



# University of Sheffield

Experiences of undergraduate students who successfully completed their equine  
degree during the COVID-19 pandemic

Anke Twigg-Flesner

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis was to explore equine students' experiences when completing their degree during a global pandemic to provide recommendations for future emergencies or unprecedented scenarios. Students on equine-related degrees have been underrepresented in education research, and as these programmes attract a high proportion of "non-traditional students", factors facilitating student success were an additional focus in this research, providing an additional novel aspect.

The project was shaped under the four cornerstones for student achievement outlined by Tinto (2012): expectations, support, assessment and feedback and involvement. Eight final year students were interviewed at the end of the academic year, using a semi-structured approach which encouraged reflection and evaluation of their experiences. Some findings, like the importance of tutor and peer support, as well as a separate social support group mirrored findings from research in other areas, but the role of horses as a motivator, safe space and to drive a passion for learning had not previously been reported, as equine students in the UK have been underrepresented in education research.

Further complementary research should therefore consider the importance of horses and other animals for equine and animal science degree students, wider use of animals to support mental health interventions for students, the use of software modelling for anatomy modules, and enhancing digital confidence to support future hybrid teaching approaches. My research also clearly demonstrated that traditional and "non-traditional" students on equine degrees are able to thrive in higher education in the right conditions, and that struggles of traditional students require more research investigation.

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## Declaration

I, Anke Twigg-Flesner, confirm that the Thesis is my own work.

I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means  
([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)).

This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other,  
university.



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## 1.0 Introduction

I have been working in the Higher Education (HE) sector for over a fifteen years now, teaching and tutoring predominantly on Equine and Animal Science programmes at a specialist provider who gained university status in 2019. This institution is one of the largest providers of Equine Science and Management- related university courses in the world, and between the Equine and Animal Science departments had around 1,700 HE students when I conducted my research, with sustained growth in student numbers for the past 10 years, illustrating the increasing popularity of these more applied courses with prospective students (HESA, 2023). Despite rising popularity, the experiences of equine students in the UK have so far been underreported, as have experiences in the wider land-based sector, with most existing research taking place in the USA (Lavoie, 2019; Gibbens, 2022; Marsh, 2024). Experiences are less comparable as the American courses tend to be focused strongly on the practical use of theory, whereas the equine degrees in the UK are more theory focused with some application to practical scenarios or case studies. Hence there is a gap in the research to learn more about the experiences of equine students from a range of backgrounds and their learning journey through their degree during a global pandemic.

There are several theoretical frameworks focusing on student- institution interaction and student resistance as well as a sense of belonging in HE, so for my research I have elected to use a combination of Tinto's conditions for student success (Tinto, 1993) and Bourdieu's thinking tools (1986), as these complement each other, compensating for some of the weaknesses in Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) models.

Vincent Tinto's work (spanning from 1975 until the current day) developed several models, focusing on institutional action to support persistence and retention (Tinto,

1975, 1993, 2012, 2017, 2024). His teaching background has influenced his proposed models, and while I will be considering his student persistence model, the structure of my thesis is based on his four conditions for student success: Expectations, assessment and feedback, support, and involvement (Tinto, 1993). Tinto defined involvement as social and academic connectedness, and the impact these can have on student persistence and ability to adjust to the university environment (Tinto, 1993). His more recent revisions of the model (Tinto, 2012; 2017) show links to psychological theories such as Bandura's Goal Motivation Theory (Bandura, 1993) and Deci & Ryan's Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985 in Ryan & Deci, 2017), but weaknesses remain to assess the influence of individual student attributes on student persistence.

Bourdieu's sociological thinking tools of habitus, capitals, and field (Bourdieu, 1986) could therefore be used complimentarily to strengthen my insight into equine student experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Hallam (2022) used Tinto's psychological lens to evaluate college student experiences the global pandemic in the southwest of England, favouring this lens over Bourdieu's sociological one, although she acknowledges that "using a psychological lens to explore the field of student persistence does not negate the value of differing perspectives including a sociological lens" (Hallam, 2022, p. 15). Therefore, my research provides a novel contribution as it explored previously underrepresented degree topics by combining psychological and sociological lenses. Chapter 2 provides more detail about the theoretical frameworks and an evaluation of how Tinto and Bourdieu's models could support my insights into the student journey.

## 1.1 Statement of intent

My research used semi-structured interviews to learn about the experiences of eight final year students on equine-related degree courses towards the end of their final year, including their experiences of studying through a global pandemic. Learning more about the experiences of students on equine degrees through a global pandemic, the challenges they experienced and factors supporting student success, could provide an insight into the experiences of students in an area that has been vastly under researched to date.

Eight final year equine students who commenced their degree in 2019, and so had experienced the initial move to online learning during lockdowns, and the return to on campus learning during their final year were interviewed, therefore providing a unique insight into the “full circle” of teaching and learning experiences during this time. Students spoke about their strongest sources of support, disappointing moments, uplifting experiences, and factors influencing their learning journey. Recognising positive influences as well as barriers were equally important to me here, as especially the latter could be explored in further interventions so the quality of student support and the student experience can be enhanced and “future-proofed” for future unprecedented events. COVID-19 undoubtedly impacted on the student experience for this group of students, but rather than this being the focal point of my thesis, I will bring forward examples that could inform future institutional actions to further improve student support mechanisms, especially when individual students need to study remotely, e.g. through injury, illness, or family commitments.

## 1.2 Equine Students in the United Kingdom (UK)

In the UK, there are currently 30 HE (HE) providers who offer 145 courses (University and College Admission Service [UCAS], 2023) relating to Equine Science and Management (UCAS, 2023), with an expanding portfolio across those providers. These courses attract significant numbers of students across the UK, with UCAS (2021) reporting over 16,000 main scheme applications, translating to approximately 0.1% of all HE undergraduate students. Yet the experiences of students on these courses remain underexplored in peer-reviewed research.

Lavoie (2019) considered students on equine courses in Nebraska as a small part of her MSc Thesis in relation to their success based on demographics and motivation. Motivation was the most influential factor in success, leading to recommendations that courses should link to industry scenarios as these are more likely to increase self-determination and self-efficacy, especially in female students. Equine-related courses are usually advertised as applied or vocational courses, so the link to industry examples throughout the teaching, learning and assessment on these courses links well to this ethos.

In 2017, I presented research about the decision-making process in university choices through questionnaires and brief interviews with 88 students on applied Further Education courses at a land-based niche provider. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed that, despite concerns about the financial impact and student debt, university seemed the path to ensuring students would not become disadvantaged in the future job market, making this the dominant factor in deciding to go to university, rather than intrinsic motivation, mirroring findings by Bathmaker *et al.* (2017).

Only a small number of informants saw attending university as part of a clear plan (like findings by Bradley & Miller, 2010), with most showing a lack of understanding of the purpose, demands and values of participating in HE, but felt that this was the route expected of them moving forward (Tett *et al.*, 2016). Whilst they stated they expected the work to be “harder” and “more independent”, it was difficult to explain why or how university study was perceived this way. Informants also found it challenging to explain what this might look like for them in practice, leading to what Tett *et al.* (2016) described as the unknowns of the university environment “impacted negatively on their self-confidence and dimmed their sense of excitement about their studies” (p.403) in the initial student transition into HE, highlighting the need for prospective students to learn more about teaching and learning approaches in comparison to school or college pre-arrival to aid a smoother transition. First year students equine students, often enter university with a limited understanding of expectations, or without a clear plan of where their studies could take them, resulting in variable levels of motivation and active engagement with their studies (Twigg-Flesner, 2017).

These insights into the current body of research suggests that equine students as a group have been vastly underrepresented, despite increasing numbers of students, courses, and providers in this area. Institutional data indicates that courses attract a significant number of “non-traditional” students on all courses, including the equine course provision (Greening, 2020). The access and participation plan (2020-21 to 2024-25) showed that 42% of HE students were part of the plan’s target groups, which included POLAR 1&2, ethnic minority students, mature students, disabled students (including physical, sensory, communication, cognitive and mental health conditions), care leavers and students showing intersections of these criteria (Greening, 2020).

Internal data for the provider in my research showed that the proportion of “non-traditional students” has now risen to nearly 50%, maybe providing an indication that the courses offered appeal to a diverse range of students, many of whom might not typically have engaged in conservative range of HE courses. This illustrates the diverse nature of the student body, and, more unusually, a setting where “non-traditional” characteristics are as common as traditional ones, as opposed to elite universities policy makers feel all students should aspire to attend.

### 1.3 Researching “non-traditional” students

I am not arguing that disadvantage should not be researched, or social justice is not an important concept, but the continued focus on disadvantage with seemingly very little progress in the last two decades (Reay, 2022) could indicate that focusing on a deficit discourse here is not improving the student experience for students that come from a disadvantaged background. Additionally, this approach- and education research, does not seem to consider the challenges traditional students might be facing, although some limited research has now considered “high-achieving non-traditional students” (Wong & Chiu, 2019; Wong, 2018, Goings, 2016). Yet the divisive categorisation of “actual” (traditional) students or difficult outsider (“non-traditional”) students persists in education research and education policy. Focusing on a student group in a niche setting, with an almost equal proportion of traditional and non-traditional students provided an opportunity to explore how much students relate to the labels that policy and wider education apply, and how these influence reflections on their learning journey.

“Non-traditional” students have been at the centre of discussion in policy texts, education research, and institutional targeted action over the past decades. All of

these aim to integrate “non-traditional” students into a higher education system (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012) that continues to see very traditional values as the norm. Any student not immediately entering full-time higher education after completing A-levels, which would be deemed to be the traditional entry route, could be described as “non-traditional” or as an anomaly. The “traditional” view does not consider that diverging from these criteria, students may have additional requirements or responsibilities they must balance against their studies, requiring universities to take positive action to support a more diverse student body, rather than assuming the residential, full-time 19-year-old student as the “norm” and all other students as someone who needs to fit in.

There is no research agreement or policy agreement on what the term “non-traditional” student actually means, leading researchers in this field to have to define what they mean by the term “non-traditional” being studied individual piece of research. In many studies, “non-traditional” refers to mature students or adult learners, but others also include working students, BTEC progressors, commuting students, students with disabilities, students of ethnic minority (Arday *et al.*, 2022), students who have lived in social care, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students from neighbourhoods with historically low participation rate in high education, first-in-family (Payne *et al.*, 2023) to enter HE, part-time students (Goodchild, 2019) or students entering HE with an alternative qualification to A levels. I would argue that these are not terms students would organically use to describe themselves, or to define themselves in a university context in all learning and social spaces.

The group of “non-traditional” students is described in research and policy as a homogeneous group who needs extra support to succeed in higher education, yet the

previous examples show that a wide range of characteristics that have little in common have been labelled as one group. Trowler (2015) described the grouping of characteristics as “non-traditional” as characteristics “included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common” (p. 297). Therefore, institutional action targeting “non-traditional” students without recognising the diversity within this group runs a high risk of “perpetuating their outsider expectations and lower chances of success” (Gulley, 2021; p.5). For my thesis, I am focusing on a student group in a niche setting, with an almost equal proportion of traditional and “non-traditional students” provided an opportunity to explore how much students relate to the labels that policy and wider education apply, and how these influence reflections on their learning journey.

Splitting the student body into different categories for reporting purposes can be useful to understand the diversity within the student body, but assumptions of barriers or challenges for the group of “non-traditional” students as on are fundamentally flawed, and interventions to remove assumed barriers are likely to be ineffective (Trowler, 2015). For example, “non-traditional” students have been reported as prone to limited academic engagement (Thomas *et al.*, 2017) and participation in the wider student experience Stone (2019) which further limits their already insufficient social and academic capitals (Thomas, 2021). Gulley (2021) argues that

“the labelling of students as “nontraditional” can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of academically focused self-doubt, feelings of imposter-syndrome, and inequitable educational outcomes. Referring to a student as “nontraditional” sends the message that the student is not one for whom the institution or system of higher education was designed to serve and [...] we set our institutions up to perpetuate this divide instead of working to rectify it” (p.5)

This evaluation of adverse effects when using othering terminology to investigate the journey of students whose characteristics historically would not lead to university enrolment seems to summarise the persistent deficit discourse present that persists in educational research. For example, Reay *et al.* (2010; 2009; 2004; 2001) extensively researched the experience of non-traditional students, who in this context were usually working-class students, and persistently found they struggled to fit in with the institutional culture and ingrained higher education traditions.

Iloh (2018) further criticised the continued use of the “non-traditional” description of students in relation to widening access and supporting today’s diverse student body: “Use of the term nontraditional will not bring us closer to equity-minded and student-centered practices and instead, minoritizes one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education” (Iloh, 2018, p. 28) Whilst well-intentioned, researchers have coined the term of “high achieving non-traditional students” (Wong, 2018; Wong & Chiu, 2019, Goings, 2016), which seems a “double-othering”, describing a group that does not belong in HE, but yet does well against all expectations “by chance” Wong (2018; p.9). The author identified predisposing or common factors in the successful students, which included academic skills development and the drive for self-improvement, particularly after a bad experience, in combination with social support, although he acknowledges that social and educational capital are often acquired coincidentally rather than because of a strategy to succeed or because of skills, attributes and behaviours these student acquired prior to starting university.

Gulley (2016) cautioned that “we can start with a discussion that comes from recognizing the inadequacy of the ‘nontraditional’ label—for only through recognizing

the problem can be find new paths". Other terminology that has been used to describe the group of "non-traditional" students in an attempt to have a less stark additional group to traditional student, such as adult learner (Fowle, 2018; Brunton & Buckley, 2021) to describe mature students- a challenging term as almost all HE students are legally adults, and hence adult learners.

"New-traditional" students has been used to describe "the unemployed, the handicapped, newly arrived immigrants etc." (Lynch, 1978) in a further education context. More recent research by Broton (2020) defined "new-traditional" students as "students who juggle multiple work and family responsibilities" (p.35) while studying. Dempsey & Malpas (2018) extended the definition to include part-time, mature, and distance-learning students, and Costa (2022) used the term to describe "first-generation, parents, full-time employees etc.) (p.176). Overall, other than the original definition by Lynch, there seems to at least be a broad consensus that this term describes students with significant external commitments, such as paid work and family, which may impact on their study mode, e.g. long distance or part-time.

Several researchers, including Ewing Goodman (2024) favour the term "post-traditional" , which she defined as a student who has at least one of the following characteristics: "is financially independent, delayed enrolment, employed full-time, enrolled part-time, has children, obtained a GED or high school certificate, and/or is a single parent" (p. 17). Unlike the adult learner term, there is a lack of consensus about the definition of "post-traditional" as well, as Spence *et al.* (2024) define it as be mature students and students with longer periods to complete their degree, justifying this term as "they are not far from the norm, but rather the new normal"(page 351). If this was accepted as the new normal, no description other than student should be needed to

refer to the student body in current education research – as also suggested by Gulley (2021).

Maybe somewhat controversially to the criticism I have raised so far, I have collected information about student characteristics for my informants to show that experiences are influenced by more than a single criterion, such as a non-A-level qualification on entry. The characteristics will be considered in my analysis where students related and referred to them within the interviews, rather than assuming that certain criteria have a specific impact, taking Gulley's (2021) advice into consideration. This approach allowed me to explore how challenges can be experienced similarly between traditional and “non-traditional” students, rather than focusing on the perceived deficits of “non-traditional” students.

The setting I work in provides a novel environment in which the student experiences can be researched, whilst considering whether institution-assigned labels for reporting are recognised and valued by students, whilst also investigating if and how students use labels that are ascribed to them. The cohort who participated in my research also provided a unique opportunity to learn more about the individual experiences, challenges, and successes of “traditional” and “non-traditional” students, whilst studying during a global pandemic, and maybe providing indications of circumstances that allow all students to thrive rather than just survive (O’Sullivan & Penney, 2014). Reflecting on areas of challenge, unexpected events such as a global pandemic, and strategies to success can then be developed to support future instances of significant, unexpected events interrupting university study for future equine student cohorts.

Both education policy and education research tend to focus on one student characteristic, basing their entire context on race or age or socioeconomic background

or disabilities, or recognise very specific and narrow intersectionality between traits, with a recent focus in widening participation research on the disadvantage of white male students – who ironically, based on just this description, were the traditional university before HE expansion in the 1990s and surely provides a sound argument to review the definition, and usefulness in practical terms of the “traditional student” description (Hillman, 2016).

An institutional approach to student support and communication and collaboration between different departments is essential to provide coherent student support for all students (West *et al.*, 2015; McDuff, 2016). There is also an argument to treat each student as a unique individual with unique attributes and skills, rather than making assumptions based on a set of criteria that classify the student as “other”. The importance of the interaction between the institution and the student as an individual has been the central point of Tinto’s (Tinto, 1975) theories around academic persistence, which is the theoretical framework for this thesis, explored further in chapter 2.

#### 1.4 Summary of research approach

A questionnaire targeting final year equine students was posted on the relevant university social media pages, providing students with an opportunity to self-select for participation in follow-up interviews at the end of the questionnaire. I also collected demographic information, including age, course, information linking to widening participation characteristics and asked students to feel how well they were able to cope with academic demands. The last questions asked for a positive and a negative teaching experience (based on Douglas *et al.*, 2015), use of support services and areas on campus students felt most at home (based on Thomas, 2015).

The information from the questionnaire allowed me to show the diversity of students on equine courses, and the diversity of backgrounds of the eight students whom I interviewed towards the end of their final year. I used Tinto's' conditions for student success- expectations, assessment and feedback, support, and involvement (Tinto, 2012)- as a frame for the semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was used to identify themes under each of the four areas.

### 1.5 Research Aim, research questions and scope of the project

My experience within the HE sector, and through the changes and challenges of teaching through a global pandemic therefore led me to the following research question:

What can we learn from students' experiences on equine degrees completing their studies during a global pandemic?

This aim was addressed through the following research questions:

1. How did equine degree students' prior experiences and course information expectations about their HE course, and how were they met?

Exploring expectations of equine students pre-entry and their experience of the transition into HE might reveal parallels to experiences of students across the university sector but could reveal challenges that were more distinctive for equine student. This could identify areas for improvement to improve the match of equine student expectations and course content and delivery, resulting in improved student persistence (Tinto,2012, 2017). The interviews aim to understand how students experienced how their expectations were met, and how they understood institutional

expectations beyond the first year of their course, exploring how equine students managed transitions between academic levels and changing learning environments.

2. What support was effective for equine degree students, and would other support have been useful?

As illustrated in section 1.2, equine degrees attract higher numbers of students with additional support needs than the sector average, and hence this can provide a better understanding of support mechanisms equine students access and engage with and which mechanisms are less effective. The impact interactions of equine students with lecturers, tutors and support staff have not previously been reported, hence this provides a further novel contribution to the research understanding of equine student journeys. The importance and types of social support networks and the role the university plays in these provides a further novel contribution, exploring whether the rural setting encourages enhanced local support networks, or whether equine students compartmentalise their network, with different groups in the network fulfilling different support needs (Tinto, 2023; Brooks, 2007) . Universities could play a role in the development of social networks through classroom interventions that “interrupt the tendency of students, left on their own, to recreate patterns of social and academic stratification outside the classroom” (Tinto, 2023; p. 4), while changes in social networks could become evident in changed classroom behaviours. Evaluating the intricate connections between support mechanisms and the persistence of equine students makes a further novel contribution to the knowledge of equine student experiences in the UK.

3. How did equine degree students experience and engage with assessment and feedback, and overcome adverse experiences?

Equine students at the provider experience a wide range of assessment types, ranging from coursework, written and oral exams to practical examinations of industry skills, running public-facing events and engaging with tasks written in collaboration with industry partners of the university. Assessments evaluate generic graduate skills as well as evidence-based industry practices. Poor performance in assessment carries an enhanced risk for forced or voluntary drop out (Tinto, 1975, 2012), hence an appreciation of equine student experience could provide valuable insight and allow a comparative evaluation of equine students and the experience of students across the sector. .

#### 4. How did wider experiences in and academic and social content aid the involvement of equine degree students during a global pandemic?

This final question considers the impact of social and academic connectedness on equine students, and the changes and development they underwent to complete their degrees (Tinto, 1993; 2017). The term involvement encompasses concepts others have referred to as “engagement” (e.g. Thomlinson & Simpson, 2023; Kahu, 2013), the different types of support networks student build in physical and virtual contexts (Tinto, 2023) while recognising that the most impactful contact students could have on their journey were through “seemingly random encounters with someone on campus that cannot be planned” (Tinto, 2023; p.5) . Such encounters were limited by social lockdowns for this group of equine students, and so this provides a unique opportunity to explore the impact of limited chance encounters.

The findings from my research will be useful for universities and colleges with HE provision to become more adapted to the support of today’s diverse student population. Rather than expecting students to “fit in”, small adjustments have the

potential to make disadvantaged students more comfortable, develop a stronger sense of belonging and ultimately support their continuation and academic success in HE.

Students on equine degree courses in England have been underrepresented in education research, with most available research considering students in America with a very different course structure and course aims compared to the degree courses offered at UK providers. Therefore, my research makes a unique contribution to the understanding of the student experience of equine students at a niche provider setting in the UK, which may provide some recommendations for good practice for equine students elsewhere in the UK land-based education sector.

### 1.6 Rationale for Research Aim and Research Questions

Broadly, there are three main reasons which have led me to complete this investigation because of my experience over the last 16 years. Firstly, the terms “traditional” and “non-traditional”- or more recently, “post-traditional” (Choy, 2022) have been used to split the student body into two distinctive groups and implies that one of these groups falls outside of the norm for HE participation, failing to recognise or reflect the diverse nature of the student body in each of the two categories, Barrow (2011) and therefore missing the individual factors that can support or hinder student success (Tinto, 2012).

#### *1.6.1 Assumptions about “non-traditional” student performance in higher education*

Historically, A levels have been the traditional route for students into HE study, and this level 3 qualification remains the most common one for current students, but there is an increase in the number of students entering HE with alternative level 3 qualifications (see table 1). The university at the centre of this study has a strong widening participation record, reporting that 22% of students held BTEC diplomas

whilst 29% of students had entered via the more traditional A level route in the 2016/17 academic year (Access Agreement, 2018), which equates to 4% higher and 9% lower respectively compared to the national trends reported in Bekhradnia & Beech (2018) (table 1).

Approximately a quarter of first year students enrolled at the university in my research in 2019/20 came from POLAR 3 LPN and approximately 13% of students declared a disability on entry to their programmes in this university. The institution's location and course provision attract a higher number of disadvantaged and "non-traditional" students than traditional or elite institutions.

The institution has a strong academic and pastoral care provision, some of which is a benefit of sharing support services with the FE provision on the same campus, which – alongside relatively small university student numbers (~2500) facilitates to a more personal approach than students may experience in larger institutions. Rolfe (2002) highlighted the stronger reliance of BTEC students entering HE as "non-traditional" students on their allocated academic tutor for academic and pastoral support, whilst Kahu & Picton (2019) and Yale (2019) emphasised the importance of a good relationship between first year students and their tutor to understand expectations and transition successfully. The relationship of equine students in the UK with their tutors has not previously been explored, but as this is likely to be a significant source of support, experiences could provide a valuable contribution to education research.

Secondly, research focusing on "non-traditional" students appears to focus on the challenges and lack of success of these groups, and their difficulties to adjust to a university setting and associated academic and cultural expectations in larger universities (i.e. Reay *et al.*, 2010, 2012 and Reay 2013; Crozier *et al.*, 2008), with

very limited research affirming the success of “non-traditional” students and strategies that may have underpinned their success, and those focused on “high achieving non-traditional” students, such as Wong (2018).

**Table 1: Percentage of level 3 achievement by qualification type (Bekhradnia & Beech, 2018)**

Cohort (19 in...)	Percentage achieving Level 3 by qualification type						Percentage achieving Level 3 by age 19**
	A-Levels, Applied A levels	AS Levels	Advanced Apprenticeship*	Vocational qualification outside of Apprenticeship	International Baccalaureate		
2006	36.4	1.5	1.0	7.7	0.2		46.9
2007	35.9	1.6	1.0	9.4	0.3		48.2
2008	35.2	1.6	1.1	11.4	0.3		49.6
2009	35.7	1.7	1.2	12.5	0.3		51.4
2010	35.9	1.6	1.5	14.3	0.5		53.8
2011	37.2	1.6	1.7	15.3	0.5		56.5
2012	37.7	1.6	1.9	16.0	0.6		57.9
2013	38.0	1.7	1.7	16.8	0.6		59.1
2014	38.5	1.7	1.6	17.6	0.5		60.0
2015	38.2	1.7	1.6	18.3	0.6		60.4
2016	38.2	1.5	1.5	18.3	0.5		60.1

This bias in research involving “non-traditional” students further emphasises the underlying assumptions that this student group is less successful than their traditional counterparts, and that academic success is achieved “against all odds” or only with significant institutional support and assumes that all students are aiming for the highest degree classifications and careers following their university studies.

This perception does not reflect the reasons for HE entry reported by “non-traditional” students in preliminary research conducted by Twigg-Flesner (2017b). Many students, especially those without family members with HE experiences, feel that university is pushed as the logical next step after school, and so they apply to university without

really exploring other options, or being aware alternatives exist (Twigg-Flesner, 2017b).

Research surrounding student support and challenges has mostly failed to consider traditional students explicitly. The cumulative effect of this appears to be a categorisation of students as either “problematic” (non-traditional) or “proper” (traditional). This could lead to biased approaches to teaching both student groups in practices. Before research can establish whether there is an element of subconscious bias towards students’ backgrounds and academic entry qualifications that may influence interactions with students, actually listening to and hearing the voices of “non-traditional” students explaining how students perceive themselves in the context of traditional and non-traditional students, and whether they feel that self-identification with a particular “type of student” in line with the terminology used in policy and legislation reflects the students’ perception of themselves. The overwhelming research evidence in this field focused on “non-traditional” students feeling out of place, both at red brick and larger post-1992 institutions, with very limited available findings from niche providers. Previously published research about mature students and BTEC progressors to a niche provider revealed challenges which have led to institutional action locally and could be of value to the wider land based sector (Twigg-Flesner, 2018a;2018b; 2017b).

The division of participants into traditional and non-traditional characteristics might seem contradictory but allows me to frame a discussion of equine students at a niche provider whilst being able to explore connections to existing research. Through the questionnaire, I was able to collate information about how students perceived themselves, and, through analysis of the interview transcripts, demonstrate that, despite some overriding characteristics, like ethnicity (Bhopal, 2016), students were

unlikely to define themselves by a single characteristic. Experiences were variable, allowing me to show that traditional students experience similar academic challenges to non-traditional students, and non-traditional students have potential to be more successful than their traditional counterparts, placing my research investigating the experiences of a diverse group of equine students apart from most of the work in this area.

