach in the context of revising for final examinations. Understanding and memorization were both used, and students’ interpretation of the meaning of the terms changed in different situations; the distinction between the two processes was not clear to some. They argue there are different forms and levels of understanding, including, breadth, depth, and structure. The complexity of memorization and understanding made the two concepts difficult to separate. This may be important because the approaches to learning

theory presents them as being different and distinct, dichotomous, processes.

Theory about the nature of understanding has been developed by Perkins (2008) who identified three different distinct types: (1) possessive knowledge in which students' conception of learning is that it is about the accumulation of knowledge; (2) performative knowledge, where they recognize the need to understand, but are more focused, or interested, in achieving a high grade rather than deep engagement with the material; and (3) proactive knowledge, where students expect learning to enable them to see things in a different way, to achieve an understanding which is personally satisfying. The three align closely with, respectively, a surface approach, a strategic approach and a deep approach.

These research findings highlight the contested nature of understanding, which is linked inextricably to the role of assessment in higher education.

2.3 Assessment

2.3.1 The role of assessment as a driver for learning

As has been discussed, a student's perception of assessment requirements is a key factor in their approach to learning (Struyven, et al. 2002). There is a broader argument that assessment is the most important factor in learning. Entwistle, for example, maintains that it is "the single, strongest influence on learning" (Entwistle 2000 p.111-112), whilst Boud et al. argue that:

> Assessment is a central feature of teaching and the curriculum. It powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve. It is one of the most significant influences on students' experience of higher education and all that they gain from it (Boud et al. 2010 p.1).

Assessment has been identified in many studies as playing a central role, shaping and dominating learning processes in higher education, with the link between assessment and learning widely acknowledged as being significant (see Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Gibbs 1992, 1994, Ramsden 1992, Brown and Knight 1994, Brown et al. 1997, Ramsden 2003, Race 2005, Sainsbury and Walker 2008, Brown 2015).

There is a strong and widely supported argument that "assessment defines what learners regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as graduates" (Brown 2001 p.4). As Gibbs argues, "assessment frames learning…and orients all aspects of learning behaviour" (Gibbs 2006 p.24). He suggests it frequently has more impact on learning than the teaching. Similarly, Ramsden maintains that "from our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum" (Ramsden 1992 p.187). These quotes demonstrate assessment is one of the most important aspects of formal education, and that from a student's perspective it may be the most important. Yet while the role of assessment in promoting learning is acknowledged, it may not always serve to promote a deep approach.

2.3.2 The importance of assessment for contemporary students

Despite claims about the role of assessment, in today's mass higher education system it may be neither as powerful, nor as important, as is frequently claimed. Joughin, for example, provides a strong argument that "we cannot assume, from the empirical studies of the 1960s and 1970s, that assessment dominates students' academic lives in the ways often supposed in much contemporary writing about assessment" (Joughin 2009a p.218). He argues that much of the earlier foundational research which is often referred to in the literature on assessment and learning, specifically that presented in the texts; *The Hidden Curriculum* (Snyder 1971), *Up to the Mark* (Miller and Parlett 1974) and *Making the Grade*

(Becker et al. 1968) was to some extent equivocal, and that tentative or context-specific findings and conclusions were taken and used out of context by subsequent researchers (Joughin 2009b, 2010). These publications, which, arguably, have become important in the discourse on assessment, have never been fully replicated, were carried out in elite or specialised higher education institutions, and were limited in sample size and to one or two disciplines.

Snyder's research, for example, only used five students as a representative sample. Yet the term 'the hidden curriculum', that is, the difference between the formally or explicitly stated assessment criteria and what academic staff actually assess student work on, and the difference between the formally stated assessment and what students believed, or perceived, they were being assessed on, has become a commonly used, and frequently revisited term in higher education (Gabb 1981, Sambell and McDowell 1998, Margolis 2001, Cramp 2012, Sambell et al. 2013). In the context of this thesis the term is relevant because if students perceive there to be differences this may affect their approaches to learning. The research by Becker et al. (1968) identifying that few students valued learning for its own sake, but adopted an instrumental approach, seeking to achieve the best grade point average they could, clearly stated their study was conducted in a possibly unique college and any generalizations should be made cautiously.

Joughin argues that, at the time this research was carried out, whilst assessment "loomed large in the considerations of many students" (Joughin 2009a p.218), this was far from a universal experience. He strengthens his argument by stating that times have changed, as has the nature of higher education institutions, students and teaching practices. Joughin's position here is that assessment may not be as important a factor in students' lives as some educators commonly believe it to be.

Yet, from my experience of teaching, it would seem that for many students, although external pressures such as the demands of balancing part-time employment with full-time study may play a larger part in their lives than in the past (Moreau and Leatherwood 2006), assessment continues to play a very strong role. In the current mass higher education system, assessment processes have serious financial implications for learners and therefore have a direct long-term impact on them. Failure to achieve a good classification of degree may lead to a less well-paid job or lower-status career (Feng and Graetz 2015, Naylor et al. 2016). My proposition at this stage is that assessment looms even larger in students' lives today than it did when the foundational research was carried out. It may be more influential in their behaviour and approaches to learning than previously thought. It is thus timely for this thesis to consider contemporary students' approaches to learning.

2.3.3 The problematic nature of assessment

The term 'assessment' is employed in different ways, and the terminology used can vary between authors. As Taras identifies "there is a lack of commonality in the definition of the terminology relating to it" (Taras 2005 p.466). The UK QAA similarly identify that there is "no generally agreed definition of assessment" (QAA 2012 p.4), it follows that any discussion may involve different meanings and interpretations. Assessment is therefore a broad term for a range of different processes, often having different aims that may be contradictory and incompatible. This necessarily leads to tensions and compromises (Carless 2007). Boud, for example, argues assessment "is a single term that describes different purposes and ideas" (Boud 2009 p.6), that, in practice, is "often a messy compromise between incompatible ends" (ibid. p.6). A key issue is that it fulfils both a certification role and a learning role. Yorke draws attention this being a source of tension, as:

> On one hand an assessment is an outcome of the act of assessing the grade and/or comment attached to a piece of work. On the other hand, it is a process that involves the assessor, the piece of work or behaviour in question, and the student (Yorke 2003 p.485).

Assessment serves different functions with differing and not necessarily complementary needs. Assessment designed for one purpose (such as providing formative feedback) may not operate appropriately when required to serve a different one (such as providing a summative grade). Carless identifies this as a "core problem" (Carless 2007 p.57), and that in performing more than one function at once, or attempting to do so, assessment is unable to do any of them well. His use of the term 'function' is important, as some of the literature makes a distinction between the functions and processes of assessment in respect of how formative and summative assessment are conceptualised. This will be discussed later.

2.3.4 Definitions

This section provides working definitions of key terms.

2.3.4.1 Assessment: definition

Although there is an argument that defining assessment is problematic (Joughin 2009), and its meanings, purposes and motivations can be difficult to discover (Black et al. 2003), a range of definitions are available. The UK QAA define assessment as "any process that appraises an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities, or skills" (QAA, 2012 p.4), and will be used as a working definition for this thesis. One frequently made and important distinction is between that of summative and formative assessment (Boud 2000, Stobart 2008, Harlen 2012a, Torrance 2012). Summative assessment is regarded as being the assessment *of* learning, and formative as assessment *for* learning.

2.3.4.2 Summative assessment: definition

'Summative assessment' is assessment to accredit knowledge (Boud 1990 p.103). It is carried out after learning has taken place and requires a judgement being made, which is translated as a grade or mark the student receives. This is often referred to as the 'assessment of learning', because it is an assessment of what *has* been learnt. Sadler, in a widely cited and influential paper, states that:

> Summative…is concerned with summing up or summarizing the achievement status of a student, and is geared towards reporting at the end of a course of study, especially for purposes of certification (Sadler 1989 p.120).

The UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provide a similar definition:

> Summative assessment is used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme (QAA 2013 p.24).

For the purposes of this thesis, Sadler's definition will be used as a working definition.

2.3.4.3 Formative assessment: definition

Whilst there is an argument that there may currently be "no watertight definition of formative assessment." (Ecclestone et al. 2010 p.33), it is usually taken to mean the provision of feedback to improve teaching and learning, and in turn, to enable teachers to structure teaching towards better learning. Sadler identifies that:

> Formative assessment is concerned with how judgements about the quality of student responses…can be used to shape and improve the student's competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning (Sadler 1989 p.120).

Sadler's use of the word 'judgements' is important, as there is an argument that assessment which makes a judgment is necessarily summative (Taras 2005). This will be discussed later.

Black and Wiliam, influential proponents of Assessment for Learning (discussed later) defined formative assessment as "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black and Wiliam 1998a p.8).

For the purposes of this thesis the QAA's definition of formative assessment will be used as a working definition:

> Formative assessment has a developmental purpose and is designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and on how it can be improved and/or maintained (QAA 2013 p.23).

Their position is that for the student, "individual pieces of assessment…promote learning by providing feedback on performance and help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses" (QAA 2012 p.6).

2.3.4.4 Assessment processes and functions: definitions

Harlen suggests it is generally agreed in the context of education that assessment "involves deciding, collecting, and making judgements about evidence relating to the goals of the learning being assessed" (Harlen 2012a p.87). Yet she notes that this "makes no reference to the use of the evidence, who uses it and how" (ibid. p.87). Taras defines processes as "a mechanism which carries out a judgement" (Taras 2009 p.58). This will be used as a working definition for this thesis. The use of the word 'judgement' is important and relevant to the discussion which follows later. The 'functions of assessment' will be defined as referring to assessment's "intended use or purpose" (Taras 2005 p.468), that is, what the assessment is designed to do, or should do. The distinction between function and

process is an important one, as the intended use may differ to what assessment actually does in practice. A distinction along similar lines is made by Mansell and James (2009) between intended uses and a*ctual* uses, whilst Harlen (2007, 2012a) distinguishes between purposes as being the *reasons for* the assessment, and uses as what is *actually done* with the results.

As a university lecturer in an Education department with a long-standing interest in pedagogy and assessment I believe there is a common understanding amongst educators about the term 'assessment'. Yet this understanding may relate to whether one considers the function of assessment to be that of certifying existing learning, or improving future learning, or both. Joughin, for example, argues that "most definitions of assessment…incorporate or omit elements in a way that reflects particular contextual perspectives" (Joughin 2009a p.15). Joughin's position resonates with my views developed through engaging with a range of literature. There are numerous definitions, particularly in respect of summative and formative assessment, yet the distinction between them is both confusing and contested.

2.3.5 The distinction between formative and summative

Although researchers such as Newton (2012) identify eighteen different functions of assessment there are only *two* clear roles that are generally agreed upon: 'summative' and 'formative'. This distinction is frequently made from a theoretical standpoint (Boud 2000, Stobart 2008, Harlen 2012a, Torrance 2012). As defined previously, summative assessment refers to summarizing a student's achievement (Sadler 1989), whilst formative refers to the provision of feedback on a learner's performance that is designed to help them improve their performance (QAA 2013). Yet, this distinction is not clear-cut and has been challenged, since assessment that is intended to have a summative function may be used formatively.

For example, a summative grade may motivate a student to achieve more highly in a subsequent piece of work, and vice-versa formative feedback may demotivate (Harlen 2012b).

Harlen (ibid.) argues that there is a division in the research literature about the extent to which formative and summative assessment are clear separate processes, or not. Taras and Davies argue that "the research literature is divided on the relationship between summative and formative assessment (with) some definitions based on the process and some on the functions of assessment" (Taras and Davies 2014 p.113). The question this raises is, whether assessment should be defined by what it is intended to do, or by what it actually does? This is an important distinction, with an educator's position shaping their understanding and use of the term. It follows that a discussion of this helps to provide clarity.

The summative-formative distinction is attributed to Scriven (1967) who originally referred to evaluation of academic programmes (Bennett 2011). Scriven identified formative evaluation as taking place whilst a curriculum was being constructed, so that amendments and improvement could be made prior to a summative evaluation, which took place once the curriculum was finalised. Bloom later introduced the terms summative and formative 'assessment' (Bloom et al. 1971), formative assessment being that which helped teaching and learning whilst they were still taking place and able to be modified. Bloom's position was that it should provide feedback to students about how well they were learning at that point in time, and what they needed to improve on. He conceptualised assessment as being corrective activities that would help learning, with formative assessment being a precursor to summative. Importantly, both Bloom and Scriven regarded summative and formative assessment as being linked and working together, part of the same process. Scriven's work made a distinction between the functions and processes that, as Taras and Davies (2012) point out, could be interpreted in different ways. They argue that

"the issue hinges on whether the processes or the functions of assessment are the defining features of summative and formative assessment" (ibid. p.52). This is important, because students' approaches to learning may be determined by their perception of the assessment, and this may not always align with its intended function.

Scriven saw summative and formative assessment as linked (Taras 2007), yet subsequent literature often makes a distinction between the two, identifying that they involve different processes and should be kept separate (Knight 2002, Joughin 2009a). Gipps, for example, maintains that "assessment to support learning, offering detailed feedback…is necessarily different from assessment for monitoring or accountability purposes" (Gipps 1994 p.14, also Gipps 2010 p.221). Yet the distinction of summative serving the purpose of certification, and formative that of aiding student learning is a broad conceptual one. In practice, as will be discussed later, the two are frequently combined (Pokorny and Pickford 2010).

2.3.6 Assessment for Learning (AfL)

Tee and Ahmed (2014) suggest that higher education is currently in an era of transition from the assessment of learning, to one of assessment for learning. AfL is a pedagogy developed in schools that has increasingly influenced universities, with many emergent practices (Sambell et al. 2013). AfL conceptualises assessment as a tool for learning, where emphasis is placed on the formative function, and on students actively participating in the process (Dochy and McDowell 1997, Wiliam 2011, Harlen 2012b). Although there has been an increased focus on student-centred learning in universities in recent years, AfL has yet to be fully embraced throughout higher education (Boud and Falchikov 2007, Bennett 2011, Carless 2017). Carless has recently suggested that AfL is "reasonably well-entrenched as part of higher education pedagogy" (Carless 2017 p.3), that there is a rapidly expanding literature and research base for it, and

that it is embedded within the practices of many lecturers. Yet he maintains that it is "difficult to gauge precisely the extent to which interest in AfL has led to widespread implementation at course levels" (ibid. p.3).

The emphasis on AfL practices lies in Black and Wiliam's (1998a, 1998b) extensive review of literature on formative assessment and classroom learning. Their work was influential in shifting the discussion and focus of assessment, particularly in the compulsory education sector, from summative to formative. The majority of research they reviewed related to schools, though there was evidence from higher education. Their analysis of the literature found that students who learnt in a formative way achieved better results than those who learnt in a more traditional style. Further, they claimed that the research they reported on "shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning" (Black and Wiliam 1998a p.44). Later research confirmed their assertion that AfL practices improved learning (Black et al. 2004, Hattie and Timperley 2007, Shute 2008), though, as will be discussed, this is contested. Black and Wiliam's research emphasized the central role of classroom practices including questioning and diagnostic evaluation as a collective form of feedback that informed changes by both learner and teacher, and led to improvements in learning. 'Diagnostic assessment' here refers to that which assesses, at the beginning of a programme of learning, what a learner already knows, focussing on their strengths and weaknesses, providing detailed feedback in order to identify areas where they may need help (Alderson et al. 2014). As such, although it has an independent research base, primarily in language education, diagnostic assessment is frequently seen as a key component of AfL practice. Black and Wiliam (1989a) maintained it was not the feedback *per se* that was formative, but the use of the information gathered to adjust teaching and learning which could lead to substantial learning gains.

Carless (2017) argues that the term AfL came into use to emphasize the

actual purpose for which assessment is carried out and that it contrasts with formative and summative assessment, as these relate to the functions which are served by assessment. He argues that the literature on AfL in higher education does not often define the term explicitly, that 'AfL' and 'formative assessment' are used both synonymously, *and* to describe different processes. It follows that the terms are problematic. In a review of the literature on AfL and formative assessment Bennett (2011) suggests there is no clear consensus of their meanings. He argues that some of the literature uses AfL as a synonym for formative assessment, or an updated term for it. Ecclestone (2007) suggests that the term 'formative assessment' has frequently been identified as being both a *part* of AfL and as *being* AfL. The lack of clarity in the use of terms can mean that it is not clear whether formative assessment or AfL pedagogy are being discussed. It is therefore necessary to provide a working definition.

2.3.6.1 AfL: definition

The UK Assessment Reform Group define AfL as "The process of setting and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how to get there" (ARG 2002 p.2). This definition is, however, not dissimilar to the definition of formative assessment provided earlier in this chapter, and therefore does not provide clarity. Black and Wiliam provide an updated definition of formative assessment for consistency with the Assessment Reform Group's definition, stating that:

> Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited (Black and Wiliam 2009 p.10).

Klenowski (2009) subsequently developed what Wiliam (2011) labelled as being a 'second generation' definition of AfL:

> Part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning (Klenowski 2009 p.264).

This will be used as the working definition for AfL in this thesis. It may be seen from this definition that the provision of formal written feedback comments is not necessarily a part of AfL since such comments are not always part of everyday practice, nor do they necessarily involve dialogue, demonstration or observation.

From a definitional perspective, it is not easy to differentiate formative assessment and AfL. From a practical position AfL seems to place as much emphasis on teachers changing their practice, as it does on learners changing theirs. In contrast formative assessment often, though not always, may refer only to the feedback that lecturers provide to students and exclude feedback from student to lecturers. An example of this is in my own institution where module specifications, since 2015, require academics to include a formative assessment. Yet this is solely an assessment of students' work and excludes students providing feedback to tutors to allow them to change their teaching. It Is not therefore a pedagogy in the way AfL may be.

2.3.6.2 The practice of AfL

AfL practices typically include formative classroom-based assessment, feedback provided separately from a summative grade and on work prior to submission for summative assessment, feedback from the students to the teacher so they can make changes to the teaching and learning process, and informal feedback from tutor to student (Knight 2012). Yet these practices are not clearly delineated, with Black suggesting that the

term AfL has been applied to a multitude of different practices (Black 2006). He maintains it has become “a free brand-name to attach to any practice (ibid. p.11). In a similar vein, McDowell et al.(2011) argue that AfL is ill-defined and has become an imprecise term which has been applied to many different practices. From this position, it may be argued that the precise nature of AfL practice is unclear and confused.

Despite lack of clarity in the face of such confusion, Swaffield (2011) suggests that a clear distinction between AfL and formative assessment is necessary because using them synonymously has enabled AfL practice to be misappropriated. Klenowski, for example, argues that it has sometimes been misinterpreted as “an exhortation to teachers to (summatively) test students more frequently to assess the levels they attain…in order to fix their failings” (Klenowski 2009 p.263). Swaffield (2011) provides some clarity by suggesting AfL is a teaching and learning process that is broader than the provision of formative assessment; that formative assessment is only a part of AfL. She identifies six reasons why AfL is distinctive from formative assessment. These are, (1) AfL is a learning and teaching process whereas formative assessment is a function of certain assessments, (2) AfL focuses on the here and now, whereas formative assessment can have a longer time span, (3) AfL is classroom specific, whereas formative assessment can benefit other teachers in different settings (4) AfL is a learning process in itself, whilst formative assessment provides information that guides future learning, (5) in AfL environments learners exercise autonomy and agency, whereas with formative assessment learners can still be passive recipients, and (6) AfL is concerned with learning how to learn, whereas formative assessment focuses on curriculum objectives. She maintains that a key difference between AfL and formative assessment is that of AfL’s concern with the “here and now of learning” (Swaffield 2011 p.441). This immediacy is, she argues, a key distinction.

Despite Swaffield's distinction, the range of practices in use make AfL difficult to pin down. Yorke identifies it as having "*definitional fuzziness"* (Yorke 2003 p.478, emphasis original). In the face of differences in interpretation and practices, trying to ascertain its effectiveness is therefore problematic. In engaging with the literature, I have frequently been struck by how different researchers compare and contrast the benefits of using an AfL approach with a non-AfL approach, without identifying exactly what the differences between the two are. Different AfL practices, across different disciplines and institutions are frequently compared and contrasted with 'non-AfL' practices, to demonstrate benefits, yet with no clear indication of what practices were used and how they were different to the 'non-AfL' practices (see, for example, McDowell et al. 2011). Despite Swaffield's (2011) work, Gardner's review of assessment maintains that "in the final analysis there is little of substance to distinguish the two terms 'formative assessment' and 'assessment for learning'" (Gardner 2012 p.3), whilst a recent study by Taras and Davies found there to be disparity and inconsistency between the theory and practice of assessment, with formative assessment subject to "idiosyncratic interpretations" by academic staff (Taras and Davies 2014 p.103).

It can be seen from this that AfL is an unclear practice, and AfL and formative assessment may not be the same, yet the terms are often used synonymously. My position is they are distinct and different, that AfL is a pedagogy, whereas formative assessment is a part of pedagogical processes, and that formative assessment is frequently used in teaching environments which are not conceptualised as being AfL ones. In respect of students' approaches to learning, AfL pedagogy should lead to greater student engagement and less use of a surface approach. Yet, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, my experience is that some students do not engage with formative assessment. In-class formative assessment, whether labelled as AfL or not, may not always be successful because some students do not, or are unwilling to, actively participate or take seriously,

assessment that does not directly count towards a summatively assessed grade.

2.3.7 The blurring of formative and summative assessment

Despite the confused practice of AfL, and the argument that the summative assessment of learning is a *different* process to that of providing feedback to aid learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006, Harlen 2007, Joughin 2010), they are not always kept separate in higher education. Harlen argues that there is a "blurred distinction" (2012a p.97) between them, whilst Yorke suggests the distinction is "far from sharp" (Yorke 2003 p.479). He explains that assessment tasks are:

> Simultaneously formative and summative - formative - because the student is expected to learn from whatever feedback is provided, and summative because the grade awarded contributes to the overall grade at the end of the study unit" (ibid. p.479-480).

Official guidance from the UK Quality Assurance Agency is that formative and summative assessment serve different functions (QAA 2013). Yet throughout much undergraduate education it has been, and remains, normal practice to carry out assessment that provides a summative grade at the same time as feedback which is intended to be formative and developmental (Pokorny and Pickford 2010). The same assessment carries out a dual role, having both a summative and formative function. Despite increased use of AfL practices, greater emphasis is still placed on summative assessment (Postareff et al. 2012). As Wiliam identifies, "the assessment *of* learning predominates over assessment for learning" (Williams 2014 p.566). Assessment *of* learning is carried out at the same time as assessment *for* learning, this being despite a strong argument that combining the two has a negative impact on learning. Gipps, for example, argues that "*any* attempt to use formative assessment for summative purposes will impair its formative role" (Gipps 2010 p.228 emphasis mine).

In practice, lecturers will often provide students with formative feedback comments on a draft, or plan, of the work they are producing for a summative assessment. If students use this to improve their work then the feedback is strictly formative. Yet not all students will avail themselves of the opportunity for this type of purely formative feedback. After submitting the work for a summative grade the student will then receive the marked work along with comments designed to act formatively for future work they produce. The same assessment task is used to provide both a summative grade and feedback the student should engage with in order to improve future work (Yorke 2003). This creates tension (Crooks 2004, Carless et al. 2006), and will necessarily influence students' approaches to learning. Feedback *intended* to function formatively may encourage the use of a deep approach, yet, if provided at the same time as a summative assessment, may not do so, as students may focus on the grade and not engage with the feedback (Weaver 2006, Gibbs 2010, Doan 2013).

The ways in which university assessment frequently carries out a dual function can be problematic. Fletcher et al., for example, argue that "assessment is meant to inform student learning even as it sorts students into those who pass and those who fail (Fletcher et al. 2012 p.120). Carless et al. argue "that assessments need to lead to both the award of a reliable grade and contribute to productive student learning is a source of tension" (Carless et al. 2006 p.161). They acknowledge that a summative function for certification conflicts with a formative function of contributing to productive student learning, and that assessment intended to function summatively may not be able to carry out a formative one effectively. Assessment intended to measure a learner's achievement of something may not, for example, be able to provide sufficiently detailed information for improving future learning.

Boud argues that "summative assessment drives out learning" (Boud 2000 p.156) because it removes the responsibility for judgements about it from

the learner, placing them in the hands of the assessor, sending out a message that "assessment is not an act of the learner, but an act performed on the learner" (ibid. p.156). From this position, it may be argued that the practice of combining a summative grade with formative feedback undermines learning. Yet Boud maintains that formative and summative functions are "inextricably woven together and…it is probably impossible to separate them in practice" (Boud 2000 p.155). This dual role performed by assessment is problematic. It follows that there is an argument, as for example provided by Daugherty et al. that "it is not helpful to think in terms of a sharp distinction between formative and summative assessment…since the same assessment results can be used in different ways" (Daugherty et al. 2012 p.88). For example, a summative grade may act formatively by motivating a learner when they receive a grade higher than they expected, or when a student fails the assessment, or receives grades lower than expect, they may then be motivated to improve future work.

The range and diversity of assessment processes, coupled with differing perceptions amongst academic staff as to the purpose of assessment (Murray and MacDonald 1997, McLellan 2004) as well as learners, make it difficult to establish precise, clear, rigid distinction between formative and summative assessment other than from a *theoretical* perspective. Yet even this theoretical distinction has been challenged in recent years. Taras (2005), for example, provides an alternative view on formative assessment, arguing that formative and summative assessment are not different processes. Referring to Scriven (1967) she contends that formative and summative assessment are part of the *same* process, not separate and distinct, and, regardless of whether labelled as having a summative or formative function, assessment is a single process. Because all assessment involves making a judgement (Daugherty et al. 2012), it follows that all assessment is *summative,* and that 'formative assessment' is summative assessment combined with feedback which is negotiated, and used, by

learners (Taras 2005). Feedback can only be provided after some form of judgement has been made, hence it may not "be possible for assessment to be uniquely formative without the summative judgement having preceded it" (Taras 2007 p.367). This position suggests that educational processes require "both summative and formative assessment" (ibid. p.367). Taras maintains that, because all assessment requires judgement, it is a single process; summative assessment being that where a judgement is made up to a given point, and, only after a judgement has been made, can formative feedback be provided (Man and Lau 2016). Bearing this in mind, there is a clear theoretical argument that summative and formative assessment should not be separated, regardless of whether they may be able to be separated in practice.

Having considered some of the tensions associated with the summative-formative debate it is next necessary to discuss assessment feedback, because this may influence students' approaches to learning.

2.3.8 Assessment feedback: definitions

From a review of over a decade of literature about feedback in higher education Evans concluded that "there is no generally agreed definition" (Evans 2013 p.71). Wingate similarly posits that the term 'feedback' is "referred to inconsistently in the literature" (Wingate 2010 p.520). Although these positions may well be justifiable, there are definitions available which are consistently referred to. The most frequently cited definition is Ramparasad's long-standing one stating it is "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad 1983 p.4). Joughin similarly defines it as "a process of identifying gaps between actual and desired performance, noting ways of bridging those gaps, and then having students take action to bridge the gaps." (Joughin 2009c p.2).

For the purposes of this thesis Joughin's definition will be used as a working definition.