#### *1.6.2 Summary of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on teaching delivery at the niche provider*

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly posed a huge challenge for everyone, and HE studies were impacted by campus closures and a sudden move to online learning without classroom-based or practical lessons to underpin student learning (Khan, 2021a). The way in which courses continued to be delivered to students varied significantly across the university sector in England, with some moving to a solely asynchronous delivery, others maintaining a synchronous delivery in live meetings on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or a hybrid of both approaches (Watermeyes *et al*, 2021). This move required rapid upskilling of academic staff as well as students, as well as facilitating access to software packages and IT equipment for all to be able to participate in online teaching and learning. At the same time, staff and students alike had to find ways to manage their physical and mental health as they adjusted to an imposed level of social isolation (Khan, 2021b).

The pandemic restrictions were imposed halfway through the second semester of the first year for the cohort contributing to this research and persisted through parts of the second year of studies, before returning to the campus full-time in the final year of their degrees. Hence the experience of this cohort is unique, starting university “normally”

before facing significant disruptions and finally being able to return to the “new normal” to finish their studies. Their experiences, challenges, and strategies to succeed and persist under such unprecedeted circumstances could provide valuable insight into mechanisms that could be used in future large-scale disruptions, or in the day-to-day approaches to teaching and learning for students in the land-based sector and the wider university sector in England.

Investigating the experiences of a previously underrepresented student group in HE in England, during an unprecedeted global challenge at the end of their studies provides unique insights into this group’s experiences, core support mechanisms they felt were most helpful, changes in assessment approaches and other factors during their study experience that aided their success in completing their HE degree. Whilst I do not plan to make this a “COVID-focused” research project, the global and local impact of the pandemic need to be considered. It is, however, important to note that the levels of uncertainty, isolation, and loneliness for my group of students was taken to extremes, and therefore caution should be applied to remote learning in non-pandemic times as social restrictions in all parts of life could amplify some experiences.

### 1.7 Summary of subsequent chapters

In Chapter 2, I will explore Bourdieu’s theories as a framework that is commonly used in education research about student experiences and explain my alternative choice of Tinto’s theory of departure as the main theoretical framework for my thesis, alongside further contextualisation to the setting in which this research took place as most readers would be less familiar with this type of provider.

Chapter 3 provides a review of relevant literature about the student experience, alongside local contextualisation to set more background for my research. This chapter is structured under the four conditions for student success Tinto (1993; 2012) recommended: Expectations, Assessment and Feedback, Support and Involvement.

Chapter 4 summarises the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the higher education sector in England, providing a context to the wider circumstances the students I interviewed found themselves in during their studies.

Chapter 5 provides a thorough evaluation of my positionality, underpinning research theory and ethical considerations and a review of my data collection and analysis approaches.

Chapter 6 starts with an overview of the questionnaire demographic data to show the diversity of my participant group for both the questionnaire, and the sub-group who took part in the interviews, followed by my documentation of the code development during my data analysis stage.

Each overarching theme and respective sub-themes have been explored and contextualised into the current literature in chapter 7 (expectations), 8 (assessment and feedback), 9 (support) and 10 (involvement).

Chapter 11 provides my conclusions, stating the contribution of my findings to the literature and their implications for practitioners, alongside an evaluation of the limitations of my work and recommendation for associated further research.

## 2.0 Theoretical frameworks and choice of framework for this research

In this chapter, I am going to review Bourdieu as the commonly used theoretical framework or “thinking tools” (Jenkins, 2002 in Webber, 2023, p. 112) in my research area and can be used effectively to highlight mismatches and inequalities between student characteristics, attitudes, and experiences (forms of capital) and institutional cultures, procedures, and processes (habitus), alongside the concept of field, which allows researchers to evaluate the how power within a setting in terms of capital possession influences thoughts, opinions, behaviours and actions in relation to the field itself and related fields (Bathmaker, 2015). Field can be seen as the “location” of social and education interactions, governed by expectations, rules and common understanding, although power is unlikely to be evenly shared by participants (Webber, 2023), as this is determined by individuals holding cultural, economic, and social capital relevant to the field (Bathmaker, 2015). These tools therefore can be used to explore inequality of individuals on their HE journey as well as persisting inequalities in HE-related fields- for example James *et al.*’s (2014) explorations of Access to HE students and their learning community.

Tinto’s initial research (Tinto, 1975) focused on factors that affect student retention (figure 1), but over four decades developed into a sociological model highlighting both the students’ and the institutions’ roles in student retention and academic achievement. Similarly to other, more recent research using a Bourdieusian lens (e.g. Mendoza Cazazez, 2019; Romito *et al.*, 2020), Tinto focuses on the retention and success of underrepresented student types in HE, developing explanations for the variability of outcomes (Tinto, 2012), emphasising a need for institutions to adapt to reduce the persisting evidence of inequality shown in research using a Bourdieusian lens (Reay *et al.*, 2009). Thomas (2012) aligned with Tinto’s thinking and highlighted

in her work that universities need to focus on a “culture of belonging” (Thomas, 2012, p. 19) as “a sense of belonging is considered critical to both retention and success” (Thomas, 2012, p.19), yet most HEIs continue to favour full-time students, who are often residential for at least one year in most of their policies, with likely detriment to students who commute (Neeves & Stepheson, 2023), have family and work commitments or study part-time (Thomas, 2015).

This is just one examples for the currency of Tinto’s theories, as despite Tinto’s original framework being formulated in the 1970s, similar issues continue to be present in higher education research and practices, maybe highlighting how progress made has not fully considered concurrent societal change (French, 2017). His model also developed over the past five decades to incorporate wider sociological theories and remain a suitable framework for research in today’s diverse HE sector. Similarly to Bourdieu, Tinto developed his initial framework in the 1970s, where non-white, non-middleclass and often female students were the exception to the rule, and societal drive to accept and include minority groups were much less established than they are in the 2020s (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2013).

Bourdieu sociologically based tools and Tinto’s educational theory models both seek to explore how students adjust to or “integrate” to university life in social and academic contexts, although the level to which individual attributes facilitate or hinder in the adjustment to becoming a member of the university community varies between both models. Tinto acknowledges that student background, pre-entry attainment and academic experiences impact on the successful transition to and persistence in HE, yet does not explore how these factor impact on student journeys- maybe this is a limitation resulting from the time at which his persistence model was originally developed, giving less acknowledgement to “non-traditional” student groups (Goltra,

2018), and hence basing his theory on a more homogenous student body than the one seen today.

Whilst Bourdieu and Tinto's theories have been useful to highlight and explore disadvantages for students from different backgrounds, and the mismatches between students' experiences prior to starting university and the experiences and successes at university, Bourdieu focuses more on the disadvantage for individuals, rather than providing more practical evidence that may offer solutions to institutions, therefore supporting a discourse biased towards student deficits rather than a joined responsibility for student success (Reay, 2010; Webb *et al.* 2017, Luczaj, 2023). Fernandez *et al.* (2023) demonstrated also that a focus on specific student attributes or characteristics can lead to a sense of "anti-belonging" (p.690) where these do not match the "typical demographic" (p.690), highlighting the risks in well-intentioned research approaches that focus on specific, "non-traditional" student attributes.

Additionally, the nuanced impact of economic and social factors, personal health and support available are challenging to model for individual students (Chan *et al.*, 2023). Quantifying the "individual baggage" – and in fact how this should be defined before being able to determine its impact on persistence have also been discussed by Nicoletti (2019) who reviewed several student drop out models, concluding that one model is unlikely to be sufficient or effective due to the number of institutional and individual student factors, making drop out "a process hardly prone to generalisation" (Nicoletti, 2019, p.62).

Yorke & London (2004) also cautioned that Tinto's models require adjustment when researching postgraduate student experiences and persistence, as his model centres on the transition of first year students into HE. I had to bear these limitations in mind

as my work aimed to gain an insight into the whole degree journey rather than into the first year only. Despite recognised challenges with Tinto's models, "all in all [...] Tinto still appears to be useful for sociological research in HE" (, p.423r *et al.*, 2023), and incorporating Bourdieu's tools might help to counteract some of these challenges. Furthermore, more recent modifications and developments of Tinto's models (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012) consider wider sociological and psychological models to strengthen his previous models, reinforcing my choice to use this as the dominant framework to my own research rather than using a pure Bourdieusian lens.

The setting in which my research was completed is a teaching-focused provider, with a focus on supporting students from a wide range of backgrounds, including a range of alternative approaches to assessments, attendance mode and support to effectively access learning materials in recognition of a diverse set of student needs. Therefore, there already exists a sense of responsibility for the institution to adapt to support its diverse student population. Interviews with final year students at the end of their degree allowed reflections on their experiences to provide me with an insight into their journey. Interviews were structured to cover expectations, assessment and feedback, support, and involvement, based on Tinto's four areas institutional responses could positively impact the student journey.

## 2.1 Bourdieu's "thinking tools"- habitus, capital, and field

Bourdieu's sociological theories aimed to explain social inequalities and power dynamics in society, areas which are also common themes in educational research in areas of widening participation, as well as student retention and student attainment (e.g. Thomas, 2002, Reay *et al.*, 2010, Carruthers Thomas, 2018). Research utilising Bourdieu's concepts include Thomas (2015) who investigated the sense of belonging

in mature, part-time students and Diane Reay's work (i.e. Reay *et al.*, 2010, 2012 and Reay 2013; Crozier *et al.*, 2008), which focused on working-class students at different types of HEIs in England and their challenges in feeling they belong and are accepted at elite universities.

Bourdieu describes cultural capital as existing "in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state [and] in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). He uses the concept to describe social inequalities in society and in education. Bourdieu's concepts are most used to highlight incompatibilities between non-traditional students' and institutional "habitus"- which describes how an individual feels and behaves during interactions with others, based on their perceptions and their understanding of the social context (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). Habitus is based on cultural capital and hence is shaped by ingrained attitudes, behaviours, attributes, skills, and personality, which in turn are shaped through a person's upbringing, socio-economic background, and financial affluence ("economic capital"), relevant social networks and constructive family support ("social capital") (Williams & Roberts, 2023).

The institutional habitus is shaped by an institution's traditions, procedures, and policies, which embody values held by the institution based on its culture. The underlying values and perceptions can be in sharp contrast to those held by non-traditional or disadvantaged students, who can become further alienated through a lack of economic capital, restricting their extracurricular and social engagement within the institutional context (Nolan *et al*, 2023). The relationship between individuals, their associated capitals and hence power and the institutional habitus are further set within the "field", which is higher education- in this case, at a niche provider in a rural setting.

Bourdieu explains that “the social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space. (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724).

Bourdieu likens the field to an area of conflict rather than a peaceful meadow, and different analogies have been used in the literature, such as a sports field (Liu & Zhang, 2021), a force field in scientific sense (Thomson, 2014) and a field of forces and struggles (Martin & Gregg, 2014). None of these fully encompass Bourdieu’s explanation of the term, yet all contribute aspects of his interpretation: Field describes a social space (e.g. studying in a university setting), which contains people with more power, and people subjected to power, resulting in inequalities between players. This leads to competition between participants in the field, each developing their own strategy based on the value of their capitals in relation to the institutional habitus (Holden, 2016). It is important to recognise that capital resulting in higher levels of power in one field does not automatically equate to higher power acquisition in related or overlapping fields. Acquisition of power through enhanced obtainment of capital, e.g. social capital through networking within the field and overlapping fields provides one example to illustrate the dynamic nature of Bourdieu’s tools in an analytical context (Thomson, 2014). Social and cultural capital represent “soft” concepts that are challenging to measure and quantify, and maybe, as a direct result of their soft nature, are the more dynamic forms of capital, whereas financial capital is less soft or metaphorical, as a harder and clearly measurable source of power for individuals (Charalambous, 2019; Holden, 2016).

Whilst there is value in applying Bourdieusian principles in higher education research, there is a risk of underestimating the potential lack of social, economic or cultural capital in students who have been perceived as “traditional” in existing research, with research almost exclusively focusing on the challenges of non-traditional students’ experiences without exploration of the experiences of traditional students in the same setting (Fernandez *et al.*, 2023) or relying on quantitative survey data for comparisons (McCoy *et al.* 2023) without further and deeper qualitative follow-up research. If findings were applied to practice, the explicit labelling of these groups and targeted initiatives to increase their sense of belonging hold a risk of further alienating them, rather than the opposite (O’Shea, 2016).

Furthermore, the lack of capital in all forms may be used by the institutions to justify limited or no action as they cannot physically improve every student’s background circumstances to have a more level playing field as they enter higher education, potentially leading to a sense of complacency by institutions, and lack of consideration in local policy and procedure development.

### *2.1.1 Bourdieusian lenses in recent education research*

Mills (2008) discussed the concepts of reproductive or transformative habitus- with much of the existing research seeming to emphasise the presence of a reproductive habitus (e.g. Winnard, 2021; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019), in which social injustice is persistent and students accept their situation of disadvantage or difference as a given. There is a strong argument for a transformative habitus, which Mills (2008) describes as the ability of disadvantaged students to see opportunities past their current constraints and therefore embark on a journey of “self-renewal” and set higher goals

and develop inventive skill sets to “self-transform” to break the precedent set by a reproductive habitus. The concept of a transformative habitus is more helpful in contextualising how and why students from similar backgrounds and with comparable academic ability perform very differently in the same university environment, considering some personal attributes and individuality of students (Tinto, 2012).

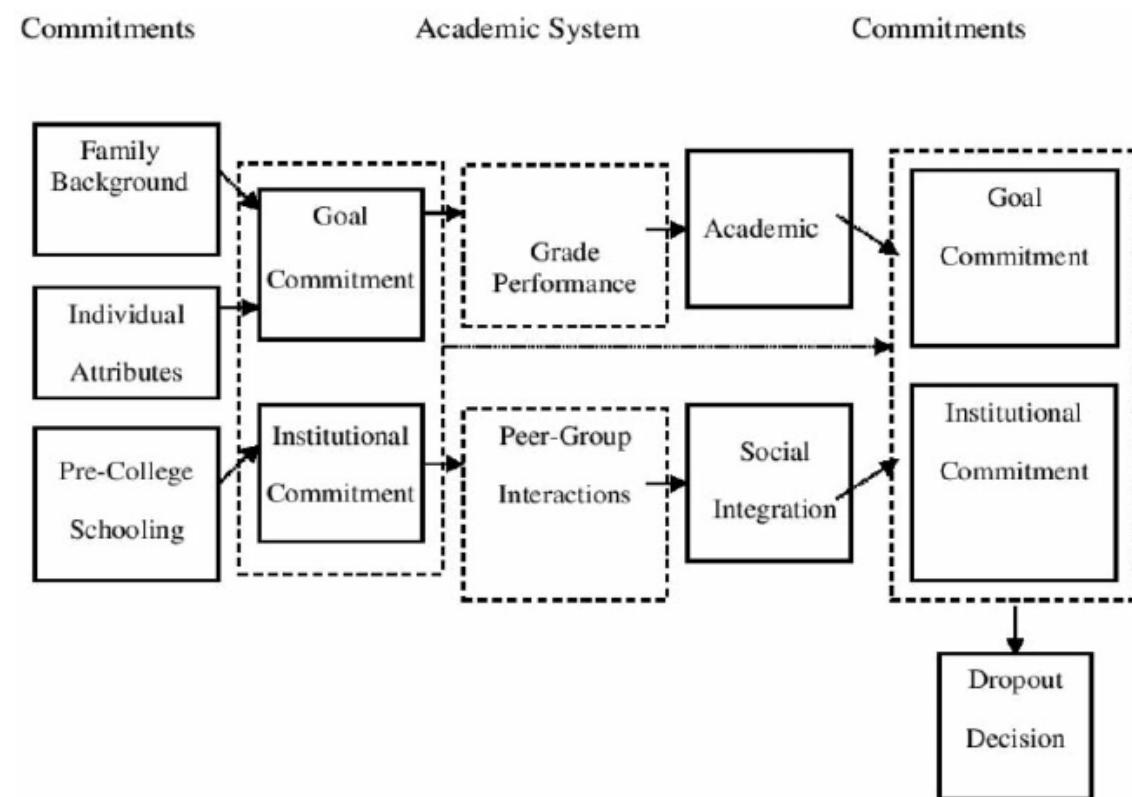
However, Maton (2008) highlighted the importance of using Bourdieu’s thinking tools as the “set” they were intended to, as “to understand and interpret habitus without reference to capital and field is to extract habitus from the very context in which it operates and derives its meaning” (Maton, 2008, p. 18), reinforcing the dynamic relationship between field and capitals and habitus to determine practice within a given community. Burke *et al.* (2022) further cautioned that current researchers were “initiated into understanding and working with Bourdieu second hand through the work of established UK scholars” (p.1) and influenced by different “philosophical orientations that previous generations of scholars, including Bourdieu, would have been” (p.1).

In my work, I am working within the setting, and I am aiming for my research to bring about positive change for the student experience as well as student academic ability to perform and reach the results they are aiming for. In this setting, all academic staff work with students from non-traditional backgrounds, which include “disadvantaged backgrounds, such as students with disabilities, students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and students with family or carer responsibilities. Using Bourdieu’s concepts in this setting would certainly highlight difficulties and mismatches between students and the institution, but I feel that the framework works with underpinning values that would not allow a forward-facing approach to working with the student body to bring about positive change in the future. Nonetheless, considering Bourdieu’s

thinking tools alongside Tinto's conditions for student success could provide me with an approach that compensates for some of the weaknesses in Tinto's model, and enhancing the sociological context of his later concepts and models when exploring the student journey.

## 2.2 Tinto's "Theory of Departure" and conditions for student success

Tinto's initial research (Tinto, 1975) focused on factors that affect student retention (figure 1), but over four decades developed into a sociological model highlighting both the students' and the institutions' roles in student retention and academic achievement. Similarly to other, more recent research using a Bourdieusian lens, Tinto focuses on the retention and success of underrepresented student types in HE, developing explanations for the variability of outcomes (Tinto, 2012).



**Figure 1: Longitudinal scheme of college drop-out factors (Tinto, 1975, p. 95)**

His original framework was based on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide (1951), similarly to Spady's (1970) Undergraduate Dropout Process Model which provided the first sociological model to explore non-continuation of studies. Both Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) suggested that a student not completing the course they started equates to a student dropping out from the academic society was a similar process to a person dropping out of society through suicide. Drop out from either society is more likely to occur where social integration and common values between the individual and society are lacking (Tinto, 2012).

This initial model shows some parallels to Bourdieu's tools, despite both researchers coming from different research perspectives, as family background and individual attributes could be equated to cultural and social capital. However, whereas specific attributes have been seen as limiting factors to capitals in research, such as age (Yaddler & Sundin, 2020; Kasworm, 2018; Rabourn *et al.*, 2018), commuting students (Thomas, 2020; Hallam, 2023), ethnicity (Richardson *et al.*, 2020; Arday *et al.*, 2022) postgraduate study and withdrawal (Templeton, 2016), and mode of study (Goodchild, 2019; Callender & Thompson, 2018), one of the main criticisms of Tinto's model is the lack of specificity when considering external factors contributing to student persistence (Nicoletti, 2019).

Tinto (1993) notes that the society in an academic context is formed from two subgroups- the academic society and the social society, and integration into both are prerequisites to persistence or continuation, with the successful immersion of the student in both societal areas of their studies (Tinto, 1975). Tinto recognised that the same circumstances for two different students can lead to different outcomes and questioned how this can be possible, and ultimately how institutions can design early

interventions targeting all students, but particularly those “at risk” of struggling to succeed in academia.

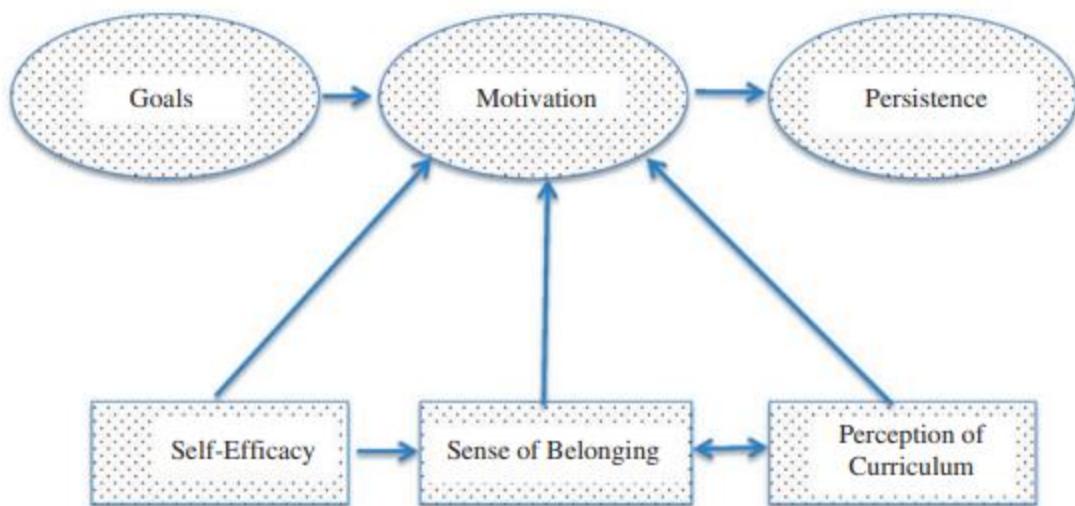
However, Tinto’s original model is not without critics, including a lack of consideration of minority students or less traditional approaches (French, 2017), leading to updates in 1993 with an emphasis on supporting “non-traditional” students (Tinto, 1993), showing the continued dynamic response to societal changes (Burke, 2019). Tinto (1975) focused on retaining full-time students on traditional length programmes (Ozaki, 2016), which was the original population Tinto based his work on, and which is not reflective of changes to higher education in the last 50 years (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2013). Tinto’s initial focus of students bringing different challenges with them that impacts their persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1975) shifted significantly to a shared responsibility of the student and the education provider (Tinto, 1993) and the need for universities to review their practices to become more inclusive (McCormick *et al.*, 2013) and demonstrate a commitment to retaining a more diverse student body with a wide range of personal attributes, experiences, skills and challenges (Goltra, 2018).

Tinto’s framework is built on some similar factors as the Bourdieusian model of forms of capital and their compatibility with the institutional habitus, such as: prior academic performance, social support structure and individual character traits and experiences. Where these characteristics “fit” with the context of an institution, students are more likely to form academic and social connections, but a mismatch does not necessarily prevent success- which is a key difference to the deficit model a Bourdieusian lens tends to provide.

Therefore, institutional action is essential to facilitate student success for the “poorer matches”, but this needs to be accompanied by students active adaptation to the HE environment (Smith & Tinto, 2024). Tinto emphasises throughout his work that the way students from similar backgrounds and of similar academic ability respond to challenges is significantly influenced on the quality of their interactions with academic and support staff (Tinto, 1994; 2012, 2017).

### *2.2.1 Retention vs. persistence and resilience – incorporating sociology and psychology*

Whilst Tinto’s work focuses on retention, in a more recent reflective paper (Tinto, 2017), he highlights the influence academic and support staff have on the success (resilience and persistence) of their students. Rather than presenting a generalised model applicable to “labelled groups” for research or institutional data purposes, Tinto’s model emphasises the individuality of students, with each having a unique response to challenges encountered during their HE studies (Longden, 2004). Tinto (2017) highlights the importance of students drive to persist as a core aspect of their academic success in his later work, incorporating more sociological aspects, such as Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory of motivation and, maybe even more so, Ryan & Deci’s (1985, in Ryan & Deci, 2017) self-determination theory to explain how a drive to persist- or motivation- can aid student success through adverse events or challenges (Figure 2)



**Figure 2: Model of student motivation and persistence (Tinto, 2017)**

Self-determination theory sets out three basic human needs- competence, autonomy, and relatedness- which need to be fulfilled to initiate self-motivated behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 1985, in Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the context of higher education, this means that students whose three basic needs are met are more likely to feel more self-determined and in control of their choices, which is linked to higher levels of persistence and resilience, positive emotions, and better performance (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

Deci & Ryan (2012) applied aspects of this theory further to conclude that autonomous motivation was linked to increased creativity and a higher level of problem-solving ability. Therefore, higher levels of self-determination in higher education students could lead to more self-motivated, engaged students who feel committed to their education, providing their environment allows them to remain in control of their autonomy. Removal or restriction of autonomy in both students and academics alike has adverse effects on the teaching and learning environment as a whole, as shown by King and Bunce (2019). Whilst academics are undoubtedly in a position to influence their students in terms of motivation, passion for a topic area or learning more, they

also are influenced by the changes in student body expectations, attitudes, and behaviours, which runs a risk of a vicious cycle of lowered or negative expectations ultimately impacting adversely on all involved in university life.



**Figure 3: Self-Determination Theory (based on Ackerman, 2018)**

Weeasinghe & Fernando (2017) conducted a detailed review of common models used in research to consider student satisfaction, and ultimately concluded that satisfaction as a concept is a complex psychological process that is influenced by a wide range of factors in the individual setting and the way in which individual students experience these factors. Therefore, surveys measuring student satisfaction do no more than reflect short-term attitudes of students when asked to evaluate their learning experiences and interactions with other services and facilities on campus rather than providing an in-depth understanding of the student experience over a three-year

period (Solinas *et al.*, 2012), supporting my research approach using reflective interviews with third year students in the last term of their equine degree.

The impact of teaching and support staff on student satisfaction and a sense of belonging has been widely researched, but less research exists about the impact recent HE developments have had on academic staff, and how this in turn might affect staff-student interactions, such as the marketisation of HE and the more recent rapid move to online and hybrid teaching. Academics interviewed in research comment on feeling that they are made to adapt their teaching, limit uncomfortable and stretching learning experiences to avoid students reporting lower levels of satisfaction (e.g. Child, 2011; Thiel, 2019; Bates & Kaye, 2014). A quote from one of the participants in Bates & Kaye (2014) sums up some of the impact of changes in higher education because of marketisation and its impact on academic staff and students:

“I think there's a much higher expectation to treat students as customers and clients...everybody I work with has always treated students with respect and...as...not customers but as colleagues as partners in learning so I find it quite frustrating...” (Participant 1 in Bates & Kaye, 2014, p,237).

The relationship between students and staff has changed over the past decades, meaning that the use a Bourdieusian lens or applying Tinto's models to a more heterogenous student body must be done with some caution. The marketisation of higher education has left academics reportedly feeling deflated and less motivated, tending to see themselves as a cog in a system that is driven by metrics rather than fulfilling learning experiences that encourage autonomy and personal drive in HE students (King and Bunce, 2019). The demotivation of academic staff is likely to lead to less productive or positive encounters with students (Bates & Kaye, 2014; King & Bunce, 2019), creating unnecessary adversity for students who may already be

struggling. As highlighted earlier, students deemed to be non-traditional tend to rely more heavily on tutor support (e.g. Rolfe, 2002; Twigg-Flesner, 2018; Zheng & Wang, 2022) and a significant proportion of equine students fall into this category. The influence of tutor and peer support was therefore a central point in the interviews of my project to establish whether similar reliance on tutors is present in equine students, and whether they were impacted by experiences with disillusioned or demotivated tutors in their university journey.

Tinto's increasing recognition of student individuality and shift to institutional practices needing to change as a shared responsibility for student success between student and provider negates the earlier criticisms of his model where he sought a way to integrate and assimilate students to institutional practices and cultures (Elliott & Lakin, 2020). The importance of institutional practices and procedures was highlighted by Chrysikos *et al.* (2017) who assessed Tinto's integration theory by combining an integration questionnaire (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983) and student enrolment data. Findings indicated that initial goals and institutional commitments alongside student-centred academic and support services "operating to the students' benefit" (Chrysikos *et al.*, 2017, p.97) have the most positive impact on student retention, highlighting the role of institutions in student retention.

The match between student characteristics and attributes, and the institutional quality, expectations and culture has a strong influence on students' "sense of belonging", one of the crucial features underpinning the student resilience concept (Tinto, 2017). Tinto recognises the importance of wider social support mechanisms, which are more strongly represented in Bourdieu's capitals (Bourdieu, 1986), but the emphasis on students as individuals rather than as a homogenous student body (Tinto, 2017) is

better suited to learning how staff interpretations of students based on their background influence their approach to teaching and tutoring support in my thesis.

Equine degrees at the university I work at attract approximately equal numbers of traditional and non-traditional students, which provided a setting in which non-traditional students might feel less like “a fish out of water” (Reay *et al.*, 2009; p. 1115) in comparison to working class students at elite and civic universities. Tinto also emphasises the roles of the provider and peers in a student to develop a sense of belonging (Elliott & Lakin, 2020), further recognising the importance of the societal as well as academic challenges students might experience.

### 2.3 Tinto's conditions for student success

Tinto suggested there are four cornerstones to facilitate and enhance student success in higher education, which are expectation, support, assessment and feedback and involvement (Tinto, 2012; 2017). Expectations refers to expectations the provider has of students, and also what students expect of themselves and their degree course. It is crucial students know and understand what they need to do to succeed, and the effort required to do well (Tinto, 2012). Support covers any social, academic, and potentially financial aid students need to overcome challenges and continue their studies (Tinto, 2012). For assessment and feedback, Tinto (2012) recommends that

“to be effective assessments must be frequent, early, and formative as well as summative in character [...] pauses for assessment and feedback within the classroom improve motivation” (p. 54).

The final pillar of involvement combines the concepts of student engagement and mattering, considering the impact of personal interactions on campus on individual students and their connectedness with the campus (Ryan & Deci, 2010). Tinto (2012,

2017) recognised that two students with similar backgrounds and qualifications can fare differently in higher education, and in later research emphasises the need to recognise the individual, their values and beliefs, and the impact of previous academic and social experiences in relation to their persistence. His theory underpinned research by Hallam (2023) who explored the experience of commuting students during the COVID-19 pandemic, further added that students' "sense of belonging is strong, yet they need to feel they matter as individuals" (Hallam, 2023; p, 383).

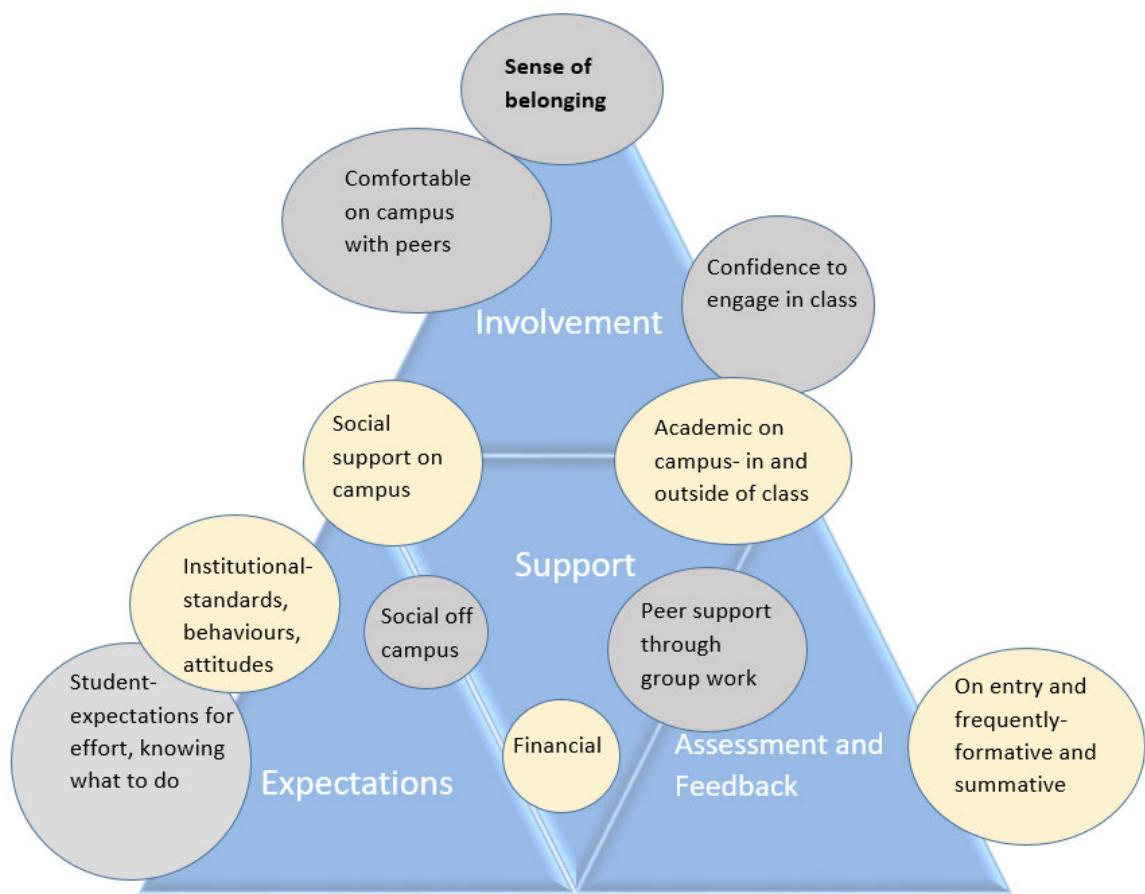
The structure of the diagram as a pyramid (figure 4) was intentional when I developed it, as the three "base layers" need to be as secure and stable as possible to enable student involvement and a sense of belonging for students. Weakness, e.g. in setting and meeting expectations, perceived unfairness in assessment and feedback or perceived lack of access to constructive support can have significant detrimental impacts on belonging, persistence, and success for HE students. Each pillar is considered further in the literature context in chapter 3.

While Tinto progressed over four decades from investigations of a student drop out model to a model of institutional action leading to what he calls "conditions for student success" (Tinto, 2012, p. 6), there remains an underpinning expectation for students to "integrate" into the institutional culture when entering HE (McCubbin, 2003; Perrell, 2018), regardless of personal attributes or traits, and undergo an active process of adjustment to "academic expectations of coursework while also forming social and other relationships" (Smith & Tinto, 2024, p.530). Harrison & Waller (2018) highlight criticisms of research and policy text looking to integrate student groups from low-participation backgrounds, stating that this approach "failed to locate educational choices within longstanding social structures, and absolved universities and schools from responsibility for changing" (p.915) in order to raise student aspirations. This

further emphasises the need for institutional responsibilities for meaningful actions to accommodate today's diverse student body.

Aspirations – or desirable future states in terms of employment and social status- are often higher than expectations. For example, parents of underrepresented groups in HE might want their children to complete a good degree, but do not realistically expect them to do so, based on socioeconomic and other disadvantage (Fuller, 2014, Archer, 2014). Persistent barriers to underrepresented student groups continue to be a challenge at elite university, whether this is through protocols in the admission process (Bolliver, 2016) or undervaluing A-level alternatives (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2017), for example, potentially further undermining parents' and students' expectations of success in HE. This adds to the arguments for institutional action for meaningful change in practices and procedures to prevent the replication of disadvantage. One way in which providers can take action is to ensure course content and academic expectations are communicated clearly and relatable to students and prospective students.

Tinto (2010) emphasised the importance of universities setting high expectations to encourage students to have high expectations of themselves and their performance. The consistency and clarity of explanations provided in the classroom as well as in other institutional communications must match the high institutional expectations to foster a teaching and learning environment conducive to student success. This is particularly important for recruitment materials that students use to make their course and university choices, as a mismatch resulting from incorrect or unclear communications creates expectations for students that are unlikely to be met by the university, resulting in disappointment and potential disengagement of students (James, 2002; Thomlinson & Simpson, 2023).



**Figure 4: Conditions to support student success (based on Tinto, 2012)**

Furthermore, the relationship between university approaches to academic skills expectations and support provision often do not match students' assessment of their own academic skills and support expectations, creating further potential for conflict, an environment for negative experiences and lower rates of student retention (Byrne & Flood, 2005; James, 2002). In policy and research texts, the concept of "student preparedness" is often explored in conjunction with expectations and continuation in higher education (Byrne, Flood & Hassall, 2012), so I will now move on to review Tinto's four conditions for student success in education research in chapter 3.

### 3.0 Literature and institutional context

In this chapter, I will provide a literature context within the four pillars of Tinto's factors in student persistence, aiming to relate these to the context of equine students at a small provider in England, as there are no peer reviewed papers to inform of their experiences in higher education in the UK. Whilst research to explore the experiences of equine students is more available from American providers, the nature of courses is not comparable as the UK courses tend to be more theory and research-based rather than on practical skills. Further challenges in the literature occur when comparing research from other rural providers, or research exploring the experiences of students at inner city universities, which is where most research in the UK is based (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2010, Thomas, 2015; Thomas, 2018, Webber, 2023, Wong, 2018).

Students on equine courses are likely to face similar challenges as those at larger providers, but also encounter unique challenges because of their specialised degree courses. The rural location of the campus, and lack of local resources might also pose additional challenges although [Bartlett \*et al.\* \(2011\)](#) claim that the addition and move to a rural campus for medical students in northern England did not compromise the student experience compared to its previous urban setting. It must be noted that the concept of a “rural campus” is not clearly defined in the literature, with European researchers locating it within a “small-to-medium sized town” ([Benneworth \*et al.\*, 2024, p. 1](#)) rather than more remotely and secondary to a main campus in an urban setting (Charles, 2016).

There is a significant amount of research about the rural “satellite” or “branch” campus as an extension of a larger, city-based university in America and Australia, although arguably the vastness of those rural areas is far more extensive than those referred to in European-based research (Bartlett *et al.*, 2011). The purpose of the rural branches is often described as a way to reach populations with lower higher education participation or higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation.

Ahoba-Sam *et al.* (2021) provided an additional suggestion that many smaller rural universities in the UK have arisen through an “evolutionary” (p.260) process where smaller rural and initially further education-focused campuses have become universities- not dissimilarly to the provider in my research, which acquired university status in 2018, but maintained the provision of further education as a separate educational entity sharing the same campus. In this chapter, I am exploring challenges and opportunities most relevant to equine students, using Tinto’s conditions for student success as a structure, which will also provide further context for my research questions.

### 3.1 Expectations

Tinto highlights the importance of representing and informing students about an institution as truthfully and accurately as possible to allow students to choose an institution and enter higher education studies with the best chance of success. This framework does not only consider access to higher education but retains its focus on retention and academic success for the individual student, but the definition of success in this context is debatable (Tinto,2012), and varies between academic staff and the

institution compared to students, where data driven approaches and the achievement of good degrees signify success to academic staff (Thompson & Ryan, 2018).

Student definitions of success are less well established in research, and are usually broadly claiming degree completion to be success (Twigg-Flesner, 2017) or alluding to the transformative intrinsic benefits of higher education, often related to positive academic outcomes. Other intrinsic benefits of completing a degree revolve around more independence from family, and developing an own life, yet a “more instrumental attitude in which education is a means to an end appears to increasingly apply” (Rasciute *et al.*, 2020, p. 3385). This might be a result of the massification of HE, and schools promoting universities as the next logical steps over other routes into the workplace (Twigg-Flesner, 2017b).

Student behaviour and attitude in sessions, where students are inquisitive, motivated and “build cultural capital through research” (Thompson & Jensen-Ryan, 2018, p.11) and active participation in classroom activities can compensate for limited cultural capital on entry, and stand out as succeeding students to teaching staff (Thomson & Jensen-Ryan, 2018). Such behaviours are influenced by student motivation to gain a degree, and as my research indicated, many equine students enter HE without a clear idea how this could influence their future career development, running the risk of limited motivation to actively engage in studies compared to students who know where the degree could take them, and the degree forms part of a clear career plan (Twigg-Flesner, 2017a, b). The limited intrinsic drive that arises from aiming for an ultimate goals the degree is needed for can make the transition more challenging, especially when expectations were vague, with students stating they expected to have to work harder, on their own and be independent- none of the students were able to explain how they expected this to look in practice.

Therefore, another aspect of the “expectations pillar” of this work strongly highlights the need for academic staff and institutions as a whole to set clear, achievable, but high expectations that students should aspire to as they begin to engage with the institution (Tinto, 2012). The importance of high expectations from the institution and the students themselves is summed up by Tinto (2010) as “no one rises to low expectations” (p.3).

### *3.1.1 Transitioning into higher education*

Where students are unable to access the information required to plan about the higher education studies, whether that be subject or location, their motivation to study and continue to study at the first-choice institution may be undermined by anxieties and the fear of the unknown gaps in knowledge about the institution (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Choosing the right institution, and potentially more importantly the right course for each individual can hugely impact on their ability to develop career goals (Chan, 2016), life aspirations and maintain focus; all of which are crucial for student persistence (Tinto, 2012). Learning experiences involving academic staff are the main interaction of students with their studies, and these are influenced and potentially limited by institutional approaches, policies, and actions that –maybe unintentionally- limit the effectiveness of the learning environment and students’ experiences in this context (Yorke, 2002; Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, unexpected changes to the learning environment as seen during the pandemic, can have significant effects on student satisfaction (Dastidar, 2021), belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2024) and performance (Pérez *et al.*, 2023).

Students in the UK progress through a schooling system that measures academic achievement at four points at key stages, and students are prone to developing a need

to know what to do to succeed, which has also been identified as an important factor in higher education success (Tinto, 2012; Sá *et al.*, 2019). When institutions can set clear expectations to enable students to understand what is required of them, and those expectations are set at a level to challenge the students, Tinto suggests that students are more likely to attend and engage with classroom-based extracurricular sessions (Tinto, 2012).

These expectations need to be realistic and meet subject benchmarks set out in the UK quality code (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2024), which are used to support module and course validations. The benchmark criteria application should be publicly available for each course and module which provide a detailed overview of the content and assessment modes on a degree, although they are rarely written in a student-friendly style, limiting the clarity of this information.

Universities in England are also benchmarked against weekly contact or teaching hours on their courses under recent changes in regulatory frameworks. Following the Browne Review (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) and 2011 White Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011), there has been an increase in lecturers with teaching qualification and / or professional accreditation through AdvanceHE, based on the assumption that this approach recognises and rewards excellent teaching, presenting the institution with a “good marketing tool [...] publicising a high percentage could benefit [...] student recruitment” (Botham, 2018; p.169).

HEA accreditation, particularly at the higher levels, also requires reflection on the wider learning experience of students (Cochrane & Jenkins, 2022; Donaldson, 2021). Although prospective students look for qualified teaching staff, there has been no

correlation between qualified teaching staff and increased satisfaction with the “teaching on my course” aspects of the NSS (Bell & Brooks, 2016; Knapper, 2016). However, Botham (2018) concluded that the professional accreditation “can encourage the way a teacher thinks about their practice and these changes in practice can subsequently have a positive influence on the student experience” (p. 174).

Whilst the completion of a formal teaching qualification may encourage newer academic staff to become more innovative in their teaching methods, the requirements have been met with resistance by older, established staff (Knapper, 2016). Furthermore, teaching excellence takes many different forms across the wide range of modern HE courses, making it highly unlike it can be captured in universal metrics – especially where teaching and learning occurs outside of scheduled contact hours in the classroom (Boxall, 2016).

The quantity of contact hours arguably is a meaningless metric, as measuring “value for money” in terms of cost per teaching unit does not reflect the quality of the learning environment and therefore the student’s interpretation of themselves in relation to a particular topic or wider institutional culture. The course and HEI need to provide a learning environment with which students can identify, with classroom interactions at its core. Successful achievement of meaningful interactions in the classroom facilitates social integration (Thomas, 2012), even where costs or time of extracurricular activities limit the engagement of disadvantaged students. This may also explain the continued lower admission of certain student groups to elite institutions, despite criticism from the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron (2016), and supporting research evidence, such as Boliver (2015). New universities or smaller HE-in-FE settings provide more familiarity, and hence greater appeal to these groups, despite the lesser

academic reputations of non-elite HEIs (Kahu, 2013) - a conclusion that may be applicable to the institution at the heart of this research. Due to its size and nature of the provision in a niche market, the university prides itself on a positive "learning experience "(UUK, 2016) and positive interactions outside of the classroom and with an institution as a whole (Temple *et al.*, 2014), which promotes positive conditions for students' self-association with the university.

They need to be challenging whilst accompanied by appropriate and accessible support mechanisms for students who require support to meet the expectations . This goes beyond support institutions have to provide for students with learning disabilities and should be available to all students at an institution, although students with weaknesses in academic credentials are targeted –and potentially labelled as a result – in many institutions, rather than facilitating access based on academic capabilities and academic confidence (Gorges & Goeke, 2015). Suitable support mechanisms are explored in more depth in section 3.2.

### *3.1.3 The impact of academic staff and changes in the higher education sector*

Clarity and consistency in communications from academic staff plays a crucial role in student retention and student motivation. This moves beyond the type of language used in communications to the style or manner in which communication between academics and students takes place, e.g. through the adaptation of a stricter or more relaxed teaching style (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), or by creating an environment that fosters a deep learning approach (James, 2002). The marketisation of higher education over the past decade somewhat repositioned students from being learners,

with an intrinsic motivation to learn to consumers expecting a service, which enables students to move into higher-paid careers on completion (Bunce & Bennet, 2019).

As Tinto reinforced repeatedly in his work, the institutions can create the right conditions and environment for learning and success, but each individual student brings with them their own expectations, mind-set, and wider sociological contexts that all influence the chance of student success (Tinto, 2012; Smith & Tinto, 2024). Therefore, the shift to a marketized higher education market, with students as consumer, alongside the promotion of higher education study as the most logical next step after school (Twigg-Flesner, 2017) is likely to present academics with a different set of challenges to create the right expectations in the right environment, to promote a drive to learn and improve performance in students. A consumer mindset in students has been associated with short-term gain approaches to meet assessment demands rather than the deeper learning approach and curiosity about the subject area higher education traditionally values (Wong & Ciu, 2019; Rolfe, 2002).

### 3.2 Support

Whilst high institutional expectations can create an environment for students to strive to meet those expectations, the appropriate support mechanisms must be present and accessible to students to support their success (Tinto, 2012). The support mechanisms must extend past academic support to social, pastoral, and potentially financial support from the institution and a student's wider network to create an environment that supports student persistence and success. Institutions with a culture of high (academic) expectations tend to inspire students to set higher expectations for themselves, resulting in higher levels of effort invested in meeting those expectations (Tinto, 1987). Where academic and assessment expectations can be met and

exceeded without significant study effort, students become less engaged with their studies over time, resulting in reduced retention and achievement.

Achievement of a “good degree” (upper second or first classification) is a benchmark against which universities are measured, but equally the achievement of a good degree influences career prospects for students, although Wong (2018) amongst other authors highlights the increasing number of students achieving good degrees, and therefore the need for students to engage in extracurricular activities to “stand out from the crowd”. High academic and behavioural expectations from institutions lead to higher student engagement and commitment and ultimately better academic performance, providing appropriate and accessible support is available, especially for students who are described as “disadvantaged” or “non-traditional” in the current literature (Tinto, 2017). Support is not limited to academic support to facilitate successful assessment completion but needs to address the wider university environment and the needs of students who have relocated, potentially for the first time in their lives and some distance from their family and friends, requiring them to build a new social support network (Clayton *et al.*, 2009; Thomas, 2016, Read *et al.*, 2020).

In order to combat the higher dropout rates during the first year of a degree programme compared to subsequent years, support mechanisms available to students need to be communicated explicitly, signposted for individuals in response to their needs and their “learner profiles”, with Tinto (1987, 2012) suggesting that the classroom is the ideal setting to engage students with available support. Support to develop a social support network in a new place also links closely to involvement, which is the fourth pillar in this framework. Early intervention to bridge mismatches between expectations and

experiences support the transition process (Leese, 2010), allowing students to gain confidence and competence that they can meet their own and the institution's expectations (Tinto, 1987, 2012). It is important that support mechanisms are introduced and initiated in the classroom or other formally scheduled activities that form part of the course a student is engaging with, and that engagement with the support is positively encouraged. If students feel uncomfortable to engage with support in a scheduled teaching interaction, they are less likely to seek out additional support services (Tinto 1987).

Universities offer a vast range of additional "personal development" or "academic workshops" to enhance student attainment, in an attempt to close the skills gap and support student confidence, leading to higher engagement and therefore retention. Tinto discussed these practices extensively and highlights additional courses (which may or may not contribute academic credit to a final award) as good practice throughout his work (1975), but strongly moves towards the use of embedded support mechanisms in his later work (206/07 & 2012). Most students engage poorly with add-on sessions, and disadvantaged students cannot afford to spend the additional time and money for these sessions (Kahu, 2013). Thus, the students who would potentially benefit the most are the ones least likely to attend (Tinto, 2012).

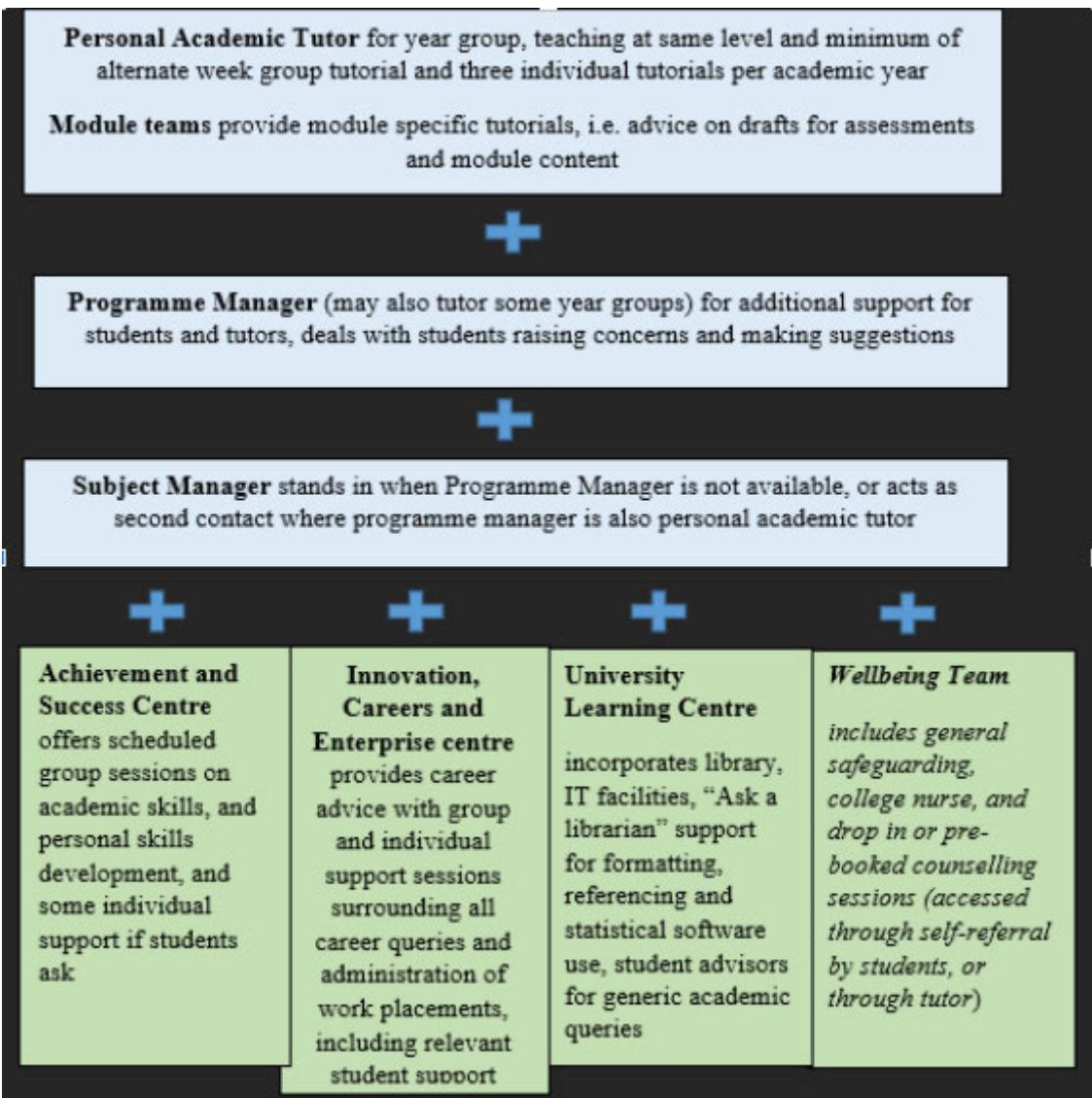
The traditional manner in which most universities operate presents a range of challenges for non-traditional students (Roberts, 2011; Mampaey, 2016). Non-traditional students have raised access to support outside of "standard office hours" as a significant concern, as due to additional family or full-time work commitments, their time on campus during these hours is very limited (Witkowski *et al.*, 2016). This is one example of non-traditional students being disadvantaged by a very traditional

approach, with very few HEIs adjusting traditional practices to accommodate non-traditional student needs (Roberts, 2011; Archer, 2007). Fragoso *et al.* (2013) clearly state that there is a need to change and develop HE culture in institutions and across the sector as a whole to address the practical challenges non-traditional students face (in this context mature students returning to education).

Whereas it may not be appropriate or practicable to open all relevant services through the evenings and weekends, alternative online-materials or support might be an option to support non-traditional students more effectively (Witkowski *et al*, 2016). This is a model offered in postgraduate studies in many institutions, but few extend the practice to full-time undergraduate courses. Traditional students with “unacknowledged, hidden challenges” are also likely to experience these problems. Although these have received limited attention in an education research context, this is something I have experienced regularly as a practitioner. Hence my research here could provide novel insights.

Milward (2016) focused on talented rather than underachieving students and highlighted a number of issues that may limit student motivation to participate in additionally scheduled courses or activities, citing limited financial support and negative academic experiences as crucial factors. In schools, pupils who are taking additional or separate sessions from the main class are often doing so to address a lack of academic achievement, and, as a result, are likely to have experienced derogatory comments or bullying for being the “stupid one”. These negative experiences can make it very challenging for students to build up the courage to participate in additional sessions that are not part of the core lectures on their programme of study (Milward, 2016).

Academic tutor support gains increasing importance for students from families who do not understand the concept of HE study, or simply disapprove of the student's decision to enter HE (Sachs, 2016). More students commute to university across all types of HEIs to reduce the cost of university attendance, more so since the fee increases in 2012 (Thomas, 2012; University Alliance, 2014). This reduces the availability of peer support on campus, making social integration on campus more difficult for commuting students. Therefore, meaningful learning opportunities, and equally meaningful learning interactions with both staff and peers, are even more important (Thomas, 2012). Staff perceptions influence their behaviours and support approaches, with the potential of affecting their tutees' persistence in HE positively or negatively. Support mechanisms available to all university students in this research are shown in figure 5.