Information about the gap usually comprises written feedback comments to students about how their performance fell short of the required standard and what they could do to improve (Taylor and Burke da Silva 2013), although in AfL environments verbal feedback will typically also be provided. Feedback is frequently seen as being effective only if it allows these gaps to be bridged (Wiliam 2011, Evans 2013). As Sadler identifies, "information about the gap between the actual and reference levels is considered as feedback only when it is used to alter the gap" (Sadler 1989 p.121). He argues that feedback not used to alter the gap is merely "dangling data" (ibid. p.121). These definitions all suggest that feedback should not be labelled as such unless there is an impact on future performance (Draper 2009, Wiliam 2011). As the Higher Education Academy argue "feedback will have no impact on future student learning, unless they actually pick it up and read it" (HEA 2013 p.12).

The concept of feedback as involving the identification and closing of a gap has been questioned, with Torrance (2012) suggesting that the idea there is a gap to be closed may lead to students adopting more of a surface approach to their learning. He argues that sending out the message that feedback is about closing a gap may signify that, once the gap has been closed, no further learning of the topic need take place. This may close down further development for some learners, and imply a surface approach should be used to 'close the gap'. Moreover, it implies that the transfer of curriculum knowledge is all important and that the only problem is one of "how to 'close the feedback loop'" (Torrance 2012 p.33). This is in turn implies a behaviourist transmission-based pedagogy should be used, and may send out a message to learners that a surface approach to learning should be used.

In defining feedback, the QAA state that its purpose is “not just to evaluate the quality of students' work; feedback should also assist them in showing how to improve that quality” (QAA 2008 p.7). It is evident this encompasses *both* summative and formative feedback. The QAA’s definition, however is about ‘improving quality’ rather than ‘altering a gap’. My understanding aligns with Torrance’s, namely that feedback intended to improve learning should encourage a student to go beyond the closing of a gap. It is perhaps significant that the QAA’s definition omits mention of altering, or closing a gap or ‘having students take action’ and instead identifies that feedback involves *showing* a student what they need to do. From my perspective, this is more in line with what academics can be expected to do, to show students how to improve their work, rather than to require them to close a gap. However, if some students perceive feedback to involve showing them what to do, rather than requiring them to take action, they may not act to improve their future work. Some may also believe that feedback should be so detailed as to show them precisely what they need to do, taking away some of the responsibility they have for improving their work. Nevertheless, despite confusion about what feedback is, it undoubtedly has an important role to play in assessment and students’ approaches to learning.

2.3.9 Feedback and learning

There is a widely supported argument that, in respect of assessment’s role in improving learning, feedback is the most potent and powerful element (Gibbs 1995, 2006, Merry et al. 2013, O’Donovan et al. 2015). A body of research indicates its importance, particularly in encouraging a deep approach (Higgins et al. 2001). Yet feedback can have both a positive or negative impact (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Torrance argues that feedback “will always impact on students and have a central place in what and how students learn, but not necessarily in a positive sense” (Torrance 2012 p.334). He maintains that the research base only demonstrates that

assessment feedback *can* improve learning, not that it necessarily will. This position is supported by others including Hounsell (2003), Joughin (2010) and Molloy et al. (2013).

There is a lack of clear evidence that feedback improves learning (Higgins 2000, Higgins et al. 2001, Scoles et al. 2012). Crisp, for example, argues that "educational theorists frequently claim that formative feedback can assist students to evaluate their progress and plan for future learning…although evidence to support such assertions tend to be absent" (Crisp 2007 p.572). Similarly, O'Donovan et al. argue that "much feedback practice does not…influence future student learning" (O'Donovan et al. 2015 p.1). Feedback can only help students if they engage with it, and frequently this does not happen (Carless et al. 2011). A study by Murtagh and Baker (2009), for example, found that almost a quarter of students did not look at or act upon the written feedback they received. This concurs with previous work by Hounsell (2003, 2007), who has argued that some students do not use feedback to inform their future learning, and feedback made little difference to the quality of future work they produced.

Crisp suggests that claims about the benefits of formative feedback are invariably presented as being "uncontestable 'truths'" (Crisp 2007 p.572) and that this common-sense assumption may be ingrained in the organizational culture of universities. Yet feedback intended to have a formative function is only formative if students act on the information provided (Harlen and James 1997, Davies and Ecclestone 2008, WIliam 2011). As Wiliam bluntly states, "feedback is useless if it is not acted upon" (Wiliam 2011 p.12). It is also difficult to predict an individual learner's use of the feedback which they receive. A 2007 study by Crisp, for example, found there was "only limited support for the idea that students respond to feedback by making changes which are consistent with the intent of the feedback received" (Crisp 2007 p.571).

2.3.10 Student engagement with feedback

Despite a body of research on engagement with feedback and whether or not students read and/or act upon it, the literature is not conclusive. Alongside the research, there is considerable anecdotal evidence and practitioner experience to indicate that many students show little interest in assessor feedback, nor make an effort to engage with it (Winter and Dye 2005). There may also be discrepancy between the intentions of staff providing feedback and that of the expectations of students who receive it and, arguably, "miscommunication and dissatisfaction are inevitable" (Price et al. 2011 p.285). Perhaps, not surprisingly, some students engage with feedback, whilst others do not.

There is evidence that students do appreciate, and want, feedback (Higgins 2000, Williams 2014). Higgins et al. (2001) suggest that in today's mass higher education system students expect to receive feedback as something they have paid for as part of their degree. In line with this, feedback is frequently prioritised as an element in the contemporary student experience (Kovacs et al. 2010) as it is one of the areas in the NSS where universities consistently receive a low student satisfaction score. As Carless and Boud recently identified, there is "persistent student and teacher dissatisfaction with feedback processes" (Carless and Boud 2018 p.10).

Yet despite students' professed expectations of feedback, there is evidence that some are disengaged from the feedback process entirely (Bloxham and Campbell 2010, Price et al. 2011). Some students do not bother to collect their marked work (Orsmond et al. 2005, Crisp 2007, Duncan 2007, Murtagh and Baker 2009) and some do not read it (Ecclestone and Swann 1998, Gibbs 2006, Duncan 2007, Price et al. 2011). One explanation has been found to include the timeliness of its delivery, notably, students often feel it has been provided too late to be of benefit (Gibbs 1994, 2006, Hartley and Chesworth 2000, Higgins et al. 2001, Hepplestone et al. 2011,

Hattie 2012). Another reason is that they may not understand the feedback provided (see Higgins 2000, Lea and Street 2000, Higgins et al. 2001, Glover and Brown 2006, Weaver 2006, Burke 2009, Walker 2009, Scoles et al. 2012, O'Donovan et al. 2015). In the study by Higgins et al. for example, it was found that only a third of students indicated they actually understood the criteria against which they were being assessed. Work with first years by Bloxham and Campbell found that out of a whole cohort "all the students interviewed expressed some problems with understanding what tutors expected of them in their academic writing" (Bloxham and Campbell 2010 p.294). Weaver's (2006) study found that three-quarters of students sampled had not received any advice or guidance prior to university about how to utilise feedback, and once at university, less than half had received guidance about how to understand and use it.

In a related vein, Hounsell (1987), has argued that some students do not understand the taken-for-granted academic discourses underpinning assessment and the language used in feedback. More recently Price et al. (2011) argued that although feedback can only be effective both when the learner understands it *and* is willing and able to act on it, yet:

> In higher education the likelihood of providing unambiguous, categorical feedback to the student about the exact standard of all aspects of their work or how to interpret it is very low indeed with most feedback requiring interpretation (Price et al. 2011 p.279).

This argument implies that many learners may not easily be able to utilise feedback, and it therefore may not contribute to improving their learning. Students may simply not recognize the benefits that engaging with feedback can provide.

Another explanation for students not making use of feedback was their "lack of appreciation that the comments about one essay could help their achievement in a later assignment" (Duncan 2007 p.272). Students may also require guidance on how best to use feedback (Burke 2009, Doan

2013, Jonsson 2013), particularly if they find it to be vague (Weaver 2006) or specific to that assignment (Carless 2006). They may view feedback as criticism (Irons 2008). Both Weaver's (2006) and Burke's (2009) research, for example, found that the majority of students commencing university did not have any strategies for using written tutor feedback.

More recently, Tomlinson (2014) has identified that students' lack of interest in using feedback to improve their work may be explained by the fact that in most universities there is a relatively low grade required to successfully pass a module. He found that "the implicit message of 'getting 40%' is enough, promoted casual approaches" to studying amongst students (ibid. p.25). Students may thus not recognize a need to improve the standard of their work if they perceive passing at 40% to be all that is required for success; particularly so in the first-year where grades do not contribute to the final degree classification.

Although this is not specifically referred to in the assessment literature, the concept of 'wilful blindness' (Heffernan 2011) may offer a further explanation. Wilful blindness is conscious avoidance of something that we are aware of, but decide to ignore in order to avoid having to take action about it, because it is easier to ignore it than to address it. The concept may go some way to explaining why some students may not engage with feedback.

Students have a choice about whether or not to act on feedback. Yet their engagement with it is part of, and influenced by, a wider range of processes, involving those both within and out-with a community of practice. There is therefore an argument that it is not entirely the responsibility of the individual learner (Bloxham and Campbell 2010), but of all those involved in the process, including other learners. If, for example, students observe their peers to be not engaging with feedback then they may act similarly, and vice-versa. It has also been identified that some

students may regard feedback as being a teacher-owned endeavour (Taras 2003) and therefore not perceive it as their responsibility to do anything to learn from it. They may expect to receive feedback yet not to have to act on it.

Bloxham and Campbell (2010) argue that the act of making personal judgements about whether to pay attention to feedback provided and how, when, or whether learners will use it is difficult, because these judgements depend on the learner's ability to discern an impact on their work, and to reflect on this. They argue that in order to be able to do so, students require a "reasonably well developed" understanding of the learning process (ibid. p.286), further, that many have a:

> Limited, or at least, more 'immediate' conceptualisation of feedback. Although they recognize its role in improving performance, they do not understand its role in contributing to the long-term development of learning and understanding …students need to have some understanding of pedagogic processes and concepts. However, the extent of students' pedagogic literacy is generally too limited (ibid. p.286).

It follows that, in the later stages of a degree, having developed a better understanding of the role of feedback compared with the earlier stages, students should be more likely to use feedback.

2.3.11 Educators' understanding of the purpose of feedback

The individual lecturer's conception of the process of learning is important as it may influence their understanding of the purpose of feedback. If it is conceptualised from a teacher-centred perspective, an assessor could argue that the feedback s/he provides is "formative in intention, even though the student does not learn from it" (Yorke 2003 p.484). Yet, conceptualised from a perspective of student learning, it is formative *only* if it actually contributes to learning. A lecturer may intend that feedback has a formative function, but, as Wiliam argues, "assessment that is *intended*

to be formative…but does not, *ultimately* have the intended effect…is not formative" (Wiliam 2000 p.10 emphasis mine). Although a lecturer may believe their feedback acts in a developmental way because that is its intended function, it only acts formatively if students actually use it for that purpose (Black and Wiliam 2009, Wiliam 2011).

2.3.12 The emotional impact of feedback

There is a strong argument that assessment practices can involve complex and emotional processes (Hyland 1998, Higgins 2000, Higgins et al. 2001) which impact on learners' identities and notions of self-worth and confidence, both positively and negatively (Carless 2006, Cramp et al. 2012, Torrance 2012). Positive emotional experiences are identified as correlating with deep approaches to learning (Trigwell et al. 2012). A substantial body of literature therefore indicates that feedback can have an emotional effect on learners (see Higgins 2000, Higgins et al. 2001, Skelton 2002, Carless, Joughin et al. 2006, Davies and Ecclestone 2008, Cramp et al. 2012, Torrance 2012, Molloy et al. 2013, Harland et al. 2014, Shield 2015). It is commonly understood amongst educators that assessment feedback can motivate learners if they are successful, but if they are less successful feedback can undermine confidence and the capacity to learn (Torrance et al. 2005). As may be expected, positive emotions are believed to affect learning in a positive way (Pekrun et al. 2011), whilst negative ones have been found to have the opposite effect (Lewis et al. 2011). Yet they may not always operate in this way, since negative emotions may sometimes spur a learner on to achieve more highly, whilst positive ones may lead to some feeling they do not need to improve their work at all.

Assessment can threaten a student's self-perception and confidence (Carless 2006) and their ability to achieve to their potential. Shield (2015), for example, found that for Social-Science and Humanities students in the early stages of their degree, there was a link between how they interpreted

feedback comments and their individual beliefs about themselves as learners. Feedback could help develop confidence and reinforce notions of self-worth, or, reinforce notions of inability to successfully study at university, with some interpreting negative feedback as being personal criticism.

Cramp's (2011) work on first-year students' engagement with feedback draws attention to what he labels as students' first formal 'moment' of receiving feedback. He argues this can put confidence and self-esteem at risk, with feedback that a student perceives as being negative, impacting negatively their confidence and self-esteem. Recent work by Jones et al. (2012) concurs with this, finding that many students, irrespective of their emotional reactions to it, valued feedback, and, for some, their initial emotional reaction was extremely important. Where feedback demotivated the student, it was found to have "very limited value to the ongoing learning process" (ibid. p.4). It therefore follows that while initial feedback should be couched sensitively, there is a fine line between this and not conveying clearly what actions students may need to take to improve their work.

A practical problem here is that an assessor cannot know what an individual student's perception of their own confidence and level of self-esteem is, nor how they may view their ability. An assessor cannot predict the immediate impact of their feedback on an individual learner, nor how it may influence their future approach to learning. Lecturers cannot know how students will interpret, nor whether they will understand, feedback (Wilson 2012). Torrance (2012) argues that the existing social knowledge and expectations learners bring with them mediate their experience of assessment, and assessors need to give attention to this. Yet doing so may not be a simple, or easy practice to implement. Whether an individual student uses feedback to improve future work, or discounts it, or is put off further learning by it, is down to the individual. As Entwistle and

Karagiannopoulou point out “assessment and feedback are not procedures we can expect to have uniform effects: they are events which students’ interpret in terms of their own motives and feelings” (Entwistle and Karagiannopoulou 2014 p.90). Predicting an individual learner’s reaction to assessment feedback is therefore extremely problematic. As such it cannot be assumed that the effect of feedback can be predicted in advance. No matter how positive and constructive the feedback provided is intended to be, it may not be seen as being such by the learner. The same feedback that inspires and motivates one student, may have the opposite effect on another.

2.3.13 Pre-specified learning outcomes

A significant change in university assessment practices since the foundational research on approaches to learning was conducted is the implementation of pre-specified intended learning outcomes. Student achievement of intended learning outcomes is a requirement of higher education qualifications in Britain. For academic credit to be awarded their use is mandatory (QAA 2011, QAA 2013). One espoused reason for their use is that they should provide clarity, consistency and transparency in assessment processes for both student and educator (Otter 1992, Ellis 2004). Yet despite these aspirations, Torrance (2012) argues that where students are only required to pursue stated pre-specified intended learning outcomes, it may convey the idea that learning outside the externally specified parameters of qualifications is less valid, or irrelevant. And the use of learning outcomes decided prior to the commencement of study, arguably, may lead to a more transmission-based pedagogy, which in turn may encourage a surface approach.

Both Sadler (2007) and Torrance (2007) suggest that learning outcomes are too frequently over-specified and that the language they are written in

does not always help learning. Hussey and Smith have argued that it is "impossible" to write learning outcomes which are sufficiently precise that learners can understand what is expected of them (Hussey and Smith 2002 p.30). They maintain that however carefully they are written, they can *only* be interpreted in the light of prior understanding of what quality or standard is appropriate in a given subject at a given level (Hussey and Smith 2002, 2003, 2008). This is an important dimension of assessment in higher education. If learning outcomes are not articulated in a way that all students can understand then they may not be able to produce assessed work which meets the outcomes. Students may also misinterpret the requirements of an outcome, leading to the use of a surface approach, when a deep one is required.

Following the discussion of assessment, and in the light of students' transition into
higher education emerging in the data, a brief consideration of this is necessary.

2.3.14 Students' transition to higher education and the first-year experience

It is widely acknowledged that a student's transition to university-life is often a difficult and complex process (Booth 1997, Kember 2001, Christie et al. 2008, Briggs et al. 2012). A growing body of research indicates that the first-year transition to university can be a challenging time for many (Chemers et al. 2001, Scanlon et al. 2007, Krause and Coates 2008, Palmer et al. 2009, Johnston 2010, Briggs et al. 2012). Such studies suggest that the initial experience of university and assessment practices in particular has an important impact upon learning.

Knight and Yorke maintain that it is widely understood that the first-year experience of higher education is of critical importance to student success

and a negative experience in the early stages may discourage students from further engagement “perhaps even for life” (Knight and Yorke 2003 p.192). Negative experiences of assessment, and feedback specifically, can discourage learners. Higher education may be an “alien environment” for some students, particularly non-traditional learners (Askham 2008 p.90), whilst Cramp has identified that some are “‘shocked’ by the differences between school and university” (Cramp 2011 p.119), particularly in respect of the requirement for independent study. More recently, a study by Henri (2016) found that up to 33% of students expressed feeling shock regarding their transition to university in the first-year.

An important aspect of students’ transition into university is a change in how they experience feedback (Beaumont et al. 2008, 2011, Shield 2015). In the compulsory education sector, students typically receive a greater amount and more-frequent feedback than in higher education (ibid.). In their study, Beaumont et al. (2008) found students experienced a stark contrast between the extensive support and guidance given prior to assignment submission in further education and that at university, which provided relatively little feedback and only after submission. In addition, prior to university, feedback is often in the form of coaching and correction rather than suggestions for improvement (Monchinski 2008). Students may also have experienced ‘teaching to the test’ (Popham 2001) which encourages memorization rather than understanding. In the vocational education sector, research shows that students are provided with feedback in the form of precise guidance about what they had to do to complete successfully the summative assessment, with feedback typically provided in the form of coaching-and-correction rather than suggestions, advice and guidance (Ecclestone and Pryor 2003, Davies and Ecclestone 2008, Ecclestone 2010, 2011).

Torrance (2007) has similarly argued that narrowly defined assessment criteria used in A-levels, vocational, adult education and work-based

training have led to formative feedback provided in the form of coaching to increase student achievement. He argues that transparent assessment criteria and pre-determined learning outcomes lead to student instrumentalism and a surface approach to learning. Further, he argues that assessment has "come completely to dominate the learning experience" (ibid. p.282) with compliance with the assessment criteria replacing genuine learning. This position resonates with my experiences outlined in the introduction to this thesis, that some students commence university seemingly focused on wanting to know the 'correct answers' to pass successfully an assessment. It would seem that some have, through their pre-university experiences, learnt to conceptualize feedback as serving to provide them with correct answers rather than as suggestions for improving their work.

2.3.15 Students' prior educational experiences and their approaches to learning

Student's attitudes to, and feelings about, knowledge are often strongly influenced by earlier educational experiences (Bainbridge 2007, 2013). Entwistle has identified that students' approaches to learning are affected by their prior educational and personal history, creating "habitual patterns of studying" (Entwistle 1998 p.73). He argues that they enter university with beliefs about learning which are derived from their own previous experiences of education, as well as their own feelings about the nature of learning. Torrance (2012) has similarly argued that students' experiences of assessment are mediated by the existing social knowledge and expectations they have. Because students may have experienced "teaching to the test" (Popham 2001 p.16) and some feedback provided in the form of coaching and correction prior to university, it is likely they will have a different conceptualisation of the purpose of feedback to that of their lecturers. Squires has argued that higher education can sometimes be a disconcerting experience involving confusion and disorientation as

students may have to “unlearn’’ (Squires 1990 p.146) what they previously learnt during compulsory education. For those students who enter university believing that success in assessment tasks predominantly involves a surface approach to learning, and that feedback involves being provided with correct answers, this may require considerable change, and take time.

As Kruger and Dunning (1999) have suggested, many people fail to recognize their own lack of skills or ability, and tend to overestimate their ability at performing a task compared to what it actually is. It follows that some students studying at university for the first time may have unrealistic beliefs about their ability to produce assessed work of high quality and, crucially, unrealistic ideas about the role of assessment in this. This aligns with recent work by Boud, who argues that when students first encounter new material they will not sufficiently appreciate the criteria they need to apply to their work, with the result that “they may err on the side of generosity to themselves – they just don’t know their work is not good enough” (Boud 2014 p.11). The first time a university student receives feedback may therefore be something of a shock if they have overestimated their ability and expect to receive a high grade and positive feedback praising their achievement.

2.4 Summary of chapter

This chapter has considered and critiqued the long-standing theory of approaches to learning, which argues that students use either a deep approach (an intention to understand and make personal sense) or a surface approach (memorization without understanding). It identifies that students have a general tendency to use one approach, yet, for specific tasks, this depends on their perception of the assessment requirements. The theory is not without criticism, for example, it may be culturally specific and dichotomise understanding and memorization, prioritising

understanding, when both support learning and may be complementary. The term 'understanding' is ambiguous, and the claim that deep approaches lead to higher achievement is dependent on the method of assessment.

Assessment is of central importance to the theory, and a discussion of it and its role has been provided, focusing on the summative-formative distinction, the lack of clarity surrounding the practice of Assessment for Learning, the role of feedback, and students' use of, and emotional reactions to it.

2.5 Implications from the literature for the research

There has been relatively little research on contemporary students' approaches to learning. The majority of the research was conducted prior to the expansion and massification of higher education and the many changes that have taken place over the last twenty-five years. It is not known whether contemporary students value understanding *per se,* and whether they typically use a deep approach to learning. Nor do we have sufficient knowledge about the relationship between assessment and students' approaches. It is therefore now timely to investigate contemporary students' approaches to learning.

The literature has pointed to a number of areas that should be explored in the research presented in this thesis. These include: students' views of what understanding means and, in the context of their approaches to learning, whether they differentiate between memorization and understanding; how assessment practices influence their approaches; students' use of learning outcomes; their engagement with and use of assessment feedback; and their emotional reactions to feedback and how these may influence them.

Because formative assessment and AfL are confused in practice the thesis data collection will focus on students' views about the feedback that is formally provided to them in written form about a completed assessment task.

2.6 Identifying the research questions

Four sub-questions were developed to address the central research question: in the context of English higher education, what insights can be drawn about contemporary students' approaches to learning, assessment and formally received assessment feedback, at two contrasting universities? These are:

(1) How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning?

(2) What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning?

(3) To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding?

(4) What changes take place in students' approaches to learning between the first and third year?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides justification for the research methodology and method adopted to gather and analyse data to illuminate research questions and four sub-questions.

A qualitative case study was chosen, with data gathered through the use of semi-structured individual interviews with a total of twenty undergraduate students in both their first and third-year. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. In order to situate and contextualise the research approach taken, a discussion of the nature of qualitative research and of the use of the case study and interviews is presented. Discussion of ethical issues and how these were taken into account is provided. The data analysis method, thematic analysis, is critiqued, and an explanation of how the data was analysed is provided. The chapter first discusses qualitative research methodology. This is followed by an explanation of, and justification for, the use of semi-structured interviews, a consideration of ethics in research and relevant to this thesis, and the method adopted for the data analysis.

3.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative work is a situated activity, locating the researcher in the world, where they may use interpretive practices to illuminate it. Phenomena are studied in their natural settings, and researchers attempt to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2013). In qualitative work the researcher is the instrument of research (Patton, M. 2014), and rather than being randomly selected, the choice of sample is deliberate and purposeful (Patton, J. 1996). There is no requirement to

either strive for objectivity or for isolation from participants, because it is not possible to do so. In the social world there is no neutral or objective knowledge (Ritchie et al. 2014), only interpretation (Denzin 1994). Qualitative researchers acknowledge that "the researcher *inevitably* influences the research process and the knowledge produced" (Braun and Clarke 2013 p.279, emphasis original). The validity and reliability standards used within a positivist paradigm cannot be directly applied to qualitative work because they presuppose a realist epistemology, that is, there is a human, researcher-independent, reality which is knowable, with only one true or correct version of any phenomenon, and this requires a single absolute account of social reality.

Qualitative research regards the subjectivity of the researcher as being an inevitable and inherent part of the research process, and essential for understanding (Simons 2009). In the social world the researcher is never independent of the process (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The objectivity standards of quantitative work cannot be applied. Instead, a range of concepts of quality are used as ways of breaking free from positivist notions that distinguish research quality from a purely realist perspective. These attributes include, *inter alia*, trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985), relevance (Hammersley 1990), truth value (Guba and Lincoln 1989), credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability and reliability (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Bryman 2012). A discussion of quality is relevant in necessary order to demonstrate that it has been taken into account in this thesis.

3.2.1 Quality in qualitative research

There is a strong argument that the research literature contains many debates about what quality is and how it may be recognized (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013). Flick, for example, argues that:

> The question of how to ascertain the quality of

> qualitative research has been asked since the beginning of qualitative research and attracts continuous and repeated attention. However, answers to this question have not been found – at least not in a way that is generally agreed upon (Flick 2007 p.11).

This tension arises from the very nature of qualitative research, how it has developed in different contexts and the assumptions of different theoretical and methodological schools and disciplines. In contrast to quantitative work it is "difficult to define benchmarks or indicators for distinguishing between good and bad research" that are agreed by the majority of researchers (Flick 2007 p.21). This does not mean that the issue of quality may be ignored. It is important, and a range of criteria for conducting high quality qualitative research are widely available (see Seale 1999, 2004, Flick 2007, Silverman 2013). Criteria which are typically applied include that research results should be believable and convincing (credible), findings should have applications in similar situations (be transferable) and should endure over time (be dependable), and they should be able to be confirmed by other researchers. Confirmability implies that the researcher has space for interpretation, but this should be verifiable by other scholars.

Credibility relates not just to the design of the research process, but also to that of the researcher. There may be several different possible accounts of any social phenomena; it is the credibility of the researcher's account that determines its acceptability. This may, in part, be assured by conducting research "according to the existing canons of good practice" (Bryman 2012 p.390). It is incumbent upon the researcher to document their procedure clearly, because the public deserves to know how the data has been collected and analysed (Kirk and Miller 1986).

3.2.2 Quality in this research project

Bearing the previous criteria in mind, the processes of data collection,

analysis and interpretation are clearly explained along with how the researcher's perception, views and biases, may have influenced the process. This is important because the positionality a researcher inevitably brings to their work, and their unique personal experiences that have shaped it, influence their choice of processes and their interpretation of the outcomes (Foote and Bartell 2011). I am aware that I hold my own unique set of values, beliefs and assumptions, and these are not fixed, and my ethics, personal integrity and social values influence my research (Greenbank 2003), yet that it is not always possible to precisely identify how this influence is realised. My knowledge of the world, is, like everyone's, "mediated by our perspectives and the interpretative framework through which we organise our perspectives" (Balarin 2009 p.295). Like all researchers, I am part of the world I investigate and cannot be objective about it (Cohen et al. 2007). As Malterud argues:

> A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions (Malterud 2001 pp.483-484).

Malterud's statement resonated with me, because my research originated from experiences as a lecturer in higher education. I questioned the importance of personal understanding for contemporary students, perceiving many to be instrumental and overly focused on the summative assessment.