**Figure 5: Student Support Structure (Twigg-Flesner, 2018 in Atherton *et al.*, 2018)**

Student mental health and wellbeing has been of increasing interest in the press (Raddi, 2019; Lavery, 2019, Zeffman, 2018), placing pressure onto HEIs to provide appropriate support for students. Lower levels of autonomy, motivation and relatedness have also been shown to link to poorer mental wellbeing, and higher education student mental health has been reported on in the mainstream media, whether this was to report campaigns to raise awareness of student suicides (BBC East Midlands, 2019) even before the pandemic, the introduction of a text-based mental health support service (Fuller, 2023), reports highlighting inefficiencies in

mental health support provision by universities (Shepka & Mulroy, 2022) or the introduction of mental health campaigns like “crisis cafes” (Sissons & Watson, 2022) or the introduction of therapy dogs (Harris, 2020)- my university currently has one resident therapy dog. Morris (2022) illustrated links between the increase in poor mental health in higher education students and the marketisation of higher education and speculated that increasing students’ autonomy should lead to increased student wellbeing, and consequently achievement.

However, whilst mainstream media have been focusing on student suicides and poor mental health and trying to hold universities responsible, the Office for Students (2019) reported that suicide rates of higher education students were about half as common as the wider population of the same age (age 20 and under), and about a third of the rate of young males in the same age group. The report concludes that suicide in under 20-year-olds is more likely to be a wider societal problem, rather than a concern specifically for higher education students (Office for Students, 2019).

Whilst this is a big debate in itself, which is outside of the scope of this thesis, the local setting has seen an increase in students declaring mental health concerns on entry or during their time at the institution. The university is fortunate to have a designated wellbeing and mental health team on site, who operate a drop-in clinic as well as structured appointments for ongoing support, in close liaison with the student’s GP and other medical professionals. It is important to note that students with diagnosed conditions are more likely to access these services, but for most students their academic tutor is the first port of call, highlighting again the importance of a good tutor-student rapport (Yale, 2019).

My work with BTEC and Access to HE students indicated that students expected to be more “independent” at university and seemed to associate this with “less support” (Twigg-Flesner, 2017), something which was emphasised by their FE tutors, similarly to the experience of psychology first year students in Yale (2019). Students with siblings in higher education potentially had a better understanding of available support, especially personal tutors, but this depended on whether their sibling felt comfortable to access the support- as highlighted by Watts (2011) and based on news headlines discussed earlier, effective tutor support can provide a lifeline, and enable students to access the right support in challenging situations (Brinkworth *et al.*, 2009; Grey & Osborne, 2020), and this may also be applicable to equine degree students.

### 3.3 Assessment and Feedback

Assessment and Feedback forms the third pillar of Tinto’s framework and underpins the first two areas of expectations and support strongly in an academic sense (Tinto, 2012). Frequent and formative feedback, whether verbally in taught sessions, or in other formats on assessment drafts allow students to gauge the quality of their work against academic expectations and identify areas in which they may require additional support, hence “enabling the self-regulation of learning” (Pereira *et al.*, 2016, p.7) Hankins & Harrington (2022) evaluated challenges to high-quality, frequent feedback provision, including limited staff training, time constraints and students not seeming to use feedback for improvements. The latter aspect becomes a vicious circle, as staff invest less into their feedback, making it decreasingly constructive, resulting in even poorer student use of feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). Therefore, developing feedback literacy should be a priority early in a degree, so students are ready to receive and process feedback This links nicely to Tinto’s (2012) suggestions of early and

frequent summative assessments, signalling that the engagement with assessments and feedback is a core expectation in higher education. William (2011) makes the utilisation of feedback to alter academic approaches, hopefully leading to improved academic outcomes part of the definition of feedback rather than the mere process of commenting on students' work.

"Explaining why feedback is powerful, what kind of feedback they can expect, and giving students clear expectations about the formative feedback loop are essential in setting the stage for more positive student interactions with the feedback (Hankins & Harrington, 2022, p.7).

This conclusion highlights the importance of a two-way interaction with the feedback provided and students processing the feedback and acting in future assessments to gain higher results and a sense of achievement (Bloomberg, 2023).

At the institution this research was completed at, students are provided with a formative assignment on entry to their programme, and at the beginning of each academic year, allowing students to gauge their confidence and current abilities in comparison to the institutional academic expectations. This means that students submit a short essay of 500-1000 words, depending on their programme of study, and tutors provide suggestions for improvement and confirmation of good practices in the work without awarding a mark. The feedback aims to highlight areas for improvement alongside reassurance and confirmation of strong aspects of the assessment. Engagement with this process is not compulsory, the process is often bypassed by students who would benefit from the feedback, but prioritise work, family, and other social commitments, although this was explored further in my interviews. Adapting Tinto's suggestion of early formative work (Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2012) bearing credits towards degree completion could result in stronger engagement with this process, and

provide constructive and individualised support in this setting, hence early credit-bearing assessments with detailed feedback could lead to increased student buy in.

Academic staff have been reported to have expectation that students are able to process and implement feedback provided on assessments to improve future submissions yet research of feedback literacy indicates differently (Hankins & Harrington, 2018). Student feedback literacy was first coined as an expression by Sutton (2012), and defined in later research as “the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p.1). Whilst there is empirical evidence suggesting a positive impact of interventions to promote feedback literacy, many have shared shortcomings, like poor student engagement despite heavy staff time investment (Winstone *et al.*, 2019). Research involving teaching staff has also shown that not all academic staff have the same understanding of what feedback is, and how a two-way process involving students is more effective (Xie & Liu, 2024) than comments to justify a mark without forward-facing recommendations (Carless, 2020). Feedback literacy has not previously been explored in equine students in England, and so my research has potential for original contributions in this context.

### 3.4 Involvement

The final pillar of Tinto's framework, involvement, is very similar to what authors using a Bourdieusian lens refer to as a "sense of belonging" (e.g. Thomas, 2015 & 2016), and policy highlights as "engagement" (Kuh *et al.*, 2005), ultimately summarising the active involvement of the student in institutional activities. These may go beyond teaching and learning experience, but classroom experiences are a crucial influence, especially for commuting students and student who do not spend a lot of time on campus outside of scheduled sessions (Tinto, 2012).

In more recent research, a further aspect of "mattering" has been added to Tinto's theories about student persistence (Smith & Tinto, 2024), which emphasises the need for students to feel heard and seen as an individual rather than one of many (Shine *et al.*, 2021). This could be facilitated by relatively simple steps, such as knowing and addressing students by their name (Smith & Tinto, 2024), but also being able to provide authentic feedback and support during teaching sessions and in individual meetings, especially if students are revealing challenging circumstances (Gravett & Winstone, 2020).

Tinto refers to formal affiliations with academic tutors, which Rolfe (2002) highlighted as particularly important for non-traditional students in HE, and social connections or "informal social connections with faculty, staff and peers" (Tinto, 2012, p.64) improving students' engagement and therefore likelihood to persist and remain at the current institution. Whilst there is a distinction between academic and social interactions which influence student engagement, the classroom interactions are arguably a pivotal experience that influences engagement. In a smaller institution as the one in this case, classroom experiences a hugely influential, but encounters between staff and students

on campus between classes are equally influential. Being able to great a student by their name can have a positive influence on the student's perception of their association with, and loyalty to, a university (Twigg-Flesner, 2019).

Traditionally, the strongest focus has been on the transition of students into HE, but more recently, the institution in this study is focusing on students returning after the first year of their course to continue their studies. Retention of students from level to level of their course has also become of increasing research interest. This may be the area in which my research deviates somewhat from Tinto who maintains that the first-year experiences and the transition period in particular are the most important as these periods serve "*as a foundation upon which subsequent student and faculty affiliations are built and academic and social memberships established*" (Tinto, 2012, p. 64). This discrepancy may be a result of a shifting sector focus from facilitating access to higher education from underrepresented groups to maintaining engagement with higher education studies to successful degree completion. Retention, in turn, has been superseded in research by a focus on student engagement rather than simply accessing and staying in higher education (Tight, 2019). However, Tight (2019) also noted that "Tinto's model appears to have had the greatest impact" (p. 692) when reviewing influential literature in the context of student retention and engagement, validating the use of Tinto's model in my research.

Furthermore, Tinto distinguishes between retention (institutional monitoring of student progress) and persistence (the students' ability to succeed in a given academic environment despite personal struggles), arguing that therefore institutional actions should aim to increase persistence in students which requires empathetic recognition of the individual circumstances (Tinto, 1987; 2012). The first hurdle students need to

clear to succeed at their expectations of what higher education entails-particularly for students who are first-in-family this can be very daunting and difficult, as they have no close person to speak to about potential challenges in other aspects of University learning (Christie, 2008, for example). Equally, institutions' expectations they have in relation to students' actions, behaviours, and attitude towards learning and engagement are communicated in a wide range of ways, leading to further areas of mismatch between institutional and student expectations (Leese, 2010). Each individual student expects certain behaviours and actions from an institution, but, maybe more importantly, are driven by their self-perception and expectations to themselves, with the latter being influenced strongly by institutional actions and behaviours, especially during transition into higher education and the first year of a course.

Tinto (2010) highlighted that institutional expectations created an environment to nurture success, whereas low expectations were more likely to result in failure as students were less likely to strive to succeed. This highlights the importance of institutional levels at the right level to challenge, but not over face students, and create the most effective learning environment. The “#family” ethos at the provider in my research aims to create such an environment, so learning more about how equine students experience the wider environment, belonging and mattering provides a unique contribution to the current body of research, especially as this cohort’s degree was significantly impacted by the global pandemic. The next chapter outlines steps this provider took during and between lockdowns to facilitate teaching to a normal schedule, as well as the wider impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on HE students in an academic, financial, and mental health context,

## **4.0 The COVID-19 Global Pandemic and the University Experience in England**

The global COVID-19 pandemic unarguably has affected all aspects of “normal life”, and the university sector has not been an exception to this. Campuses were closed, and, at the university for this investigation, all teaching, learning, and assessments moved online at short notice in March 2020. Further disruptions occurred in the 2020/2021 academic year, when a further full national lockdown closed university teaching facilities for the first six weeks of the second semester in January 2021. Teaching moved back full-time to the physical campus locations in September 2021 and remained there for the full academic year. These fast-moving and unprecedented changes caused disruption to students in most UK universities.

### 4.1 Impact on Teaching, Learning and Assessment for the provider in my research

The first national lockdown was announced a week before the end of term, so students were effectively sent onto an extended break, and the missing teaching week moving to after the break. This gave staff an extra week to modify learning materials for pure online use, and to pre-record teaching sessions in sections. The pre-recordings were used after Easter during the normal timetabled sessions, whilst staff were available at those times to guide discussions or take questions about the materials. The university was hesitant to move to a solely live delivery model as this might have disadvantaged students in other time zones, or those with poorer internet connectivity- a common problem in a relatively rural area. Staff and students had to upskill rapidly to engage with teaching and learning using Microsoft teams, and confidence in live sessions was limited, illustrated by less active interaction from students to start with.

Further pressure was removed through online assessments, often allowing students a longer timeframe to submit exams, or have open book exams, resulting in lower

levels of anxiety. Any oral exams, presentations or practical exams were modified to written online submissions, representing the original assessment context as closely as possible.

Teaching approaches moved to the live delivery of all lead lectures using Microsoft Teams from the start of the 2020/2021 academic year. Students had one day of seminars and practicals on campus, with a specific day allocated to each year group to limit the overall number of people on campus at any given time. Seminars - and practicals where this was logically achievable- were delivered in a hybrid format, with some students in the room, and others participating via Microsoft Teams. Assessments were prepared in a “COVID-proof” manner, relying on online mechanisms, with some practical exams taking place on campus, and any presentations being marked in live presentations using Microsoft Teams.

Teaching and learning approaches assumed a “normal” approach in the 2021/2022 academic year, although lectures continued to be recorded using Microsoft Teams to support students who were shielding or otherwise unable to attend campus in person. Assessment returned to their original form, although presentations, especially for postgraduate students, have stayed in an online format.

Students who took part in the interview were affected by all three years of changes, making their experience of higher education unique in uncertain and quickly changing circumstances. Therefore, measures taken to support students in an extreme and unprecedented situation whilst being perceived as positive by the students are measures that could continue to be used to improve the student experience and level the playing field for all higher education students. The participants were all enrolled on equine degree courses, which meant that a significant part of the practical application

and practical skills development were experienced very differently compared previous cohorts.

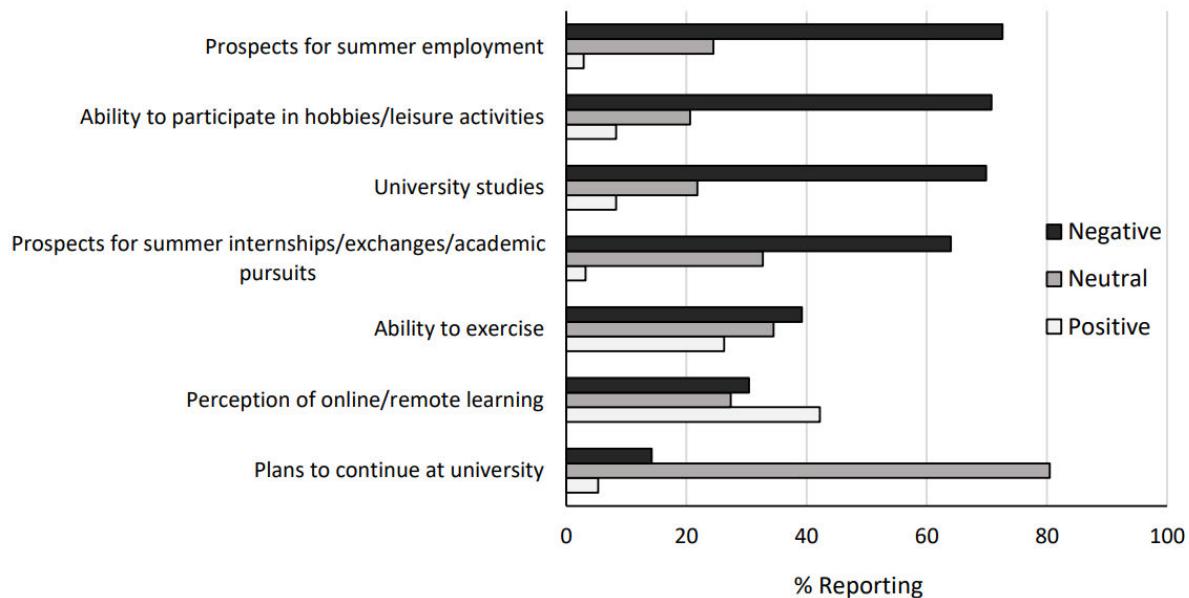
I will now review the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student experience and external pressures students experienced during this time. This will provide the background to then learn more about the experience of students on equine courses compared to the more commonly studied providers, which are predominantly red brick and post-1992 universities in England.

#### 4.2 Financial Impact

Comparative research with students from Oxford (UK) and Queen's University (Canada) highlighted concerns about the learning quality, finances, and impact of the changes to teaching and learning on future progression, both in terms of academic and career contexts (Appleby *et al.*, 2022). The Queen's students in this study actually reported a decrease in academic performance, but also reported a positive impact on relationships with family members during lockdowns and therefore isolation from friends and social activities (Figure 6; Appleby *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, Oxford students reported predominantly negative impacts on employment and leisure activities, which was also echoed in The Sutton Trust Research Brief in February 2021 (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021), but showed a more positive perception of online teaching, maybe valuing the increased flexibility of asynchronous sessions. Students in the institution at the core of the present research project had not previously had access to recordings of lectures and felt this was a positive aspect of online learning, as they could attend sessions live (online) and then listen back to areas they found more challenging when writing up notes. Research in this area appears to have focused on the asynchronous nature of delivery at most universities,

whereas this university delivered live online lectures as per the original course timetable. Student feedback indicated that this provided some structure to students in lockdown, and as such was seen as a positive by many students.

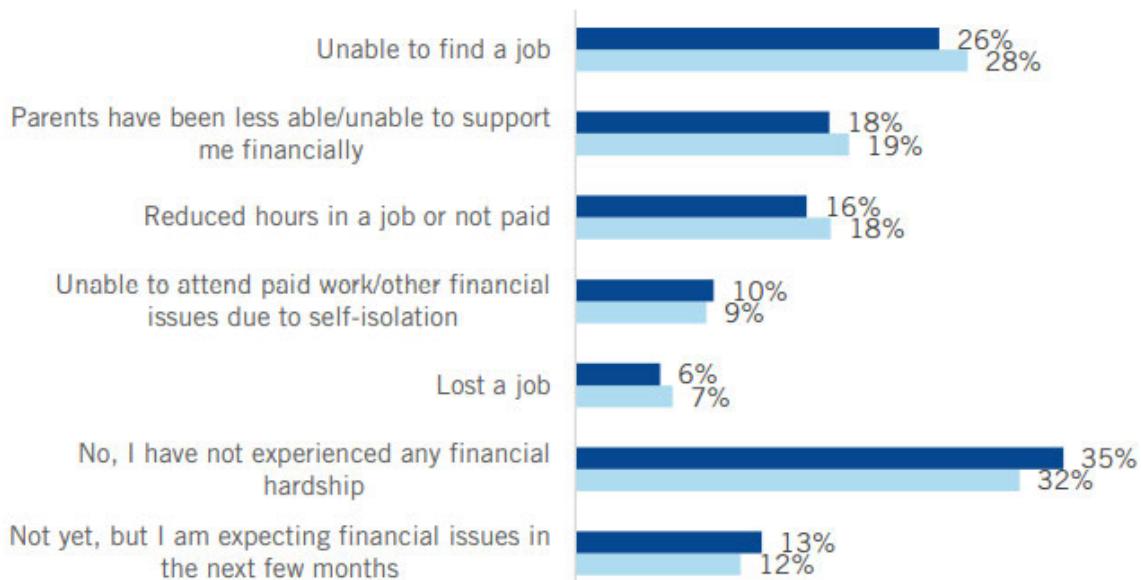


**Figure 6: Impact of COVID-19 and social distancing on aspects of students' lives (Appleby et al., 2022)**

Burki (2020) predicted a dark future for the UK University sector, with large financial losses due to accommodation and catering closures, and uncertainty about the 2020/2021 academic year, which has impacted on spending power and service provision at some universities post-COVID but did not apply to the institution at the core of this research. Despite significant reductions in income through the above closures, and abandonment of international events over the summer, the institution did not make redundancies, and in fact has been recruiting higher student numbers and new staff to manage this sustained growth. Financial support packages have remained in place for students in financial difficulties, alongside the longer standing bursaries for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which continues to include financial support towards IT equipment or loans of laptops and internet dongles to support

student access to online learning materials, such as learning support workshops and study skills materials.

However, the financial impact of the pandemic, and subsequent events leading to an increase in the cost of living, such as Brexit and the Ukraine crisis are continuing to have an impact on the university experience of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. More students from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to live at home and commute to campus, which has become increasingly difficult as fuel prices have been rising in 2022 (Kelsall, 2022). Financial challenges for students have been highlighted in several places, but The Sutton Trust Research Brief in February 2021 provided an insight into the challenges in the job market for student (Figure 7) and resulting financial challenges, which may explain the higher focus on paid employment alongside university at a cost to physical attendance reported in 2021/2022 by many providers and highlighted by Williams (2022).



**Figure 7: Financial challenges due to COVID-19 Pandemic for university students (dark blue-middle class background, light blue working class background) (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021)**

#### 4.3 Mental Health Impact

In addition to financial challenges, student engagement post-pandemic in terms of physical attendance is negatively affected by student mental health- a topic of rising concern pre-pandemic, this continues to present challenges to students as well as staff supporting students. This is not an unexpected consequence, as researchers such as Pownall *et al.* (2022) provided guidance about the expected challenges for students returning to what has widely been referred to as the “new normal” or a “post-pandemic environment”. Drawing on challenges already outlined, the impact on already disadvantaged students, e.g. from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of attainment and re-engaging with the physical campus. Inequalities that were evident pre-pandemic appear to have been amplified, with the learning of lower income students most adversely affected due to a lack of access to appropriate resources such as reliable internet access, IT equipment and a suitable place to study (Appleby *et al.*, 2022). Students returning from these sub-optimal settings, joining peers whom they perceive as not having experienced the same challenges and hardships has led to a higher likelihood of students experiencing imposter syndrome, and having a lower sense of belonging, both of which impacting negatively on (re-) engagement and potentially attainment (Pownall, 2022).

Burns *et al.* (2020) investigated the psychosocial impact of the pandemic at UK Universities in October of 2020, which provided an initial insight into the wellbeing of students partway through the pandemic. The remote, and often asynchronous delivery of teaching sessions has obvious drawbacks in terms of limiting traditional social interactions, limitations in technological skills, access to a suitable studying environment and reliable internet access, but 10% of students who previously

experienced anxiety when engaging in discussions in the physical classroom felt safer to ask questions and engage in discussions.

The high level of social isolation and resulting adverse effects of the pandemic on student mental health were a concern (Lee, 2020), and have been shown to manifest in practice and in research, with recent news articles reporting that nearly 50% of students are negatively affected by poor mental health (Pandey, 2022). This figure is certainly concerning, but needs to be treated with caution, as the results are based on 7,200 responses, and the study was commissioned by a mental health charity, potentially leading to higher levels of engagement from students suffering with poor mental health and those who feel ok not engaging. Nonetheless, the impact of the pandemic on mental health in the population is undeniable, and concerns for university students have been addressed in research from the early stages of the pandemic.

Nurunnabi *et al.* (2020) provided an early insight into the impact of the global pandemic on mental health in G20 countries, highlighting the increased online provision of materials in the UK, through platforms such as Universities UK, OfS, and GuildHE, but did not assess the accessibility of or engagement with these resources in their research. The biggest challenge for students suffering from poor mental health is to reach out, and access to static online materials may not be perceived as a supportive or useful mechanism here. Garrido *et al.* (2019) emphasised that whilst access to online materials is better than nothing, supervised engagement with online resources is more effective than individual engagement, and neither are as effective as active alternatives, especially as static online resources require individual (self-)motivation which is adversely affected by conditions such as depression and anxiety.

Undoubtedly, the global pandemic has impacted on the student and learning experience for students graduating from undergraduate degrees in 2022, with at least half of their teaching and learning process being affected COVID-19 associated changes, including the move to online and hybrid learning, as well as the wider impact of social isolation and financial pressures. The students who were interviewed for this research were in a unique position to explore and share their experiences, and personal consequences during this globally unsettling time.

## 5.0 Research design

Methodology considers the positionality, epistemology and ontology of the researcher, and reflexive commentary as to how these align with the adapted research methods, justifying the overall approach to the research project. Researcher positionality was explored throughout this chapter, but particularly during the ethical considerations for this research. The ontology of this research fits the definitions outlined by Cohen *et al.* (2018) as it recognises the informants as individual people who “construct their own meaning of situations and make sense of their own world” (p. 288), leading to deliberate, intentional, and creative actions to meet perceived situational demands (Cresswell, 2013).

These actions are founded in the individual's cultural norms and experiences. Therefore, “realities are multiple” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; p.288), meaning that the same scenario is experienced differently by each person who encounters said scenario. Epistemologically, this means that the same scenario can be variable, and even contradictory at times, emphasising the importance of learning the context of a person's statements or actions in a given moment in time (Punch & Oncea, 2014). The scenarios are not analysed through the lens of the researcher, but through the lens of the informants, using their stories and interpretations of a scenario to formulate a wider understanding (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

## 5.1 Social constructionism

This project took a social constructionist approach, which accepts that different people have different views on a concept or topic, shaped by their individual experiences, skills, knowledge, and social background (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Research using this lens seeks to examine a problem or concept through the way in which different people view a situation, understand a concept, and examines the background that has led to individual stances, such as background and personal experiences. This approach was highly compatible with an educational setting, as it emphasised the social nature of learning, based on communication and social interactions (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Students who took part in this study had a wide range of backgrounds, and as such there was potential for very different or contradictory narratives and experiences during the course of their degree studies, but these differences were a key area of interest and focus to develop a deeper understanding in this topic area.

An interpretive approach recognised that individuals act as independent, intelligent beings, who actively construct their world, and respond dynamically in any situation, based on their world views and experiences (Cresswell, 2013). Therefore, academic experiences, including interactions with academic and support staff, peers *and* the student themselves collectively impact on the nature of interactions, and the impact these have on individuals, and the manner in which students subsequently recall specific experiences (Gergen, 1992) It is important to note that exposure to a scenario does not equate to all individuals leaving that scenario with the same memory, as individual levels of self-confidence, confidence with issues arising in the scenario, so the influence of the individual and the manner in which different individuals remember the same moment provides a much deeper and multifaceted information for me as the researcher (Kiltz *et al.*, 2023)- or in a simpler way, constructionism analysis cognitive

approaches to a scenario- through “thinking, memory, knowing and problem solving “ (Chaib, 2015, p. 4) to create common knowledge, understanding and sense about a situation between the student and myself as the researcher.

Interpretive researchers recognise that reality is multifaceted and as considers the multiple perspectives on any given situation or concept, rather than taking a positivist drive to control confounding variables to measure and confirm facts that are measurable (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In my teaching, I predominantly cover equine health, reproduction, and welfare modules. Research in these areas, apart from some mixed methods work on perceptions of a concept or issue, takes quantitative approaches in most aspects. Whilst I was excited to take a very different approach for my thesis, the hard-line positivist in me still needed to chart some findings for visualisation, e.g. to summarise the questionnaire answers to be able to make sense of my data despite some deep ideological conflict between constructionist and positivist research philosophy. A further significant challenge for me was to accept that positivistic requirements to ensure the robustness of data could not be demonstrated through reliability or repeatability, as the underlying assumptions permit the existence of different versions of the same reality, relying on tools such as interviews, focus groups etc. and using the language and content of these in their context, rather than as isolated data sets or measurements (Burr & Mackay, 1997), hence linking individual knowledge to social processes and action (Mardorf, 2021).

As discussed in chapter 3 (Theoretical frameworks) and 4 (literature context), students who are classed as “non-traditional” or “disadvantaged” are often considered in research in the context of a deficit discourse, and considered as “fish out of water” (Franceschelli *et al.*, 2015) at elite universities (Reay *et al.*, 2009), this research took place in a new university, which is often more attractive to “non-traditional” students,

and these are the students whom this research is focused on. Taking a constructionist interpretive approach to learn more about the experiences of “non-traditional” students studying applied science and business degrees in a new university therefore was a suitable approach to this research.

It is, however, essential to recognise that this approach remained affected and influenced by the researcher’s values and beliefs (which meant some charts to make sense of the data for me, for example), and therefore significant effort was made to recognise the role of myself in the research and potential challenges in this chapter. Areas that were most likely to show researcher influence included the approach to the data analysis and interpretation phase but underpinned the entire research process. Therefore, it was essential to recognise my positionality as an insider researcher with a dual role reflexively and consider how it could influence this research.

### 5.2 Insider research in a small provider setting

When I was planning to recruit and interview students from a department where I teach on approximately ¾ of degrees on offer, I had to consider the influence of myself in a dual role of lecturer(tutor) and researcher carefully to prevent adverse effects on my daily work with students and the quality of data I could expect to gather in the interviews. From a methodological perspective, insider research (IR) provided a convenient and suitable research approach for me as a practitioner who already works within the setting and with informants in that setting, therefore providing a degree of common ground between the researcher and participants (Unluer,2012).

Kecskes & Zhang (2009) described two types of common ground: Core common ground is the shared knowledge, for example of previous experiences by both the researcher and the informant, which is present at the start of the research process and remains relatively constant throughout the process. Shared common ground is a more complex concept, which is subdivided into shared sense and current sense, with both being sensitive and the individual's private experiences in a given context.

In the context of my research, assumed areas of core common ground were the knowledge about the course, the setting, a common interest in equestrianism and the research relevant to the course the student had taken. There were some further areas with some participants, including gender, being a parent, and similar ages to two mature students who participated. Equally, I interviewed two male students, students from other countries and cultures, and students who were nearly 20 years younger than me. There was a risk that my assumptions about course content and wider cohort feedback about experiences on the different courses could give me an impression of a larger level of common ground than that actually evident in the interviews- a risk discussed in depth by Hart & Okkali (2021). I therefore entered the project, particularly the interview phases, with a preconception of common ground, which could be positive or negative in terms of the research. If I failed to confirm, or misjudged the extent and nature of common ground, the data robustness would become questionable, as my inaccurate assessment might have influenced questions or the way in which questions were framed - this risk was mitigated through the formulation of open-ended questions for a semi-structured interview approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

Trowler (2012) argued that insider research could drive localised practitioner knowledge, and hence would be less likely to be seen as high impact work or be published in higher quality academic journals. However, I would argue that, when

conducted in an ethical and transparent manner, individual case studies can provide original and valuable suggestions for changes in practice in a way that is accessible to practitioners (Thomas, 2011; Bamber *et al.*, 2011; Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2012) alongside a valuable contribution to education research (Tight, 2013) and therefore has the potential to make significant contributions to current knowledge. Unlike empirical research, achieving global or even national impact, case studies provide an opportunity to reflect on and improve current academic practice (Hewitt-Taylor, 2013), a concept which Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as transferability rather than generalisation.

Sayer (2010) added to this, by claiming that insider or practitioner research could be more useful to practitioners than case controlled as it provided a deeper understanding of informants' experiences and perceptions, which is of particular relevance when my students belong to a vastly under-researched group in education research. Randomised trials as used traditionally in "truthful" empirical research might add to theoretical knowledge, but this was rarely translated into changed practice in the short or medium-term, and rarely provided the deeper insight behind responses on a multiple-choice questionnaire.

Therefore, my research in a niche university, with a group of non-traditional students as informants and reflecting on the challenges they experienced during their studies, and their strategies to succeed provided an appropriate and novel approach to understand more about their experiences for a number of reasons: this study did not assume a deficit discourse approach, which many studies using a Bourdiesian lens demonstrated in this area, but accepted that smooth sailing is not the main indicator of student success. Challenges were expected, and understanding how students dealt

with these, and which attributes and skills supported their success were a focus of my research.

Additionally, existing research tended to focus on large Russel Group or Post-92 Universities, with little research in smaller universities reaching publication stage in terms of peer-reviewed papers, although some conference presentations have explored smaller higher education settings (E.g. Twigg-Flesner, 2017b). Furthermore, students on equine or equestrian degrees are a vastly underrepresented group of students in research, despite a steady increase in student numbers on these courses over the last decade.

### 5.3 Recruitment of participants

In order to encourage students to engage with this research, a questionnaire was used to attract a sample from the final year undergraduate equine programme students, similarly to the effective approach Rodgers *et al.* (2023) used to recruit disabled academics for interviews. The students who volunteered their contact email at the end of the questionnaire were subsequently invited for interviews after they completed their assessment period two examinations to avoid any conflict between students' academic commitments and volunteering time to participate in this research.

#### 5.3.1 Questionnaire design

The survey was distributed as an online questionnaire, using Google Forms, to all equine course undergraduate students in the case study setting, as despite a predominantly constructionist approach, this allowed the recruitment of a diverse sample from a restricted population, building on the approach and justifications of Horton & Tucker (2012). Ethical approval from the local institution was therefore linked

to a low-pressure and limited promotion approach of this questionnaire to students, rather than sending targeted emails or asking programme managers to promote questionnaire completion for this project. This approach was far less direct than the way other surveys were promoted to students, which might have been a contributing factor to the relatively low response rate, as well as not offering a reward for completing the questionnaire. Research by Saleh & Bista (2017) suggested that communication methods to promote a questionnaire and reminders to complete the questionnaire in a personalised approach, e.g. directly to the students' email account and/ or communication via a trusted staff member were more likely to result in higher response rates- neither of these approaches were taken for this project as a result of local restrictions.

The questionnaire consisted of two distinct parts. Part 1 aimed to collect demographic data, such as areas and level of study, age, gender, and satisfaction with their academic performance in relation to self-perceived academic abilities. A blank copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

These questions allowed me to understand how well my sample could reflect the diversity of the wider equine department, which Boddy (2016) suggested was needed in a study covering a breadth of topics, and might also have been driven by my traditionally more positivist research focus, although I recognise that the representative sample in this context does not necessarily mean findings would be more widely applicable (Rapley, 2014 in Flick, 2014). Nonetheless, the answers allowed me to check I had covered a range of programmes within the department, and students who reportedly felt differently about their academic performance, which was likely to provide more breadth in experiences.

The next question specifically asked informants how they would describe themselves in an academic setting, e.g. whether they would identify as a traditional or non-traditional student, or just as a student, with other options based on WP criteria also available. This question was originally included to challenge the dualism of traditional and non-traditional students, as Brunell (2015) and Fowles-Sweet & Barker (2018) highlighted the negative impact the “othering” effect of labels can have on some students, but still allowed me to show the range of student backgrounds for those who completed the questionnaire and volunteered for interviews and develop recommendations that could be trialled in a larger population (Grosshoechme, 2014).

The information collected in the first part of the survey allows the profiling of informants, but also allows the self-selection of a subsample for the interview phase, aiming to interview a range of students with different characteristics, covering experiences on a range of Equine-related programmes (as argued by Horton & Tucker, 2012 in research about disabled academic staff).

Part 2 asked students to reflect on positive and negative learning experiences, involving both academic and support staff. A further question prompted students to expand on their reflection about their emotions, and how they feel the situation was either handled positively, or how the situation could have been handled differently to convert a negative learning experience to a more positive one. Responses to these two questions were revisited during the interviews, and explored further to gain deeper insights (Griffioen, 2019). The answers provided here were considered under the relevant pillars of Tinto’s conditions to meet student success, and explored further within the context of expectations, assessment and feedback, support, and involvement during the interview (Tinto, 2012).

This approach, using open questions, was based on research by Douglas *et al.* (2015 and 2016) who used a customer- satisfaction approach as an alternative suggestion to the Likert Scales used in the NSS. Part 2 of the survey is likely to trigger emotional responses, particularly when reflecting on a negative learning experience, so participants were advised to state “no answer” if they felt unsettled or upset by the questions. Responses to these two questions were revisited during the interviews, and students were able to talk about these in more detail if they felt comfortable to do so, leading to deeper reflections and insights.

Two questions also aimed to find out where on campus students felt most and least settled or “at home”- based on work by Thomas (2015), as responses to these questions could highlight some interesting findings with regards to a sense of belonging in a range of undergraduate students. Thomas (2015) worked with part-time mature students, who identified a sense of belonging mainly in the teaching rooms they accessed, and learning resource centres, but felt isolated and out of place in the social spaces on campus. A similar picture has been identified for mature students in the current setting, but the extent to which different students identify with areas of the campus could provide further insights as to where and how support could be streamlined or offered more effectively and gave a further insight into student involvement (Tinto, 2012).

The final question in the second part of the questionnaire invited informants to leave their contact email address for follow-up interviews, should they wish to do so.

### 5.3.2 Pilot study

The questionnaire was presented to a group of postgraduate students, who were briefed that the target group for the final questionnaire would be undergraduate students (Malmqvist *et al.* 2019). I asked the students to make a note of how long the questionnaire took to complete, and to comment on any questions or other aspects of the information sheet, consent form or available answers which were unclear (Williams, 2021). A total of 18 pilot questionnaires were completed with comments, with small changes to the phrasing of three questions. Pilot participants reported a completion time between 6-8 minutes. No questions were added or removed from the questionnaire, and the order of questions remained the same.

### *6.3.3 Questionnaire Distribution and response*

The finalised questionnaire was published on the social media pages run by the student union, inviting students from all backgrounds in the final year of their equine bachelor's degrees to complete it during the spring semester of 2022.

The respondents studied a range of programmes within the equine department, so experiences reflected the wider department experiences rather than the experience of a cluster of programmes in only one area. As cohorts are small, and some characteristics of participants could make them very identifiable, the respondents have been grouped together in two groups, reflecting the science grouping and business and performance groupings. This group split is an established one in the equine department, with an Associate Head of Department overseeing each of these two areas (see table 2).

Out of the twelve respondents in the Business and Performance group, eleven were female and one male, whereas the gender distribution in the ten Science group respondents was 8 female and two male students. This is representative of the gender balance within the whole equine department, which, similarly to large areas of the equestrian industry, is a female-dominated area of interest from hobby riders to elite level riders. Equally, the low number of BAME respondents - 2 in the Performance and Business group, and one in the science group- was reflective of the overall proportions of BAME students in the department, institution, and wider geographical area of the university (Greening, 2020).

As the aim of this research was to hear students' stories and consider whether there were commonalities in terms of their success strategies, rather than drawing comparisons between gender or race groups, these imbalances were not a significant concern for this project. Furthermore, to protect interview participants' anonymity, some characteristics have not been linked explicitly to their statements, in line with "disclosure avoidance" (Victor *et al.*, 2023) who stated that this approach was acceptable in qualitative research.

**Table 2: Programme group allocation to Science or Business and Performance groups (NB list only shows programmes as relevant to survey respondents)**

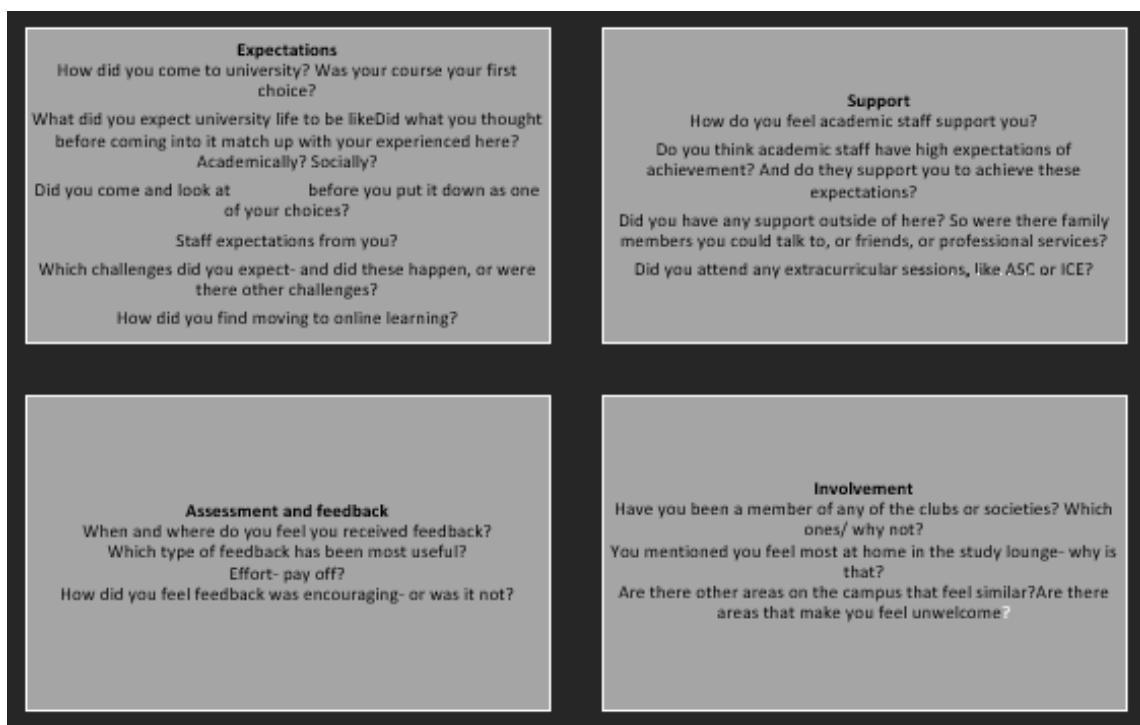
Science	Business and Performance
BSc (Hons.) Equine Science	BA (Hons.) Equine Business Management
BSc (Hons.) Equine Science with Therapy	BA (Hons.) International Horseracing Management
BSc (Hons.) Equestrian Sports Science	BSc (Hons.) Equine Management
	BSc (Hons.) Racehorse Performance and Rehabilitation
	BSc (Hons.) Equestrian Coaching

#### 5.4 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were completed in May 2022, following the completion of the survey phase, and initially a total of 12 participants volunteered to take part in the interviews, representing both the science and business management- focused programmes in the equine department.

Semi-structured interviews allow a degree of comparison between responses, as pre-set themes are covered in each interview. Provisional prompting questions had been set out in advance to elicit more detail or clarifications of responses participants

provided, but for most interviews, the follow-up questions were formed organically from the responses individual participants provided. Ruslin & Masmur. (2023) emphasised the versatility of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research as detailed and rich information could be elicited without losing track of the core information required to address research questions. The core questions, based on Tinto's concepts of departure, were read out in the same manner in each interview to enhance the comparability between responses (figure 8).



**Figure 8: Interview opening questions, structured under the four conditions for student success**

Maintaining a core basis to all interviews also enabled data analysis in line with the proposed theoretical framework. Mercer (2007) suggested that a semi-structured approach to interview tends to be the most productive in an IR setting, and Drever (1995) highlights this approach as “helpful” in small-scale studies like this one.

#### *5.4.1 Interview structure*

The interview structure was based on the four core areas of Tinto's work on student departures and student resilience: expectations, support, assessment and feedback and involvement. All interviews opened with questions covering the journey to higher education and expectations about the course content, delivery approaches and academic challenges. The order of the second and third pillar questions was not consistent between interviews, which had potential to adversely affect the data quality, but to promote an organic conversation within the interview, and taking informants' leads, either assessment and feedback or support were considered next. Involvement in terms of engaging with extracurricular activities as well as activities with peers were considered as the last pillar in all interviews. All interviews ended with questions about future plans to return to education, and open questions inviting informants to share other aspects of their experience in higher education if they felt they would like to.

#### *5.4.2 The interview process*

The interview opened with an invitation to review the participant information sheet and gained informed consent for the interview to be recorded. After each interview, the participants were sent a copy of the transcript to review and agree for the narratives provided to be used for further analysis.

All interviews were held on Microsoft Teams and recorded with the participants' permission, which was obtained at the start of the meeting. As interviews with participants took place on MS Teams, this might subconsciously have promoted a "student-tutor" conversation (Nolen & Putten, 2007). Therefore, the purpose and scope of the interviews was revisited at the start of all conversations, and the confidentiality of information discussed in the interview was re-emphasised at the same time, and

during interviews where participants seemed unsure whether the next part of their story was appropriate to share in this interview. Some “small talk” to ease informants into the conversations was employed to build rapport with informants and enhance their experience of this process. Most informants commented at the end of the interview that they felt it had helped them to reflect on their journey in an open conversation.

The importance of building rapport with informants has been covered in the methodological literature by a number of authors, including Stewart *et al.* (2016), Brown & Danaher (2017), through forming respectful and ethical relationships within the interviews (Perryman, 2011). Brown & Danaher (2017) reviewed the importance of connectivity, humanness, and empathy, which they referred to as the CHE principles, in semi-structured interviews and recommended that these are used by education researchers to guide and review their approach before and during semi-structured interviews. This could support the level of trust in the interviewer, subsequently leading to deeper conversations that might benefit both the researcher and the informant. Kvale (1996) describes the interview process as a “construction site of knowledge” (Kvale, p.2) with the interviewer and interviewee as active participants, and further describes the process as a journey through the interviewee’s experiences, with potential of a therapeutic effect. This was evidenced in a number of interviews in this research:

“Thank you. Yeah, it's actually been really nice to get it off my chest” (Olivia)

I think you're the first person at [...] that I'm actually kind of ...telling my story too, because I've never told anyone about all of this. (Jodie)

“I quite enjoyed [the interview]. I mean, it was a long time coming. I did need to have the...I mean, I have had conversations with my father [...]. It’s just one way, because he’s there to support me [...]. but you know, to have that two-way conversation has been good, and thank you for this. It’s been really good”. (Danny)

These quotes illustrate that the interviews had potential to be quite a powerful tool. They did not just benefit me as the researcher, but also provided benefits to my informants, something suggested by Golby & Parrott (1996) as an important aspect of educational research.

## 5.5 Ethical considerations

The study design and execution follow the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and The 2008 BERA Charter for Research Staff: promoting quality conditions for conducting quality research (BERA, 2008). Ethical approval was granted by The University of Sheffield (Application 017400 Anke Twigg-Flesner) and the ethics committee of the university where this research took place.

### *5.5.1 Informed consent and the right to withdraw*

I employed a convenience sample of final year undergraduate students, who were enrolled on BSc or BA (Hons) programmes in the equine department, which was posted on the student union Facebook page. With students being final year students, all were over the age of 18, and provided informed consent to participate in the recruitment questionnaire and subsequent interviews, for which contact details were provided voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained through ticking checkboxes on the online questionnaire and signing an electronic copy of the informed consent form

prior to the start of the individual interviews (Flory & Emanuel, 2004). The participant information sheet provided contact details for the researcher and the supervisor of the project, should participants require further information, or have any concerns about the study or their participation in the study (Jones *et al.*, 2013) (Appendix A) Further verbal consent was obtained at the start of the interview, and re-emphasised during conversations about sensitive topic areas (Klykken, 2022).

Participants had the right to withdraw from the study without providing reasons at any point during this project (Jones *et al.*, 2013), and ongoing consent was confirmed throughout the interview process (Klykken, 2022) by reminding informants they could avoid talking about topics they would rather avoid. The provision of clear information about the project, its purpose and intended publication routes, alongside an outline of risks and benefits of participation limited the number of participant drop-outs, which was important for this project as the target population was relatively small to begin with.

### *5.5.2 Voluntary participation and halo effects*

The project information sheet outlined the purpose of the research project and potential risks to participants. Participation was voluntary, although I considered that some students may feel that they “should participate”, e.g. students who have been tutored by or worked with me for the past two or three years. Students were never placed under pressure in a formal or informal manner to engage with the survey.

There is evidence of a “halo effect” in qualitative research, a concept that has been discussed for the past century. Nisbett and DeCamp Wilson (1977) considered this effect to be commonly discussed but poorly defined but could have a powerful impact on the information volunteered during interviews (MacCann *et al.*, 2020). Ultimately,

there is an agreement that the halo effect influences how students perceive teachers- where teachers are perceived to have positive attributes, students view and engage with the teacher or lecturer in a more positive light and *vice versa*, which has also been named the general impression model of the halo effect (Fiscarp & Lance, 1990; Werle, 2020).

Equally important, the perception I might have of students had the potential to influence my body language, tone, and interactions in the interviews, so I relied on my counselling training to show unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951) throughout all interviews. Nonetheless, there were instances where I was aware of sensitive experiences, and therefore maybe did not question some topic areas as deeply with a student as I would have without the additional knowledge from my tutor role.

Nunally & Bernstein (1994) proposed a second, alternative version of the halo effect, and called it the salient dimension model. This model highlights that one attribute- e.g. in this context, the quality of teaching or the approachability in my day-to-day role- influences the perception of other attributes that are not related to my role, or qualities and challenges within that role. This effect has been evidenced in relation to course evaluations completed by students (Rohl & Rollett, 2021), and might have an influence on the quality and honesty of the interviews for my research. It must be noted that both models most commonly are used to evaluate the interviewees approach and behaviour in an interview, rather than the researcher, as the researcher should maintain an unconditional positive regard (as described by Rogers, 1951) so interviewees feel comfortable during the questioning process.

The third model of the halo effect is the inadequate discrimination model was initially defined by Saal *et al.* (1980) as “a rater’s failure to discriminate among conceptually

distinct and potentially independent aspects of a ratee's behaviour" (p.415), which posed a risk in the present research. This model is often used in research around recruitment practices and unconscious bias of the interviewer mis-evaluating the interviewees qualities as they become too influenced by pre-judged conceptions of the interviewee, and consequently misinterpret answers to questions. In the context of my research, there is a risk that I could evaluate and analyse responses in one part of the interview based on impressions and evaluations of a previous question, or a subconscious comparison to other informants' answers to the same questions. I aimed to limit halo effects or errors in my data analysis by following the thematic analysis approach as outlined initially by Braun and Clarke (2006) which includes multiple steps to revisit and revise the coding of interview transcripts, alongside notes to allow reflection and review of the coding approach, but this is an error risk that could arise from my own positionality and interpretation of answers.

### *5.5.3 Data management*

Data collected was stored securely on the Google drive and my home institutions OneDrive, both of which have sufficient encryption to maintain data safe in compliance with GDPR requirements (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Business and Information Commissioners Office, 2020) and any hard copy notes were stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed once digital copies had been made and stored on my Google drive and OneDrive (BERA, 2018). As participants voluntarily provided contact details for follow up interviews, the security of data is of even greater importance than with an anonymous online questionnaire (Jones *et al*, 2013).

#### *5.5.4 Ethical considerations when working with my own students*

The use of online questionnaires or surveys has become increasingly common, as it provides advantages such as faster, wider, and more cost-effective distribution and flexible returns than more traditional approaches, such as postal or personally administered surveys (Reips, 2012; Tuten, 2010) There were several ethical issues I needed to consider, firstly in relation to my dual role as researcher and member of academic staff, and personal tutor to some participants (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004). As a researcher, I have a continued moral obligation to consider students' needs, which continues throughout the research process, which could result in some difficulties, leading to conflict with my responsibility as an academic member of staff and academic personal tutor to some informants.

Asking informants to complete a questionnaire was asking them for their time (Cohen *et al.*, 2017), which can be challenging to many people in a busy teaching and learning environment (Regan *et al.*, 2012) and could be seen as controversial when the research is conducted by a lecturer, effectively asking to use time that participants could have spent studying (Roberts & Allen, 2015).

Whilst there is no such guidance in the BERA protocols, the AERA recommends that participants should not be taught or supervised or otherwise dependent upon the researcher, with Chen (2011) highlighting that when sampling from a familiar student cohort, participants should be treated as "vulnerable" rather than independent participants. I have addressed this through clear participant information at the start of the questionnaire (appendix A) and again at the beginning of each interview, highlighting the participants' right to withdraw from the interview and overall research process without consequences for themselves (Roberts & Allen, 2015). Further

explanations about the purpose and scope of the interviews were provided at the start of the conversations, so students felt that they could safely share their experiences without worrying about the wider impact of experiences they disclosed. Students appeared comfortable and relaxed in the interviews, indicating that there was a level of trust in the process and me as the researcher, as students discussed a number of sensitive topics openly.

#### *5.5.5 Power (im)balances*

As interviews took place using MS Teams, a setting students at that point equated to a learning environment setting, it could be argued that this approach in itself shifted more power to the interviewer than the interviewee, especially for those students I tutor or teach on a regular basis, as this was a predominant teaching environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cartwright (2004) wrote about the impact of the physical setting of a psychoanalytical research interview in comparison to clinical interviews and emphasised the importance of context or purpose of the interview, as well as the topics covered, interviewer attitude and technique and an interviewee's comfort level with questions to elicit deep and truthful responses. Despite this vast range of influencing factors, Ivey (2023) queried the hidden meanings and contexts of the interview setting in qualitative research, concluding that data analysis needed to move beyond a superficial semantic analysis, but consider body language, intonation, and hidden meanings to gain deep and meaningful data evaluations.

During my research interviews, I made a conscious effort to be dressed less formally, and any institutional logos or other materials relating to the teacher-student role were removed from sight, but interviewees may have felt less in control compared to the

researcher, as they did not know which questions would be asked, further simulating a classroom-like setting rather than one removed from the day-to-day dynamics. On the other hand, the technology used was very familiar to me and the students, both through academic interactions and their social interactions with peers during the pandemic, which helped to limit their anxiety around using the software and allowed them flexibility to choose their physical location to some extent. Jodie, for example, chose to sit outside on the campus, whereas others used their bedroom or their kitchen for the interview. These might have been areas they had to use out of necessity, and especially in shared places like a communal kitchen, this led to some minor interruptions, but all informants seemed comfortable with their physical surroundings during their interviews.

There was a risk that participants felt as if they were in an assessment (as some were just days before their interview) with the researcher and were trying to give a “correct” answer. This may be particularly true when questions cover perceived common ground, and participants assume the researcher knows the answer (Trowler, 2011). These questions, however, are essential to confirm common ground and understanding of aspects of student experiences, and therefore neglecting these could result in biased and inaccurate data collection. Questions to assert common ground were interspersed with questions about participants’ experiences and opinions to limit the “examination” perceptions (Scott, 1999; Sayer, 2010).

As a result of the tutor/ research dualism, informants might also have struggled to dissociate from previous encounters such as very recent oral examinations with the researcher, (Wang, 2013), similar to the previously explored halo effect or halo error. Previous, and especially recent experiences could influence how secure participants

feel in the research setting, and therefore how much and what type of information they volunteered in the interview setting.

The same activities also allowed me to focus on the interview rather than issues that have been raised by the participants about academic or personal problems in recent tutorials. This was particularly challenging when I interviewed participants who had been supporting another student in their peer group through multiple suicide attempts. It was difficult in interviews not to become side-tracked into the current issues outside of the interview, and I made a point of having an informal conversation about the participants' wellbeing and manner of coping after the interview had finished. Taking "a step back" from concepts that were linked closely to my own practice and current challenges limited my emotional involvement, and this allowed me to maintain a stronger focus on the purpose of the interview and overall project (DeLyser, 2001). The dual role of the researcher as a tutor had the potential to cause confusion for the participants, and occasionally required strong control by the researcher in terms of their own reactions and responses during interviews or focus groups (Nolen & Putten, 2007), as well as requiring the researcher to provide a stronger direction in the data collection - one of the advantages of using semi-structured interviews (Mercer, 2007).

David (2002) challenged the power bias in favour of the researcher and placed higher levels of power with participants who volunteered to give their time in the first place, could refuse to provide answers to questions and could withdraw from the research process at any point in time. Throughout the interview, participants had control over how much detail they provided in their narratives, and how accurately they described their recollections of previous events and experiences- or whether to talk about a specific experience or their emotions at all. Therefore, building a positive rapport with participants, and allowing them to relax and trust the researcher were essential to

provide deep, rich data for subsequent analysis, as well as a continued positive working relationship after the interviews.