3.2.3 Justification for using a qualitative approach

I wanted to illuminate the phenomena of contemporary students' approach to learning in rich detail, based on gaining authentic insights to these. A quantitative approach was not used because the research used a small data set (n= 20) involving self-selected participants, that is, the participants were not randomly selected. There were not equal numbers of

students from the two universities, nor equal numbers of first and third-year students. A quantitative analysis would not have been statistically valid.

3.3 The researcher's positionality and philosophy: pragmatism

Each researcher's choice of methodology and the methods for research follow on naturally from their world-view and philosophy, determined by the way they see the world, the beliefs held about what can be known about it, and the kind of information they wish to discover (Wisker 2007). My ontological position is broadly constructivist-realist (Cupchik 2001, Johnson 2010) or realist-constructivist (Barkin 2003). These positions argue that whilst both positivism and constructivism are not mutually compatible, they can be complementary and operate in parallel, and that social phenomena exist in communities quite independently of professional researchers. This acknowledges there is a social world that exists prior to, and is independent of, either positivist or constructivist analysis (Cupchik 2001, Johnson 2010).

My research philosophy throughout my EdD studies has been that of pragmatism. A pragmatist philosophy asserts that truth can be interpreted in terms of the practical effects of what is believed and their usefulness, that is, whether something is 'workable' in practice (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013). It focuses on solving practical problems in the "real world" (Feilzer 2010 p.8). As Savin-Baden and Howell explain:

> Pragmatism does not require adherence to a particular philosophical position about the nature and reality of knowledge, but instead implies that a researcher will take a practical view when attempting to problem solve and link theory and practice through the research process (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013 p.22).

The real-world practical issue I perceived was that some students did not use a deep approach to learning, with the associated impacts of this, such

as not engaging with assessment feedback, or valuing understanding. A central proposal of pragmatism is that truth is regarded as being the usefulness of an idea in helping the researcher understand something. This:

> Draws attention to the way in which a valid answer depends on what was asked, and suggests that truth has not a monolithic out-there quality, but is constituted by a researcher according to how s/he asks questions and verifies answers (Grix 2010 p.258).

A central belief of pragmatism is that research approaches can be wide-ranging and eclectic, and they should be designed based on the individual circumstances of each unique project (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013). Pragmatism allows for methods to be chosen that are appropriate for the research conducted. It downplays the influence of philosophy and is not anchored to specific concepts, beliefs or methods (Newby 2010). What distinguishes the pragmatic researcher from more paradigm-oriented ones is their concern to open up the world to social enquiry whilst being "less purist in methods and preconceptions about theory and method" (Brannen 2005a p.10). They are oriented to producing research results that may link to practical ends. This applies to my approach, as I wanted to investigate the approaches to learning used by contemporary students, in order to, hopefully, make a contribution to improving teaching and learning processes.

Pragmatism appealed to me precisely because it does not require me to hold a particular, narrow and fixed, set of beliefs and assumptions; in fact, I have never operated in such a way. It would be false and unethical to claim that I had. It is clear from the research into methodology that it is acceptable, and possible, to conduct high quality research from a pragmatic position. Seale, for example, argues that "good-quality research does not depend on the adoption of a particular philosophical or theoretical position, or on the commitment to particular political goals" (Seale 2004 p.417).

3.3.1 Reflexivity in the research process

Throughout this research project I have adopted a reflexive approach. Reflexivity is a term applied to thinking about how knowledge is affected by the researcher carrying out the process of research. As Gibbs identifies "put simply, reflexivity is the recognition that the product of [good] research inevitably reflects some of the background, milieu and predilections of the researcher" (Gibbs 2007 p.91). I am aware that much of my understanding of assessment and learning processes has been shaped by my broad alignment with a constructivist epistemology and a heuristic approach to student-centred learning (O'Neill and McMahon 2005, Attard 2010). I value personal understanding, a deep approach to learning, more than the acquisition of facts, and my pedagogical approach as a lecturer is a constructivist one. I see myself as a facilitator of learning, rather than a provider of knowledge. I believe that constructivist pedagogical practices, focusing on the learner as an active participant in the learning process who seeks to build coherent and organized knowledge, created through personal interaction (Guba and Lincoln 1994, Mayer 2004). are more effective in developing understanding of the subject than behaviourist approaches, and they are more personally meaningful. Constructivist approaches argue that for learning and understanding to take place knowledge has to be assimilated by, and incorporated into, a learner's existing mental patterns, making new mental constructs for themselves (Kanuka and Anderson 1999, Mayer 2003, Adams 2006). Students are regarded as being responsible for their own learning, actively constructing their own knowledge; not as passive vessels waiting to be filled. The teacher is a facilitator or guide and co-producer of meaning, rather than a provider of facts (Kember 1997). Constructivist practices necessarily require the use of a deep approach to learning.

As part of the reflexive process it is important to outline my understanding about approaches to learning. I acknowledge that whilst learning involves

processes of both memorization and understanding, I believe that a deep approach leads to more personally fulfilling and meaningful learning (Trigwell and Ashwin 2006). I realise that position has influenced the design of my research and might have implications for my analysis of the data I obtained. From a pragmatic perspective I do, however, recognize that a surface approach can be utilised in some contexts and memorization can help further understanding. Memorization of key concepts and definitions is often a necessary part of learning, and the two processes can work synergistically (Au and Entwistle 1999, Watkins and Biggs 2005).

3.4 Research method: a case study

I decided to use a case study to illuminate my research questions, one reason being that "case study research is the principal means by which inquiry is conducted in the social sciences" (Thomas 2011 p.511) and they are "prevalent throughout the field of education" (Merriam 1998 p.260). A second reason was that case studies have frequently been used in research on assessment and learning (for example, Weaver 2006, Ellery 2008, Maclellan 2008, Sun and Richardson 2015). A case study fitted well with my pragmatic approach. A brief discussion of the case study approach is provided next in order to justify the validity of the approach taken.

3.4.1 Differences between the case study and other qualitative approaches

An important difference between a case study and other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory or ethnography, is that it is open to the use of theory or conceptual categories which guide the research and analysis of data, rather than presupposing that theoretical perspectives are grounded in, and emerge from it (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Meyer 2001). My research was structured by four sub-questions; hence a case study was

very appropriate. The term ‘case study’ is open to interpretation though, and so a discussion of this is required.

3.4.2 Defining a case study

Yin defines the case study research method as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin 2013 p.23). Ragin (1992) argues that the approach places emphasis on cases, rather than variables, that other kinds of research focus on.

There is however an argument that attempts to define the case study have led to a “definitional morass” (Flyvbjerg 2011 p.302), and using a simple commonsensical dictionary definition may be the *only* way of avoiding this (Gerring 2004). The common theme defining the case study is a commitment to studying the complexity of real-life situations in ways that are not defined by the method of data collection (Simons 2009). Its only defining characteristic is that it is a bounded system which the researcher can ‘fence in’ to study (Merriam 1998). My research was bounded by being limited to first and third-year students studying in the field of education at two English universities.

There is debate as to whether it is a method or a methodology (Thomas 2010). Hyett et al. for example, argue that “differences between published case studies can make it difficult for researchers to define and understand case study as a methodology” (Hyett et al. 2014 para.1). Thomas (2014) argues it is not a method in itself, but is a *focus*, and that methods are chosen to investigate the focus for the case. This applied to the way I identified the methods used, namely, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis.

3.4.3 Criticism of the case study approach

One criticism is that findings have a lack of power to generalize compared with quantitative approaches. A common argument being Yin's (in this case rhetorical) question "how can you generalize from a single case?" (Yin 2013 p.21). This implies that researchers should be wary of making generalized claims based on one specific case (Atkins and Wallace 2012), whilst the view that one cannot generalize from a single case study is "usually considered to be devastating to the case study as a scientific method" (Flyvbjerg 2004 p.393). Similarly Thomas argues that "we cannot generalize from a case study" (Thomas 2010 p.23).

These positions base their argument on the basis that case studies typically analyse small data sets, so their findings are not statistically significant. The argument that a case study cannot be used for generalization may be due to a misunderstanding of the term generalizability. It is only correct: "if generalizability is taken to refer only to statistical inference" (Brannen 2005b p.175). Yet a qualitative case study does not set out to produce statistically significant results (George and Bennett 2004). My research did not aim to generate statistical data. Yin's (2013) position that the purpose of the single case study should be to expand and generate theory (analytical generalization) resonates with my own views. I did not seek to *prove* theory nor to produce statistically significant data, but rather to try to understand a problem I encountered in my practice.

There is a counter-argument. Flyvbjerg (2004, 2011), for example, argues that a single case study can be used to generalize, depending upon the case and how it is chosen. This position is supported by others (for example, Donmoyer 1990), whilst Lincoln and Guba argue that generalization and transferability are directly related to the similarity of the different contexts under consideration (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Where two contexts are sufficiently congruent, what they label as being 'fittingness' (that is, the

degree of transferability being a direct function of the similarity of the two) then a working hypothesis from the first context may be applicable to the second. The concept of relatability (Bassey 1981), that is, the extent to which research is authentic or true to life, is also important. Taylor et al. for example, argue that where a researcher in a similar environment is "able to relate his/her decision making to that described in the published case study research, then relatability has been achieved and…this is as important as generalisability" (Taylor et al. 2008 p.28). My research investigates students' approaches to learning at two institutions. Where sufficiently congruent contexts are identifiable in other universities then some generalization of my findings and relatability (Bassey 1981, Taylor et al. 2008) may be possible, but that may require researchers in other universities to make such connections.

3.5 Data collection method: semi-structured interviews

To gather data semi-structured face-to-face interviews with twenty individual students were conducted. Students were recruited on a voluntary basis from each university, via posters, emails sent out through course leaders, and visits to taught sessions. A set of interview questions was developed to illuminate the research questions. See Appendix 8.1 for the interview protocol.

Semi-structured interviews are ones where the purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee so as to reinterpret the meaning of the phenomena described (Kvale 2007). This allowed insight into the students' lived experiences, allowing a level of enquiry that other methods, such as using a questionnaire, may not have.

Interviews are a well-established research method, "probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research" (Bryman 2012 p.469). They can produce data that can be uniquely compelling as they illuminate

real people's lived experiences in a way statistics rarely do (Gillham 2005). Kvale argues that they provide "unique access to the lived world of the subjects" (Kvale 2007 p.9) and that they are a powerful method of producing knowledge. Hakim (1987) suggests the interview's strength is the validity of data obtained, because individuals may be interviewed in sufficient detail that the results may be accepted as being correct, true and believable. Respondents' opinions and understandings can be explored, with the interviewer being able to clarify terms, probe for detail and build on contributions through paraphrasing and further questioning. Interviews are very appropriate and suitable method of capturing data for my research.

3.5.1 Limitations of interviews

The closeness of an interview to everyday conversation may suggest an illusionary simplicity, implying it may be "too easy to start interviewing without any preceding preparation or reflection" (Kvale 2007 p.8). For the research presented in this thesis. I spent time carefully preparing and trialling the interview questions, ensuring they would allow me to gather sufficient data to illuminate my research questions.

One limitation is that interviewer-interviewee interactions can sometimes be seen as being "'just' about the interviewee's singular individualised story" (Rapley 2007 p.29). The main question arising from this was that of whether to treat the students solely as individuals, or part of the broader research story. I took the second approach. Although individual comments were important and could provide unique insight to a particular student's approach to learning, I was interested in the students' collective comments, in order to identify themes and trends.

Another area which can be problematic with interviews is that a balance has to be struck between the interviewer having to set aside their

presuppositions and being open to new and unexpected phenomena, being sensitive to what is being said, and not said, and aware, and critical of, their presuppositions. Yet they also need to be sensitive and knowledgeable about the topic under investigation. This tension between the two is what Kvale calls “qualified naiveté” (Kvale 2007 p.12). The interviewer must skilfully balance foreknowledge with minimal presupposition (Kvale 1996). This was not easy for me to do, because I had read extensively prior to conducting the interviews, yet I do believe I was able to strike an appropriate balance and approach each one with some level of qualified naiveté.

A further limitation of interviews is that of the difference between what people state they do, and what they *actually* do. People often behave differently to how they intend, or claim to (Argyris and Schön 1974, Gillham 2000). What interviewees say, or believe, they do, or would do, in any given situation, may not be the same as what they *actually* do. One way of reducing any differences between the espoused and in-use theory of participants would have been for me to observe students producing their assessed work. In reality this would have been completely impractical, requiring many hours of extended direct observation of each student. A second way would have been to use students’ *actual* assessment artefacts in addition to interviews so they could explain and show me how they approached an assessment task. I considered this, but found students to be extremely unwilling to provide copies of their assessed work. In order to resolve this problem of bridging the gap between their espoused theory and theory in-use, I asked participants to tell me how they *actually* approached *specific* assessment tasks, as well as how they typically approached assessment tasks in general.

3.5.2 Data sample selection process and limitations of the data source

I chose to interview students studying in the field of education at two contrasting Northern English universities, one a Russell group member (identified as the 'elite' institution), one a non-aligned institution (identified as the 'non-elite' institution). Although the term 'elite university' is open to interpretation, it is generally understood as referring to pre-1992 universities with long established track records of high quality research and recruiting students with who have attained highly. The two institutions were selected because their student body should represent learners with different levels of prior educational achievement, therefore providing an insight into the views of a more diverse range of students than had only those from one university been interviewed. I am aware that including a third university, a lower ranking one, from the bottom of the league table(s), or a college providing validated-degrees with lower entrance requirements, may have allowed views from a greater diversity of students. Unfortunately, the practicality of conducting interviews at a third institution whilst working full-time, prevented this.

During each interview the student was asked whether they believed themselves to be a high-achiever or not, based on their perception of their previous educational attainment and of their current attainment whilst at university. The information was used to identify a student as being a high, low, or average achiever. It is acknowledged that labelling a student as such may be interpreted as an essentialist judgement. However, the students' themselves self-identified as higher achievers, the researcher did not label them as being so. This was included to allow contextual information about each student's perception of their achievement, not to provide a fixed categorization of any individual. In Table 2 'low achiever' refers to a student who identified herself as a low achiever, and who subsequently failed the first-year and left university.

The students interviewed are not representative of all undergraduate students, nor of all undergraduates studying in the field of education. Participants self-selected to be interviewed, and so it is therefore possible that they were, to a greater or lesser extent, more dedicated and interested in learning than those who declined to be interviewed. Those less dedicated may well not have been represented in my data.

Table 2, overleaf, presents a breakdown of the interview participants including: age, year of study, institution, gender and nationality, and self-identified perception of their achievement.

Table 2. Breakdown of interview participants

Student	**Study year**	**Age** 'Older' refers to a student over 22 when they entered university	**Gender and Nationality**	**Institution**	**Self-identified achievement**
1	3rd	Older, Mid–late 20s	Female British	Non-elite	High-achiever
2	3rd	Older, Early-mid 30s	Female British-Malaysian	Non-elite	High-achiever
3	3rd	Early-20s	Female British	Elite	High-achiever
4	3rd	Older, Mid-50s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
5	1st	Older, Early-20s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
6	1st	Older, Early-40s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
7	1st	Older, Early-mid 20s	Female British	Non-elite	High-achiever
8	3rd	Early-20s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
9	3rd	Older, Early-20s	Female British	Non-elite	High-achiever
10	1st	Early-20s	Female British	Elite	Average-achiever
11	1st	Older, Mid-40s	Female British	Non-elite	Low Achiever
12	3rd	Early-20s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
13	3rd	Early-20s	Male British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
14	3rd	Early-20s	Female Polish	Non-elite	High-achiever
15	1st	Early-20s	Female British	Elite	Average-achiever
16	1st	Early-20s	Female British	Elite	High-achiever
17	3rd	Older, Late-20s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
18	1st	Older, Late-40s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
19	1st	Older, Mid-30s	Female British	Non-elite	Average-achiever
20	3rd	Early-20s	Female British	Non-elite	High-achiever

3.5.3 Piloting the questions and interview method

Due to the limited time available, I chose not to conduct an extended pilot study, but to conduct one pilot interview with a student and use this to develop more refined versions of the interview questions. A pilot is important as it helps ensure that interview questions are clear and unambiguous, so each participant understands them in the same way (Cohen et al. 2007). Prior to the pilot the questions were trialled with a colleague in order to ensure they were clear and not open to misinterpretation. The pilot interview allowed me to finalise the questions used and confirm their clarity.

Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with each student, using the set of interview questions developed (see Appendix 8.1 for the interview protocol). Each interview took place at a time and place to suit the student, with the venue being a room in the student union at each institution. The pilot interview was conducted in late February 2015, and the interviews between March to May 2015. Each lasted between 30 minutes to just over an hour and was digitally recorded. On a rolling and reflexive basis, I developed slightly more nuanced versions of some questions as the interviews proceeded over a period of three months. I was careful not to change the questions too much as I wanted to be able to compare different responses.

3.6 Ethical issues

There is a strong argument that "interview research is saturated with moral and ethical issues" (Kvale 2007 p.23) which are integral to the entire research process and require serious consideration from start, to finish. Yet, ethical decisions "to a large extent come to rest in the integrity of the interviewer as a person" (ibid. p.31). I would argue that, barring institutional, professional body, and funding agency requirements, the

interviewer is solely responsible for ensuring an ethical approach is used. The trustworthiness and integrity of the researcher is paramount (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Although guidelines and institutional ethical approval processes are important, Hammersley argues that whilst the principles identified in codes and frameworks: "operate as proper *external* constraints upon how researchers should carry out their work" (Hammersley 2014 p.11, emphasis original), they do not fully answer the question of *how* values should guide it. These values include a responsibility to clarify terms where necessary, to make sound decisions about what data are required, to check arguments, explore alternatives, test the reliability of evidence and the validity of conclusions and to neither exaggerate, nor underplay them. Occasionally these internal values may be in conflict with the ethical principles enshrined in formal policy statements. This conflict did not occur in my research project. Hammersley's position that the ethical principles espoused in formal codes and framework "can do no more than serve as reminders about some of the considerations that need to be taken into account" because "ethical judgments are essentially situational" (ibid. p.13) resonates with my views.

3.6.1 Trust, and the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee

"When relying on interviews as the primary data collection method, the issue of trust between the researcher and the interviewees becomes very important" (Meyer 2001 p.336). From an ethical standpoint the integrity of the researcher is critical to the quality and soundness of decisions made (Kvale 2007). Their honesty, experience, knowledge and judgement are involved in the process, and as the main, or sole, instrument for obtaining knowledge their importance is magnified (Gillham 2000). The knowledge interviews produce depends on the social relationship of the interviewer and interviewee, which, to a large extent, relies on the interviewer's ability to create a suitable environment where the subject is free and safe to talk

about private events, for later public use (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). As such, their skill is the sole determinant of the quality, and quantity, of data collected. I have carried out many interviews over the years and am an experienced interviewer with appropriate skills.

As with any method of data collection the interview is not without potential pitfalls. One of these is that of the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Atkins and Wallace 2012). An interview is not an egalitarian dialogue, there is always power asymmetry, though not necessarily overtly (Kvale 1996, Kvale and Brinkman 2009). Power usually rests with the interviewer, yet not always (Gillham 2005). Power relationships can also lead to challenges in obtaining genuine and open responses. There is a danger that, because of the structural position of the interviewer, interviewees "may, more or less deliberately, tell what they believe the interviewer authority wants to hear" (Kvale 2007 p.14).

For students in my own institution, as a lecturer I am, arguably, in a position of power. I was aware that I taught four of my interviewees and supervised the dissertation of one. They knew I was responsible for grading their assessed work and may have tried to impress me in some way with information they felt indicated they were a particularly dedicated, or hardworking student. To mitigate against this, I reminded participants it was important they be honest and open when answering questions, and there were no expected, or right or wrong, answers. I explained that what they said during an interview would not consciously influence my opinion of them, or any judgment I might later make when assessing their work, that the faculty operates an anonymous marking system, interview transcripts would be anonymised, and they were free to withdraw from the research at any time without having to provide an explanation why. I am aware I had to make an assumption that the data gathered was trustworthy (Thomas 2014) and participants gave valid responses, rather than socially desirable ones (King and Horrocks 2010).

3.6.2 Potential bias in the interview process

I acknowledge that I am male, heterosexual, English, white middle-class and middle-aged, and hold broadly left-of-centre political beliefs and, somewhat more loosely, Christian and Humanist beliefs. Students studying in the field of education are mainly female, younger than myself, from a variety of countries, social classes, and racial backgrounds, and hold a diverse range of political and religious beliefs. It follows that my background and beliefs may be quite different from those of the students interviewed. I also hold strong views about learning and education, and acknowledge that I value personal understanding and regard it as being much more important than memorization. My experiences until this study had made me somewhat sceptical about students' instrumentalism, and I found it difficult to put myself in the position of a learner whose aim was to achieve highly regardless of understanding. I was aware that, to reduce any potential bias, I had to try and set aside these beliefs and values during the interviews and adopt an open mind. I believe we all have biases and prejudices we are not aware of, and these may affect the interview process in ways we are unaware. A reflexive approach, as previously discussed, helped to mitigate this.

3.6.3 Ethical approval for the research project and practical issues

As has been explained, any research project requires a careful consideration of ethical issues. Prior to commencement, the research gained ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (see Appendix 8.2). Each participant was provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the research, how they would be involved, along with a participant consent form which they read and signed (see Appendix 8.3). Interview participant data was anonymised, as was the institutional data. Participants were offered the opportunity to validate and approve their interview transcription, although none availed themselves of this

opportunity. Transcripts were stored in password-protected files on a hard drive.

Having considered the ethical issues involved in the research the next section discusses how the data was analysed.

3.7 Data analysis process: thematic analysis

Data analysis involves reducing large volumes of information so that sense can be made and the material can be interpreted (Bryman 2012, Silverman 2014). It is an iterative process, requiring the researcher to move backwards and forwards between raw data and differing levels of extraction to verify and refine their account (Miles and Huberman 1994, 2002, Miles et al. 2013). Given the many analytical methods available, I used 'thematic analysis'; because it is a tried and tested, trustworthy and reliable technique with a claim to be the most useful method of capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013).

Thematic analysis involves searching a data set to find and describe repeated patterns of meaning to bring order and structure to it, with three main purposes: (1) exploring commonality, (2) exploring differences, and (3) exploring relationships (Gibson and Brown 2009). Careful reading and re-reading of data allows the identification of themes, which are then used as analytical categories (Rice and Ezzy 1999, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). The process acknowledges that analysis happens at an intuitive level (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013), it does not prescribe methods for data collection, theoretical positions, epistemological or ontological frameworks. It is solely a method for data analysis. It is inherently flexible, offering scope to analyse many types of qualitative data, and is well suited to analysing interview data. Themes can be structured and categorised according to the research questions being investigated. This fitted well with

my pragmatic position and realist-constructivist ontology. Outlined below is a brief explanation of thematic analysis. For a detailed discussion and explanation of the application, theory and process see Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013) and Guest et al. (2012).

Although different authors make claims for slightly different processes (Aronson 1994, Boyatzis 1998, Marshall and Rossman 2010, 2015, Attride-Stirling 2001, Spencer et al. 2014), thematic analysis essentially involves six stages, with an assumption that an initial stage of data transcription has been carried out (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013, 2014).

Firstly, data familiarisation through initial reading and re-reading transcripts, identifying potential ideas about what is interesting. This is often referred to as being 'immersed' in the data (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013, Willis 2013, Marshall and Rossman 2015).

Secondly, reducing the volume of data by generating codes. This process "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana 2013 p.3). Each code is a short, written description, word, or phrase assigned to a portion of data that the researcher believes may be useful or important. Codes form the semantic boundaries of what later become themes (Guest et al. 2012). The coding process is unique to each researcher, with the individual bringing their own analytical lens and analytical filters to it (Saldana 2013), because "data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (Braun and Clarke 2006 p.84). Data memos and/or a coding manual are often developed and used during this and subsequent stages to help clarification and aid reflexivity (Harding 2013, Richards 2015).

Thirdly, reviewing the codes and combining them, searching for and identifying clear themes within the data. Each theme is a unit of meaning

(Guest et al. 2012) or a unifying or dominant idea (Savin-Baden and Howell 2013). They capture what is important that is related to the research questions, (Braun and Clarke 2006, Grbich 2013). Typically themes are sentences, or phrases used for analytic reflection (Firmin 2008). They need to be distinctive, making sense on their own, yet also fit together forming part of the overall analysis. As themes are being developed and the analysis progresses the coding categories may be renamed, reorganized, merged or separated, and re-conceptualised (Ayres 2008). Through this process coding can transform the data (Bernard and Ryan 2010).

Fourthly, reviewing and revising the themes, searching for material that supports, or refutes them, examining plausible rival or alternative explanations, re-reading, condensing, clarifying and identifying relationships. Braun and Clarke identify two levels of review. The first, at the level of the coded extracts, to identify coherent themes, the second, a review of the themes in relation to the entire data set.

Fifthly, defining and naming the themes. The aim being to capture the essence of what each one is about in order to "provide a rich, coherent and meaningful picture of dominant patterns in the data that address our research question" (Braun and Clarke 2013 p.249).

Sixthly, a final analysis and presentation of themes and findings, or 'writing the report'. The common phrase of a 'writing up' stage may be misleading though, because writing takes place throughout the process (Richards 2015), though often the data analysis is only fixed (that is, finalised) through the act of writing up (Smith et al. 2009).

Stages five and six are usually presented as being separate. In practice, they are interwoven. Similarly stages two, three, and four are presented separately, but occur throughout, as "coding facilitates the development of themes, and the development of themes facilitates coding" (Ayres 2008

p.867). Coding is essentially an organic process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2014), the analysis is recursive and active.

3.7.1 Interview transcription

Prior to analysis interview data is transcribed from audio-to-text (Bryman 2012). There is a strong argument that transcribing is not just a mechanical process of converting oral material into text, it is an interpretative act which creates meaning as part of the analysis (MacLean et al. 2004, Lapadat and Lindsay 1999, Wellard and McKenna 2001). Transcribing involves individual researcher's ontology and epistemological position impacting upon the process (Sandelowski 2010). Because of this there is "no single 'correct' transcription" (Newby 2010 p.465). It was for this reason I felt it was important for all transcription to be carried out by myself.

Verbatim transcription is rarely one hundred percent accurate (Maclean 2004), being open to a range of human errors, including, inter alia, misinterpretation of content because of language errors due to social and cultural differences between interviewer and interviewees (Halcomb and Davidson 2006). Some qualitative researchers argue that the notion of accuracy in transcription is problematic (see for example, Poland 1985, Halcomb and Davidson 2006). My position is that accurate transcription is possible, but that it takes time, and it can never capture fully all aspects of an interview (for example, non-verbal communication, tone, and pace) or the sometimes very subtle, emphasis used in language. Yet if the transcriber has also been the interviewer, as with this thesis, then I believe there is scope for greater accuracy.

3.7.1.1 Transcription process

VLC Media player was used to listen to each interview and MSWord to type it up. Each was then listened to each one a second time, usually a day or two afterwards, whilst reading and editing the transcription. I then waited at least a week, and carried out a re-reading and editing-whilst-listening process. After another two weeks, each was listened to a further (fourth) time whilst re-reading, editing and amending the transcription as necessary to ensure a trustworthy version was obtained. This was a time-consuming process, but it provided detailed transcripts and a thorough immersion in the data. I focused on carrying out an orthographic transcription, but I underlined words where greater emphasis or stress had been placed on a particular word to try and capture some of the paralinguistic and prosodic elements, and I did include punctuation. Transcription was verbatim, rather than following the conventions of Standard English, for example using 'yeah', rather than 'yes'. Each interviewee was offered the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy.