Power could be redistributed to the researcher to some degree through the inclusion of questions throughout the process to validate or review and adjust these assumptions (Unluer, 2012). Equally, it was essential that the researcher questioned areas and clarified assumptions participants have of the researcher's knowledge and understanding of a discussed situation (Sikes, 2006a; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002).

"Backtrack questions" were a useful tool to maintain a degree of power during interviews, as these could expose inconsistencies in or facilitate clarifications of responses from informants, which aided further in the validation of data sets. For example, the student discussed their initial experience in the transition to higher education, and backtrack questions were used to compare these to their emotions and experiences when moving to online learning, or back from online learning to attending on campus. Some would argue that, whilst participants were strongly empowered during the majority of the data collection process, the final conclusions should be a co-production of knowledge and findings at the end of the project (Wang, 2013). The co-ownership of power is fundamental to IR, but this might be emphasised in some contexts, such as investigations surrounding the views, needs and experiences of underrepresented groups, and targeted widening participation groups. If conducted well, the research could strongly empower these groups of students and made them feel that their contribution was valuable (Unluer, 2012).

However, where researchers do not foster the co-productive nature, and hence a more equal distribution of power between them and the informants, conclusions are less likely to make a useful contribution to knowledge, or indeed to suggest new

approaches or confirm effectiveness of an intervention (Trowler, 2011). Power remains shared following the interview process as transcripts were checked and confirmed by interviewees prior to analysis. The finite power, however, lies with the researcher as an author, as their interpretation of the data is most likely the version to enter the public domain through the submission of the thesis, and associated research papers and conference presentations.

#### *5.5.6 Declaration of interest*

My research project was reviewed and approved by the local ethics committee and therefore supported by the university. I have a declared interest in the research findings in my role as senior lecturer and tutor. My university did not contribute to fees or time allowances for my doctoral research, therefore the independence of my research and freedom to write up my analysis has not been limited by my association with the university.

### 5.6 Data analysis

#### *5.6.1 Questionnaire data analysis*

Descriptive approaches allowed the development of an overview of interview participants in relation to

- age group
- gender
- ethnicity
- prior academic qualifications,
- breaks from education

- description of self in a higher education context
- family experience of higher education
- ability to meet academic expectations

This overview essentially provided a “flavour” for the overall sample from which self-volunteered participants moved forward to the interview stages. No further statistical analysis was completed, as this would have been relatively meaningless with a small sample size and large number of variables. Questions about positive and negative learning experiences, as well as physical places of belonging or not belonging were considered further during each individual interview to support the conversation.

#### 5.6.2 Interview Data analysis

An overview of demographic information allowed me to identify potential characteristics that could have an adverse impact on the anonymity of some of my participants. Descriptive approaches allowed the development of an overview of participants in relation to

- age,
- prior academic qualifications,
- breaks from education
- description of self in a higher education context
- family experience of higher education
- ability to meet academic expectations

This summary allowed me to draw comparisons between the interview sample and the range of questionnaire responses and decide if further interview recruitment would be needed for a more representative sample.

Initially, Interview data analysis was planned to commence following the first three interviews, as Cohen *et al.* (2017) suggest that qualitative research results in rapid data accumulation, and early analysis is recommended to prevent data overload. It was not possible to set a target number of interviews to be completed prior to commencing the interview phase, as the content and richness of the narratives from the interviews ultimately determines the need to interview more participants, or to finish the data collection phase and focus on further analysis (Creswell, 2012). Miles & Huberman (1984) refer to this approach as “progressive focussing”, where the researcher starts with a broad approach to data collection, and following early analysis of data focuses subsequent data collection to the salient themes that emerged out of early data sets. In other studies, this has been referred to as “theoretical saturation”. Saturation in qualitative research has traditionally been described as the moment in data analysis where no new themes appear to be emerging from the data that is being examined (Cohen *et al.*, 2017).

However, this approach could be viewed as somewhat problematic as confirming the point of saturation can be problematic- is this at the point where one transcript no longer allows the identification of further themes, or do several further transcripts need to be reviewed to confirm with more certainty that all possible themes have been explored? Surely, if the research was meant to be representative of the wider population, the sample needed to represent all possible themes? Which then leads to the question of whether this was achievable without interviewing the whole population (Ando *et al.*, 2014), as through my research and the acceptance of the importance of individual circumstances, there was a strong likelihood that some themes from the wider population would not be identified in this sample.

The convenience sampling approach utilised here limited the structure that might have otherwise been pre-imposed on the data collection process, and this in combination with a semi-structured interview approach rather than a fully structured interview approach as shown by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006).

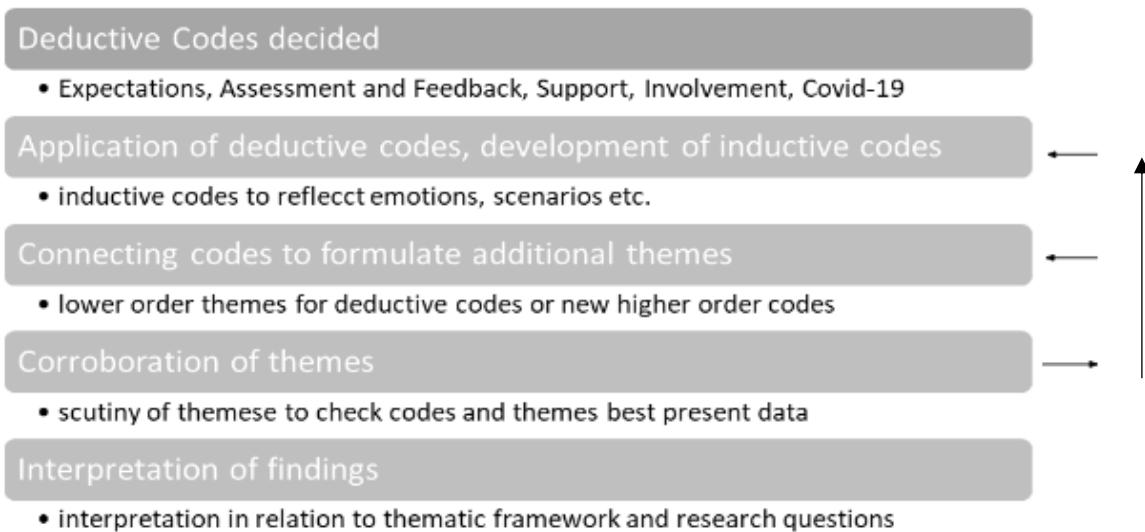
The level of theme I was looking for in terms of higher and lower-level themes, or which level of detail the themes should consider, also influenced the point of saturation. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke, who have written extensively on the thematic analysis approach, highlighted in a more recent paper that foregone conclusions about required sample sizes cannot be drawn with certainty, and so flexibility with regards to sample size is important throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The challenges in evidencing and confirming saturation, or even assuming that this point can be reached in all qualitative research might lead to the conclusion that this should not be the guiding principle in sample size determinations, but more a guidance tool to be considered together with other factors, e.g., availability and access to participants. Lowe (2019) even argues that defining saturation as a point where no further information or themes can be gained was “a logical fallacy, as there are always new theoretical insights to be made as long as data continues to be collected and analysed” (Lowe, 2019, p.131).

Hence, in the context of this research, the repeat emergence of the same themes with little addition of new codes was deemed an indicator that themes reflected key experiences and emotions, but there was potential that further interviews could have added additional perspectives, and this was accepted as a limitation of the approach in this research, as a result of a convenience sample from a relatively small research population to start with. Experiences of participants in this setting on an equine course

might not reflect the experiences of students on animal science or sports courses, or those of equine students studying with another provider.

### 5.6.3 Coding process

In order to have a consistent application of the chosen framework, and the interview structure also reflecting the four pillars of Tinto's framework of departure, a hybrid coding approach was utilised, which is a combination of deductive coding, using predetermined themes- in this case, the deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework- and inductive coding, where codes arise from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Codes in the context of thematic analysis refer to patterns or of meaning within the data set that can be organised into one overarching concept or theme (Clarke & Braun, 2017) when using an inductive coding approach. All transcripts were read once before the coding process started, and themes were refined in further rounds of coding - the process is illustrated in figure 9.



**Figure 9: Summary of coding process (adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006)**

A closed codebook or a deductive coding approach is a more time-efficient method of coding when data is examined through a pre-determined lens or framework and can provide a detailed analysis within the restraints of the framework, but often leads to a

less rich interpretation of the full dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I have used this approach in previous research using a mixed methods approach, with a predominantly positivist approach to, for example, questionnaire analysis, where open answers are grouped or categorised in relation to the research question to feed into further empirical analysis to discover association or differences between variables or groups of respondents. Therefore, starting with a deductive coding approach within a social constructionism project may seem contradictory, but as Byrne (2022) states “inductive/deductive approaches to analysis are by no means exclusive or intrinsically linked to a particular epistemology (Byrne, 2022, p.1397).

In fact, Braun & Clarke (2021) who tend to advocate inductive coding in reflective thematic analysis, agree that a hybrid approach to coding is more commonly used than not. In its strictest interpretation, all coding begins from a somewhat deductive approach in order to determine the importance or relevance of data in relation to the overall research question and whether a code needs to be developed (Byrne, 2022). Therefore, using the predetermined four codes in a deductive approach allowed me to identify aspects that were relevant to each research question in all interview transcripts, followed by an inductive approach to allow themes to emerge from the data coded for each of the four pillars.

The first round of coding was predominantly semantic, with notes that might lead to deeper or latent codes as the analysis progressed, using NVivo. For subsequent rounds of coding, the transcripts were reviewed in combination with the video recordings from the interviews, and the notes made at the time of the interviews with regards to emotional states or changes in body language of participants. Interview extracts coded under the larger themes were then printed and manually reviewed and coded to allow a deeper engagement with the data through another medium to

compensate for the lack of a second researcher to agree codes. This allowed a deeper level approach to coding beyond a simple rhetoric analysis of the interviews, providing a more thorough understanding of the experienced participants shared in their interviews through the development of latent codes (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

Codes were further refined and scrutinised sufficiently to feel confident all participants' experiences and emotions were reflected and further changes did not lead to more detailed or informative interpretations. It is important to note that usually coding would be conducted by at least two researchers independently, with a review of allocated codes after the first approach to the data set (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). This is a process to ensure inter-coder reliability by checking that similar codes have been applied, or a mutual understanding of further coding is reached. This step is often needed to demonstrate the robustness of the coding approach in peer-reviewed research, but as this is an individual piece of research for a doctoral thesis, this step was omitted from the process. Instead, careful consideration was given questions to be considered in the data analysis, based on Rabiee (2004):

- Which words are chosen by participants, and what might these words mean to individuals?
- At which points during the interview do participants choose to change topics, or talk about a topic in depth? Which other experiences might the topic relate to?
- Does the way in which topics are spoken of change throughout the interview? What might that change indicate about the emotional impact of the topic?
- Which topics were talked about in detail, and which topics were diverted or only spoken about briefly?
- When considering the choice of adjectives, what positive or negative connotations are made, and what is their importance?

- Was the interviewee considering actual or hypothetical events?
- Are any topics or phrases used frequently, and do these indicate emotional conflict or a need to be heard?

Additionally, participants were sent a final list of emerging themes and associated codes by email to consider whether any areas of the experiences they covered within their individual interviews were not represented. Two participants did not respond to this email, but the remaining six agreed that themes and associated codes seemed appropriate. This process is also referred to as “member checking” and is mostly recognised as a quality assurance tool in qualitative research, although it is not without critics. Barbour (2001) spoke critically about the use of checklists and similar tools to validate qualitative analysis but warns that these must be used in a research approach that considers and respects the principles of qualitative research and its potential limitations. She highlighted the risk of completing a set of tasks in a drive to show rigour in data through processes such as triangulation or member checking as “technical fixed” that may lead to “the tail wagging the dog” when completed as a tick box exercise (Barbour, 2001). The final codes were then evaluated in the content of the thematic framework and existing body of literature.

## 6.0 Results

This chapter begins with a review of questionnaire responses to provide a flavour of the respondents and their experience throughout their higher education journey, moving beyond ethnicity and gender into previous qualifications, support and academic experiences. The use of charts here might not be fully in keeping with a constructionist approach, but the visualisation aids to show the diversity in the respondents to the questionnaire, and the interview participants.

I will then move onwards to consider the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, demonstrating how the coding process developed to the final themes for further discussion and interpretation to provide suggestions for the future support of students in unprecedented circumstances.

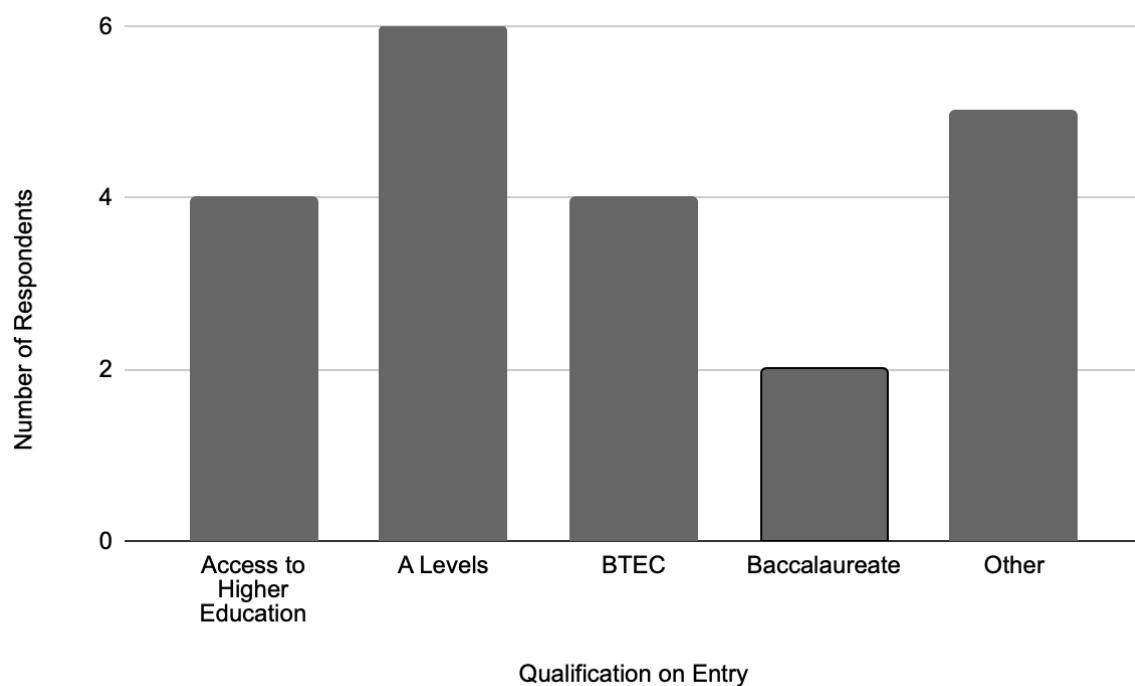
### 6.1 Questionnaire Results

A total of 22 students completed the questionnaire out of a possible 147, providing a response rate of 15%, with two more respondents replying “yes” for interview availability, but not leaving their contact details. Whilst this is not a sufficient sample size for empirical statistical analysis, some interesting findings are emerging in the descriptive analysis of the data.

Twenty of the respondents were female, and two male. This may seem very unbalanced in terms of gender representation in a research sample, but this actually mirrors the gender distribution within equine higher education courses at this provider (Greening, 2020). Two of the participants identified as coming from an ethnic minority background, whereas the remaining 20 reported a range of white background. Most of the participants were between 21 and 25 years of age (n=13; 59%), followed by 18-

20 (n=4; 18.2%), 26-30 (n=4, 13.6%) and 31-35 (n=2; 9.1%). This age distribution is typical for those seen across the equine programmes at this provider.

Respondents entered their degree programme from a range of previous academic qualifications, with most entering through alternative pathways to A Levels (see Figure 10), and only 5 students coming through the more “traditional” route of A levels (22.7%). The “other” group covered qualifications gained abroad that did not directly match to Level 3 qualifications in England, as well as previously started and potentially completed degree courses.

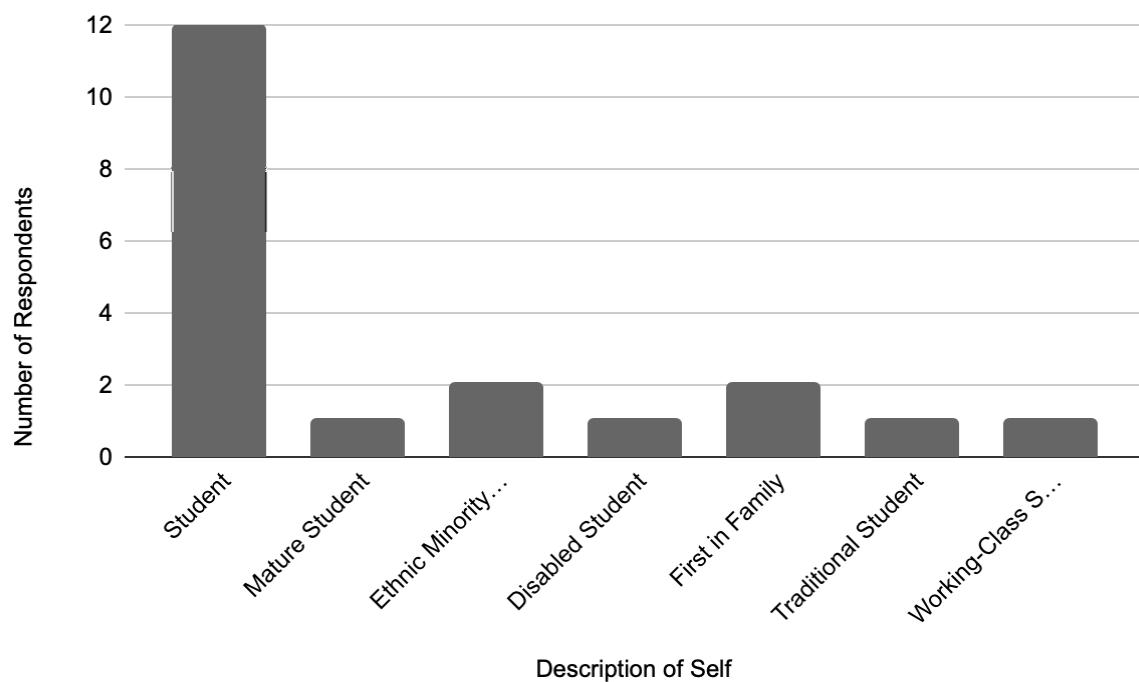


**Figure 10: Respondents’ Academic Qualification on Entry to HE**

Whilst qualifications other than A levels might be deemed to be “non-traditional” in the literature, the majority of respondents (n=13) followed the traditional approach to enter tertiary education the academic year immediately after completing their secondary education. Eight respondents returned to education after a gap ranging from one to

seven years. Shorter breaks of one or three years tended to be to work (n=5) or travel (n=1), whereas the longer breaks of five and seven years were linked to undisclosed reasons, or to start a family (n=1 respectively).

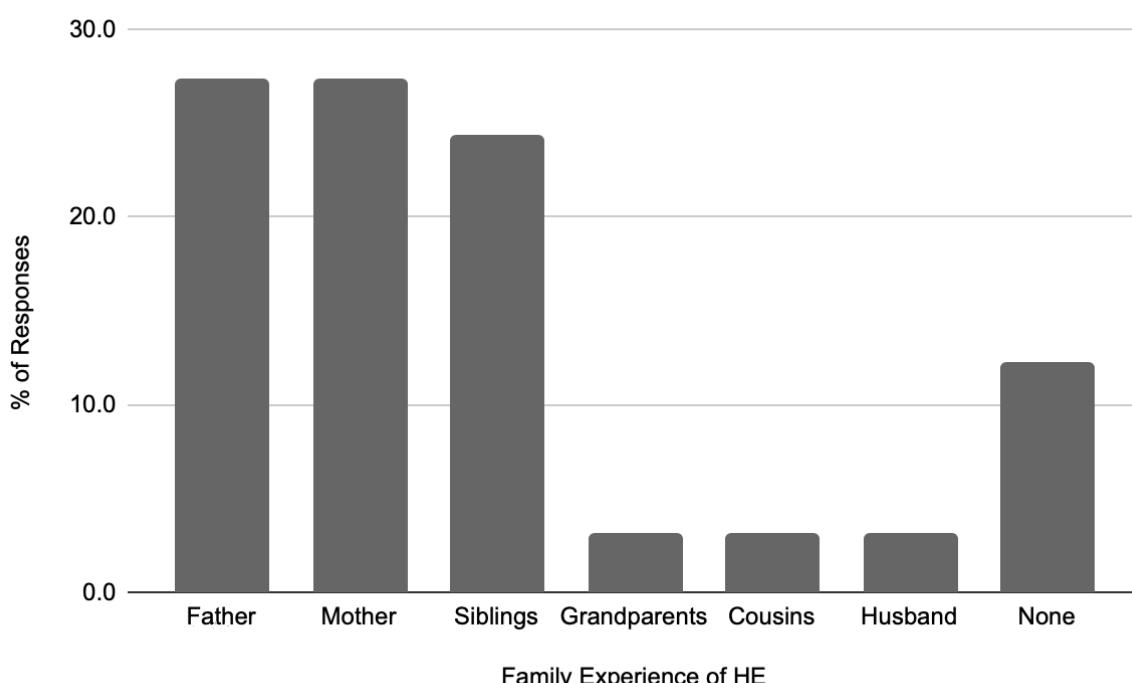
Bearing in mind the range of WP characteristics represented by all questionnaire respondents, most would simply describe themselves as “student” (n=12; 54.5%) rather than a specific type of student. Two students described themselves as either “traditional” (9.1%), First-in-family (9.1%) or “Ethnic Minority Student” (9.1%) respectively. Finally, three students self-selected either “disabled student” (4.5%), “non-traditional” (4.5%) or “mature student” (4.5%), (see figure 11).



**Figure 11: Respondents' description of self**

Interestingly, five students (22.7%) responded that no other family member had previously engaged with or completed higher education studies, compared to the two students who described themselves as “First-in-family”. Although an equal proportion

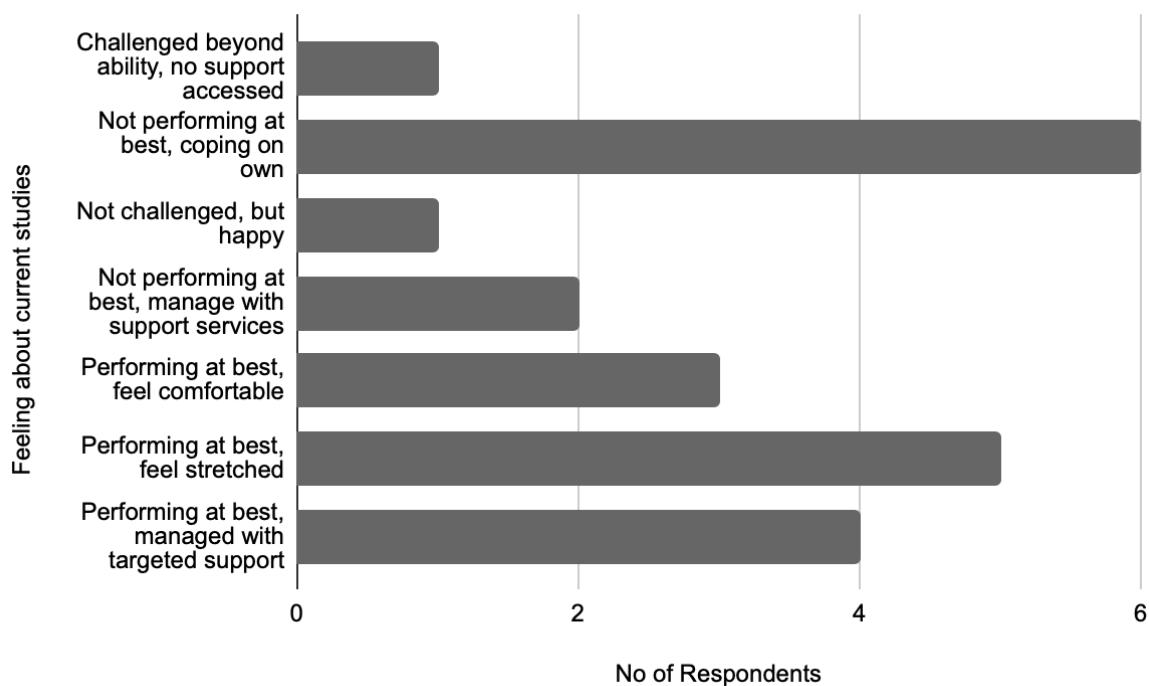
of students reported that at least one parent had attended higher education, only five stated that both parents had done so, with the remaining respondents stating only one parent. Mother, father, and siblings were the most commonly reported family members to have experienced higher education (27.3%, 27.3% and 24.2% respectively). Three students mentioned additional family members, such as grandparents, cousin, or husband as having previous higher education experience (see Figure 12).



**Figure 12: Respondents' family experience of HE**

Just under a third of students ( $n= 6$ , 27.3%) felt comfortable meeting academic expectations and standards whilst performing at the best of their academic abilities. On the other hand, one student reported being challenged beyond their ability, but not seeking support ( $n=1$ ; 4.5%), or not being challenged sufficiently, but happy with this ( $n=1$ ; 4.5%). The remaining respondents felt they were performing as well as they

could, and either felt stretched ( $n=5$ ; 22.7%) or managing with targeted support ( $n=4$ ; 18.2%). Notably, both BAME students reported that they felt stretched and struggled to meet academic demands, but both accessed academic support to manage ( $n=2$ ; 9.1%), see figure 13. This overview indicates that overall, students are able to meet the expectations set, with the majority seeking out required support when required. Answers around positive learning experiences further indicated that this support were mainly personal tutors, module leaders and/ or the Achievement and Success Centre.



**Figure 13: Respondents' perception of current effort and achievement**

## 6.2 Interviews

I will begin with the demographic overview of participants and their questionnaire responses in relation to the whole group of questionnaire respondents before providing an overview of each informant taking part in the interviews. Following from this overview, I will proceed to outline the findings from the thematic analysis as an overview of codes and themes. These codes and themes are further explored in depth in the respective chapters following the results chapter.

### *6.2.1 Interview Participants*

Initially, thirteen students volunteered to participate in the interviews. However, two did not include their email address with their questionnaire, and so could not be invited to the interviews. Three further students dropped out of the process for several reasons: one no longer felt they would like to share their experiences, one student had a significant riding accident resulting in hospitalisation, and so was not invited to allow them to focus on their long recovery, and the third had a significant mental health crisis, which could potentially have been aggravated by revisiting a range of experiences in the interview. Therefore, the interviews continued with a relatively small sample size. An overview of key characteristics of the participants is summarised in table 3.

All three age groups from the questionnaire participants were represented in the interview participants, with most (n=4; 50%) in the 21-25 category, and 2 (25%) in each the 18-20 and 31-35 group. Two male and six female students volunteered, and all except one participant had a non-A level route to Higher Education, with four students entering higher education directly from secondary education. Four participants had a break between secondary and tertiary education, ranging from 1-3

years to work to 5-7 years for undisclosed reasons and to have a family respectively. All except one self-described first-in-family student reported previous family exposure to higher education. Descriptions of self as students were very variable in this group, but three referred to themselves as student and one as a traditional student, whilst the other four reported themselves to be First-in-family, Ethnic-Minority Student, Mature student, and Non-traditional student. Interview duration ranged from forty minutes to one hours and twenty-five minutes, indicating that the comfort level of students sharing experiences and reflecting in depth was variable, the individual duration of each interview is also indicated in table 3.

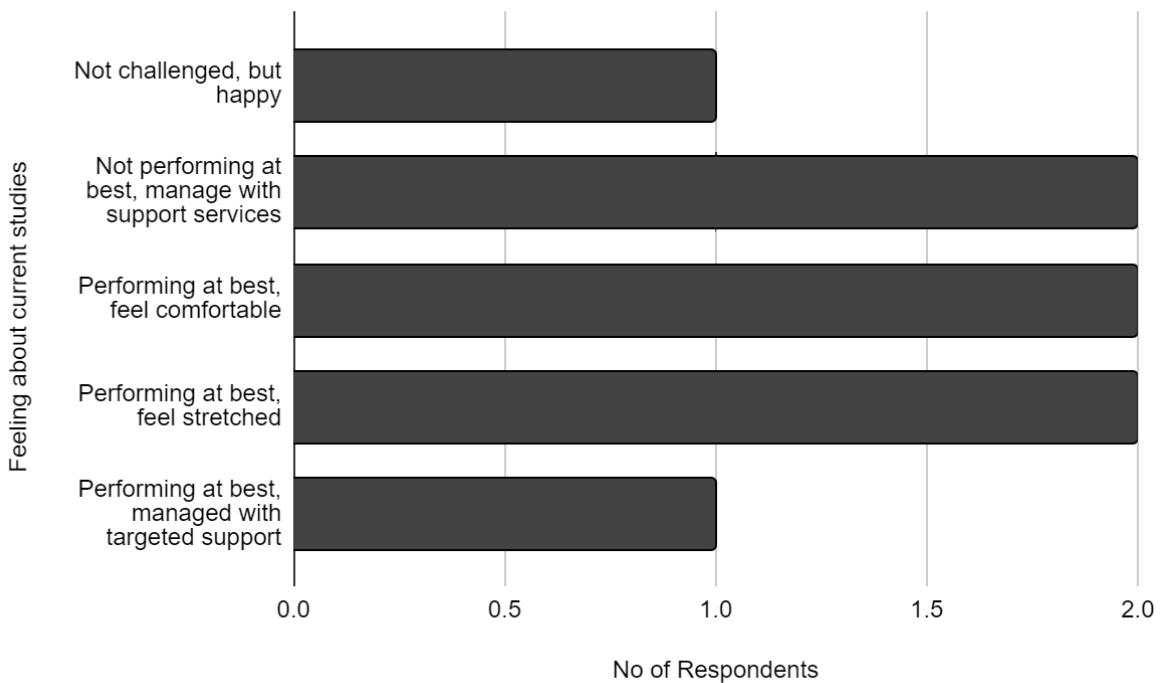
**Table 3: Respondents' demographics**

Name (interview duration in h:min:sec)	Age Group	Entry Qualification	Break between school and university	Family Experience	HE	Description of self
Catherine (39.47)	21-25	A level	1 year	Father		Student
Danny (1:05.41)	21-25	BTEC	3 years	Father		Student

Edward (42.34)	21-25	BTEC	No	Mother	Ethnic Minority Student
Jodie (1:24.41)	31-35	Other	5 years	Parents, siblings	Mature Student
Lucy (48:03)	31-33	BTEC	7 years	Mother, Siblings, Husband	Non- traditional student
Molly (49:46)	18-20	Baccalaureate	No	Parents	Traditional student
Olivia (46:15)	18-20	Baccalaureate	No	Father, Siblings	Student
Penny (52.40)	21-25	Access to HE	No	None	First-in- Family

Although this was not explicitly noted in the questionnaire, five out of the eight interview participants came from a mixed-culture background, with four speaking a different language at home rather than English.

One student (12.5%) reported they did not feel challenged, but were happy with their studies, and one student (12.5%) required targeted support such as DSA-funded access to mentors, but felt they were doing as well as they could. Four students felt they performed at their best and felt comfortable (n=2; 25%) or stretched (n=2; 25%). As reported previously, both BAME students (25%) felt they could perform better but were accessing wider academic skills support to improve their performance (Figure 14).



**Figure 14: Respondents' perception of current effort and achievement**

The interview participants overall appeared to be a representative sample when compared to the questionnaire participants, with a wide range of WP criteria represented within this group. The small sample size may mean that small sub-themes

could remain under-or unexplored in the following thematic analysis, but areas that are relevant to this setting as well as the wider higher education context remain likely to emerge, but the limitation has been formally recognised here.

#### *6.2.2 Initially emerging codes*

The eight transcripts were reviewed against the recording of interviews for accuracy and coded initially to fit into the four pillars of Tinto's framework. An additional overarching theme of COVID-19 was included to reflect the experiences of informants during and after the pandemic restrictions that were enforced during their studies.

Table 4: Emerging codes from deductive approach

Themes	Codes
Expectations	Academic Skills Course Content Cultural Expectations Expect more from self Grief or disappointment Lack of plan Prepare for worst
Assessment and Feedback	Criticism Helpful Handling adversity or challenges

Support	Academic Support Services Empathetic Support Employment Support Family Lecturers Peer Support Previous Friends
Involvement	Academic Focus Being a burden Disheartened Homesickness Previous friends Social Academic balance Social Isolation Societies
COVID-19	Anxiety about uncertainty Blessing in disguise Lack of practical Loss of peer support Online learning Remote learning environment Return to Campus Structured Delivery

Ten codes only showed one instance of use after all interviews had been coded for the first time, so these codes were revisited and incorporated into other codes where possible. The ten codes that were revisited and consequently reallocated are shown in table 5.

**Table 5: Code revisions and merges**

Initial code	Frequency (no of cases)	Revised code
Adverse academic impact	1 (1)	Online learning
Addressing weaknesses effectively	1 (1)	Personal growth
Lack of interaction	1 (1)	Lecturer support Peer support
Character clashes	1 (1)	Support Peer support
Addressing weaknesses	1 (1)	Adversity Personal growth
Independence	1 (1)	Resilience Personal growth
Pushing comfort zone	2 (1)	Assessment & Feedback Self-drive
Wrong course	1 (1)	disheartened
Frustration	4 (1)	Online learning Course content (3)

### 6.2.3 Final coding and themes

Codes were revisited using the transcripts in electronic and hard-copy formats alongside the videos until the final codes and themes were refined and scrutinised sufficiently to feel confident all participants' experiences and emotions were reflected. The main themes and associated codes are summarised here for each of the four pillars of Tinto's framework, and each is further evaluated in subsequent chapters, using the wider body of literature in relation to each theme, and leading to recommendations of ways in which universities can strengthen each pillar to promote student engagement and achievement (table 6).

**Table 6: Final Themes and Subthemes**

Main Pillar Theme	Core Themes	Subthemes
Expectations	<p>“Caught off guard”</p> <p>The big C” (Criticality)</p> <p>“Horsing around”</p>	<p>The comfort zone...</p> <p>Unprecedented changes</p> <p>Blessing in disguise?</p> <p>Horses on courses</p> <p>Improve horse’s lives</p>
Assessment and Feedback	<p>“Talking Things Through”</p> <p>“Making mistakes to learn”</p> <p>“I need to do better”</p>	
Support	“I matter”	<p>Trust</p> <p>Being seen and heard</p>

	<p>“With a little help...”</p> <p>“Against all odds”</p>	<p>Friends</p> <p>Staff</p> <p>Adversity</p>
Involvement	<p>Personal Growth</p> <p>“We are family”</p>	<p>Culture Club</p> <p>Happy Places</p>

## 7.0 Expectations

This deductive overarching theme in my analysis aimed to address the following research question: "How did equine degree students' prior experiences and course information expectations about their HE course, and how were they met?" The overarching theme of "expectations" was chosen to represent themes and subthemes relating to my first Students spoke about their expectations in various contexts, such as what they imagined their courses to be like, their motivations for studying an equine-related course and how they experienced studying during the national lockdowns. The breadth of topics covered under the expectations pillar was large and led to the development of five higher order themes and several subthemes (Table 7) The importance of horses to all interviewees became very evident, leading to the inclusion of a horse-related theme, as most participants would not have engaged in higher education at all without having an equestrian context.

**Table 7: Final Themes and Subthemes for Expectations Pillar**

Themes	Subthemes
"Caught off guard" – challenges and adjustments	"The comfort zone" – adaptation and expectations "Unprecedented changes" "Blessing in disguise?"
"The big C" (Criticality)	

Horsing around	Horses on courses Improve horses' lives
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## 7.1 “Caught off guard”- challenges and adjustments

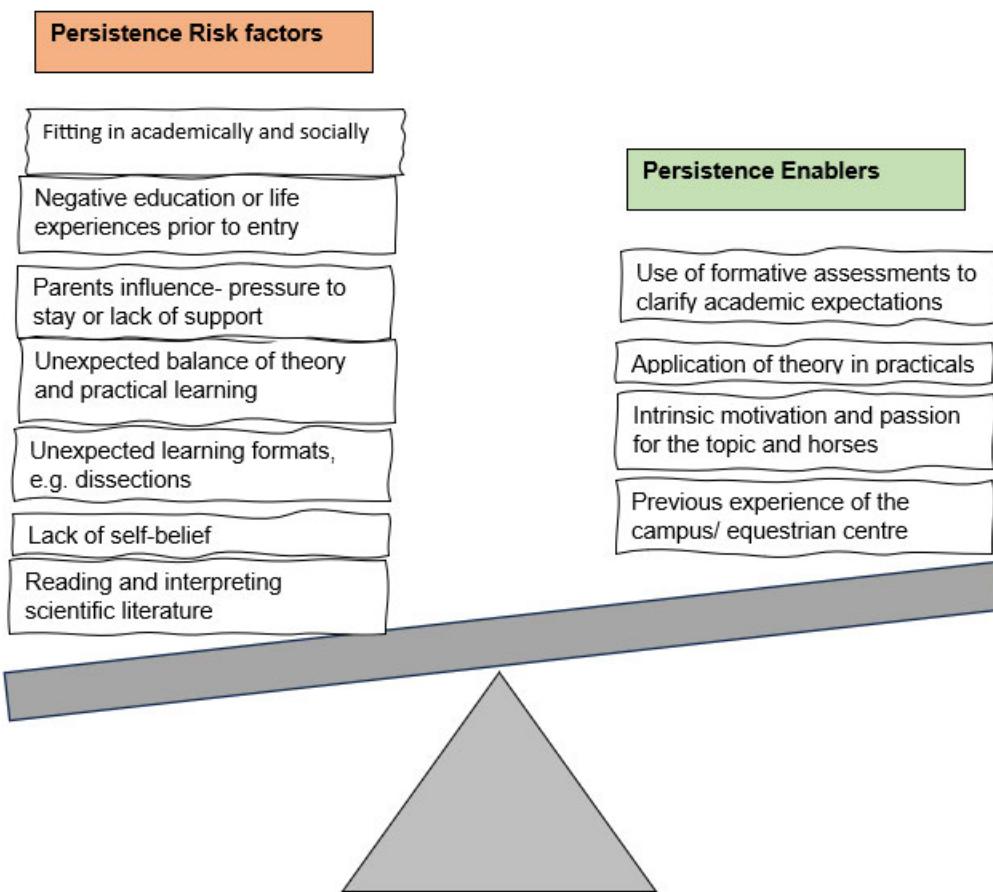
Students extensively spoke about their experiences of how the course met their expectations when they arrived, or their journey through the different stages of their programme and how prepared they felt. In some areas, this corresponded with research findings of non-traditional students at larger universities, but some comments provided a rich source of information and stimulated further reflection and recommendations for adjustments to practices. Tinto emphasised the need not just for the clear communication of expectations to and from students but setting a bar to aim for to “stretch” students in their academic and practical skills development (Tinto, 2010; 2012; Chan, 2016).

### *7.1.1 “The comfort zone”- expectations and adaptations*

Informants shared some experiences and challenges in their transition to HE, which included adjustment to an independent learning approach, living away from home or managing their studies around home and paid work commitments, which was not dissimilar to students in wider transition research (Briggs *et al.*, 2012; Young *et al.*, 2020), and could be described as a balancing act.

The interviews revealed several risk factors that had the potential to limit student persistence, and factors that strengthened student persistence (figure 15). Student characteristics used to report WP statistics did not seem to play a role in the factors individual informants considered in their reflections on transition to university, with most sharing similar challenges and support experiences. This might provide an early indicator that “traditional” and “non-traditional” students have common experiences in the transition and therefore the clear communication of expectations pre-arrival and in the first year of study are essential to support student persistence and resilience

(Gregerson *et al.*, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2022). Risk factors outweighed protective factors in student recollections of their experiences on equine degrees, further highlighting the importance for providers to strengthen persistence enablers within their control. The first section of this chapter explores how students experienced the risk factors and enablers in their respective journeys.



**Figure 15: Student persistence risk factors and enablers during the transition to HE (based on interview contents)**

#### 7.1.1.1 Transition into Higher education

Most interviewees remembered the initial weeks on their course positively, despite the range of mindsets shown at the start to higher education, ranging from expecting worst case expectations in terms of being able to meet expectations to just wanting to fit in. These expectations are very similar to others reported in research, such as Burton *et al.* (2011) who concluded that mature student worries about fitting in were most readily dispersed by tutor and peer contact as early on following their arrival as possible. Danny had previously completed a BTEC on the same campus, so had some familiarity with the setting, yet he still remembered feeling nervous when he returned to begin his higher education course some years later, but he soon settled in when he realised that his time out in industry had not put him at any disadvantage compared to his peers (Read *et al.*, 2003; Aplpeyard-Keeling, 2021).

“Coming back into education after three years of a gap was the sort of thing that I was worried about. But knowing that everyone was on the same boat in first year and getting a hang of scientific literature and how to go about reading and writing all that literature as well.” (Danny)

Edward’s previous life experiences and career changes outside of his control might have pre-determined a more pessimistic mindset as he moved into higher education (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013), leading him to expect the worst. His mindset stood out from others, who were nervous and excited, but he settled into his studies and found them “manageable”, suggesting that elements of challenge remained present for him, reflecting findings by Shankland *et al.* (2019) that high levels of challenges in daily life, e.g. financial hardship, balancing paid work against academic work can accelerate burnout in students, which mirrored Edward’s experiences.

The motivations for the mature students in my research were very different to each other, highlighting the importance of understanding the individual, rather than making broad assumptions based on a shared characteristic, e.g. mature student. Little is known about mature students on equestrian degree courses in terms of their motivation, but some parallels to research of mature students on nursing degrees are likely to exist, including research about mature students who had a different career and chose to make the change to nursing (Fleming & McKee, 2005). The intrinsic motivation of agriculture students was their passion for improved and more efficient practice, which might be the most comparable research for highly motivated, passionate students on equine degrees (Karimi & Sotoodeh, 2019), and providing a protective factor against drop out when challenges occur (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Tinto, 2012).

Lucy was the only parent out of the interviewees and started her degree on a part time basis for her first two years, before going full-time for her second and third year as her youngest child started school. Her guilt at leaving her youngest child at home, spending less time her to focus on her own education after a long break mirrors the wider research findings for mature female students returning to higher education (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2023; Fragoso *et al.*, 2013). The intrinsic motivation of mature students in higher education is well-established in the existing body of literature (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003; Rozvadská & Novotný, 2019; Carreira & Lopes, 2021), and it seemed that students on equestrian courses were no exception.

Whilst intrinsic motivation was evident in Jodie's story, Jodie gave a very different reason for her choice to change her career from an established career in the financial sector to an equestrian interest, with a long-term plan to become an equine chiropractor. Jodie's feelings at the time were intense, reflected by her choice of

words, e.g. “my soul was dying everyday”, and she felt stuck in a job she did not enjoy, in an industry she had no passion for.

Unlike Lucy, Jodie did not have dependents or a partner to consider in her decision (Christensen *et al.*, 2017), which made her move less complicated, and was met with bemusement and criticism from her parents and wider family. Jodie’s choice allowed her to combine two of her passions- horses and learning- to gain a higher education qualification that could open doors to a different career she felt more positive about. The value of this move was very much intrinsic- setting a personal challenge Jodie could engage with, and personal growth to build a career in an area that she had always been passionate about - like mature students interviewed by Bell (2021), and the role of horses for this group of students was explored further later in this chapter (section 7.3).

Alongside the university and college provision, the equestrian centre hosts several unaffiliated, national, and international competitions and championships in all three Olympic disciplines. The campus also has specialist gyms and labs for sports performance, which can be popular with students who have an interest in the rider as an athlete as well as the horse. Many students would have previously visited when they were spectating or competing themselves, seen the facilities online and in magazine articles, or visited the campus on an open day. Secore (2018) reviewed the importance of campus visits for prospective students and suggested that “personal interactions [...] during the visit stir ideas and perceptions of the campus community; and interactions after the visit affect the lasting impression of the visit on a whole” (Secore, 2018; p.155). The combination of confident student guides and the quality of the equestrian facilities were determining factors for equine students.

“I have always heard about it, and it always sounded like this amazing place, [...] amazing facilities .... [...] it didn't disappoint when I came.” (Edward)

While the “usual” university such as libraries and teaching rooms could be a highlight for the university, facilities specific to students’ needs or interest seemed most influential in encouraging equine students to take the leap into higher education. Regardless of whether they had planned to live on campus or commute, other facilities mentioned in the wider research including childcare and mental health support (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), laboratories and learning spaces with catering outlets (Kane *et al.*, 2022), teaching facilities and sports facilities (Matzdorf & Greenwood, 2015; Beacom & Golder, 2018) played a less significant role for equine students. Facilities relevant to the content of the course therefore can provide a significant draw for students, with accessibility of the facilities being a secondary factor (Bekhradnia *et al.*, 2006)- concepts that appear to be applicable for equine students, too.

#### *7.1.1.2 Academic Expectations in the first year*

Staff expectations of academic performance were set early with a formative assignment at the start of each academic year, which is thought to allow students to understand changed expectations at each level and improve the understanding of tutors of their students’ need (Lopez-Pastor *et al.*, 2013), although its impact on the student’s understanding of expectations and subsequent performance is debatable (Hortigüela-Alcalá *et al.*, 2015).

MacNaul *et al.* (2021) concluded that setting a practice assignment in an online environment during the pandemic had limited positive, but no negative impact on academic performance. Practice assignments only fulfilled their developmental intention for the student when students were taught and encouraged to engage with

the feedback they received, alongside being taught how to implement changes as understanding and implementation were not necessarily connected to each other as a logical consequence (Green, 2019). Hattie & Timperley (2007) warned that persistent use of formative assessments could hamper student autonomy and increase students' dependence on their tutor for "next steps"- so these should be used as tools to foster feedback literacy and to shape students' understanding of academic expectations, with Wiggins (2012) recommending goal-orientated feedback that links clearly to learning objectives to support student confidence to use feedback.

When thinking about teaching and learning expectations, anatomical dissections seemed to be an unexpected approach, which student either found fascinating or repulsive. Dissections as a teaching tool has been a controversial topic, especially as technological advances have brought the use of computer animations and 3-D modelling, or simply animated videos with formative assessment to gauge student understanding (Scott *et al.*, 2023). Dissections were generally more expected as a part of medical degrees rather than applied science degrees, but traditional dissections of individual organ systems continue to have significant educational value as they allow students to take an active role in the dissection process, and hence their learning (Johnston & McAllister, 2008).

Lombardi *et al.* (2014) went as far to conclude that the active use of anatomical specimens had a positive impact on student retention compared to using anatomical models or simulations instead. When comparing preferences of students on different courses, Anderton *et al.* (2016) concluded that biomedical students had a significant preference for anatomical dissections as part of their lab sessions, compared to sports students who preferred workbooks and models. Interestingly, the same split was not recognised in this study, where students on non-science programmes could be equally

as intrigued by the dissections as science students struggling with the concept and *vice versa*, although this might reflect the impact of a small sample in my research.

“It is something very, very unique and I did. I do think I learned quite a bit from it, and I do see horses in another sort of light after that, seeing what happens internally. A video is not the same as seeing it live, so it's a bit of both definitely. (Catherine) “

As a practitioner, I have taught students who had strong feelings about dissecting organ systems, or watching a lecturer demonstrating a dissection, and often we have made alternative provisions, such as videos, organ models or animations. Often, students were more apprehensive about the idea of a dissection, rather than becoming involved “hands on”, but most students tended to find dissections a positive learning experience that is unlikely to be replaced fully with technological advances now.

Davidson (2017) suggested that a combination of in lab and online dissection sessions might lead to the highest level of student satisfaction in health science students, indicating that some diversification in teaching methods on the anatomy modules might be more accommodating to those students who are uncomfortable in the lab itself (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). The shortage of specimens post-Brexit is likely to require universities to consider anatomy practical approaches, and findings here indicate that “hands off” approaches using models might match student expectations on non-science programmes more effectively, alongside the use of live horses for musculo-skeletal and movement assessments to enhance student engagement (George, 2018). As dissections predominantly take place on first year modules, the impact of remote learning on these practicals could not be assessed through my research, but Roy *et al.* (2020) provided a review of the use of Zoom for remote anatomy lecture delivery.

Aside from becoming more familiar with the laboratory, students on some courses also started their other practical subjects, which included equine rehabilitation and therapy, facilities management, equitation, or coaching. The degrees offered at this provider have practical elements involving horses that tend to be complementary to content on the science programmes, and more extensive and tied into programme aims on the management and performance programmes. The degrees are promoted as academic courses with a variable proportion of practical components, but while staff still have the implied understanding that a science degree relies on classroom and laboratory work with the additional benefit of practical application, students did not seem to share that interpretation.

“So, we actually have to do writing and learn stuff, learn stuff on paper, not learn stuff in practice. I [...] I thought the main academic stuff would obviously be [...] learning about the horse, maybe a bit of science just to understand it better.” (Olivia)

Olivia seemed unhappy about her course, the content and how it met her expectations. She was the only one of the participants who had chosen her course with significant input from her parents. She was reliant on her parents with regards to her course choice, as well as their financial support to keep her horse. The latter was used as leverage to stop her from leaving the course after her first semester, by her parents, possibly contributing to her negative view of her whole situation and a sensation of becoming trapped.

This led to her only engaging with their studies as little as needed to pass- a concept overall that is not unique to equine students, as parents could threaten to withdraw any privilege the student values. A forceful parental approach was also reported by Vermote *et al.* (2012): “When parents were perceived as more controlling or uninvolved, late adolescents reported feeling more pressured [...] to go through the motions of the study choice process more superficially (p.12), leading to a lower level

of student commitment to the course they enrolled on (Kleanthous & Williams, 2013; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018), and consequently lower levels of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2012) and motivation, especially during more challenging times (Tinto, 2017).

#### *7.1.1.3 Transition through the levels*

Danny, amongst most of the informants in my research, certainly reflected very honestly and openly about being “in the comfort zone” and not really rising to the higher academic demands of his second year. Practitioners and researchers refer to this drop in academic performance during the second year of a three-year degree as the “second year slump”, often linked to a drop in active engagement with lectures, independent reading, and assessments (Haas & Hadjar, 2020). The drop in academic performance has been linked to several factors, including financial pressures and the need to work- which was a challenge for Danny’s cohort during the national lockdowns- academic pressures, and failure to form meaningful relationships with peers (McBurnie *et al.*, 2012). Poor workload planning has also been shown to be a significant factor in student achievement, often linked with taking on employment alongside higher education studies, especially for non-traditional students, although part-time could have protective factors against drop out, but be a risk factor for taking longer to graduate (Carrera & Lopes, 2021).

Transitions from first to second year have reportedly been challenging, but for this group of students, this was affected by teaching modifications during the COVID-19 pandemic, where lead lectures were delivered live using Microsoft Teams, and students were on campus for one day per week for the hybrid delivery of small group seminars and practicals.

Factors affecting student retention include academic success, financial stability, reputation of the provider, and a sense of belonging (Wardle, 2023). Having clear information about the course structure and expectations as students progress through the levels have been highlighted as key areas universities could address to boost their retention rates for re-enrolling students after the first year (Hillmann, 2021). Students had mixed experiences when they recounted how much they understood the expectations staff had for academic performance in the second and third year. It is important to note that the last three teaching weeks and the second year were heavily impacted by the global pandemic for this group of students.

Students were adjusting to yet another new delivery approach, after the abrupt move to online learning in March 2020, where lead lectures continued to be delivered synchronously in line with the published timetable, and students were able to attend seminars and practicals on their allocated weekday, but these were delivered in a hybrid format, with some students- often only a handful- in the room and some- often the majority of the module group- online using Microsoft Teams.

Hybrid learning during the pandemic has been evaluated by researchers, and there were very few favourable comments for the hybrid teaching approach in wider research and from participants in my work (Buckley et al.,2021, Ní Shé et al., 2019). Students who remained online during the hybrid approach reportedly felt awkward and not quite part of the conversations, felt stuck between "two worlds' ' and highlighted the lack of non-verbal communication cues from staff and peers (Chattaraj & Vijayaraghavan, 2021). Small things, such as having to unmute before being able to ask or answer questions, along with poorer sound quality during more discursive sessions and not being able to read writing on whiteboards were further criticisms

students voiced by my participants, mirroring experiences explored by Ní Shé et al. (2019)

The limited number of students in the classroom, and delivery of lead lectures in an online environment continued to limit students' exposure to each other, limiting face to face interaction, and the preference for the chat function of students joining online limited the flow of discussions and group activities, potentially leading to some messages not being sent out as clearly as they would have been in a traditional classroom setting. Sessions were also recorded, meaning that students could access recordings asynchronously, further limiting the "need" to engage actively with the timetabled sessions. Activities that previously worked well in the classroom, like students marking exemplars from previous years, became less effective as students relied on watching recordings passively rather than engaging in the live sessions (Keshavarz, 2020).