3.7.2 Data coding and analysis

After considering the merits of alternative software packages, I had decided to use either Pittsburgh university's Coding Analysis Toolkit (Shulman 2007) or NVivo. Unfortunately, a health problem meant that I had to restrict my use of a computer keyboard and mouse for almost six months. I therefore used a hands-on approach, using printed copies of my transcriptions for the analysis. Braun and Clarke, referring to work by Bringer et al. (2006) make an important point that "being away from a screen allows for a different mode of interaction with data, and moves you into a different conceptual and physical space for conducting analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2013 p.204). Their view resonates with my experience. I found being away from a computer allowed me to immerse myself in the data. I felt personally connected to it, something that may not have

occurred had I used a software package. Using software could have allowed a different kind of analysis, it is something I may use to re-visit my data at some point in the future.

Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis was followed (Braun and Clarke 2006 p.96), see Appendix 8.4 for this. Other authors (see Bernard and Ryan 2010, Boeije 2010, Harding 2013) provide a range of techniques for identifying themes and codes; there being no one right or correct way. Throughout the process analytic memos were used (Miles et al. 2013) in the form of a series of code and theme generation tables. These were developed on an iterative basis as I worked through the stages of thematic analysis, see Appendix 8.5 for an extract from a working example.

Two initial cycles of coding were used, to help drill down into the data. Initial and second-stage coding produced a code and theme table with 49 main codes and a number of sub-codes. A number of codes overlapped, and therefore a third cycle of coding was carried out to refine and narrow them down. From this it was possible to develop themes that illuminated the four research sub-questions. Following this, a final stage of re-coding was conducted, essentially one in involving re-reading each transcript, checking to see if anything had been missed. After naming each theme a decision I took a decision to remove the names and to present the data by the research sub-question it contributed to. Some of the data could contribute to more than one question, so time was spent to present data according to the research sub-question it most coherently contributed to.

3.8 Summary of chapter

This chapter has provided a summary of, and justification for, the methodology adopted and method used to address the four research sub-questions. Ethical issues have been discussed, as has the chosen method, a

case study using semi-structured interviews analysed by thematic analysis. The interview and transcription process has been explained, as has the method of data analysis. The next chapter presents the research findings that were generated.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings from the thematic analysis. It will foreground the participants' voice to articulate their thoughts by presenting representative illustrative quotes from the interviews. Quantitative data are provided to indicate the significance of each finding.

Findings are presented for each of the four sub-questions:

1 How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning?
2 What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning?
3 To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding?
4 What changes take place in students' approaches to learning between the first and third year?

4.1.1 Assessment methods and types of feedback received

Students indicated that they were typically assessed by written essay, with the essay title set by the lecturer. As they progressed through a degree students were given greater choice by being provided with a selection of essay titles to choose from. At one institution third years had been able to suggest their own essay title for one of the modules studied. In addition to essays, examinations had been used, typically for no more than one module per semester. Students had also been assessed by group and individual presentations and written reflective accounts, though essays had been the predominant method.

In terms of feedback, students had received written comments provided with a summative grade. They had been able to request formative feedback on a draft plan for an assessment and/or on a partially completed assignment, with this feedback usually only provided once. Typically, it was provided as annotations on a written draft or as verbal feedback during a tutorial. No student described the provision of frequent formative feedback in a way that could be regarded as being AfL.

4.2 Perceptions of the differences in teaching and assessment practices between university and compulsory education

One theme that emerged from the data illuminates the overarching research question. Students perceived clear differences between university and school or college both in teaching practices, and in how assessment feedback was provided. For example, Student 7:

There are a lot of people from my generation who will use the Internet because [at college] all you have to do is go onto Google and type in your question and the answer will come up. They are used to having the right answer, the right information there and then. So by going on the Internet they are still getting that same process that they had at college….Because that's what happens at high school and then college…. you've only got to write that down, that information, you write that down and then you get a mark. There's a black-and-white, there's a right and wrong, and if you don't write them things down you're going to fail…A lot of education is parrot-fashion.

And student 20:

…they [teachers] kind of gave you the information didn't they, and, like, you went away with that, whereas now it is, like, references, you have to find more detail and all that sort of thing…Uni. it's definitely a lot different in terms of finding your own stuff out…At 6th form you got kind of told what you needed to do. Yeah, like, there are different approaches you can do for your assessments in uni., you can set things out different whereas you were always given a structure at 6th form. They told you exactly how to do it. You don't get that at Uni. (emphasis student's).

Similarly, student 10:

It was drilled into me… Because everybody who has just come from school, although they are used to being able to go out and research a little bit, they are still, personally I think really, just taught to the book at A-level.

Student 6:

[At college] I learnt to pass exams and a lot of memorisation.

Thirteen students mentioned they had experienced a noticeable contrast between assessment feedback provided in the compulsory education sector compared with that at university. The difference was primarily in the provision of formative feedback. In college and at school, the amount of feedback provided was perceived to have been higher than at university, and it was more in the form of coaching-and-correction to provide correct answers, which, as both students 7 and 8 indicated, was like being "*spoon-fed*".

At school and college, students indicated that they had been able to submit drafts of assessed work, which tutors would then provide feedback on in the form of correcting mistakes, which the student then amended, often multiple times, until the final piece of work was ready to be submitted for grading. Prior to submission students' would already know that their work would pass, because the errors and mistakes had been ironed out through repeated tutor correction. The following extract from the interview with student 12, demonstrates this:

…before we submitted…our teachers would go through it with us and say 'Yeah that's right' or would tell us where to improve.

(Interviewer) *Individually, with each person?*

Yes, they would come round when it was coursework so…we'd ask the teacher daily, when we'd finished something, 'Is this right?' and, when it was, well, then we submitted it.

Student 15, discussing college assessment practices:

I could re-draft it and they'd accept drafts, and I probably gave them a draft twice, or three times. It's not rewriting though. They say it's a draft, I wouldn't say it is, they'd only give spelling mistakes that they would change.

(Interviewer) *So would they go through it paragraph-by-paragraph?*

"Yes, normally it was just that my sentences didn't make sense or something like that, and stuff like that.

Similarly, student 1 stated:

When I first started at uni, I felt I was a little bit out of my depth… at college…the lecturers had been a lot more sort of hands-on, helping, giving a lot more guidance as to exactly what's expected of you; you'd hand in a draft essay…and get feedback, so it was quite a bit of a shock…at uni.

She felt that studying at college had not prepared her for university:

I think at college maybe they shouldn't spoon-feed you as much as they do so it's not so much of a shock when you go to university, and because when you do actually go into the world of work obviously, you're not given that support.

Student 6 discussing college:

You are taught, like, everything, everything is explained to you, whereas here they just give you a piece and then you go away and do it….you go find the rest of the stuff yourself.

(Interviewer) Was that something you expected?

Sort of, but not to this extent. When I first started...it was a real, almost a shock.

As discussed in Chapter 2, many vocational learners studying at college experience coaching, and being told precisely what they should do for assessment tasks to successfully achieve. The following interview extract from student 7 provides evidence of coaching with non-vocational learners too, but also shows scepticism about, and perhaps even disaffection with, the process:

… I'm not one of those who likes being spoon-fed. It really cracked me up at college because they say to you, 'You need to put this in', and 'You must put that in'. What's the

point? Basically, I just rewrote, along with putting a few references in, what's already in a textbook. But what's the point? I don't see what I'm gaining from this…. You have assignments to do just like at university, but you get a referral and you can submit again, that's like your comfort blanket…and it's like basically if I just write down what you're saying then I'll be passing…I said to my mother at one point 'I feel like I'm just rewriting the textbook'.

(Interviewer) *So you wouldn't say that you were understanding, you were just memorizing?*

No, all you're expecting me to do is rewrite the textbook in my own words and missing out the bits you don't want. And it just seems a bit pointless. Anybody can do that. You didn't have to grasp the subject to be able to do it. You didn't have to know it, you just had to learn it. Does that make sense? If I give you the textbook that I told to get and said 'There's your assignments, there's your textbook, off you go' You read your assignments, the same title is in the textbook, so you just go to the right chapter, read it, and write it. (emphasis student's).

(Interviewer) *So, you are copying it out?*

Yes, you wouldn't have to know what you are writing, you just had to write it.

(Interviewer) *So, when you say know, you mean that you wouldn't have to understand, or even semi-understand it, or even memorize it? You just have to copy it?* (emphasis interviewer's)

Yes.

(Interviewer) *So you could do almost any subject and answer a question on it without actually knowing anything about it?*

Yes.

4.3 How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning?

4.3.1 Awareness of the terms surface and deep approach

Despite the claim that approaches to learning is one of the most-used pieces of educational theory only three students were aware of the terms 'deep' and 'surface', although none of the three knew what the terms meant, nor could articulate a definition. Although they did not know what the terms meant, all 20 recognized there were differences between memorization and understanding.

4.3.2 Learning intention

As Table 3 shows, of the 20 students, 18 indicated that their *general* approach to learning was an intention to understand what they were studying. One approached learning through memorization, whilst one did not set out to either understand or memorize, but to achieve highly.

Table 3. Students' learning intention

No. of students	General approach to learning
1	Memorization
1	Achieve highly
18	Understanding

4.3.3 Perception of what understanding involves

Students who set out to understand stated that they needed to paraphrase to be able to do so. Yet factors such as summative assessment requirements, uncertainty about assessment requirements, the general

requirements of university level work, together with a perceived, or actual, lack of time and a lack of interest and enjoyment frequently undermined their intention to understand. Data for these findings are presented in sections 4.4.4 and 4.5.3.

Each student held their own working definition of understanding that was broadly similar to those available in the literature, that is, it involves being able to explain something to someone else using your own form of words. Students explained they would articulate their understanding by paraphrasing.

Student, for example, 20 stated:

Being able to understand it enough so that I could say it in a different way to someone else…to make them understand…I won't have to say it in a way that I have seen it.

Similarly, student 18:

I have some understanding when I can start telling people about the subject.

For student 13 understanding was:

Being able to know why something is, so, rather than being told that this is this kind of thing, to be able to learn it and understand it, you need to be able to explain it back to somebody.

For student 9:

I know I have understood it when I can teach it back to someone else, when it can just come off the top of my head so when someone goes 'do you know what qualitative data is?' I…can tell them without looking…at anything else I don't really know I have got it until I come to write it and I think 'oh I can explain that really well'.

Student 15 clearly identified a difference between understanding and memorization:

It's about being able to explain it in your own way. If you just spout what someone else has said or just churn out what another person's conclusion is then you haven't got any breadth or depth to your understanding so you are just learning by rote, rather than actually learning.

Students recognized the personal value of understanding. Five of them saw learning without understanding as being a waste of time. In a similar vein to student 7, student 8, for example, identified that being "*spoon-fed*" was a "*pointless*" exercise, and:

To me learning is understanding…To me if you're just being told facts that's not learning, it's just repetition, to be able to learn you've got to be able to go in-depth into it.

Student 14 stated:

There is no point, if you do not understand something, to know the definition. Many people know the definition and if you ask them to explain something they don't know how to explain it because they are not, like, not sure what it means. You don't have to know really, like, if you have a definition, you need like the answer, but if you want to explain it to someone that's no good… What's the point of knowing, like, the answer if you don't know what a person means?

These views suggest that, even though they do not recognize the terms surface and deep learning, contemporary learners regard a deep approach as relevant, important, and more personally satisfying than a surface one.

4.3.4 Memorization

Twelve students recognized that whilst their general approach was to understand, they used both understanding *and* memorization. What they described was using memorization to reinforce learning through understanding. Memorization was typically used to develop core foundational knowledge from which understanding could be developed.

Student 10, for example, stated that memorization supported later understanding:

…you have to have some memorization learning, so, for example, you have to have the concepts memorized before you can understand them. I know that I had to memorize things so, for example, for my history assignment recently, we have to understand the concepts, but we've not memorized the concepts, so I don't know where to start in going about understanding them.

As did student 20:

I have been thinking maybe it's not quite memorization. I don't know what it is, but it is some kind of learning to get it into your head, before you can piece it together to understand it.

And student 9:

Some of it is memorising, maybe memorising big bits first, because I think that is how you start to learn, yeah, I would say memorising and then into understanding.

4.3.5 Use of the term 'understanding'

Although students recognized that the processes of memorization and understanding were different, they used the same term, 'understanding', to describe different levels of understanding and the different processes involved in surface and deep learning.

Thirteen of the 20 students prefaced 'understanding' with the words full/fully/real/really/proper/properly/genuine/complete/completely in order to indicate differences in understanding. Where students preface 'understand' with one of these adjectives they referred to a more comprehensive understanding of a topic and how it related to other material, in other words, to using a deep approach to learning. Students prefaced understanding with 'just', to indicate an incomplete or partial understanding, one that may have predominantly involved memorisation.

Student 20, for example, talked about memorization and 'fully understanding' as being different and involving different processes:

I don't feel I have learnt something if I just remember it, like, memorize it, I need to, like, fully understand what is involved in that. If I had to explain it to someone else I would be able to do that, whereas I think I wouldn't if I had just memorized it because I would be, like, that is just what I have heard from someone else. I would want to look at it and fully understand what goes where.

When asked what she meant by 'fully understanding' compared with 'understanding', she replied:

Being able to understand it enough that I could say it in a different way to someone else just to make them understand…I won't have to say it in a way I have seen it written by someone else.

She believed that a student who wrote about what they had memorized had not demonstrated they 'understood fully', because they were not able to paraphrase.

In a similar vein, student 9 identified that if she had memorized something then she understood it, yet did not '*really understand*' it, whilst student 17 stated she could remember many things from her course, yet did not feel she '*properly understood*' them.

The difference between 'fully understanding' and 'understanding' was discussed by student 20 when asked if she thought that there was a difference between the two:

Yeah, I do think there is. Well, I think if you understand, then you still think you are a bit not sure, because I know understand is a word that obviously means that you do, but I think that now it's more just you understand and remember it but have still got aspects that you could say you are not fully sure about. So, to fully understand if a tutor said to me, like, said something I would be able to go 'yep, yep I <u>completely</u> understand that', I have got it and wouldn't need further assistance. (emphasis student's).

4.4 <u>What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning?</u>

4.4.1 <u>The role of interest and enjoyment</u>

The data indicates that interest and/or enjoyment are important factors in students' approaches to learning, with 19 students mentioning these as factors and 18 suggesting they may determine whether their intention, for

a specific assessment task, was to understand (typically articulated as to 'fully understand') or to memorize.

Interest and enjoyment were strongly linked both with the amount of effort students were prepared to invest, and how difficult they perceived a topic to be. The two elements were frequently mentioned together, although not always. The data suggests they may be interlinked. A decision was therefore taken to present them as one factor.

Student 3, discussing her intention to understand:

…we have to understand what we are talking about… I think it's this whole thing about interest, if you're not interested and don't enjoy it then you are not going to understand it as much as if you were <u>really</u> interested in it. I mean if you are not interested in it you're not going to understand it. (emphasis student').

Student 11, pointed out:

If I'm more interested in something, then I will apply myself better.

Student 6 stated:

…if it is a subject I am really interested in I tend to read widely and just out of interest or go a bit further……whereas some modules I just focus on…just passing if I'm not interested.

Similarly, student 15:

…if it's a good topic and it's interesting I find I can enjoy writing the essay and reading about it…Because you want to…you read more, I think. If you've got an interesting topic you don't mind doing more of the reading, whereas if you're not that interested…

Student 14 indicated she did more work for the topics she was interested in:

...if you like something then you want to put more effort in, and if you don't like something you just want to finish it.

Student 13:

If it's a boring subject, I will be less interested but I know I have to do it so I will just kind of do it. But if it is something I am interested in I will be motivated.

Similarly, student 4, referring to studying:

It all depends on how interesting it is…If I don't enjoy a module or don't enjoy what I am learning I think it is a lot harder

Student 17, articulated how she felt she had to put more effort into topics that she was not interested in, because, without interest, studying was more difficult:

I probably put more work into something that I am less interested in. Maybe because the ones I'm interested in come more easily to me, whereas if I am not interested in something I find it a real struggle.

Student 18 identified how studying and producing assessed work for topics she was interested in was more enjoyable. She found some assignments:

… more enjoyable because I am really, really interested.

Interest, and enjoyment, would therefore seem to be key factors Influencing the amount of work that students did (or their perception of how much work they did) and, in turn, their approach to learning.

Student 12 explained:

I do want to achieve to the best of my ability but sometimes it is not just to pass, but to have an understanding, but I am only motivated if it's something I enjoy or interests me. If it's a boring subject, something I am not interested in, I will not be motivated to try and understand it...

Typically, this suggests that a lack of interest or enjoyment would lead to lower motivation and more likelihood of adopting a surface approach. An initial lack of interest or enjoyment could often be explained by a lack of initial understanding. As understanding developed, so did interest and enjoyment, as did subsequent motivation.

Student 18 explained:

Often you don't like a subject, because you've got very little understanding of it, but as you get some then you become more interested, and as you get more interested you want to understand more.

Student 20, discussing topics she did not initially enjoy, explained that she:

…started reading it and got more of an interest.

Similarly, student 9:

I might not always understand something at first or like doing it, but usually once I get reading I start understanding and then understanding more fully and sometimes even find I enjoy it after that.

4.4.1.1 Lack of interest

Although lack of interest in a topic may be specific to an individual, there were some topics in the field of education that the students typically found less interesting. Six students mentioned they found a Politics module "*boring*", or "*not interesting*" with another stating: *Politics…that is not my thing.*

Discussing her peers' lack of interest in Politics, one mature student commented:

I mean the average age of people in our lectures is about nineteen, say, and they are talking about Labour and the Lib-Dems and there is no link to it, because a lot of the girls at that age are just not interested.

She also indicated that she would not have been interested in Politics when she was younger.

During their degree students may be required to study a number of topics in which they have little or no interest and may not enjoy studying. All 20 indicated that at some point they had studied topics they were neither interested in, nor enjoyed, with one, student 16, indicating she had not been interested in the majority of topics she had studied.

4.4.1.2 Assessment, achievement, dis/interest, enjoyment

Despite lacking interest in, or enjoyment of, some topics, 15 students still had an intention to understand, recognising the importance of this to achieve a good grade. This demonstrates how assessment influences approaches to learning, further, that students' recognition of the need to demonstrate understanding in their work may override a lack of interest/enjoyment.

Student 3 stated:

I think…that we have to understand what we are talking about otherwise you will not get a good grade.

Further she identified that often topics did not interest her, or her peers, but:

…I think that making yourself interested in something is a skill that university students have to have anyway because all the time you have to write about things that you are not interested in, but you probably don't understand it as much as if you were really interested in it. (emphasis student's).

This student recognized that understanding was required to achieve well. In addition, students had to force themselves to be interested in subjects they were not genuinely interested in. At the same time a, lack of genuine interest could lead to a lower level of understanding.

Student 12 discussed the need to persevere and force herself to be interested throughout her degree studies:

…I am only motivated if it's something I enjoy or interests me. If it's a boring subject I will be less interested, but I know I have to do it, so will just kind of do it…I do less work, but I know it still has to be done. But I won't do as much research around that topic.

Student 1 had a similar view:

Well, the subjects I'm not interested in...for instance, I did a Politics module, I...just wasn't interested…I'd have to do a lot of reading if I wasn't interested…you just force yourself to do it.

Student 17 commented:

I can make myself, you know, committed I can really try. But, am I genuinely interested? Probably not. (emphasis student's).

The above comments, along with others, indicate that whilst interest and enjoyment may be strong determinants of students' approaches to learning, the lack of them may be overridden by a desire, or need, to achieve a good grade in an assessment task.

An initial lack of interest in a topic may be explained by a lack of understanding. As understanding develops over time, then so may interest, which reinforces understanding, leading to greater interest in and, enjoyment of the topic, which lead to further understanding, and so on. Student 18, explained:

Because often you don't like a subject, because you've got very little understanding of it, but as you get some then you become more interested, and as you get more interested you want to understand more.

Student 20 identified that for topics she did not initially enjoy, she often:

…started reading it and got more of an interest...

A perception that other students lacked genuine interest was a cause of frustration and anger. Student 10 stated:

There are some students who don't even come to lectures…I'm the student rep and it frustrates me when another student isn't attending lectures.

She explained that these students relied on others to pass on information and do work for them.

Student 7, had the following to say about some of her first–year peers:

I don't know how to explain, they're very, 'Oh it's fine', 'It doesn't matter',' I don't need to do this'. They are quite blasé. And actually, if you're not really bothered about the course and you're not showing an interest, then why bother coming? There's no point coming. I think my need to be here, my want to be here is a lot different to the younger ones… I come away from speaking with some of them I think, 'So why are you doing the course then?'.

'Why have you signed up to university?'. The things that they come out with, I mean, the party lifestyle and because they are getting money and they don't have to go out to work. University seems more attractive than going to work.

A belief that interest can be stimulated by inspirational teaching was not explored with students, yet one (no. 14) mentioned:

Sometimes the subject is not that interesting, but the person who talks about it, you want to know more, but I think it's, like, if the teaching is good, like, you wanna' know more.

Contrastingly, talking about a lack of interest in some subjects, student 12 stated:

…it's not the teacher, it's the subject.

4.4.2 The instrumental learner

As discussed in Chapter2, the approaches to learning model does not formally recognize a distinct approach of 'strategic' or instrumental learning. The claim that an instrumental approach involves students setting out to achieve as well as they can with the minimum of work is reflected by the comment from student 16:

I'm not aiming for understanding, I'm just aiming for a number on a page. I don't really care whether I understand it. I'm not really interested in understanding it. I don't really care whether I understand it, I just want a good grade…I mean, I'm not interested in lots of it…so It's hard to be interested…I think to be interested you have to care and I don't care about a lot of the stuff I write about. I just want to hit that magic number...I'm not interested enough, so do I ever do any work that I don't have to do? No!...In a sense I hate not understanding but because I want to do well and like all I am doing is a numbers game…I never do work that I don't have to do, no. I do as much as I need to do to be as good as I need to be. (emphasis student's).

4.4.3 Cultural influences

Cultural influences may, as discussed in Chapter 2, be a factor in approaches to learning. Student 2, for example, predominantly approached

learning through memorization and rote-learning, her view being that learning primarily involved memorization. She attributed this to her upbringing in Malaysia where she had spent her compulsory education years. Discussing her conception of learning:

I think it is an exchange of information, so if we are talking in terms of schooling then the teacher imparts knowledge to the child and the child absorbs the knowledge. But I think we learn through repetition probably …my background…I come from a very international family so there are a lot of languages involved. Yes, that's why I say learning for me is about repetition, because in terms of language it was about repeating words and keep doing it every day till it drums in there and sticks in your head.

Through studying at university, she had started to become aware that understanding was important, explaining:

I am slowly learning to expand my type of learning as I get older and… definitely since I started my degree I have found that it's often not effective to merely just memorize things you have to try and gain a deeper understanding. More of a holistic view really. I do think that the memorization method is useful.

4.4.4 Lack of time: employment and caring responsibilities

Fourteen of the students indicated that they had a part-time job and/or family/caring responsibilities, and these impacted on the amount of time available to devote to university work. This was cited as being a reason for not being able to 'fully understand'. It did not affect their *intention* to understand, yet led to them being unable to understand as comprehensively as they wanted to and/or believed they needed to. They recognized this sometimes had a negative impact on the quality of work produced and, consequently, on their grades.

Student 1, for example, explained that in her second year she had been working up to 50 hours per week in two part-time jobs, and recognized this had a negative impact on her studies:

In my second-year I was working two jobs as well as university so it was a time issue, I didn't have a lot of time…when I was getting lower marks that tended to be because I

hadn't had enough time, I hadn't put as much effort into it or been able to do as much research.

In a similar vein student 13 who worked two days per week for 16 hours, explained his aim was:

Always to get the best grade I can, but there are time constraints. Often I find I finished a piece of work that I know I can do it better that I don't have time, or I've not got time to make it interesting. If there is a grade I wanted to get, but there is issues with time constraints, I've sometimes submitted a piece of work that I know is far from what I'm capable of, but I've had to submit it because I've run out of time.

His comment that his aim was "*Always to get the best grade I can*" provides further evidence of student instrumentalism.

For seven students, lack of time was explained by family commitments. Students 2, 6, 7, and 10 all had young children, student 15 lived at home caring for her disabled mother, whilst 5 had caring responsibilities for a disabled cousin.

Student 10 commented:

I'm really struggling for time. Having a one- year old at home it can be difficult even to get my reading done for the sessions.

4.4.5 Factors influencing approaches to learning and studying

Eighteen students indicated that they knew what typically influenced and motivated them, whilst two stated they did not know at all what motivated them. A number of factors came into play for many of the students, as such they found it difficult to articulate which, if any, factor was of greatest influence, other than that of their future career.

Table 4 presents the data for the reasons both why the students enrolled at university and the main factors that motivated them to study once there.

Table 4. Factors influencing/motivating students

No. of students	Factor
3	Money, and what it will allow me to do
11	Future career, what having a degree will allow me to do i.e. future career focus but not for a specific career
4	I have a specific career in mind (and need to achieve a certain classification of degree)
9	Parental expectations
3	Overcoming personal challenges/personal history
4	I am a role model (I want to set a good example for my children)
4	Personal challenge (A need to meet or exceed my own expectations)
4	[Just] to finish my degree
8	Doing as well as others on the course
7	Doing the best I can (Personal satisfaction from doing my best)
6	Cost of attending university means that I need to do well
8	Pride (self-pride and/or parental pride)

As can be seen, a number of factors operated simultaneously to motivate each student. The data indicates that future career was the predominant factor in students' decision to enrol at university. There were no clear differences between self-identified higher and lower achievers. Attending university and gaining a degree was described by 12 of the students as: *'a hoop to jump through', 'a hurdle to jump over',* a '*stepping-stone'*, or, *'something that just has to be done'*. For these students coming to university was something they perceived they had to do, it was a means to an end, necessary for their future career.

Student 13 discussing his future career:

[university] is a stepping-stone towards it…I do this and I'm one step further.

Student 1:

You just have to go to university nowadays. It's a stepping-stone to getting a job.

Similarly, student 4:

Everybody has to go to university now. You just have to. You just have to do it, to go, I mean. It's kind of like a hurdle to jump over before getting a proper job. I mean if you don't go to uni then you'll just probably have a crap job for life. Even if you don't want to go to university you need to go, to get a degree so you can get a job that pays more than minimum wage.

Similarly, student 14 stated:

You need to go to uni nowadays in order to get a good job, or even just to get any half-decent job. It's just hoop to jump through before getting a job. You have to get a degree nowadays, otherwise, well, you'll end up working at McDonalds or in a shop.

Student 15 commented:

…if I didn't like any of my modules then it's be a bit of a drag coming to uni. I guess, but you just do it because you have to. Uni's a kind of stepping-stone, isn't it, to getting a job and having a career.

Four students identified that what influenced and motivated them changed slightly as they progressed through their degree. Students came to recognize that they needed to graduate with a good classification of degree. For example, student 11 indicated that when she commenced university, her intention was to gain a degree, but, on realising her planned future career would require a certain classification of degree, this changed:

When I first started here just a degree would have been absolutely fine…When I first started I thought a degree would get you into teaching but then it, was, like, 'No you need a first or a 2:1.

Factors relating to assessment tasks varied, frequently depending on how much interest the student had in that topic. A lack of motivation for a specific assessment task, or topic, was often overridden, influenced by a longer-term desire to achieve. Student 15, for example:

I want to be a teacher at the end, so I think having an end goal is quite good as well,

because lots of people are like 'I don't know what to do,' and then they don't really find the motivation to do the work because it's got nothing to do with what they want to do at the end.

Student 14:

I might not be very interested in doing a piece of work, but I know I've got to do well in it, to get a good job at the end, once I graduate.

The following interview extract from student 16 (the self-identified instrumental learner, quoted previously) demonstrates how a range of long and shorter-term factors influenced and motivated a particular student. Different factors are emboldened.

***I want to be a teacher**, a head-teacher…My mum and dad are always like 'All we care about is for you to try your best'. That's always the rule in our house. As long as you've tried your hardest it doesn't matter**. So I never want to do less than try my hardest** and **I'm not trying hard enough if I don't get a first**, because I know I can do it…I'm planning to do a PGCE next year and **getting a first makes a five grand difference so I've got a good financial motivation** there… [I] want to be a teacher because, to be honest, **I want to work abroad and I want long holidays**. I don't like children very much. I'm not particularly interested in how children learn**...I'm being motivated by, if the going gets tough, then I just think then in ten years' time I'll be in a foreign country, a hot country, I'm going to be able to go to the beach after school**, so I guess in that way I am rewarding myself. So, yes**...I make my own rewards, as, if there aren't any, I don't do it**. So, **in my life if you work hard you do well**…**I've never worked hard and not been rewarded for it**. I think **if there were no rewards for me I'd stop** …**I want to be happy, and to me being happy is being on a beach in the sunshine,** that's my happy place so, **money just makes it easier...I've failed myself if I haven't done as well as I want to do.** I've never failed… no **I've never failed….and I think it would cripple me if I did**.*

Similarly, for student 10, there were a range of factors:

*It's a combination and **I want good marks**…if I can't **do the best that I'm capable** of then I can't do it. So, I have to **do my utmost best work that I possibly can**, but I have **personal reasons** and motivation. **My little boy, he motivates me.** Because…I want him to see that I've pushed myself so that he can **have a better life**. I worked for a call centre before and I was so miserable, **I hated my job**. But now I'm enjoying it and I want him to see that you don't have to be stressed and downhearted in a job. You can go to university and enjoy*

yourself, but you do have to work hard…it's about ***showing that you are capable and you can have something that's interesting if you work hard****.*

4.4.6 The emotional impact of assessment feedback

As discussed in Chapter 2, a body of research indicates that assessment feedback can have an emotional effect on learners, acting both positively and negatively. Table 5 presents the data for this.

Table 5. The emotional impact of feedback

No. of students	Impact of feedback
18	Had a positive or negative emotional affect at some point during their degree
2	Had not affected them
13	Feedback about the first one or two pieces of assessed work had impacted on confidence, perception of ability, and self-esteem.

Most frequently, students indicated they had experienced a negative emotional reaction to written feedback. Student 11, stated:

I remember being really upset and crying sometimes over the feedback if it wasn't very good, if it was, like, negative.

As discussed in Chapter 2, negative ones have been found to impact negatively, whilst positive emotions are believed to affect students' learning and motivation in a positive way. An example of this is from student 4:

On a personal note, I take the feedback very personally. I remember having a remark saying that it was 'almost fit for purpose' and that devastated me. That put me right off. I think if I was not fit for purpose and if you are only just fit for purpose you are not very good, are you? But on the other hand, for one piece of work…it was fantastic, I got a 68 and really positive comments so I was chuffed to bits with that.

This clearly demonstrates how a student can be motivated or demotivated by feedback.

The data also identifies the importance of the feedback that students received about their first one or two assessment tasks, and how this can demotivate and erode confidence. For example, student 10:

It was our first assignment and none of us had done anything like that before so we were a bit thrown in the deep end. I remember contemplating quitting the course…I was close to throwing in the towel…I was crying, which I never do…I ended up going to counselling. I think they put us too deep in the water. The comments I got back were really, you know...

Student 8:

I remember the first bit of assessment I got back…I felt the tutor's comments were so horrible…my spelling was rubbish, my grammar was rubbish, my referencing was all wrong, I was really, really upset and it put me off.

Similarly, student 17:

I remember getting really upset when I got my first assessments back, the mark was sort of ok, but the comments upset me. My tutor said my spelling was crap, my sentences did not make sense. I was using too many abbreviations. Yet I didn't know not to. It really put me off.

And student 13:

In the first-year I was expecting to get marks in the 60s as I'd done ok college. I got my first marks back and they were 40s and 50s. I felt pretty devastated and my confidence in my own ability, like, went really low for a long time after. It put me off doing any work for weeks.

In contrast, more positive feedback, in the form of a higher grade, received for the first one or two assessment tasks may motivate. For example, student 7:

When I got my first assessment back here, I looked at the mark obviously and I thought 'Oh wow how on earth did I get that?' And then I went back to the feedback and I thought 'Yes. Oh wow I did do that!'.

And student 5:

I didn't know what kind of mark I'd get, but I got my first assignments back and I'd done really well I thought and that kind of inspired me, I knew that I could do it now.

For first years, feedback on initial assessment tasks helped, or hindered their confidence. Where it met, or exceeded, their expectations, it helped to build confidence and motivate, acting as a springboard for future learning by setting the standard at which they now knew they could achieve. For example, student 1:

Well, going back to the first-year…I wanted to prove to myself that I could get the best possible grade…when I first started I had no idea where I was going to come on the grading system, I just tried my hardest and thought 'I'll see what happens'. And then when it came back, there was a First! I set the standard then…so I thought 'I can do this…if I can get it in this essay I can get it in others'. So that's what motivated me.

Student 9:

One of them said an outstanding piece of work and that's, like, in my head, that is a bit of a confidence boost to write an outstanding piece of work…

She explained how, later in her programme, she received a lower grade than expected, but the earlier feedback had acted to motivate her to do better, as she knew from the comment that she was capable of producing outstanding work.

For two students, feedback had little or *no* emotional impact. For example student 15:

I do read the feedback, but I don't let it bother me that much…Lots of people get really het up about their feedback…whereas I think it's fine...

4.5 To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding?

4.5.1 Perception of summative assessment requirements

As previously mentioned, the majority of students (18 of 20) had a general intention to understand what they were learning. They felt that assessment tasks *generally* required a demonstration of their understanding, yet did not always require this. No students felt assessment tasks always required understanding. Four students were unsure as to whether understanding was a requirement, whilst four perceived that assessment tasks usually assessed their memorization. There were no clear differences between first and third years. Table 6 presents the data.

Table 6. Perception of assessment requirements

No. of students	View of assessment tasks
0	Always require understanding
12	Generally, yet not always, require understanding
4	Generally, require memorization
4	Unsure whether understanding is required

Responses indicated a perception that students felt lecturers generally looked for a demonstration of understanding when assessing work. For example, student 10:

Our lecturers encourage us to go further…to do more than just memorization. They want us to understand, to an extent, and they want that understanding to be reflected in our assignments.

Student 6 commented:

I would say they encourage you to understand because if you don't understand the task it is difficult to write a good piece of work. If you understand it you will have much more

flow, and make more sense, but if you just memorize it then I guess it would be fragmented and a bit shallow.

Student 12:

The lecturers, they want you to understand.

As previously stated, none of the students felt that assessment tasks always required a demonstration of understanding. For five of them a tension existed; whilst their general intention was to understand what they were learning, and they believed they did so sufficiently well to be able to explain using their own form of words, they perceived assessment requirements frequently required them to articulate their understanding in a certain way. They explained that it was necessary to use language they would not normally employ, that is, terminology used in the field of education and in relevant literature, what student 19 articulated as *"using academic words"*. This may lead to the use of a surface approach, using terminology which was not understood, or an inability to demonstrate 'full' understanding through paraphrasing.

Student 13, for example, indicated that, even though he *wanted* to understand, the constraints of assessment requirements frequently led to him using memorization, even though he recognized this may not benefit his longer-term learning:

I think it's a lot more memorization really. And it's not going to really stick with you. Because a lot of the essays and things you can't really put your own opinions in, it's got to be everyone else's. You are, constantly kind of thinking of things, but you have to reference somebody else saying it. So…you're having to change the entire structure of your argument in your essay so you can find about what somebody else has said. So, I think a lot of the time you do forget what you have written because you have to use quotes based on what you could find, rather than what you <u>wanted</u> to say…it's just a strong focus on that you can't put your own opinions in. There is a very strong opinion everything you say, if it's a fact, has to be backed up. (emphasis student's).

Despite recognising assessment usually required a demonstration of understanding, four students perceived that, for substantial parts of their course, memorization had been required. Student 14, for example, who had talked about wanting to understand the material she studied, and about there being no point knowing something if you did not understand it, stated:

I think all the social policies and all that's linked to all the Acts and everything are more about memorising.

Student 17, discussed her experiences of lecturers' assessment requirements, and after careful thought, said:

I think in Education it [assessment] is…about remembering what you have been told.

For some students, it seems that recognition of the requirement for their assessed work to demonstrate understanding may take time to develop. One third-year, student 9, stated:

I think they do reward understanding, but that is literally only from a recent mark that I got back.

Others though recognize the need to use a deep approach at a much earlier stage of their studies. Student 10, a first-year, commented:

…rote learning happens a lot more in schools than it does in university. I think there is an aspect of it in university. But at university you learn more than just memorization...The rote learning is there to an extent, because they definitely want to see that I've learnt what they've taught me, but they want me to show my understanding outside of what they taught me as well.

Students were sceptical about essays (which, as section 4.1.1 identified, were the predominant method of assessment) actually requiring a demonstration of understanding. Student 12, for example, stated:

If you write an essay it does not mean you necessarily understand it really… people might just read so much out of a book and just put it in their own words. It doesn't mean they actually understand it does it? Not everything I've written I've understood…I've just written it because I had to do it really… You don't have to understand everything that you write if

people use references. I suppose if a student analyses fully that could lead to understanding, instead of just stating, people just stating could be memorising, but I am not sure if they assess on memorization or understanding… I don't think you would actually know if people were just memorising or understanding in an essay.

This comment clearly identifies both that the student was unsure whether her work was assessed on whether it demonstrated memorization or understanding, that she believed writing an essay did not necessarily demonstrate understanding, and she was unsure whether assessors were able to distinguish between work that demonstrated understanding and that which demonstrated memorization.

4.5.2 Achievement without understanding

Five of the students believed that some of their peers were able to produce assessed work that achieved high grades, despite them not understanding the material. Student 12, for example, claimed:

Some people get very good marks by sort of putting bits of information together and produce a good essay even if they say they don't understand it.

In a similar vein, student 15 commented:

Yeah, I don't think I could write an essay if I didn't understand what I was writing about… I don't think I could, but some people can…I don't know how, but…some people get very good marks…even if they say they don't understand it.

When asked how she knew that they did not understand it, she answered:

Well if you ask them about it they just don't have a clue, they can't, like, explain it or explain about what it means, they can only tell you exactly what they've been told about it by the lecturer or what they've or read about it. They don't understand what it means, or is, or the implications of it.

This indicates that, from her perspective, these students had used memorization, rather than understanding.

Student 17 said:

Some people are really good at writing essays. Then you talk to them and, and it's obvious they don't really know. They don't really understand it at all.

It is clear from the statements that these students believed some of their peers were able to produce assessed work which achieved a high grade, despite them not understanding the material.

Student 16, the self-identified instrumental learner, who focused on achieving highly, identified that she was able to achieve high grades without understanding. She explained she knew how to produce work of a high standard and could identify:

W*hat an academic piece of work should look like and how it should sound.*

Although she may not have understood the content, she did understand the general requirements, or the 'look-and-feel' of presenting academic writing. She explained that she believed she could achieve highly in almost any subject, because she was highly motivated to achieve a first-class degree. She recognized the importance of including her own views within assessed assignments in order to achieve good grades, yet also believed that assessors would be unable to recognize if her views were truthful and authentic. Commenting about one assignment assessed by a reflective learning account, she stated:

I completely made it up, I completely fictionalized a traumatic experience purely so that I could talk about it. Mine was always made up, because like I'm 20, I lived with my parents until I was 18, and then I came to uni, I don't have a wealth of experience to talk about, so asking me about, and asking me, and marking me on me reflecting about the experience I don't have is stupid. Because I can't succeed at that if I'm honest. And I want to succeed, I need to succeed (emphasis student's).

4.5.2.1 Assessment not encouraging a deep approach to learning

As discussed in Chapter 2, a body of research literature argues that examinations encourage a surface approach. All 20 students identified that

they would use memorization when assessed by an examination. Understanding was seen as being neither important, nor relevant. This clearly demonstrates the influence of assessment on students' approaches to learning.

Student 18, for example, stated:

With the exam, it's more about remembering everything we did in the lectures. It doesn't matter if you didn't understand…you don't necessarily have to be able to understand it in an exam context. It's just literally repeating what you have read.

For student 15, learning for exams involved:

F*ocussing on remembering, especially the key facts. Yes, because in an essay you need to be able to expand and make it your own kind of work, whereas in an exam you kind of have to remember, like, the key points.*

When asked if she ever set out to memorize and remember without trying to understand, she replied:

In exams I do that, but not doing essays and stuff.

Similarly, when asked if she used memorization as part of her learning process, student 13 articulated:

I have done, I used to do it at school all the time and…in my degree when we had an exam...It's all gone, it was just all short-term memory.

4.5.3 Assessment uncertainty

As previously discussed, a body of research identifies assessment as having a strong influence on learning. Any uncertainty that students experience about assessment may therefore have important ramifications.

The data reveals that students were uncertain about assessment tasks. This comprised two forms, firstly, about specific tasks, (all 20 students), and secondly, about what is expected by academic staff, and allowed by university regulations (five students). Both of these related to what may be

called the 'look-and-feel', or structure and organisation, of good academic work, yet the former also related to assignment-specific requirements. Typically, students identified they had experienced more uncertainty during their first-year than in the third-year, with uncertainty diminishing as they progressed. For example, student 12 commented that:

It's never clear how important grammar and spelling are. The assessments and the assessment briefs never say anything about either, but then you get marked down if the lecturer thinks they are poor, so, you kind of only find out about these things somehow after you've done the work.

Uncertainty sometimes arose because of students believing lecturers had differing, or unclear, requirements. Student 15, stated:

O*ne of our seminar tutors is quite confusing, for our last Psychology assignment we were like: 'We don't really know what we're doing,' so I just kind of just did what I thought we were meant to do, because she kept giving us different answers whenever we asked.*

Similarly, student 13:

Often different lecturers want different things in essays. Some, like, will pick you up on the tiniest little thing that's wrong with your referencing, that others won't bother about. Also, like grammar, some will be really picky and mark you down for things that other lecturers don't comment on. So, you're never sure what exactly to focus on.

Student 10 mentioned a specific assignment:

Erm, with the curriculum one….none of us really understood it. The tutor she said that she wanted us to do a policy analysis, but then when we did she said that she wanted us to look at more of the curriculum…People were a bit confused only focusing on the curriculum, or the policy but she had wanted us to look more at the curriculum side but she'd not specified that, there was a lot of…confusion. I think, erm, some students were confused as they got a third and their other marks had not been lower than a 2:1 or 2:2...

She did, however, recognize that some of the uncertainty was due to being a first-year, and there was a process of getting used to producing university-level work:

Yeah, but I think some of it is because we are fresh into university…as the year's gone on I think we are getting a little more used to what's expected from us.

Another example of uncertainty was provided by student 10:

We are told that our course is based on seminars that are assessed, but whether that is actually true or not I'm not sure…we are a bit confused …whether we are having lectures or seminars. Actually, I have a seminar now…but whether we get assessed at the end of it or not I'm not sure.

Students may not always have sufficient confidence to ask for clarification or explanation of assessment requirements in the early stages of their degree, but, as they progressed, their confidence to do so grew, as the following extract from student 4 demonstrates:

The first-year I was too embarrassed to ask, but then I got a bit braver and I used to ask, and people used to come up to me and say 'I am glad you asked that because we didn't know what it was either.' …as my confidence grew then I didn't mind asking.

Similarly, student 11:

In all honesty I think I've become a lot more confident now, and you know, like, I can now E-mail the tutor, as I think I did with you, to make sure that I am on the right path, whereas before…I didn't always do that.

Yet misunderstanding of the requirements of assessed work may also arise, as demonstrated by the following example from student 19, interviewed towards the end of the second semester. She talked about how she had learnt about *"academic writing"* and that it involved using certain language, and conventions including, she perceived, the requirements to:

Use 'furthermore', throw in a 'thus', put in a reference every 200 words.

It seemed that she felt her writing needed to employ a certain style, yet did not seem to realise it needed to demonstrate either a coherent argument or understanding.

4.5.4 First-year grades 'not counting'

Ten students indicated that at points during their first-year they had experienced a general lack of interest in what they studied, lacked

engagement in studying, and were not interested in engaging with assessment feedback. This was typically explained as being due to the first-year grades not contributing to the final degree classification. This led to participation in what they called '*the first-year party*', that is, rather than focusing on studying, their social life was regarded as being as, or more, important than studying.

The following interview extract demonstrates the influence of assessment on a particular student's approach to learning, showing, despite a previously articulated intention to want to understand, that because the first-year grades did not count, time may be spent socialising rather than studying. Student 15:

The first-year I just want to, like, have fun.

(Interviewer) Does having fun detract from your assessments and your work then?

Sometimes…no, not really, because we have uni. Wednesday, Thursdays and Fridays, so I'd feel bad if I missed, like, loads of uni. because I only have to be in three days anyway.

(Interviewer) Do you tend to go to most of the lectures then, or...?

I try to go to most of them, if I have like a big night out then sometimes I can't go.
(Interviewer) Do you ever do any work or any reading that's not really related to the assessment, or just for interest in the topic?

Probably not I'm afraid. I'd like to say yes, but I don't think I do.

(Interviewer) Why would you like to say yes?

Because, you probably should do that, but maybe I will, like, next year and things like that, but I think everyone just has their first-year just, like, 'Do it next year kind of thing'.

(Interviewer) Why is that?

It's because the first-year don't count. It don't count towards the degree.

Similarly, student 20 in discussing her study practices said:

In the first-year I just wanted to pass, but the last year I have wanted to pass well, I mean, get a good grade.

There were differences between older and younger students, as perhaps may be expected, with older ones less interested in the party lifestyle, as the following interview extract with student 1, demonstrates:

I'm quite happy with the way I did university...I think if I'd done it straight away when I'd left college when I was 18 I think I'd have been more bothered about the social side of university, and I think my grades probably wouldn't have been as high as what they was. (Interviewer) You'd have been partying every Saturday?

Yeah, and more! I think I probably would have done, but because I'd waited so long and matured, that side didn't bother me so I did focus all my effort into trying to get the grades.

4.5.5 Differences between self-identified high achievers and others

The data suggests no clear differences in a stated *general* intention to understand and the use of feedback between self-identified higher achieving students and others. Yet there were differences both in their awareness of, and how they interpreted, the requirement of assessed work to demonstrate understanding, and in their engagement with feedback (data presented in section 4.6.3). All of the self-identified higher achieving students identified they recognized that, in order to demonstrate their understanding, they could incorporate their own views in their work by including material from their perspective and experiences. In contrast, students who did not perceive themselves to be higher achievers did not always recognize this and/or they perceived this was neither allowed, nor encouraged, by assessment processes or tutors.

Student 3, for example, a high achiever, indicated she recognized it was necessary to include her own views:

I think a big part of the grades is about originality and doing something outside-of-the-box, I think my best grades have not been ones where I've written about what's good and what's bad and then adding a conclusion to it, but the where I've included stories about things…

Student 1, a self-identified high-achiever, when asked if she thought it was important to draw her own conclusion and include her own voice in assessed work:

Yeah, definitely, I think that's where the marks are. That's the criticality, isn't it?

Students who did not classify themselves as being higher achievers did not always realise they could include their own views.

For example, student 12:

Well, throughout this course it hasn't been encouraged, as we are not allowed to bring in our own opinions or thoughts… I suppose it could be important to see our perspective but…we are not allowed to talk about our self.

Student 4:

I never was sure if I could actually use my own thoughts in an essay, you know, because it always has to be in the third person.

Student 8 pointed out:

We write in the third person; it has to be. You can't say your own opinion because you have to reference it from an author and obviously if you have to reference through an author you can't say what you think about it.

In a similar vein, student 13 stated:

A lot of the essays and things you can't really put your own opinions in, it's got to be everyone else's…It's just a strong focus on that you can't put your own opinions in…

4.5.6 Fairness in assessed group presentations

An issue raised by seven students was that the same grade was awarded to each member of a group when the assessment was by group presentation. Students perceived this was an unfair process because they felt that some group members put in less effort and did less work than others, yet received the same grade. Some expressed considerable anger and frustration, feeling that they were having to carry weaker students, and doing more than their share of the work, or believing the grade they

received was lower than they should have received given the amount of work they put in compared to others in their group. For example, student 3:

I remember being in the digital cultures module, it was really interesting module. I really enjoyed it. And one of the assessments was to do a presentation, but you have to do it in a group and, well, we all got the same mark. And I felt that that was not that appropriate because some of us had done a lot more work than the others and yet we all got the same mark… it shouldn't be like that.

In discussing group presentations, student 7 said:

We've just done another one where we had the option to work on our own or in a group and I've decided to work on my own, and I was asked 'Why?'… 'Because I don't want other people taking credit for the work that I have done'. I said 'I did it last semester, and then a girl got a really high mark for something that she never did….so when I had the option to work in a group or not, I took the option not to. (emphasis student's).

Student 13 provided a lengthy response about his negative experiences of presentations where some group members did not contribute:

I personally have had quite a few issues with group work…when you're trying to arrange things with large groups…you are strongly recommended to keep minutes of the meetings, which if you are doing the work, it takes additional work to do… because the person who isn't doing the work won't do the minutes because it will reflect badly on them as it will show that they've not done any of the work, so you end up doing that…if you don't do that it's going to affect you all, because you all get the same grade.

Student 15 expressed considerable dissatisfaction:

…we've done, like, three group pieces of work and my lowest marks have always been in those because you're not marked on your own work but for the group and it drives me insane. My lowest mark was 58, it pains me to this day, it was a group presentation…Got the mark back, 58 and I thought 'That is deeply unjust, that is not fair', so, I e-mailed the lecturer and I said 'Is this an individual mark or a group mark?' and she said it was a group mark and so I said' I think that is deeply unfair because the next lowest I've ever got is 64'. It's quite a huge jump and I said 'This doesn't represent the rest of my marks, it doesn't represent the amount of work I did, it doesn't represent the presentation I gave, it doesn't represent the information I gave', and she replied 'Well yeah, it's a group mark' (emphasis student's).

It was very clear from the tone of her voice that, despite the incident occurring in the second-year, she still felt extremely annoyed about this towards the end of her third-year.

4.6 What changes take place in students' approaches to learning and studying between the first and third-year?

4.6.1 Conception of what learning involves

The data reveals that, for the majority of students in the study, their conception of what learning involved changed little, if at all, during the course of their degree, with 19 identifying that when they commenced their studies they believed learning involved understanding, and this belief had not changed. Only one student identified that their conception of learning had changed, or had started to change, through studying at university. This learner had British-Malaysian heritage, having spent her compulsory education years in Malaysia and had a particular view of learning which she attributed to her cultural upbringing (see previous section 4.4.3).

4.6.2 Approach to assessment, study practices and awareness of the general requirements of university work

Although the data suggests that students' beliefs about what learning involved remained the same during their degree, their approach to assessment tasks, and engagement with feedback, did change. The changes described in moving from the first-stage of the first-year to the final-stage of the third-year were quite subtle, with no student describing particularly striking ones. Broad statements were provided by the students, such as they '*did more work*', or '*more reading*', or '*more research*' the further they were in their degree and spent less time socialising. The most significant

change was less participation in social activity (data presented in section 4.5.4).

As the findings presented in section 4.4 demonstrated, as students progressed they became more aware of the requirements of university-level academic work, and also recognized that assessment usually required a demonstration of understanding.

For example, student 3:

…in the first year I just concentrated on trying to get it down and get a good grade. Whereas now I know that I have to understand it first before I can get a good grade. There were times when I have not understood it, but I've tried to write it down in a way that I did understand it, but then I have not got a good grade. (emphasis student's).

The data indicates that some of the more general changes related not to deep or surface approaches to learning, but to aspects relating to the requirements of assessed work which students may be unaware of when they commenced university, such as referencing, and writing style.

Student 10, for example, mentioned her friend who:

…couldn't believe that you get marked down for spelling…she didn't know that you get marked down for it.

Discussing the early stage of her degree, student 20 said:

If I look at my first-year ones…like, in a reference I didn't realise that you could join it to your sentence… like, if I was writing something and I thought the reference for a quote…had to be fully separate from my work… I thought it had to stand on its own... I mean, when I came to uni. I didn't know a thing about referencing, like anything whatsoever.

Student 15:

I think my grammar and the way I write is much better than then [at the start of semester]

Similarly, student 4 discussed starting university and writing an initial essay in the first person, because, having been told to write in the 'third person', did not know what that meant. She had thought this meant that someone would help her to write the essay. She explained:

I didn't quite understand what that meant when I first started the course. I didn't know who was going to help me to do it, to write the essay. Because one essay that I wrote, I wrote, 'I am going to do this' and 'I am going to do that' and the lecturer said that I should not write in the first person, but in the third, and I realised. 'Oh is <u>that</u> what it means' I didn't know what it meant... (emphasis student's).

These uncertainties may not just be confined to students studying in the field of education. For example, student 20 talked about her boyfriend, studying Sports-Science:

I was…looking through my boyfriend's work. He is in the first-year now…reading through his work and the same sort of things I remember doing in my first-year he is doing, so obviously across university we are not getting told them sort of things. I said 'Yeah, you don't put 'don't'. He said 'You are ripping my work to pieces' and I said 'Well I have learnt that.' Even though we are the same age I have gone through uni. already, so I already kind of know things you should or shouldn't do.

4.6.3 <u>Engagement with assessment feedback</u>

Students' engagement with formally provided assessment feedback typically increased the further they were into their degree, with the highest level of engagement in the final year. Out of the 11 third-years, eight indicated they were more likely to read assessment feedback, and refer to module learning outcomes in their final year compared to their first-year.

Students engaged with assessment feedback in different ways. It was either: (a) always read, (b) never read, (c) read if the mark was higher than they expected it to be, (d) read it if the mark was lower than they expected it to be, and (e) not read in the earlier stages of their studies but

increasingly read, and acted upon, as they progressed through their degree. Data is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Students' engagement with feedback

No. of students	Engagement with feedback
4	Never read
4	Always read
12	Sometimes read
7	Usually only read if the mark was higher or lower than expected
8	Focused on the grade and did not read in first-year, but did in third-year
11	Read but did not act on it in first-year
4	Read but did not act on it in third- year
9	Identified that a lack of time was a reason for not engaging fully with feedback (they read it yet may not act on it).

The data suggests that self-identified higher achievers and older students were more likely to read and use feedback, although not all did. One high-achiever (student 14) indicated she never read feedback as each piece of assessed work was different so, as she explained:

What is the point?".

Eight students identified how in the earlier stages of their studies they focused on the grade, and did not read feedback, but, as they progressed, increasingly focused on the written feedback comments. The further they were into their degree, the greater was the likelihood that feedback would be read. For example, student 13 commented:

I tend to focus on the mark, only recently have I tended to read back on the feedback …It's towards the third-year that I have started to look at the feedback...I know in the first-year we should look at it, but…

Student 12, when asked if she read feedback, stated:

I didn't in the first-year…This year I have been doing it as it's my last year. In the first-year, I didn't…I only started doing it at the end of the second-year...In the first-year I just looked straight for the mark and didn't look at the feedback.

4.6.3.1 Disparity between reading feedback and acting upon it

Although the data identifies that students were increasingly likely to read feedback as they progressed in a degree, this was not always commensurate with how they acted on it. As discussed in Chapter 2, feedback can only be effective when the learner understands it *and* is willing and able to act on it. Yet there is evidence that some students do not understand feedback, and do not engage with it when provided.

Only one indicated they did not understand feedback she had received. Student 5, who stated:

With some lecturers, they put the feedback in quite a hard way to interpretate [sic] it.

For those students who indicated they read feedback, yet did not act upon it, the explanation provided was not that they did not understand it, but they did not see it as being useful. They explained that, typically, they could not see how feedback provided about one piece of work could be used to inform a subsequent one. For example, student 15 commented:

…I don't know if I would, like, use that with my other work if that makes sense? I don't know if when I read feedback I take in in properly to, like, use in other assignments…I don't think, I probably should, but I just sort of…yeah. I guess, like, all assignments are different so when I get feedback from one I don't know whether I can use that for another one.

Similarly, student 14:

I do read it, but…I think every single essay is different, so there is nothing I can learn from it.

Student 13 indicated she regarded feedback from different tutors to be contradictory and, because of this, did not use it:

Well I tried it once, but because each lecturer changes and…because each module is different, every lecturer is different, you will find that one person will feedback about one aspect of your writing which they do not agree with and then you will get feedback from another lecturer who says 'well actually we like you to do it this way'.

Similarly, student 9:

Each lecturer looks for different things, y'know, so there's no point in changing work based on what one says, as another may want something different.

One explanation provided by students (seven of 20) for not engaging with feedback was they felt they did not have sufficient time available. As previously discussed in section 4.4.4, many had part-time jobs and/or had caring responsibilities. One exception was student 18, a mature student with six children at home, and many family commitments, who explained that she did make time to engage with feedback.

The data suggests that, compared to younger learners, mature students were typically more willing to engage with feedback and to accept it as being both constructive and encouraging development. Student 18, for example, mentioned her maturity allowed her to accept feedback as being constructive, something she believed she would never have done at an earlier age, and that the younger students on her course generally did not:

Because they've put a lot of work into things, sometimes they're not prepared to see anything negative about their work. I think it's something that comes with age a bit more, that you accept criticism a bit. Like you say you learn to accept criticism as constructive...the whole point of criticism is that you learn from it …I would <u>never</u> have accepted that when I was young, never. So, I can look back at myself and now how I used to see criticism as a personal criticism when I was younger, to whereas now I see it as a constructive criticism, to build upon learning, it's not a negative thing. (emphasis student's).

In a similar vein, student 7 identified her younger peers as being less likely to take on board lecturers' advice and guidance:

Because sometimes, when you are younger, you think 'Yeah yeah, whatever,' Yeah, I'll do that', and you don't do it, and you get to the assignment and you think 'Where's that?',

and if you'd done that thing that they asked me to do, because you can't find it and it would have been really useful. But when you're young you are like 'Oh it'll be fine'. But it doesn't work like that...

4.6.4 Use of intended learning outcomes

In a similar way to their engagement with feedback, in relation to learning outcomes, students indicated they either: (a) never read them, (b) always read them, or (c) did not refer to them in the early stages of their degree but started to do so as they progressed through it. Data presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Use of intended learning outcomes

No. of students	Use of learning outcomes
4	Always used
3	Never used
13	Did not use in the first-year, but did in the third-year

Student 20, for example, said she always referred to the learning outcomes and re-wrote them in words that made sense to her:

W*hen I am writing my work I always have them as the side, like, I have wrote them down in my own words for my own, sort of*.

Student 1 stated:

Yeah, I do look at the learning outcomes quite a lot, especially when I'm getting ready to write my assessments…I do think they're very helpful for you, when you're prepping to do your assessment, and after it as well, when you've read through, you can look at the learning outcomes and think, 'Have I met that, have I met that?

Conversely, student 12 said:

That is one thing I have not particularly looked at throughout the three years is the module handbook, apart for looking at deadlines, I've not really looked at the learning outcomes,

it's something maybe I should have done to ensure that everything was in the essay or assignment but that is one thing I haven't done.

For 13 students, their use of learning outcomes, was, as with engagement with feedback, something that may not take place in the earlier stages of their degree, but increased as they progressed through it.

Misunderstanding of what prescribed learning outcomes required existed amongst third-year students, as well as those in the first-year.

Student 8 stated:

I do look at them, but some of them I don't know if I've met them.

Student 9:

I never used to [use them]…because I didn't really understand them at first.

Student 13 commented:

Towards the third-year I have started to look at the feedback and learning outcomes, but then…they are kind of very vague around the topic itself. I started reading learning outcomes to give me an idea what they're looking for in the assessment. They may say, for example, that they are looking for understanding, but, they don't say understanding of what!

Student 15, a first-year, was unaware what learning outcomes were. When asked if she referred to learning outcomes, she replied:

What are learning outcomes?

Student, number 16, (the self-identified instrumental high achiever) indicated she never looked at learning outcomes, stating:

I don't think I've ever looked at a module handbook.

4.6.5 Increase in learner independence and confidence

Fourteen students identified that they believed their level of independence had increased, and confidence had improved since commencing university. Eight of these identified they felt required to exercise greater independence as they progressed. Students in the final year cited the process of producing a dissertation and having work placements as being particularly useful.

Student 3 observed:

The lecturers encourage you to do it on your own, I mean the dissertation, you have your own supervisor, you do work on your own…I guess for the dissertation you are left to your own devices you are independent but at the same…You can't just do anything, but…you can take it any direction you want, they do encourage that.

Student 9 asserted that the development of confidence and independence was helped by assessment through the process of lecturers progressively giving more choice and flexibility in assessment tasks:

I think that is done gradually from year 1 to year 3...In the first-year all the assignment titles are the same, you don't change them…Whereas when you move through to year 2 you kind of have more of a free rein, you have to do like a health-based assignment but you can choose which part of health you do, you are choosing…In year 1 I was so under confident, I was saying to the others 'What are you doing? What are you doing?'…now I am like 'Well I am doing this because it is completely different' but I feel that that is fine. And I am secure in that and I can do it now, on my own and I never thought I would be able to do that…ever.

As with the above example, independence was frequently mentioned at the same time as confidence, suggesting an iterative process and symbiotic relationship.

The data reveals that for younger students, developing confidence and more general independence, rather than independence in learning, was part of the process of being at university and growing up. Students believed

they became more independent in their learning as they progressed through a degree, particularly so during the final year. Student 1, for example, posited:

I think definitely, that's something which has evolved over time on the course. It's happened more in the third year compared with the second and first-year, definitely.

Student 9:

I think it is a combination of the whole university lifestyle of growing up and living on your own and of work-placements because I think you need a lot more confidence, skills and abilities to do that independently, you are on your own, you have to arrange it [the placement] *and things…but, looking back now, the assignments and placements have actually done it, have made you work independently and created a bit of confidence in all. Well definitely in myself*.

Some types of assessment and learning tasks, specifically presentations and those involving an assessed work-placement, were regarded as being particularly useful for developing both independence and confidence in learning. Student 20 discussed this:

There has been a lot of presentations that you have to do on your own, now there is more chance for you to speak up in class and everyone kind of does it so you feel more confident. So, I think confidence is really improved definitely… in this degree you have to do a placement…that is confidence as well…I have made a massive step with that because when I first came to uni. I didn't have much confidence at all. I was quite shy, whereas now I feel like I can just speak up. That's from doing the presentation assessments and stuff…being put there to do it and you have to do it.

Student 14 recognized that a work-placement contributed to learning and to the development of confidence and independence:

I learnt a lot during the placements…I have learnt more doing the placement than doing my essays …I remember the most from doing something than, like, being at the lectures.

4.7 Summary of chapter

In response to the central research question, 'In the context of English higher education what insights can be drawn about the approaches to

learning, assessment and formally received assessment feedback, of contemporary undergraduate students at two contrasting universities?", the data revealed a number of key findings.

(1) The majority of students, whilst not aware of the terms 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning, recognized there were differences between understanding and memorization. The majority valued personal understanding and had this as their overall general learning intention, with learning without understanding regarded as being less worthwhile. Yet many had used memorization as an approach to learning, and used memorization to support their understanding.

(2) Assessment was found to be the key determinant of students' approaches to learning, yet interest and enjoyment of the topic studied were also found to be crucially important factors influencing students' specific approach and their study habits. Students prefaced the term 'understanding' with full(y)/properly/ complete(ly)/real(ly)/genuine(ly) to indicate a more comprehensive understanding, one that necessarily required a deep approach. Where understanding was used on its own or prefaced with 'just' this indicated a recognition by the students that they did not yet have a comprehensive understanding and may have used memorization to a greater extent. Typically, where students had a higher level of interest and enjoyment they were more likely to want to understand a topic and were prepared to expend greater effort. All had experienced studying topics for which they had little or no innate interest, with one subject, Politics, explicitly identified as holding little interest for many education students. Where they had little interest, students needed to force themselves to be interested and to persevere. A lack of initial understanding may explain an initial lack of interest and, as some understanding is developed, then so does interest and enjoyment.

(3) Most of the students, though not all, recognized that, with the exception of examinations, in order to achieve well in assessment tasks, they needed to understand and to demonstrate their understanding. Yet the requirement to use appropriate disciplinary terminology sometimes constrained their ability to paraphrase and to demonstrate their understanding. Those who identified themselves as higher achievers were more likely to recognize that they could incorporate their own views and ideas in assessed work in order to demonstrate their understanding.

(4) Students identified that the most frequently used method of assessment was an essay, yet felt essays did not always require a demonstration of understanding. There was a perception held that, despite some of their peers not fully understanding the subject matter, they were able to achieve good grades when assessed by essay.

(5) One student had a highly instrumental approach, not being interested in what she studied, and with no intention to understand, or to memorize, yet she indicated that she was able to achieve highly, despite not understanding a topic because she understood the academic conventions and presentational aspects required when writing an essay.

(6) Uncertainty about the requirements of assessed work existed, particularly in the earlier stages of a degree, when students had greater uncertainty about the typical requirements and conventions of academic writing. A small number of students were uncertain whether their work was assessed on memorization or on understanding.

(7) Cultural factors had strongly influenced the approach to learning of one student who had spent her compulsory education years in Asia.

(8) Assessment feedback had a strong emotional impact on students, acting both positively and negatively, both motivating and demotivating.

Feedback about initial pieces of assessed work in the first-year was particularly important.

(9) A number of complex intertwined factors motivated students and influenced their learning. These included: personal circumstances, parental influence, money, fear, personal challenges, future career and acting as a role model for their children. No one factor influenced on its own, although for many students the most important factor was their future career. Students frequently expressed a sense of resignation that studying at university had been something they felt obliged to do, as a stepping-stone precursor to joining the labour market.

(10) Students' engagement with, and use of, assessment feedback and learning outcomes, typically increased as they progressed through their degree. First years typically were less engaged with coursework and assessment feedback, and, for younger students, their social life was as, or more, important than university study. The fact that first-year grades did not count towards the final degree classification was provided as an explanation for this. Older students were more likely to engage with feedback and accept its intended function as being formative. As students progressed they were more likely to engage with assessment feedback, yet not all third-year students utilised assessment feedback or learning outcomes. Reasons for not engaging with feedback included: a lack of time due to having a part-time job or family responsibilities; an inability to see how feedback about one piece of assessed work could be used to inform subsequent work; and a perception that lecturers had different requirements.

(11) The issue of fairness was raised about group presentations where the same grade was awarded to each student. They were seen as being unfair, and did not encourage all to use a deep approach to learning, with some students contributing little to the work.

(12) Students developed increased confidence as they progressed from the first to third-year, particularly as they gained a better understanding and recognition of the requirements of university level work. Work placements and assessed presentations were felt to have been particularly useful in developing confidence.

(13) Students identified a contrast between both the teaching methods used and how formative feedback was provided in the compulsory education sector compared with university. At college and school feedback had typically been in the form of providing correct answers and involving coaching-and-correction, (which one student was very critical about the merits of). This implies some enter higher education with very different experiences of feedback to that which they are likely to receive whilst at university.

5.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The chapter is structured according to the four research sub-questions:

5.1 How do students perceive differences between surface and deep approaches to learning?

5.1.1 Awareness of surface and deep approaches

The data identifies that students were not aware of the terms 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning. This finding was unexpected given they were studying in the field of education and in the light of the claim by Houghton (2004) that the theory is one of the most frequently used pieces of research in education (see also Richardson 2000, Ramsden 2003, Case 2007, Marshall and Case 2012). The theory may well be a cornerstone of education programmes, and highly used by educators, albeit it may be more common in Certificate of Education courses than undergraduate ones, yet it is not one that these education students were aware of. Nevertheless, although unaware of the terms, students perceived clear differences between an approach involving an intention to memorize and one involving an intention to understand.

For the majority, their *general* approach was an intention to understand for themselves what they were learning, that is, to use a deep approach. This contrasts with historic research by Becker et al. (1968) asserting that few students valued learning for its own sake, and aligns with those findings from the foundational research on approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö 1976, Laurillard 1979, Marton and Svensson 1979), as discussed in Chapter 2. It also counters Haggis' (2003, 2004) argument that understanding may no longer be an aim for learners in today's mass higher education system. This finding was rather surprising given my experiences

of teaching students, as outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, whom I perceived to be not particularly interested in understanding for themselves, to not always want to participate in formative assessment activities and to be overly focused on the summative assessment. At the commencement of this thesis, my initial beliefs were that; many contemporary students were uninterested in, and did not value, personal understanding and learning which was not assessed for a grade; they regarded learning which did not contribute directly towards a summative assessment as a waste of time; and they predominantly used a surface approach to learning. These beliefs have been found to be, in part, incorrect for the sample of students in this study. Contemporary students do value personal understanding, yet at the same time are instrumental, focusing their learning on areas of the curriculum that are summatively assessed for a grade which counts towards their degree.

5.1.2 Interpretation of understanding

As noted in Chapter 4, students indicated that understanding involved being able to explain something to someone using their own words, thereby aligning with definitions available in the literature. Perkins' (2008) research (discussed in Chapter 2) suggested three types of understanding: 'possessive', where the conception of learning is that it is about the accumulation of knowledge; 'performative' where there is a recognition of the need to understand, but with a focus on achieving a high grade rather than deep engagement with the material; and 'proactive', where students expect learning to enable them to see things in a different way, to achieve an understanding that is personally satisfying. Perkins' triad aligns with a surface, strategic, and deep approach. The students interviewed had a recognition of understanding as being 'proactive' and had a general intention to personally understand. There was only one, the more instrumental learner, who was clearly focused on 'performative' understanding. With the exception of the student who was educated in

Asia, none of the students' conception of learning involved 'possessive' understanding, the accumulation of knowledge. Yet, as will be discussed in section 5.3. they perceived that assessment sometimes only required a demonstration of this. Students also recognized that memorisation could support understanding, and that the two processes often worked synergistically, thus concurring with the research by Lublin (2003), Kember (2006), and Purdie and Hattie (2012), as discussed in Chapter 2. It would seem that the students in my study, although articulating a desire for 'proactive' understanding, often focused on 'performative' understanding, particularly so where they had little interest and enjoyment in the topic.

One student, a self-identified high-achiever, could clearly be categorised as being a 'strategic' learner, concurring with the research by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Entwistle (1987, 2001) and Entwistle and Peterson (2004). She was not interested in understanding, nor interested in many of the topics studied, only in achieving as highly as possible, and was particularly motivated to do so. This intention had led to her learning only what was necessary to achieve and to fabricating one piece of assessed work. Yet she recognized that her lack of understanding sometimes led to frustration. Although this was only one student in the study, it does point to the existence of some highly-motivated learners whose sole aim is to achieve highly, and is thus evidence of a particular form of instrumentalism.

5.1.3 Use of the term 'understanding'

One particularly interesting finding is that of students' use of language to preface their acknowledgement of the term understanding. Students did not use the term understanding in isolation; they prefaced it with an adjective, either 'just', or, with full(ly)/proper(ly)/complete(ly)/ real(ly). This provides an insight into how contemporary learners view what understanding means and involves. Using such adjectives indicates their perception of their depth, level and breadth of understanding and this, in turn, relates to their approach to

learning. This offers an interesting dimension for deconstructing students' use of language and for fully appreciating their analysis of the term and engagement with it. In this vein, Hughes' (2016) research, which explored care and dis/connectedness related to young people and their engagement with education, identified that people used prepositions and adjectives in ways which offered insight into their practices. She found that the heuristic device of 'authoritative adjectives' such as: 'real', 'genuine', and 'quality', were used to emphasize learners' ethos and intent. In the research presented in this thesis, students used 'authoritative adjectives' to qualify the term and express the depth of their understanding.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Entwistle and Entwistle, A. (1991) and Entwistle and Entwistle, D. (2003) suggest that the term 'understanding' is open to interpretation and there are different forms and levels, although these may often be implicit. The research presented in this thesis concurs with their argument. The data presented in sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.5 suggests that, where understanding was used on its own, this indicated a partial understanding and/or a surface approach to learning. Where 'just' was used to preface understanding it seemed to indicate an intention to use a deep approach, and a recognition that the student had some comprehension, yet not in any depth; their understanding was incomplete. Prefacing understanding with full(ly)/proper(ly)/complete(ly)/real(ly) (hereinafter 'fully understand') indicated a more complete understanding, one which would necessarily have involved a deep approach to learning and which aligns with Perkins' (2008) 'proactive' understanding. Students' use of the term understanding and their subtle, often implicit interpretations, have not previously been identified in the body of research on approaches to learning. As such, my study provides a new insight and, because students have a range of interpretations of what understanding means and requires of their academic practice, it raises questions about how universities use the term in prescribed learning outcomes and assessment practices.

I would therefore argue that if students do not interpret 'understand' as meaning the same as 'fully understand', it complicates their comprehension of what is required in an assessment. Where the term is used in isolation by lecturers, and in pre-articulated prescribed learning outcomes, students may have multiple, implicit interpretations of how they demonstrate their understanding and, in turn, may perceive that assessed work does not require them to understand in the depth and level required. This finding offers an insight into the choices made by students as to whether or not to use a deep approach to learning and contributes to explaining why they may not use one. The data indicates that students appear not to always recognize that 'understand' requires them to use a deep approach and, as such, they risk producing work which is not of the standard required and is not of the same standard they would have produced had they recognized the requirement as being, in their words, to 'fully understand'. However, the findings about lack of time, first-year grades not counting, and interest/enjoyment, are important in explaining why, despite a general intention to understand, students may use a surface approach if they do not recognize the requirement to 'fully understand'.

The data identifies that students regarded learning without understanding as being a waste of time. This further demonstrates that students want to engage in understanding personally, as well as academically, what they are studying, that is, in accordance with Perkins' (2008) concept of 'proactive' understanding. This finding contrasts with Haggis' argument (2003, 2004) that personal understanding may not be relevant to, nor a goal for, contemporary learners. My study found students' interest in, and enjoyment of, the topic to be crucially important in influencing their approaches to learning, with a deep approach more likely to be used where they are present. This adds a thought-provoking dimension that is rarely considered. Although interest has been explored from psychological perspectives on learning in relation to motivation (see Schiefele 1991), there appears to be little substantive discussion of interest as a factor in

the literature on approaches to learning. As discussed in Chapter 2, Biggs (1987) identified that without interest, students were more likely to adopt a surface approach, and Richardson's (2007) work briefly mentions that the approach *may* depend on the level of interest. The research presented in this thesis reinforces and advances both Bigg's and Richardson's positions. Students' approach to learning *does* depend on the level of interest and enjoyment.

5.2 What factors, including the role of assessment, influence students in their approaches to learning?

5.2.1 Factors influencing students

The data identifies a number of short and long-term factors that influenced students and their approaches to learning. Perhaps not surprisingly, future career was cited by a majority as being a key factor influencing their decision to enrol at university. Additional factors included peer pressure, parental expectations and overcoming personal challenges. These factors combined in a multitude of ways to influence students in how they approached learning and studying during their time at university. Students wanted to achieve, as they perceived this was necessary for their future employment and to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were capable of achieving a degree, or a 'good' degree. This in turn meant that, where they recognized the assessment required them to demonstrate understanding ('fully'), they would use a deep approach. Yet where they did not recognize this, or perceived that memorisation was required, they would be more likely to use a surface approach. This reinforces the argument for a 'strategic' approach as identified by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Biggs (1987), Entwistle (1987) and Entwistle and Peterson (2004). However, the extent to which this is a distinct approach to *learning,* or an approach to studying, is, as the literature indicates, unclear.

Twelve of the students identified that coming to university was something they felt obliged to do, a necessary 'stepping-stone'. For them there was almost a sense of resignation, as they did not seem to be genuinely interested in studying or learning. Given the findings about interest and enjoyment, this contributes to explaining the perception amongst educators such as Field (2012) and Wiliam (2012) that contemporary learners seem to be more focused on summative assessment, which can relate to why they may use a surface approach. Yet my research suggests that, despite a feeling of resignation about studying in higher education, students did typically recognize that assessment required a demonstration of understanding, and that they expressed a general intention to understand, particularly where they had an interest in, and enjoyed studying the topic.

5.2.2 Perception of assessment requirements

As the data suggests, for the students in my study, assessment was a dominant factor in determining their approaches to learning, concurring with previous research (see Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Gibbs 1992, Ramsden 1992, Brown and Knight 1994, Gibbs 1994, Brown et al. 1997, Ramsden 2003, Race 2005, Sainsbury and Walker 2008, and Brown 2015). Joughin's (2009a) claim that educators cannot assume that assessment 'looms large' for contemporary students seems to be incorrect for the sample interviewed. For all of the students, assessment played a key role in their university life.

The students perceived that assessment at university usually required a demonstration of understanding yet they did not believe this was always so, with examinations specifically cited as a form of assessment where understanding was not required and a surface approach to learning would always be used, regardless of having a general intention to understand. This confirms the earlier work of Willis (1993) and Entwistle and Entwistle, D.

(2003) and aligns with the original research on approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö 1976, Laurillard 1979, Marton and Svensson 1979). Yet, leaving aside the particular case of examinations, as the data presented in section 4.5.1 demonstrates, students perceived that they were often required to demonstrate memorization rather than understanding. The implication, as the literature on approaches to learning maintains, is that, for those assessments where students do not recognize there to be a requirement for understanding, they will be likely to use a surface approach. It therefore brings into question the widely taken-for-granted assumption amongst academics, and regulatory body requirements (QAA 2012, 2013), that assessment at university necessarily requires a student to demonstrate their understanding.

The finding that four students perceived they were usually assessed on their memorization indicated they believed 'possessive' knowledge (Perkins 2008) was required, despite their general belief that personal understanding involved 'proactive' understanding. This implies that their espoused general intention to understand was undermined by a perception they were assessed on what they had memorized. Consequently, despite wanting to understand, for assessment tasks where students perceived that 'possessive' knowledge was required, they would adopt a more surface approach; particularly so where they lacked interest and enjoyment. The implication is that they will devote a greater proportion of study time to memorising, rather than to developing understanding. This may lead to some failing to produce work that meets the required learning outcomes or is of the required standard.

Similarly, the finding that four (different) students were unsure as to whether understanding *was* a requirement of university work raises another related problem. If students have not recognized understanding is necessary, it follows that they are unlikely to aim to demonstrate it in their work. This could mean they may not achieve as highly in assessment tasks

as they should be able to.

The data identifies students believed some of their peers were able to produce assessed work that achieved highly, despite not understanding ('fully'). This raises further the question whether assessment tasks, other than examinations, in the field of education at the two universities always require understanding. If students see that some of their peers are achieving high grades without it, they will necessarily question whether understanding is a requirement. Unfortunately, without having access to data about the students whom their peers believed were able to achieve in this way, it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions from this. A possible explanation is that some students have recognized the requirements for producing a credible piece of academic work, in terms of its look and feel, structure and flow, referencing and use of grammar and appropriate disciplinary terminology. Because these criteria are met, they can produce work of an appropriate standard despite not 'fully understanding'. It is interesting that the one highly instrumental learner, a self-identified high-achieving student, indicated she believed she would be able to achieve highly in any subject because she recognized what was required to produce a good piece of academic work.

5.2.3 First year grades not counting

It is interesting to note students suggested that, because first-year grades did not count towards the final degree classification some would pay less attention to studying and, instead, devote more time to their social life, particularly so for younger students. This clearly demonstrates how assessment impacts on students' study practices. As discussed in Chapter 2, assessment has a significant and dominant role in processes of learning in higher education (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Gibbs 1992, Ramsden 1992, Brown and Knight 1994, Gibbs 1994, Brown et al. 1997, Entwistle 2000, Brown 2001, Ramsden 2003, Race 2005, Gibbs 2006, Sainsbury and

Walker 2008, Brown 2015). The data suggests that, where students perceive the assessment does not 'count', they adopt a more instrumental approach, devoting less time and effort to studying. This aligns with research by Field (2012), Williams (2012) and Boud (2014), it demonstrates that, despite the wide range of factors found to influence students' learning, the reward of a grade which counts plays a key role in determining the priority given to studying. Students recognized that in the first-year they did not need to devote as much time and effort to studying, because they did not have to, nor did they feel it necessary to engage with feedback, because all they had to do was to pass, not to pass with a high grade. This concurs with research by Tomlinson (2014), cited in Chapter 2, who argued that the requirement to pass at 40% promoted a more casual attitude towards studying amongst some students.

The data from my study suggests that first-year students may be less likely to use a deep approach to learning, thereby inhibiting both their depth of understanding and development of effective study habits and skills that will be required in the later stages of their degree. Students' recognition that first-year grades do not count also explains why they are less likely to engage with feedback and why they may be less likely to engage with formative assessment (and any AfL practices) in the earlier stages of their degree.

5.2.4 Cultural influences

Cultural influences were a factor for one student who had spent her compulsory education years in Malaysia. Her conception of learning was that it involved memorization. This was therefore her preferred approach to learning. Yet, as she progressed through her degree, she had started to recognize that understanding was also necessary. Although this was only one student in the sample, it supports the research which identifies the predominant use of memorization by Asian students (see Kember 2000,

Watkins and Biggs 2005, Donald and Jackling 2007, Bilgin and Crowe 2008). My data identifies that Western students used memorization regularly too, concurring with the research discussed in section 2.2.6.5 (Beaty et al. 1990, Purdie et al. 1996, Dahlin and Watkins 1997, Kember 2000, 2001, Purdie and Hattie 2002, Entwistle and Peterson 2004, Watkins and Biggs 2005).

5.3 To what extent do students perceive a relationship between assessment tasks and a deep approach to learning that encourages understanding?

As discussed in section 5.2.2, students perceived that assessment tasks usually required a deep approach to learning, whilst at the same time, memorization was also often required. If, as is claimed by educators and mandated by the QAA (2012) and degree programme specifications, assessment requires students to demonstrate their understanding, this identifies a fundamental tension either in assessment practices, or students' perception of them. As discussed in Chapter 2, examinations are a form of assessment where students would be expected to use a surface approach to learning (Marton and Säljö 1976, Entwistle and Entwistle, A. 1991, Willis 1993, Enwistle and Entwistle, D. 2003). Yet students believed that memorization was often required for assessment tasks that did *not* involve an examination. This implies either that students failed to recognize the requirement to use a deep approach and demonstrate understanding in certain tasks, or, quite simply, that some assessment tasks did not actually require a demonstration of understanding. This is an interesting and somewhat perplexing finding. The existing research on approaches to learning argues that, in addition to having a general approach, it is students' perception of the assessment that determines their approach to a specific task (Van Rossum and Schenk 1984, Van Rossum et al. 1985, Struyven et al. 2002, Houghton 2004, Richardson 2005). University assessment tasks *should*, according to traditional expectations and official

instruction (see QAA 2012) require understanding, yet students did not perceive this to always be the case. This will necessarily have affected their study practices and approaches to learning.

The data indicates students did want to understand for themselves, the implication being that they would use a deep approach. Yet, conversely, at the same time were instrumental in their study practices, that is, they did not use a deep approach where they perceived one was not required. This is a tension and one that I acknowledge is problematic. The data does not provide a clear explanation about the contradiction between students' theory-in-use and their theory-in-action (Argyris and Schön 1974). One possible explanation is that because the approaches to learning theory was developed prior to the mass higher education system, the tension between instrumentalism and the desire to understand for themselves might be a product of a mass rather than elite system. Contemporary students have experienced thirteen years of compulsory education and assessment for qualifications that typically rewards memorization, and compliant responses to detailed coaching, rather than understanding. Other pressures may also encourage instrumentalism, such as: fees of almost £28,000 for a three-year degree, concerns about future employability, and a perception that they 'had' to go to university, and must achieve a good grade. Further research is required to explore these tensions in more depth.

5.3.1 Difficulty in demonstrating understanding

The data identifies that students sometimes experienced difficulty in demonstrating their understanding, because assessed work at university required them to use disciplinary terminology and 'academic writing'. This raises an important question about how they perceive the requirements of assessed work. If, as described by the students, understanding is taken to mean explaining something to someone else using your own form of words, it follows that, having to explain something using specific terminology

(which one respondent identified as '*using academic words'*) that one does not feel comfortable, or confident, in using, may result in a failure to explain adequately or in the depth expected by an assessor. This aligns with the position of Entwistle and Nisbet (2013) who maintain that educators may refer to understanding as an achievement target, whereas students may use it to refer to reaching a personal understanding. It seems that, from their comments, students believed they could articulate their personal understanding using their own form of words, yet were not always able to do so when required to use the appropriate terminology necessary for an academic achievement target. This suggests that academics need to be more aware of the ambiguity of the term 'understanding' in relation to assessment outcomes and the varied interpretations students have and, perhaps, that some students may need greater support in developing the confidence required to articulate their understanding using the appropriate linguistic terminology.

5.3.2 The role of interest and enjoyment

The data indicates that students' interest in, and enjoyment of, the topic studied were important and these influenced their approaches to learning, with a deep approach more likely where there is interest and/or enjoyment. However, the requirements of assessment were found to be more important and to override interest and enjoyment. Despite students' general intention to understand, and following Argyris and Schön's (1974) concept of 'espoused theory and 'theory-in-action', this espoused intention was not always evidenced in how assessment tasks were actually approached. Students indicated that although they wanted to understand, they may use a surface approach when interest and enjoyment were lacking. Their theory-in-action was thus different to their espoused general intention. It was determined both by the assessment requirements, and by how much interest and enjoyment they had in that topic, yet also, as will be discussed, by their current level of understanding.

The impact of assessment was not unexpected, and aligns with the existing body of research on approaches to learning, which maintains that students' perception of the requirements of assessment is the key determinant (Richardson 2005, Case and Marshall 2012, Howie and Bagnall 2012). More significant in my study was the finding that interest and enjoyment were key factors; this was not expected. The data suggests that where students recognized the need to demonstrate understanding ('fully') in order to achieve in an assessment task, they would use a deep approach. Those students who did not recognize that an assessment task required a demonstration of understanding, and those in the earlier stage of a degree who did not *yet* recognize this, were likely to use a surface approach. This concurs with research by Marton and Säljö (1976), Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Marton and Säljö (1984), Marton, Dall'Alba et al. (1993). However, the data in my study build on this body of research through the important dimension of interest and enjoyment. Where there is little, or no interest, there is a greater likelihood that students will use a surface approach.

An initial lack of interest in a topic may be explained by a lack of understanding of it. As discussed in Chapter 2, students use different approaches on different occasions based on their perception of the assessment requirements (Meyer and Parsons 1989, Meyer et al. 1990). The data in my study indicates that it is not only students' perception of the assessment but also their interest and enjoyment and, to an extent, their *current* level of understanding of a topic that determine their approach. Interest, enjoyment, and understanding are therefore likely to be inter-dependent, and may be implicit rather than conscious. As the data presented in section 4.4.1 suggests, when students commence studying a topic they may not initially understand something, and have minimal interest. As their understanding develops over time, then so will their interest, which reinforces their understanding, which leads to greater interest in and enjoyment of the topic, leading to further understanding, and greater interest and enjoyment.

Students indicated they lacked interest in some topics studied. For some, lack of interest applied to a substantial element of their degree, with one subject, Politics, identified as being particularly uninteresting. It is perhaps not unsurprising that students may lack interest in some aspects of their studies, yet I did not expect to find Politics would be identified as being of little interest, as its study is integral to the field of educational studies.

It was interesting to find that some students identified a lack of interest in much of what they studied and had to force themselves to be interested, to persevere, because they recognized they needed to demonstrate their understanding in order to achieve successfully in an assessment task. This further demonstrates the dominant role that assessment plays, and that it has a greater role in influencing students' approaches to learning than interest and enjoyment do. Where students had to force themselves to be interested, it is unlikely that the depth and breadth of understanding would be the same as for those topics in which they were interested and/or enjoyed studying.

Joughin (2009b) argued that there was no real detail on the ways in which assessment interacts with students' overall learning orientation. However, this is challenged by the data in my study, which revealed students' likely approach to learning under given conditions. This is presented in Table 9, overleaf.

Table 9. Students' approaches to learning: assuming a *general* intention of understanding

General learning intention of understanding	Approach
Student recognizes that the assessment does not count, with perception that assessment does not require understanding	Surface. Where there is interest and/or enjoyment a deep approach may be used, where there is no, or little interest and/or enjoyment a surface approach is likely
Student recognizes that the assessment counts, with perception that assessment requires 'fully understanding' and student has interest and/or enjoyment	Deep. Although surface may be used, particularly where there is a lack of time
Student recognizes that the assessment counts, with perception that assessment requires 'fully understanding' and student has no, or little, interest or enjoyment	Surface or deep. Interest may need to be forced. As understanding develops, then so may interest and enjoyment
Student recognizes that the assessment counts, with perception that assessment requires 'fully understanding' and student has an interest in or enjoyment, yet lacks initial understanding	Deep. Yet until further understanding is developed, the level and depth of understanding may be limited
Student recognizes that the assessment counts, with perception that assessment requires 'fully understanding' and student has no, or little, interest or enjoyment, and lacks initial understanding	Initially surface. As some understanding is developed, then interest and enjoyment may also be developed leading to a deep approach.

5.3.3 Memorization

As previously stated, although students perceived that assessment tasks usually required a deep approach, by no means was one always required. The data presented in section 4.3.4 identifies that memorization was frequently necessary, and students pointed to using it as an aid to support understanding. They recognized that the processes of memorization and understanding were different, yet did not perceive them to be disconnected. Their view aligns with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 (Beaty et al. 1990, Purdie et al. 1996, Dahlin and Watkins 1997, Kember 1997, Kember 2000, Lublin 2003, Watkins and Biggs 2005, Purdie and Hattie 2012), which argues that memorization can support understanding

and that the two processes can be complementary. As such, the finding was not unexpected and reinforces the positions of Hess and Azuma (1991), Richardson (1994) and Kember (2006) who have raised questions about the ways in which the approaches to learning theory presents surface and deep approaches as not only being distinct and dichotomous, but as having different values; with surface approaches labelled as being inferior. The data in my study underpins an argument that the theory's presentation of dichotomous approaches may be incorrect. They may well be distinct approaches, yet the data suggests they can work synergistically as complementary approaches, concurring with the research by Lublin (2003), Kember (2006), and Purdie and Hattie (2012).

5.3.4 The emotional impact of assessment feedback

The role of feedback in influencing students' emotions was found to be significant in the data. This aligns with the research by Higgins (2000), Higgins et al. (2001), Cramp et al. (2012), Jones et al. (2012), Lamond et al. (2012) and Torrance (2012). Feedback was particularly important for students' initial university assessments. This concurs with research by Shield (2015) who found that in the early stages of their degree, students' interpretations of feedback comments were linked to their individual beliefs about learner identity, which can be fragile. As discussed in Chapter 2, Cramp (2011) identified that students' first formal 'moment' of receiving feedback at university can put confidence and self-esteem at risk. This was clearly noted in the data presented in section 4.4.6.

The data identifies some serious negative emotional impacts of feedback, leading one student to seek counselling and consider leaving the course. However, it acted positively too, providing reassurance and an indication of the standard of achievement that a student was capable of. Today's higher education system prioritises the student experience, and it could easily be inferred from this that, particularly in the early stages of a degree, feedback

should be couched in such a way that it is regarded as being positive, constructively critical and encouraging. As the Higher Education Academy suggest, it should be "encouraging and supportive in tone" (HEA 2013 p.13). If feedback is taken to refer to the 'closing of a gap' (Ramparasad 1983, Joughin 2009c), then lecturers' feedback should be constructive and supportive for students to be able to utilise it in order to close any gaps and improve future work (Irons 2008, Gibbs 2010, QAA 2012). Yet, on the other hand, if the feedback is too uncritical, it may not convey the necessity to improve work, inferring that students may not take action to close any gap. As discussed in Chapter 2, Torrance (2012) has argued that sending the message feedback is about closing a gap may signify to students that, once the gap has been closed, no further learning is required, which may lead to a surface approach. It is therefore important to ensure feedback is used to help students build upon and develop skills and encourage the use of a deep approach.

The emotional upset from assessment feedback experienced by students may be explained by higher education's blurring of formative and summative assessment (Yorke 2003, Pokorney and Pickford 2010). Many students, particularly in the initial stages of their degree, and having recently left school or college, have experienced AfL pedagogy in the compulsory education sector, which emphasises formative feedback provided separately from a summative grade (Wiliam 2011, Harlen 2012a, 2012b). Students in my study explained that, prior to university they had been used to receiving extensive feedback on numerous drafts, and consequently, submitting work for summative assessment knowing it would pass. Whereas at university, they had only been able to receive feedback once on a draft of, or plan for, an assignment. As such, they had little, or no, experience of receiving feedback provided alongside a summative grade, concurring with research by Fletcher et al. (2006), and Carless et al. (2006, and consequently, did not know what to expect. Therefore, the grade and feedback received may be a surprise, or shock

and, where it did not match their expectations, would be perceived as being negative. As discussed in Chapter 2, the dual function of university assessment, providing a grade at the same time as formative feedback (Yorke 2003, Carless 2017) is a source of tension. Students' negative emotional reaction to feedback is one way in which this tension is manifested.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a university lecturer cannot know whether the grade and feedback comments provided will lead to a positive or negative reaction, either for a student's first assessment task or later ones, nor whether they will act as a motivator or de-motivator. Torrance's argument that providing and receiving feedback is a "highly demanding emotional process, impacting on learner's notions of identity and self-worth…particularly so if it is a low grade" (Torrance 2012 p.334) is borne out by the data presented in section 4.4.6. Student 13's comment that initial feedback and grades lower than expected had left her "*devastated*" and experiencing a severe drop in her perception of her ability is a particularly good example of this.

Feedback should help students develop motivation, confidence and self-esteem (HEA 2013), yet however carefully it is articulated, lecturers are largely unable to take account of a student's self-perception of either their own relative ability, or, of the amount of effort they believe they have put into an assessment task. The same grade and feedback that may be interpreted as positive and motivate one student may be interpreted as negative, and de-motivate another. Lecturers' feedback cannot take this into account, particularly so where it is anonymised (as is frequently practised). Yet the finding suggests that feedback could sometimes be couched more sensitively, and greater use of feedback which has a formative function, provided separately to a summative grade, could help students to be better prepared for the feedback they later receive with a summative grade.

Although AfL practices have increasingly influenced assessment in higher education (Carless 2017), existing practices of providing a summative grade at the same time as feedback intended to be formative (Pokorny and Pickford 2010) mean that students receive formal written feedback alongside a summative grade, and the students in my study indicated they had experienced this. AfL practices, particularly as defined by Klenowski (2009), assert that they are everyday practices and therefore, because they involve regular formative and developmental feedback, should help students to be better prepared for any feedback they later receive alongside a summative grade. AfL practices should assist students to develop a better understanding of the requirements of assessed work and subsequent feedback comments. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 2, despite AfL being a confused practice (Yorke 2003, Black 2006, Bennett 2011, McDowell et al. 2011) it is increasingly influencing assessment practices in higher education, although none of the students in my study described experiencing practices that would align with an AfL pedagogy as articulated by Swaffield (2011). Tee and Ahmed (2014) and Carless (2017) note the increasing use of AfL in higher education, thus arguably over time, as AfL pedagogy increasingly permeates higher education practices, this should better prepare students for feedback provided alongside a summative grade.

5.3.5 Perceived lack of fairness in assessed group work presentations

Students identified the phenomenon of "social loafing" (Latane et al. 1979 p.822), that is, some peers did not contribute equally in group work. The finding was not unexpected as the practice of awarding the same grade to all members of a group is known to be problematical (Carless, 2015). It provides further evidence of instrumentalism, suggesting that, although students may have a general intention to understand, where they perceive assessment requirements to not require a demonstration of personal understanding, some may simply let others do the majority of the work.

This reinforces the position that assessment plays a dominant role in determining approaches to learning, concurring with the foundational research by Marton and Säljö (1976), Laurillard (1979), and Marton and Svensson (1979).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the research presented in this thesis involved interviewing learners who self-selected to participate. As volunteers, they were likely to have been the more dedicated students and, as such, their negative feelings towards the award of the same grade to all members of a group may have been a very specific view. I suggest that, had other, perhaps less conscientious, students been interviewed, their comments may well have been very different, and reflected satisfaction with a group mark for presentations which allowed them to achieve with less effort.

5.3.6 Higher achieving students

The self-identified high achieving students recognized the importance of including their own views within their work in order to help demonstrate understanding. This indicates they perceived a clear relationship between assessment and a deep approach to learning. It also points to the continued existence of a form of hidden curriculum (Snyder 1971, Joughin 2009b, 2010, McDowell et al. 2013) in that self-identified high-achieving students recognized they were better able to demonstrate understanding through the inclusion of their own views and perspective, and this was expected by lecturers, whereas other students did not seem to recognize this aspect. The implication is, despite the many changes enacted in university assessment practices since Snyder's (1971) work, and the much greater clarity provided to contemporary students about assessment, a mismatch between what students are actually assessed on and what some perceive they are assessed on still exists.

5.4 What changes take place in students' approaches to learning and studying between the first and third-year?

5.4.1 Students' experiences prior to university

As the data presented in section 4.2 suggests, students entering higher education from school or college seem to have experienced more feedback in the form of coaching and correction, or ''teaching to the test'' (Popham 2001 p.16). This concurs with research in the vocational education sector by Ecclestone (2007, 2010) and Ainley and Allen (2012) and with Torrance's (2007) argument that overly narrow assessment criteria used in A-levels have led to coaching and surface approaches to learning. Because of the AfL practices used in compulsory education, students entering university for the first time may have been used to receiving extensive guidance and support prior to submitting work, and to receiving regular and detailed feedback (Beaumont et al. 2011, Alderson et al. 2014), in the form of a correction of their errors, a number of times, until the work provided the correct answers. It seems that, as a result of such practices, students may perceive the role of feedback in helping them bridge gaps in their knowledge to be that of a process of 'correcting mistakes'. From their experiences of AfL pedagogy, and despite having a general intention to understand, students enter university having learnt that success in assessment tasks requires demonstrating they know the correct answer(s), rather than demonstrating their understanding, and the purpose of feedback is to provide these corrections. This perception aligns with Torrance's (2012) argument that defining feedback as serving to bridge a gap sends out a message that the transfer of curriculum knowledge (and the memorisation and replication of it) are of greatest importance, and his argument that learner's existing social knowledge and expectations mediate their experience of assessment. The finding also implies that despite students' comprehension of what understanding involves, and seemingly despite AfL practices in compulsory education, they seem to have experienced a more behaviourist, transmission-based pedagogy, prior to university. It

follows that, on entering higher education their perceptions about what learning involves, what is required for success in assessment tasks, and the purpose of feedback, will need to change. This concurs with Squires' (1990) argument, discussed in Chapter 2, that students may need to ''unlearn'' what they have previously learnt in school and at college.

Students indicated they had been 'spoon fed' during compulsory education and that assessment had sometimes involved copying material from a textbook, or using Google to search for the correct answer. This suggests that, prior to university, some students may have used neither a surface nor a deep approach to learning. They had not been required to demonstrate understanding, nor had they needed to memorize; they had just been expected to replicate knowledge. This concurs with Torrance's (2007) argument that compliance with assessment criteria has replaced genuine learning. It would imply that, on entering university, students' expectations of what is required may be unrealistic. It supports the research by Cramp (2011) and Henri (2016), which indicates that some students experience a sharp contrast in the differences between university and their previous educational experiences. It also leads to questions about how comprehensive the approaches to learning model is. As discussed in Chapter 2, Beattie et al. (1997) have argued that it is a simple model, whilst others have questioned its simplistic dichotomisation of memorization and understanding. It would seem from the research presented in this thesis that, pre-university, these students had experienced, and perhaps been inculcated into using, a highly strategic form of assessment requiring neither memorization, nor understanding; one that is not catered for in the theory of approaches to learning. I would, however, argue that this is not an approach to learning, nor even necessarily one to studying, but purely an approach to assessment, concurring with Sadler's (2007) argument that assessment practices frequently "focus on methods of getting students through – often at the expense of what it really means to learn" (Sadler 2007 p.387).

5.4.2 Students' use of feedback

The data reveals that students did not always engage with feedback, thereby concurring with research by O'Donovan et al. (2012), Carless et al. (2011), and Hounsell (2003, 2007). One explanation for lack of engagement in the first-year stage is that students noted their grades did not count towards the final degree classification. They recognized there was no need to engage, because improving their work made no difference, at that stage, to their degree classification. As they progressed students started to engage with feedback to a greater extent; this can be explained by the fact that grades started to count. As discussed in section 5.3 there is a tension, although students expressed a desire to personally understand, at the same time they adopted an instrumental approach, in this case to their use of feedback. The data does not provide a clear explanation about this contradiction between students' theory-in-use and their theory-in-action (Argyris and Schön 1974).

In contrast to the work of Higgins (2000), Hartley et al. (2001), Glover and Brown (2006), Walker (2009), Scoles et al. (2012) and O'Donovan et al. (2015), as discussed in chapter 2, which argues that students do not understand assessment feedback, the data presented in section 4.6.3.1 identifies only one student who indicated this. Yet the finding that students may not always recognize that feedback provided about one piece of work should be used to inform future work aligns with existing literature identifying some regard feedback as being specific to an assignment (see Higgins et al. 2001, Carless 2006, Crisp 2007, Duncan, 2007, Murtgah and Baker 2009, Bloxham and Cambell 2010, Price et al. 2011, Doan 2013).

Although the data identifies that students were increasingly likely to *read* feedback as they progressed from the first to third-year, there were not always commensurate changes in how they *acted* on it. As discussed in Chapter 2, the research base only demonstrates that assessment feedback

can improve learning, not that it necessarily *will* (Hounsell 2003, Black and Wiliam 2009, Joughin 2010, Wiliam 2011, Torrance 2012, Molloy, Borrell-Carrio et al. 2013). Feedback can only be effective when the learner understands it *and* is willing and able to act on it. To have an impact on learning feedback has to be actively utilised (Yorke 2003, Draper, 2009, Wiliam 2011, Evans 2013). Yet, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is evidence that some students do not do this (Higgins 2000, Higgins et al. 2001, Weaver 2006, O'Donovan et al. 2015). By definition, feedback involves "having students take action to bridge the gaps" (Joughin 2009c p.2) yet, as has been demonstrated in this study, some students do not take action to bridge such gaps. This implies that what is provided is, by definition, not feedback, but rather, as Sadler argues, merely "dangling data" (Sadler 1989 p.121). This supports the assertions by Wiliam that "feedback is useless if it is not acted upon" (Wiliam 2011 p.12) and O'Donovan et al. that "much feedback practice does not…influence future student learning" (O'Donovan et al. 2015 p.1).

An explanation provided by students both for not engaging with feedback, and being unable to produce work of a standard they would like to, was that they felt they did not have sufficient time available. As the data presented in section 4.4.4 demonstrates, many had part-time jobs or caring responsibilities that necessarily limited their available time. One exception was student 18, a mature student with many family commitments, who explained that she always made time to engage with feedback. It may therefore be the case that some students who cite 'lack of time' as a reason for not engaging with aspects of study or feedback, use this as an excuse, perhaps because they do not see it as being a priority in their busy lives. It is also likely that older students have already developed better, or more effective, personal time management skills than younger ones (Truman and Hartley 1996).

The finding that students indicated they sometimes were unable to devote

as much time as they wanted to their studies or to engage fully with assessment feedback was not unexpected. Students' increasing lack of time was to an extent predicted. In 2003, three years after means-tested student fees were introduced, Knight and Yorke suggested the more that students were under pressure to provide for themselves financially, the greater the likelihood they will be strategic or instrumental in how they used their time, arguing that "the pressure on students might tip the balance a little towards surface learning at the expense of deep learning" (Knight and Yorke 2003 p.170). Since then, student fees have risen from £3000 per annum to over £9000. The findings in the research presented in this thesis do not indicate education students typically use a surface approach, yet that they *are* instrumental in their study practices. Where they recognize that grades do not count (in the first-year) less priority is given, and less time devoted, to studying, and, where they recognize that understanding is not required (when assessed by examinations), or perceive it is not required, a surface approach is adopted.

Heffernan's concept of "wilful blindness" (2011 p.1), the conscious avoidance of something that we are aware of, but decide to ignore in order to avoid having to take action about because it is easier to ignore it than to address, also explains some students' lack of engagement with assessment feedback and with improving their study practices, particularly in the first-year. It is interesting to note that some students recognized they should engage with feedback, yet acknowledged they did not. As the data in Table 7 shows, over half of the first-years identified they read feedback, but did not act on it. This provides further evidence of the importance of assessment, student instrumentalism, and a grade that 'counts' impacting on their approaches to learning and study practices.

One reason provided by students for not utilising assessment feedback was they perceived that different lecturers had different requirements, and making changes to future work to meet the requirements of one lecturer

may not meet the requirements of another. This is an interesting perspective. HEA guidelines (2013) and good practice suggest that feedback should have a forward-facing focus and develop the abilities of students to improve their future work. Yet if students do not use it for this purpose, it does not function formatively (Hounsell 2003, Crisp 2007, Draper 2009, Black and Wiliam 2009, Wiliam 2011). Without further research, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion from this finding, other than that some students saw feedback as being too 'assignment specific', concurring with the research by Duncan (2007). As discussed in Chapter 2, research by Hounsell (1987), Weaver (2006), Bloxham and Cambell (2010), Price et al. (2011), Doan (2013), and Jonsson (2013) suggests, students may need guidance, and support, on how they should interpret and utilise feedback. The data from this research suggests that their assertions are valid.

5.4.3 Uncertainty about the requirements of assessment

The finding that students experienced uncertainty about both the general and specific requirements of assessed work was not unexpected and aligns with the research by Bloxham and Campbell (2010) who found that students identified problems with tutors' expectations of their writing. The data suggests, not surprisingly, that general uncertainty reduces over time, as students develop confidence, independence, settle in to university-life, and start to engage with feedback. Yet uncertainty about *specific* assessment tasks may remain.

As discussed in Chapter 1, many changes have been enacted in higher education assessment practices since the original research on approaches to learning was conducted. It is a QAA requirement that students are provided with assessment guidelines, clearly articulated prescribed learning outcomes, and clear assessment grading criteria QAA (2001, 2012, 2013). These, along with the increased use of formative assessment (Boud and Falchikov 2006, Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet 2007, Beamont et al. 2011,

Harlen 2012, Wilson 2012) *should* mean that contemporary students would not be expected to experience confusion, or uncertainty. Yet every one of the students interviewed indicated that at some point during their degree they had experienced this. Although uncertainty generally diminished as they progressed, this finding does raise concerns. If students, particularly in the earlier stages of their studies, are not clear about what is required, then it follows that they will be less likely to produce work which is of the appropriate standard or meets the learning outcomes. My research demonstrates that such uncertainty leads to students experiencing anxiety and a delay in developing confidence in their ability to produce work of the required standard.

One student mentioned that her first-year boyfriend studying in a different discipline was unaware of many of the requirements of university work which she had also not known about as a first-year. This may indicate that uncertainty is not confined to students studying in the field of education. Although this information was provided by only one student, it does imply that such concerns may be more widespread, perhaps affecting many first-year students. Although there is a growing body of research on students' first-year experience of transition to university and transition pedagogy (see Scanlon et al. 2007, Palmer et al. 2009, Johnston 2010, Nelson et al. 2012, Baik et al. 2017) that broadly supports this assertion, without further research it is not possible to draw any clear conclusion as to how widespread this may be.

5.4.4 Learning outcomes

As discussed in Chapter 2, the achievement of prescribed learning outcomes is a formal requirement of higher education qualifications in Britain, with both Sadler (2007) and Torrance (2007) arguing they are often too frequently over-specified and that the language they are written in does not always help learning. In addition, Hussey and Smith (2002, 2003,

2008) maintain that however carefully they are articulated, pre-specified learning outcomes may not convey to learners what is expected of them. They require interpretation, and there may always be an element of uncertainty. Four students in the sample articulated difficulties in interpreting what learning outcomes required of them. The implication is that, for students such as these, they may not be able to correctly identify what they are required to do, know, or demonstrate in their assessed work. This problem may particularly apply during the first-year when they are less likely to engage with learning outcomes, yet for some, difficulty in interpreting the requirements may apply throughout their degree. Questions about how learning outcomes are used naturally follow, in line with the positions of Sadler (2007) and Torrance (2007) who have, as discussed in Chapter 2, argued that they are often over-specified and may constrain learning.

The data also identifies that one student, who adopted a more strategic approach to studying, had never engaged with learning outcomes. Although this may be only one student from the sample, she was a self-identified high-achiever. An ability to achieve highly without ever referring to the learning outcomes against which she was assessed raises a question about their use, and validity. There is an assumption within much of the literature on assessment, and in QAA guidelines, that students use learning outcomes, yet this may not always be the case. It is not possible to draw any firm conclusion from one student's response, yet at the very least it points to a need for further research.

6.0 CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the research findings, presents the contribution made to new knowledge, draws out implications for changes in practice, considers limitations of this research and identifies potential areas for future research. The chapter ends with an exploration of the researcher's personal journey during the research process.

The thesis set out to illuminate the question 'In the context of English higher education what insights can be drawn about the approaches to learning, assessment and formally received assessment feedback of contemporary undergraduate students at two contrasting universities?'. The majority of research on approaches to learning was conducted prior to the development of today's mass higher education system. The research presented aimed to fill a gap in knowledge about the approaches to learning and the factors influencing this, with a specific group of participants, contemporary undergraduate students studying in the field of education.

6.2 Summary of findings

The thesis argues that assessment plays a dominant role in students' approaches to learning and that interest and enjoyment are crucial influences. Furthermore, students use selected authoritative adjectives 'just' and full(y)/real(ly)/proper(ly)/ genuine(ly)/complete(ly) to indicate the level and depth of understanding and, these, in turn, relate to their approach. Although being unaware of the terms 'surface' and 'deep' approaches students recognized differences between the two processes. They used both memorization and understanding, and the simplistic

dichotomisation of these that permeates the approaches to learning theory has therefore been further called into question. Students expressed a desire to personally understand and had this as their general espoused intention, yet at the same time were instrumental in their approaches to learning and to their study practices. Where they perceived that the assessment did not require a demonstration of understanding, and in the first-year, when the assessment did not count, adopted a more instrumental approach. Where there was a lack of interest and enjoyment students were less likely to use a deep approach. Yet, when they lacked interest, but recognized that assessment required a demonstration of understanding, they often would persevere and force themselves to be interested.

Students perceived that, with the exception of examinations, assessment usually, but by no means always, required a demonstration of understanding, that is, the use of a deep approach. However, there were some who did not seem to realise assessment required them to do this. There was a perception that other students, despite not ('fully) understanding, were able to achieve success in assessment tasks. These findings therefore call into question whether assessment practices in the field of education necessarily always require a demonstration of understanding. It would also imply that students are receiving contradictory messages about the need to demonstrate understanding in assessed work.

The study also identified that some students did not always feel able to demonstrate understanding in their written work, because the requirement to use disciplinary terminology and 'academic words' prevented them being able to do so. In addition, self-identified higher achieving students recognized they were better able to demonstrate understanding by incorporating their own views and experiences in their work.

In the earlier stages of their degree, students experienced uncertainty about the requirements of assessed work. As they progressed they identified improved awareness of the these and, typically, were more likely to engage with assessment feedback, to use learning outcomes, and to spend less time socialising and more time studying. These changes may be explained by their grades increasingly counting towards the final degree classification, providing clear evidence of instrumentalism. Yet by no means did all final year students engage with assessment feedback, nor utilise it in line with its intended purpose. An explanation was that they did not see how feedback about one assignment could be used to inform a future one, along with a perception that different lecturers had different requirements for, and expectations of, assessed work.

Feedback was found to have had a negative emotional impact on students, particularly so in the early stages of their degree. For some this had the effect of demotivating them and preventing the development of confidence in their ability to produce assessed work of the standard required. Yet feedback had also acted positively. It therefore had both motivating and demotivating effects, and this related to the student's perception of their ability and expectations of the grade and feedback they received.

Students perceived that, where the assessment involved a group presentation, the award of the same grade to each group member was unfair.

6.3 Contribution to knowledge

The thesis highlights five areas of contribution to research into higher education pedagogy and assessment.

Firstly it has been demonstrated, as the theory of approaches to learning argues (Marton and Säljö 1976, Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, Marton et al. 1993, Marton and Säljö 1984, Entwistle 1997), that assessment is important for contemporary learners, and is still the dominant factor in determining students' approaches to learning. This contrasts with Joughin's (2009b) argument that assessment is less important for today's students than many would believe.

Secondly, contrasting with the suggestion by Haggis (2003, 2004) that understanding may not be important for contemporary learners, it has been shown that personal understanding is important and students have this as their espoused general approach to learning.

Thirdly, the role of interest and enjoyment were found to be crucial factors in students' approaches to learning. Simply put, without interest and enjoyment students are less likely to use a deep approach.

Fourthly, new insight has been provided about students' use of the term 'understanding' and the authoritative adjectives used to preface it that relate to their approaches to learning.

Fifthly, students were found to use both memorisation and understanding in their study practices. This concurs with previous research by Kember (2000, 2001), Purdie and Hattie (2002), Lublin (2003), Entwistle and Peterson (2004) and Watkins and Biggs (2005). It means that the dichotomisation of memorisation and understanding in the theory of approaches to learning has been further called into question. The existence of one highly instrumental student lends credence to the argument for a strategic approach to studying.

6.4 Implications for practice

With qualitative research, it is important to be mindful that it is not necessarily generalizable, although, given certain conditions, as discussed in Chapter 3, some generalisability and relatability may be possible. The research allowed the opportunity to gain in-depth views from a particular group of people who have immediate experience of the subject matter, in this case, the students. The research presented in this thesis set out to expand and illuminate theory, not to prove it, nor to produce definitive findings that may be applied throughout higher education. However, it is possible to delineate some areas that might be considered good pedagogic and assessment practice, thereby suggesting potential implications both for individual practitioners and for institutions. In addition, although the research was restricted to students studying in the field of educational studies, there may be implications for other disciplines. Further research will be required to ascertain how generalizable these findings are. The main implications for practice are presented here, along with a more detailed discussion of the implications for assessment feedback practices.

6.4.1 Encouraging a deep approach to learning

The findings suggest that if universities wish to encourage students to use a deep approach then they should be encouraged to study topics in which they are interested, and may enjoy. There are three implications that follow from this.

Firstly, prior to enrolling at university more time could be devoted to providing information to applicants about the topics they will study. If students find that a substantial amount of their degree comprises material in which they lack interest then it is perhaps not surprising they will be more likely to use a surface approach, or may become disengaged from

studying. If universities wish to maximise student achievement, and retention, greater attention could be given to ensuring students apply for the programme that is of greatest interest to them and which they may enjoy studying more. This implies that universities may need to reconsider their recruitment strategies and the information which is provided to applicants. I do, though, acknowledge that in the current mass higher education system, universities frequently compete with each other to recruit students. It is therefore perhaps unlikely they will wish to deter applicants with the appropriate entrance grades, despite the degree having content that may not particularly interest them. Nevertheless, I would argue that more could be done to ensure students apply for, and are accepted onto, the degree programme which is of greatest interest to them.

Secondly, students could be allowed greater choice in deciding the topics they study for a module. Although there will necessarily be disciplinary requirements to study specific content, pre-specified prescribed learning outcomes could be used, as originally intended, to take emphasis away from prescribed content, allowing students to negotiate both content and method of assessment (Otter, 1992). If written in such a way enabling students to construct assignments that follow their areas of interest, it would allow them to develop a greater personal connection with, interest in, and enjoyment of, what they are studying, and help them to better understand the requirements of specific learning outcomes. This in turn would support the conditions that allow and encourage a deep approach to learning. I acknowledge that such practice already takes place in the final-year dissertation stage of a degree, yet would argue it should take place throughout a degree, and for a majority of modules studied.

Thirdly, lecturers may capitalise on this by demonstrating their own interest and enjoyment through their teaching, thereby encouraging student interest and enjoyment of the topic under study. My study

suggests that students do want to personally understand what they learn, and lecturers should therefore always aim to encourage interest, and to help students develop enjoyment. This, combined with providing students with clearer guidance about the need to demonstrate 'full' understanding, would encourage a deep approach to learning.

6.4.2 Deconstructing understanding

The findings suggest that students have different interpretations of the term 'understanding'. The implication is that further explanation should be provided, particularly in the first-year, about how the term is deployed in higher education. Ambiguity associated with understanding should be examined in more depth with students and greater clarification provided, so they become more conversant with what is required of them. Alongside this, clear explanation could be given about the need to demonstrate understanding ('fully') in assessed work. For example, a taught session could explore the meaning of understanding and the implications for the work they produce. In addition, this would enhance students' ability to deconstruct learning outcomes and allow them to identify that there is a necessity to 'fully' understand. This would contribute to reducing the uncertainty and anxiety that students experienced with assessed work.

6.4.3 Reducing student uncertainty about assessed work

The finding that some students were uncertain about the requirements of university level work raises a question about how this uncertainty may be reduced. I acknowledge that contemporary students are often required to complete 'study skills' modules and universities provide considerable support for developing such skills. Yet the data implies that time should be taken by lecturers to more formally explain some of the taken-for-granted expectations about assessed work which students, particularly in the initial stages of their degree, may not be aware of. The data suggests that a

better appreciation of what is expected may reduce students' uncertainty and this in turn would reduce anxiety and help develop their confidence. For example, explanation of the term 'third person', clearer explanation of the requirement to present work that follows orthographical and referencing conventions, and the need to demonstrate understanding ('fully') and, importantly, to engage with assessment feedback throughout a degree and use it for the purpose which it is intended - to improve learning. Academic conventions need to be learnt, and much may depend on the lecturer's approach, which will encourage or discourage students' feelings of being able to cope and to 'fully' understand what is required of them. I recognize that such practices already take place, often informally, yet formalising the process may help initiate students into a community of academic practice, and in this way, should also help improve the student experience which, longer term, may have a positive impact on NSS feedback.

6.4.4 University staff development

Because approaches to learning is claimed to be a frequently used theory, particularly in university staff development programmes, those staff in the early stages of their career may need to be made aware that students may have differing interpretations of what understanding is, and involves, to those of the people who teach and assess them. The implication is that it may therefore be important for the training and staff development programmes provided by universities, including Cert. Ed. courses for new lecturers, to include information about this, so that lecturers are aware and can take account of this both when designing assessments and explaining assessment requirements to students. It is also important, as previously mentioned, for lecturers to appreciate that some students may not recognize the requirement to use a deep approach to learning, therefore they may need to explain to them about the need to demonstrate 'fully'

understanding This information could easily be incorporated into lecturer staff development courses.

The findings about the emotional effects of assessment feedback imply that such programmes should also provide lecturers with information about the possible impact of feedback and its role in motivating or demotivating students. Whilst lecturers do need to ensure that feedback is realistic and does not provide students with false impressions about the standard and quality of their assessed work, it is incumbent upon them to ensure that feedback may not be perceived as so critical that may cause students to feel seriously demotivated, and set back the development of confidence, particularly so for first-year students. I do acknowledge that, for the reasons discussed in section 2.3.12, this may be difficult to enact.

6.4.5 Encouraging student engagement with assessment feedback

The findings identified that students typically do engage with feedback in the later stages of their degree, more so than in the early stages when grades do not count. This reinforces the argument that assessment is a dominant factor in students' learning. As grades count more in the later stages, students necessarily will start to engage more with feedback. However, the findings also noted that not all students did engage with feedback, and some failed to recognize that feedback on one assessment should be used to inform subsequent work. These findings are by no means new, or unique. They have been illuminated by numerous research projects, as cited in Chapter 2, yet these issues still exist. As mentioned previously, in the NSS feedback is the area which, nationally, consistently receives the lowest student scores. It would therefore seem that universities may still need to do more to improve students' engagement with feedback.

Questions have been raised in this thesis about the role of feedback in contributing towards improving student learning. Feedback has to be utilised by students for it to have an impact on learning; by definition it involves them taking action to bridge gaps (Ramparasad 1983, Joughin 2009c). Yet as has been demonstrated, some do not take such action. The implication is that greater attention and clearer explanation may need to be provided to students about the need to actively engage with feedback, and to ensure they know how to do this. This is not by any means a new implication for practice, and there are national initiatives to improve this, such as the Higher Education Academy's 2015 'Developing Engagement with Feedback' toolkit for lecturers. Yet it does confirm and reinforce the requirement to repeat the message about how important this is. As Jackson and Marks recently argued:

> It is not enough to simply provide good feedback – we must also ensure that students recognize the importance of using feedback and learn to become effective practitioners of the requisite skills in using feedback to improve their work (Jackson and Marks 2016 p.545).

The finding that contemporary students seem to enter higher education with a view that the purpose of assessment feedback is to correct their mistakes, implies this conception needs to change. The implication for practice is time should be spent explaining to students that, in higher education, the purpose of feedback is not merely to correct their mistakes and point out errors, but to offer developmental comments which they should act upon to improve their work and make changes in their academic practice. Linked with this, students' perceptions, particularly in the early stages of a degree, of what learning at university involves may need to change from a more behaviourist one to a recognition that constructivist and co-constructivist approaches are more typically used in higher education.

In addition, time should be taken to ensure that students clearly recognize that feedback should not be seen as being assignment-specific. In this way

lecturers could further encourage students to recognize that they are individually responsible for utilising the feedback they are provided with. I recognize that this practice may already take place, yet it may well need further attention.

Alongside this, the finding that assessment feedback had a negative emotional impact on some students identifies an area of concern and requires that lecturers understand the potential impact it can have on learners, particularly so for the very first formal feedback university students receive. If those in the early stages of their degree receive feedback they perceive as being negative, this may lead them to question their ability and perhaps presence on the course. This is something that institutions may need to take account of in order to ensure first-year retention and to improve the student experience. Constructive feedback is essential to build confidence and point to potential change and development (Irons 2008, Gibbs 2010). Academic writing is a skill which has to be learnt, with conventions that need to be understood and embraced. The data supports Cramp's (2011) suggestion that college courses and school did not prepare students fully for their first formal moments of contact with feedback at university. This implies that this should be taken into account, and perhaps, initial feedback should be sensitively couched. Lecturers who offer constructive and encouraging feedback will enhance retention and attainment by encouraging students to see past their existing perceptions and understandings about the requirements of assessed work. There is also an implication that greater use could be made of in-class formative feedback, in line with AfL practices, so that students become more used to receiving feedback on a regular basis. In this way they would be better prepared for the feedback they will later receive at the same time as a summative grade.

Given the specific concern that students raised about the unfairness of assessed presentations, it is suggested this practice be reviewed and more

equitable methods are implemented. It is recognized within the literature that the practice of awarding the same grade is problematic, with the concerns, and some potential solutions, discussed by Carless (2015). The findings from this thesis suggest that fairer methods such as peer evaluation of the individual's contribution of the work could be implemented. However, I acknowledge that this may not be a simple solution and that implementing change can lead to further problems. Nevertheless, it is an important area for lecturers to consider.

6.5 Potential areas for future research

There are some important areas that, I would argue, warrant further research. Firstly, the role of interest and enjoyment as factors in students' approaches to learning, specifically whether they are one factor, or two separate ones, and what helps or hinders their development. Secondly, students' use of the term 'understanding', particularly in relation to different disciplines and of how students from different backgrounds may interpret the meaning of the term. Thirdly, the interconnection between feedback and emotional response, particularly in relation to students who may not have been adequately prepared by college and school for differences in higher education practice. Alongside this, students' conceptions, on entering university, of the purpose and function of feedback require further illumination. Fourthly the finding that students often were uncertain about the requirements of assessment and perceived it did not always require understanding, and that some who did not 'fully' understand were able to produce work which achieved good grades, is worthy of further investigation, particularly so when understanding is claimed to be a requirement of higher education assessment.

6.6 Limitations of the research

The research presented in this thesis has a number of limitations and, as such, generalizability is limited. A sample of 20 students studying in the field of education at two institutions were considered, with interviews the sole source of data. The data was collected in 2015, and as such is a snapshot, representing students' views at that point in time.

It is possible that some participants' answers may have been influenced by my role as a university lecturer, and five of the 20 students were either directly taught, or supervised by myself. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 3, I believe that students were honest and open during interviews. Students self-selected to participate in the research and so the views expressed are likely to be those of the more dedicated or interested. They are not representative of all learners studying in the field of education, either at the two institutions or nationally. Yet evaluating the data in the light of relevant literature can improve the generalisability and relatability of insights from a small in-depth sample (Bassey 1981).

6.7 The researcher's personal journey

At the commencement of this research my initial area of interest was considerably broader than what is presented in this thesis. I was interested in students' development of independence and autonomy as well as their approaches to learning. Although these areas were tangential to this thesis, as a direct result of literature that I engaged with, I was able to produce my first published paper for a peer-refereed journal (Holmes 2018). This has enabled me to be included in my institution's next REF submission. In addition, I have recently (April 2018) submitted a paper 'The role of interest and enjoyment in determining students' approach to learning' for peer-reviewed publication, and am part-way through writing a paper about students' use of the term 'understanding'. I plan to engage in further

research about interest, enjoyment and understanding, and approaches to learning, and the role of assessment in students' study practices.

In terms of students' approaches to learning and assessment I commenced my research journey having experienced problems with, and feeling concern about, students whom I perceived did not seem particularly interested in learning, were seemingly uninterested in understanding for themselves, and who were heavily focused on the aspects of their course that were summatively assessed. Having completed this research I have been pleasantly surprised that the majority of students I interviewed did wish to understand what they were studying and that, for some, there was a healthy scepticism about learning and assessment tasks which did not require understanding. Yet I was also somewhat dismayed by the views expressed by the one very instrumental learner who was not interested in understanding, or in learning, but solely in achieving highly, and to do so had fabricated one piece of work. Her planned future career was as a teacher and then head-teacher. As a lecturer in the field of education I was quite disheartened by this.

The seemingly contradictory findings that students identified interest and enjoyment as key factors in their approach to learning and expressed a desire to understand, yet at the same time were instrumental in their approach, has prompted extensive reflection. It has led me to recognize it is perhaps to be expected that those students lacking interest and/or enjoyment may not always wish to engage in a deep approach to learning and may focus on only doing the work necessary to complete the summative assessment successfully. It is perhaps not surprising that they may question the relevance of in-class formative assessment tasks and ask *"Why are we doing this if we are not being assessed on it?".* This quote contributed to the desire to research in this area, and the findings have identified that despite students' general intention to understand, and perceiving rote-learning to be a waste of time, they focus their attention on

the summative assessment for a grade that counts and base their approaches to learning on this.

Finally, finding that contemporary students seem to regard going to university as an obligation rather than a choice, believing it was something they had to do, as a stepping-stone to future employment, is somewhat saddening, and perhaps raises a wider question about the merits of whether mass participation in higher education is necessarily always beneficial. It is therefore unsurprising that not all students are interested in everything they study, and may be less inclined to use a deep approach to learning. Contrasting that with my own experiences as an undergraduate in the mid-1980s, prior to today's mass education system, I made a conscious decision as an 18-year old to continue my education. It was not something that I felt obliged to do, it was not something I believed 'had' to be done. Reflecting on contemporary students and trying to put myself in the position of a university applicant, I can accept the labour market has changed and that, were I in their position, I may not feel going to university was something I would have a choice about, but could be something I may feel obliged to do. Bearing this in mind as a lecturer, I have now begun to understand why some students lack enthusiasm, seem uninterested and focus more, or predominantly, on that which is summatively assessed. I can now appreciate why some students are not particularly interested, and that part of my role is to encourage and inspire them as best I can, to enthuse them with my own interest and enjoyment of the topic being studied, and to make the demands of assessment as clear as possible.

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8.0 APPENDICES

Appendix 8.1 Interview protocol

	QUESTIONS FOR ALL STUDENTS Each prefaced where appropriate with lead-in. Not necessarily asked in this order/sequence. Tell me more/about this/how used as required to probe for detail/depth.
	What does learning mean to you? What does it involve for you? Do you make any distinction between formal and informal learning? Is your approach different in the different contexts? Tell me about how you specifically approach an assessment task? Talk me through what do you do and how you go about it.
	How would you, or other people, describe you academic attainment prior to and in university.
	What particularly motivates you when studying for an assessment task? What motivated you to come to university in the first place? Do you see yourself as being a high achieving student (based on your attainment so far)?
	What differences in teaching and assessment do you feel there are between school/college compared with university?
	Do you ever do work that is not specifically for an assessment task? Can you tell me more?
	When you are studying for an assessment task what do you usually focus on, or what are your intentions? If no clear answer, then hint at e.g. do you concentrate on: just passing, trying to get the best mark possible, trying to understand the material? Does it depend on what the assessment task is? Can you give me examples?
	Have you come across the terms surface and deep approach to learning? What do you think the mean? Do you feel that assessment tasks encourage a deep approach to learning? Can you tell me about this with specific examples? Do some encourage it more than others? Do you feel that assessment tasks reward a deep approach to learning? Can you think of any specific examples where this occurred? Do you feel you used a deep approach and it allowed you to achieve a high/higher mark than otherwise?
	Do you consider that you use a deep approach to learning? Tell me more. What does understanding mean to you? How would you define or explain it? What does it involve for you?
	Do you feel that you do, or regularly do, use a deep approach? Can you talk me through a few examples of how and when you did this?
	Do you feel that the assessment tasks you are asked to do encourage you to memorize or to understand? Or both? Please tell me more about this
	Are there any/or which assessment tasks encourage or require understanding or more understanding than memorisation? Can you tell me about some specific examples?
	Tell me about what you do with the feedback you are given about assessment tasks.
	Do you (ever) try and see links between the materials you are asked to study and the importance/relevance of the material to you as a person (or perhaps for your future careers?). Do you/Can you tell me about/if/when you did something like this?
	Do you feel it's important for you to reach/draw your own conclusions/explanations for topics you are studying/being assessed on? Tell me more.
	Do you think you are usually/always able to identify what's required in/from an

	assessment task? What do you usually do if unsure or uncertain?
	What do you think is most important to achieve a good mark? Memorising or understanding? Does it depend on the assessment
	What do you think is most important to you? Memorising or understanding?
	Do you ever feel that the assessment tasks don't really encourage understanding / (or a deep approach)? Can you tell me more about this?
	Do you look at the learning outcomes for a module when producing your assessed work?
	When you receive a piece of assessed work back do you focus on the grade (mark) or the feedback? Are there occasions when you would only look at the mark? What determines that?
	Do you do anything differently now when approaching assessment and learning tasks compared with when you started university? Tell me about this?
	FOLLOWING FOR THIRD YEAR STUDENTS ONLY
	What does learning mean to you? What does it involve? Do you think that what you have told me is different to what you would have said if I had asked you the same questions when you were a first year? How, in what way, tell me more. What do you think has changed the most for you between the first-year and the third-year?
	What classification of degree are you on track to achieve?
	Do you do anything differently now when approaching assessment and learning tasks compared with when you were in the first year? Could you tell me more about that?
	Could you tell me about how your understanding of learning and your approach to the learning and the assessment tasks you have had to do might have changed or be different in some way compared with when you were a first year?
	If you knew then what you know now and could go back in time to speak to yourself as a first year; what two or three things, or advice, might you say to your younger self about assessment and learning at university?
	Do you think that the way you approach assessment tasks now is different to how you approached them in the first year? Please tell me about that
	Do you think that when studying/approaching an assessment task you typically set out to memorize or to understand? Or does it depend on the task? If it does depend on the task then how do you know which to concentrate on? (and for third years – is that different to when you were in the first year?). Please explain.
	Do you feel that the teaching and learning processes you have experienced have encouraged you to be more independent? Do you think/feel you are a more (or more of an) independent learner now compared to when you were in the first-year year? Tell me about that. Do you think assessment tasks encourage you to be independent? Can you give me any examples?

Appendix 8.2 Ethical approval from the University of Sheffield

Approved: 25/02/2015

Andrew Holmes
Registration number: 120223602
School of Education
Programme: Ed D

Dear Andrew

PROJECT TITLE: Undergraduate Education students' conceptualizations of, and approaches to learning and assessment.

APPLICATION: Reference Number 002022

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 25/02/2015 the above-named project was approved on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 002022 (dated 18/02/2015). Participant information sheet 005439 version 1 (18/02/2015).

Participant consent form 005430 version 1 (17/02/2015).
If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation
please inform me since written approval will be required.
Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Appendix 8.3 Participant consent form

Research participant consent Form

Research project **Undergraduate Education students' conceptualizations of, and approaches to learning and assessment.**

The research is being carried out for a Doctor of Education (EdD) qualification.

Researcher Andrew G.D. Holmes edp12agh@shefield.ac.uk or alternatively A.G.Holmes@hull.ac.uk Tel 01482 465429

Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (dated ……..2015 explaining the above research project and that ☐
2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. ☐

4. I understand that my responses provided to the researcher will be anonymised I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐

4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

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

_____
Name of person taking consent Date Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Andrew G.D. Holmes_____ _____2015_____
Lead Researcher Date Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Appendix 8.4 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis

1 The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
2 Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
3 Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
4 All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
5 Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
6 Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
7 Data have been analysed, interpreted, made sense of, rather than just paraphrased or described.
8 Analysis and data match each other, the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
9 Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
10 A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
11 Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
12 The assumptions about the written report, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
13 There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done, i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14 The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
15 The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes.

(Braun and Clarke 2006 p.96)

Appendix 8.5 Working example extract from code and theme generation table

Sub-Research Question	Possible theme	CODE
? relationship to learning	The college contrast	The college contrast 'The Spoon-fed A-leveller'
Role of assessment [??]	? TIME ??	Time is (not) on my side Time Waits for no-one
Relationship to learning Role of assessment	Draft INTEREST	Interest Is this really a theme? INTEREST itself is a possibly meta theme?
Relationship to learning Role of assessment	Draft INTEREST	Enjoyment Is this a theme?
Changes Relationship to learning Role of assessment	FEEDBACK	Feedback (use of) and value A always read it B never read it C read it if the mark is higher than what I expected D read it if the mark is lower than what I expected
Changes Relationship to learning Role of assessment	FEEDBACK	Feedback, – Conceptualised as being about negative things. Correcting my mistakes
Changes Relationship Role of assessment	FEEDBACK Learning intention	Aim to understand Aim to achieve
Changes Relationship to learning Role of assessment	FEEDBACK Emotional straightjacket and emotional rescue	FEEDBACK The emotional straightjacket of feedback and emotional rescue springboard
Role of assessment	FEEDBACK EXPECTATIONS?	FEEDBACK The First time – first piece of feedback, Anxiety/emotion
Role of assessment	FEEDBACK	Problem presentations
Feedback	I KNOW THAT I SHOULD…BUT (also APPROACH?)	I know that I should…But In an ideal world Relates to use of feedback Relates to Time management

Role of assessment	Use of outcomes	Learning Outcomes A ignored Outcomes B used outcomes