The combination of all these factors, along with a lack of clarity of expectations made it difficult for Danny and other students to meet the increased expectations, as the conditions for learning and success made use of available resources and staff skill but was probably not optimised to promote learning and success in the same way traditional face to face delivery methods would have achieved (Tinto, 2012). Penny admittedly struggled to engage with online sessions, and was often unable to attend in person, so her experience of her first assessment feedback made her realise the difference between her understanding of the higher academic expectations and the reality of these expectations:

“I think you only realised once you then got your first mark back and then it was like Oh my God like what you're in and then it was like 'ohh we need to be doing things so differently' ”(Penny)

All students found the second year, which included the move to hybrid teaching, then to solely online delivery during the second national lockdown, and return to hybrid teaching a challenging one, and were relieved to return to campus in the “new normal” of social distancing in her third year. Penny's recollection of the move into her final year was more positive, possibly mediated by the return of full time on campus delivery and a return to a more normal social interaction:

“Academically, again, it's just like a massive jump that you don't really expect. But even though it was academically more challenging, I've enjoyed it five times as much. Just being in the environment and being able to talk to people. (Penny)

Overall, the pandemic experience had significant adverse effects on the way in which student expectations could be met for about half of students' degrees, but students recognised that there were global unforeseen factors that impacted on their experience. They recognised the much higher expectations, but some, like Molly, were motivated through their passion for the modules and topics she chose to study in her second and third year, providing satisfaction for her intrinsic motivation. Whilst some students were content to continue studying, albeit in a different way to what they had expected, Jodie summarised her experience, including her challenges as:

It was a bit of my fault in the sense that I should have managed my expectations a bit better and not expect everything to be a highway to happiness and the highway to success. No, it's many times we have to go through the back roads. So, I was disappointed, yes, but I don't blame [the university]”. (Jodie)

Molly and Danny, despite the challenges they had encountered during their studies, looked back fondly on their journey, which for both was a journey to individual success in the end, maybe because neither of them ever lost their passion for learning and for the horses that brought them to this university in the first place:

“I've seen a lot of my ideas open up a lot, seeing lectures being also sorts of things in the equine industry, nutritionists, ethologists that's opened up my mind so much I didn't. I thought of myself as a very open-minded person while I was here, but actually I didn't think those careers were actually possible in the equine industry”  
(Molly)

#### *7.1.2 “Unprecedented changes”*

Unarguably, the two national lockdowns, interspersed with a partial reopening of the campus during students' first and second years, before returning to the “new normal” full-time learning on campus in the final year. The impact of the lockdowns and move to online learning impacted on all aspects of the student experience, but in this section, I have emphasised two themes that emerged from my interviews.

The university's early provision of laptops and dongles to support internet access in well-publicised messages through emails, social media groups, online meetings with the pro-vice chancellor for regular updates, and personal academic tutors calling students whom they had identified as being at risk of access struggles seemed to have counteracted this negative effect of the pandemic. The response speed might have been linked to the rural location of this university close to areas of deprivation and known poor digital connectivity (NSS comments, 2022). These factors, alongside tutors knowing enough about their tutees to identify students who were likely to struggle early, were potentially advantages of being a relatively small provider, but supported students effectively.

#### *7.1.2.1 Move to online learning*

The abrupt move to “emergency eLearning” (Muller *et al.*, 2021), perhaps in combination with an extended Easter break for students led to a lack of engagement by some students, maybe because of the global worry about the pandemic and the readjustment to living at home in circumstances far from anything students and their families had experienced before. Student preparedness for online learning when they had enrolled on, and started to learn in an in-person delivery model was a main factor in student engagement in online learning (Kundu & Bej, 2021).

The change in delivery mode from a classroom with face-to-face interaction to a virtual setting also presented significant physical challenges to students who had to return home as part of the national lockdowns. Some students found that arrangements in the family home had changed, and creating a space to study in was challenging at best, and impossible at worst.

“Because back at home, well, I don't have my own space anymore. My father married. He moved out. So, I would pretty much be spending a few days with my mom. Then a few days with my sister, then a few days with my dad and my sister has kids, so I didn't have my own quiet study space and there was just lots of family drama going on. So basically, I just didn't study at all or even watch lectures. And then I ended up having seven resits to do in my second year.” (Jodie)

Jodie provided the most severe example out of all participants as she had to continuously move between different family members for her second year of university. None of the participants raised access to laptops or the internet as a specific challenge for them, but two were provided with laptops by the university to enable them to engage in learning activities and complete their assessments. Digital inequality has

been one of the news headlines and been at the centre of significant peer-reviewed research (Coleman, 2021; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021, Webb *et al.*, 2021), but the lack of comments worrying about digital access in this research illustrates how digital inequalities could be managed effectively by the university for students on equine courses. Edward recalls how he was expecting the removed need to travel to lectures to make engagement with lectures easier due to the elimination of travel costs, but very quickly realised that:

“It was not what I expected at all. [...] wake up five minutes before lectures, do the lectures and you're do. Uh, it wasn't that easy...” (Edward)

Whilst bedrooms functioning as a homework and recreational space is common in modern day Britain, it is also well established that this can have adverse effects on productivity, sleep quality and mental health. The effects increase when the bed itself has mixed purpose functions for sleeping and working. Dincer *et al.* (2023) reported that 50% of respondents to their questionnaire had used the bed as a replacement for an office space to work from home or engage in studies, with adverse effects on sleep quality and mental health (Costa *et al.*, 2022). Edward reportedly used his bed as the main place to watch lectures, which might explain why he and other students found actively engaging more challenging (Bergefurt *et al.*, 2022). There remained a concern about the impact of this learning set up on mental health and highlights the importance of a separate workspace in student accommodation (Costa *et al.*, 2022).

### 7.1.2.2 Engagement in online learning

Some of the students had formed a strong bond with a group of peers who tended to study together in breaks between lecturers on campus, and help each other with their work, or to discuss topics they had covered in lectures further. Without this critical support, students felt less engaged or involved in their studies (Knight *et al.*, 2021), despite some lecturers offering “coffee and chat” meetings online in addition to formal teaching sessions to foster these less formal discussions (Turnbull *et al.*, 2021). It is worth noting that Dukhan (2022) cautioned against building expectations of mental health support in such informal sessions with academic staff, as suitably trained support staff would be better equipped to provide a level of counselling and reassurance, especially in a wider context that was deeply unsettling.

Students also spoke about a similar lack of engagement with break out rooms that were used in an online setting to facilitate small group tasks within a teaching session, tying in with findings by Saltz & Heckan, 2020) that breakout rooms online were not the “silver bullet” (p. 231) to replace in person discussions or activities, with students either not participating or actively logging out of the online session at the start of break out activities (McCullough *et al.*, 2022).

Students often, other than potentially their bedroom, were unlikely to have private study spaces, lived in close proximity with others either working or studying from home alongside them, leading to reluctance to use their cameras during online lectures. Other students might have all the space available but felt as if their privacy would be invaded by letting others have a glimpse of their personal space or be worried that peers might judge them for their living circumstances (Day, 2021). Some, like Edward, might even be logging on from their bed and in their pyjamas, and hence would not

want to be seen by peers (Tobi *et al.*, 2021). Bedenlier *et al.* (2021) concluded that “the frequency of webcam use was only weakly related to technical issues but moderately related to privacy concerns and personal feelings” (p.5). others were happy to use their cameras, but felt conscious they were in the minority and became less comfortable with continued camera use

“And then, you know, I say that myself, even I was one of those blacked out screens. There were moments when I would, you know, turn the screen on. But then I would be the only one with the screen on.” (Danny)

The online learning environment relied on the use of cameras and microphones to support normal communication in a learning environment. Teaching and communication do not solely rely on verbal communications, and in fact, most communication in a group of people is likely to be non-verbal, using body language and facial expressions. Therefore, engaging in an online teaching session without cameras removes a huge aspect of normal communication, and takes away social cues lecturers would use to gauge levels of engagement, understanding and potential questions in a face-to-face setting (Luong *et al.* 2022).

Cues observed in an online language course included boredom gestures (yawn), thinking gestures (predominantly eye movements), embarrassment gestures or sudden defensive gestures if learners were uncomfortable with a topic area and fear gestures (mainly in response to unexpected or loud noises) (Codreanu & Celik, 2013). These non-verbal cues provided important information to the lecturers (Conrad, 2002), and allowed them to move discussion forwards or revisit a particular topic if students seemed to struggle. The lack of visual cues led lecturers to wait for responses in the chat function, which inevitably took longer to type than a non-verbal gesture or a verbal

response might have, slowing the pace of sessions as a result of prolonged silences. In a face-to-face setting, silences can form part of learning activities or information processing, and it might be reasonable to assume that similar processes take place in an online learning environment (Zembylas, 2022).

Ultimately, removing a core communication element had negative effects on students and their engagement, and as acknowledged by Danny, was a very challenging environment to teach in. None of the students who were interviewed volunteered reasons for not using their cameras and microphones in favour of the chat function. As will become evident in the next section, the chat function opened new opportunities for some students who found engaging in a face-to-face classroom difficult.

### 7.1.3 *“Blessing in disguise?”*

Whilst students reported challenges adjusting to a sudden online learning environment and social isolation in the lockdowns, and hybrid delivery between the lockdowns, there were some positive experiences that resulted directly from these changes. Whilst students reportedly found online learning more challenging, and most did not engage using their cameras and microphones to simulate a “normal” classroom, the chat function opened doors for students who would be too shy to ask questions and engage in discussions (Finlay *et al.*, 2022).

“I don't speak up a lot when I'm in person in the class and too many people and too shy, but I was able to write in the chat or the questions I had and opinions and. I feel like people are actually more supportive of opinions and questions than they would be in the classroom.” (Olivia)

The use of the chat function for students during online lectures has been highlighted as helpful for international students who found the chat a less intimidating way to interact with lectures (Chen, 2023) and because this manner of interaction preserved a degree of anonymity over unmuting a microphone. However, waiting for answers to be typed, and not always knowing if someone was typing slowed the pace of discussions compared to in classroom teaching (Noorashid *et al.*, 2020), creating a more artificial setting, although the slower speed could support students with slower processing abilities (Gullo, 2022).

Lecture capture was introduced as part of the move to online teaching, and this supported students in several ways, including being able to catch up on missed content, or just working through the lecture content at an individual pace, being able to pause to reflect whenever needed (Shaw *et al.*, 2021). This was helpful for all students, but neurodivergent students and students with learning disabilities found this a particularly useful tool to ‘keep up with lecture content’ (Catherine) and helpful to revisit materials.

“So actually, the whole COVID and recorded lessons have really helped me, and I can see why people don't like it because maybe it means people don't turn up.”  
(Lucy)

Recordings were often combined with additional learning activities, such as quizzes or padlet with activities students could engage with at a time convenient for them, and outcomes could be reviewed in the next teaching session. Danny also spoke favourably about the recordings, which became a permanent part of the teaching and learning materials at this university, with full capture equipment replacing the use of Microsoft Teams recordings at the beginning of the 2022/2023 academic year.

“I think everything was on top because [...] we got extra resources as well along with the lectures and [...] having the liberty of having those lectures recorded as well and being able to access them back again. “(Danny)

Despite students perceiving the accessibility of lecture recordings as positive for their learning, research findings are conflicting on the subject matter, indicating that students watching session recordings did not show “significant improvement in their academic performance” (Lesser & Packel, 2024; p.5) although authors did not note detrimental impacts on academic performance. Wider research indicates that only a small percentage of students make “relatively extensive” (Naveh & Shelef, 2022, p.239) use of recording, suggesting that the recordings may be supportive for some students in addition to active engagement in live teaching sessions, and used predominantly as a revision tool before exams by most students (Chinnery *et al.*, 2021).

Jodie and Olivia had a challenging first year for different reasons, but both described the lockdown and return to home (Olivia) or being left alone in term time accommodation (Jodie) as “helpful” and ‘a blessing’. Olivia was able to leave behind-and by her own admission, temporarily forget about the course she was not enjoying without further parental pressure to continue, which might have made her second and third year more bearable, as she was able to study remotely.

“I don't want to say that COVID helps. But it helped me because I got to finish my year early” (Olivia)

Jodie on the other hand was able to finally settle into her first year flat, as until the lockdown, she had challenging experiences with her flatmates, so their departure allowed her to breathe and enjoy her studies.

“Then COVID hit, around February? And that, for me, was a blessing because everyone went home except for myself. Uh, so I had the flat to myself and I spent a few months there until May.” (Jodie)

Therefore, experiences of the students I interviewed indicated that some of the immediate impact of an improved living conditions and reduced stress levels when other students went home, and long-term pandemic legacies for this provider, such as investment into lecture capture equipment improved aspects of the student experience, alongside an increased skill level with interactive online tools- an area previously underdeveloped in students on equine-related programmes. However, further research is required to establish whether there is an optimal integration for lecture recordings in student learning (Chinnery *et al.*, 2021; Meehan & Howard, 2024).

## 7. 2 The “big C” (Criticality)

Five of the eight interviewees reflected more extensively than the other three on what they understood by the term “critical thinking” and when or how they managed to find a way to understand and apply it to their own work. Not one of the participants was able to relate critical thinking skills they use in “everyday life” to a critical reading and writing approach in their studies, further illustrating the “mythical” nature of the concept for students.

Critical thinking and writing have long been billed as key graduate skills, yet there is no agreement on a single definition of what this skill entails, nor whether it is best taught in a discipline context or as a skill in isolation from the discipline. It has been broadly defined as “complex cognitive process requiring higher order thinking and

application to decision-making in practice" (Girot, 2000, p.289) with a logical decision-making process and identification of solutions (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2021). There is little agreement on the best way to develop critical thinking and writing skills in students beyond a broad approach, illustrated by statistical disagreement of empirical research for the same intervention (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011).

The ability to develop and improve critical thinking skills rely on attributes of the individual, which Simpson & Courtney (2002) defined as: an ability to consider multiple perspectives for the same topic, naturally questioning concepts and wanting to know more, approaching the research in a logical and analytical in the review of research evidence, as well as a critical awareness of one's own capabilities and limitations to use research evidence and come to a conclusion (Utami *et al.*, 2019). With a range of definitions and broad descriptions of skills and attributes required to become a critical thinker, and then adding discipline-specific demands into the equation, it is no wonder that Danny referred to critical thinking and writing as "the mythical beast" (Danny).

Several students had quite similar initial interpretations of what critical thinking might involve, using the "quick fix" of reading more and including more references, without an indication that they had a deeper engagement with the research they read or that they reflected on the research designs and approaches.

"I didn't have a clue. No clue. I just thought it meant read more papers and, I never really thought of it as analysing the papers better and things like that." (Edward)

Whilst evidencing their work more effectively was a building block in building critical writing skills and evaluative discussions, neither student took the next steps such as becoming more inquisitive or using the evidence to build an academic argument (Tathahira, 2020). Catherine struggled with the reverse of this approach, as she was

able to build academic discussions with evaluative argument, but struggled to incorporate research evidence rather than her own, less informed, evaluative thoughts:

"It took a while for that to click. That was what I struggled with most. [...], I thought I was being perfectly critical, but actually they were looking for a bit more evidence behind it and sort of a bit more development. "(Catherine)

The struggles experienced by these students are not novel, nor are they unique to students studying on equestrian degrees- critical thinking in education can be traced back Socrates who questioned concepts that people believed without further investigation, emphasising the importance of finding and closely examining relevant evidence, covering a range of viewpoints before concluding (Paul *et al.*, 1997; Thorndahl & Stentoft, 2020). Critical thinking is not a skill that is learnt once and achieved, but a more dynamic one that continues to develop as knowledge, understanding and access to information improves for an individual which may provide an answer, but is just as likely to raise further questions systematically (Vero & Puka, 2018).

Staff often encouraged students to "question everything" was not as helpful as it might have been intended to be, as it led students to become fixed onto every detail in a paper, losing track of the initial trail of their research investigations, rather than focusing, for example, on the research design and protocols that might impact the robustness or reliability of the data set.

"They say it's all your questioning everything and that kind of thing. Well, actually it makes it sound really hard. And it makes you end up reading everything trying to find out what's going on. You're just looking for things that they could have done better next time or why that might be a result. So, it's easier that it's made out to be. (Lucy)"

Lipman (1988) highlighted that critical thinking should not be thought of as a skill that is taught, but a skill that is embodied in as many teaching and learning activities as feasible and modelled by staff in lectures and learning tasks they set for students, with Gunawardena & Wilson (2021) highlighting critical thinking as an ongoing process rather than a skill to be acquired to progress to a new skill. This might be through questioning that fosters critical thinking, evaluating the quality and reliability of different sources, and the use of materials that help students to “train” the required skills- for example, the interviewees worked with case studies of individual horses or larger groups of horses to apply theoretical concepts and design solutions to problems that were presented in the case study in their first year. In their second year, they might be prompted to review the quality of sources more thoroughly to build more comparative and evaluative recommendations, recognising the shortcomings of many published papers.

Students recalled group tutorials in their first-year academic skills module, where the lecturer took them through how they would review a research paper in a step-by-step approach, explaining their thought processes in detail, and worked through another paper with the students in small groups. Rather than just asking what they thought, the lecturer asked them to explain their thinking and how they came to decisions about the quality of the paper, and its application to a certain context, essentially modelling the skills needed with active student involvement.

Students recalled as the by far most powerful approach to explaining the concept of critical thinking, demonstrating the value of worthwhile experiences in the classroom in the context of student transition and persistence (Tinto, 2012). Lecturers leading by example in their teaching, and in carefully designed learning activities are the most likely route to engage students on applied science or business courses in critical

thinking process and to encourage them to develop these skills throughout their degree (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Davies, 2015).

### 7.3 “Horsing Around”

Students chose to enrol on equine- related programmes for a wide range of reasons, ranging from a clear career path that required a degree in a more specialised area, e.g. equestrian sports coaching, right to being “sent to Uni” by parents, and the horse aspect is a compromise between gaining a higher education qualification and further practical experience around horses (Merson *et al.*, 2020). Student expectations of the interaction they might have with horses was variable, as were the actual interactions with horses in the gaps between national lockdowns, but the possibility of some “horse time” and the context of applied principles to an equestrian context were the main draws to attract students to their respective courses. All interviewees mentioned their passion for horses, and some expanded on the reasons they chose a particular course, predominantly based on opportunities to work practically with the horses on site.

#### *7.3.1 Horses on courses*

Molly was incredibly passionate about horses, their welfare and training and had a very inquisitive mind throughout her time at the university. Her interest in an equine-related degree course started relatively early in her life, further illustrating her unwavering passion and drive for learning and horses:

“So, I found out about [this university] very specifically when I was about 13. [...] I am a very academic person, so I did want to have that qualification specifically and I just did not see myself doing anything else.” (Molly)

Horses had been her passion, and as shown by Pressley *et al.* (1992), a higher level of interest in the core topic areas prior to starting higher education tended to be linked

to better wellbeing and higher educational performance. There is limited recent research to further contextualise the impact of students' passion for their subject area, unless it is in the context of student satisfaction or achievement (e.g. Bunce *et al.* 2017) and no research specifically about the passion for horses - or animals - in equine or animal science degree students. Robson (2020) highlighted the importance of teaching staff passion for their subject area to be able to provide inspirational learning experiences for their student, leading to more actively engaged students, similarly to findings by Bradley *et al.* (2014).

"Academically, I didn't find it as challenging as I thought it would be. I expected university to be very academically challenging. However, I don't think that reflects on the quality. I think it's the fact that I'm very passionate about what I'm doing. "(Molly)

Active learning and learning in a practical setting has further been shown to further stimulate students' interest in areas of study (Freeman *et al.*, 2014). Active learning is not fully defined, but approaches can include simple classroom discussions, group tasks and similar activities that persuade students to work through content, rather than receiving didactic lectures from an expert (Lee *et al.*, 2018). However, this process only encourages active learning if communication remains open, rather than a strongly staff-led question and answer discussion, where staff inevitably provide the answers (Wood *et al.*, 2018).

Olivia also chose her course based on the expectations she had for the practical elements of the course, with the aim to gain coaching qualifications alongside her university studies and become a qualified equestrian coach. The focus on the practical aspect here was playing towards Olivia's interests, alongside gaining internationally recognised skills sets and qualifications.

“It's not that I'm not academic, but I don't necessarily enjoy it. A lot of the time, I thought a more practical course would suit me better, [...] I would learn as a coach, I could apply to my writing and to myself. (Olivia)

Kelly (2017) recognised the potential value industry qualifications in addition to BTECs could provide to students, and it would be reasonable to assume that the same applied to equestrian degree programmes that prepared students for specialist career pathways.

All the examples included so far clearly illustrate the passion for horses or a part of the equestrian industry as a key motivator for all participants, but for Jodie and Edward, horses themselves and the university courses they chose provided both with a lifeline, or an escape from adverse circumstances. Edward had a much deeper reasoning beyond a passion for horses and told me how horses had “saved him” in a very dark time in his life.

“I was actually pursuing a career in football [...] and I've always liked horses. But I never saw horses as a career until I had a career ending injury. And I just didn't know where to go, what to do. And my friends started taking me to his horses. E I decided there and then that I wanted to try and chase something with horses. [...] that was the start of my journey [...] I was honestly in a terrible position. [...] Him taking me to those horses really did change a lot for me.” (Edward)

The role of animals in general (Parbery-Clark *et al.*, 2021; Haggerty & Mueller, 2017), and horses in particular (Colston & Shultz, 2015) in therapeutic interventions and psychotherapy (Berg *et al.*, 2021), as well as to promote wellbeing in higher education, is a well-established practice, but their role in encouraging students to enter higher education and exactly what role students can expect horses to play in their chosen course of study is vastly under researched. As a practitioner, I am aware that Edward's story is unique, but it is not unusual for horses to “save” students in adverse situations

prior to their start at university, and that experience playing a key role in their university and course choices.

### *7.3.2 Making a difference for horse welfare*

Danny and Molly were ambitious in their initial reasons to come to higher education and focus on equine-based degrees and where they expect or hope this might take them in the future. Both were passionate about the welfare of horses, and being in a position to have an evidence-based education and evidence base to be able to challenge some of the traditional husbandry and training practices that remain prevalent in a tradition-driven and results-oriented industry. Not all traditional approaches have adverse effects on equine welfare, but some practices are, at best, outdated and do not contribute positively to horse welfare. Other practices, such as trimming whiskers, have now been banned in national legislation in some EU countries, and in the Federation Equestrian Internationale (International governing body) competition rules (Emerson, 2016). Molly's passion and industry understanding at the end of her degree left her ready to enter the industry and "be the change horses need" (Ashton, 2021).

"I think the knowledge I've gained can really make the industry a better place and that's I think why we're studying at [university] to use that research in our favour. And the horse's favour. So yeah, taking all that knowledge and actually seeing change happen in less than, I don't know, 10 years. I've seen there's so many other ways I can sort of help in the industry and everything." (Molly)

When Molly started her course, she described herself as "shy" and "struggling to speak to people", but she expected more from herself when she realised that speaking to people would be an essential part of any potential career path for her, so she joined

the student ambassador team, and gradually improved her confidence, resulting in the fighting spirit she showed in her final quote of her interview about her future plans:

“I want to take that [university] legacy forward [...] I want to improve the equine industry, equine welfare with everything I have.” (Molly)

Danny, despite challenges he experienced during his studies, particularly during the online learning periods, echoed Molly’s views on where to go next, and what his role in the future should look like:

“And in the coming future, I do want to work out in the field. I mean, I would love a career and research, but I actually like working out with horses out in the field. You get to put your thinking hat on and challenge the previous practices. So, I mean it's quite prevalent in the equine industry [...] that's the only way to progress on to actually bettering the welfare of the horses, because that's what we're here for.”  
(Danny)

Other students had similar plans, either moving into postgraduate studies to progress further, or into vocational training programmes to qualify as equine therapists, but most spoke about how, despite all disruption, they felt they had experienced significant personal growth and felt equipped to tackle the next steps, followed by changing the industry “one step at time” (Danny). Vocationally based courses, like the equine courses in this research, could “empower students to be active and critical citizens in the workplace” (Lavender, 2020; p.152) and lead change in an industry that is under pressure to change currently.

#### 7.4 Conclusions

The expectations of equine students at a rural university, and anticipated hurdles were like those reported in wider research about student transition into HE in general

(Moriña, 2019; Tett *et al.*, 2017; Gale & Parker, 2014), and specifically for non-traditional students (e.g. Golding *et al.* 2018, Reay *et al.*, 2010; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Wong & Chiu, 2019). There was no evident predisposition for worries or unclarity of expectations linked to most reportable WP characteristics, rather most worries and anticipated challenges were shared by all informants. There was some evidence that mature students focused more on academic connectedness, seeking social connections elsewhere, or social connectedness arising from meaningful classroom experiences, aligning with Tinto's (2012) recommendations.

As reported elsewhere, the move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was unsettling, but the institutional response in this example mitigated most challenges cited elsewhere linked to digital poverty, for example in Summers *et al.* (2023). However, the physical space in which online learning had to take place was more challenging to navigate for all students during at least one of the lockdowns, which is an aspect not under institutional control. Universities could advice students to adapt guidance that was developed for home working (e.g. worksafeuk, 2024) as much as practicable for their situation and encourage them to use campus facilities when possible.

Dissections were a controversial learning tool, which was less expected by equine performance and equine business students, and required significant adjustment for these students, whereas equine science students seemed less surprised. This example illustrates the need for clear course information beyond the main selling points of a programme, similarly to Bainbridge's findings about the transition of law students (Bainbridge, 2023). This would support students to prepare for new learning

environments for them and allow them to agree access alternative learning materials if needed.

Criticality, its definition and then application to an academic context was a challenge all students reflected on in their interviews. In research and practice, a range of definitions and broad descriptions of skills and attributes in relation to a specific discipline have been attributed to critical thinkers, leading to one informant referring to critical thinking and writing as “the mythical beast” (Utami *et al.*, 2019). My findings indicated that learning about research designs early in the degree, preferably in relation to taught subject areas, and teaching staff modelling a critical thinking approach in their teaching were the most appreciated methods that helped students to understand and apply critical thinking approaches to their own work. Self-motivation to further develop critical thinking and writing skills seemed low with this group of students, yet Keil (2001) suggests that high levels of self-determination were required for students to develop strong critical writing skills.

As might have been expected, the horse played a significant role in student course choices, but also supporting student mental health, resilience, and motivation to succeed. Each student was on their individual journey, but the intrinsic links of the course materials to horses, and the possibilities of being able to influence the equestrian sector post-graduation provided intrinsic motivation which has previously been shown to be a protective factor against drop out (Samuel & Burger, 2020; Pusztai *et al.*, 2022). Messerer *et al.* (2022) suggested that “intrinsic motivation for enrolment [formed] an important protective factor reducing the risk of both the emergence of perception of non-fit and shielding students from dropping out of their study program (p.139), mirroring the role the passion for horses in generally played for all the students in this research project. Four informants shared stories suggesting that horses

provided a mental health lifeline for them even without the therapeutic benefits Berg *et al.* (2021) explored in a controlled setting. This concept in an equine education context is underrepresented in the current research and warrants further investigation, potentially building on Bornemann's (2020) work exploring reasons for horse ownership in the UK. Furthermore, if Messerer *et al.*'s (2022) suggestions were applied to an equine student context, the shared interest in horses might provide a supportive factor for student belonging, facilitating the transition into HE for equine students.

The findings from my work highlight several more nuanced areas that have been considered less or not at all in Tinto's explorations of student success (Tinto, 2012; 2017), such as intrinsic motivation as a protective factor supporting student resilience, but also showed practice- based applications of some concepts, such as the use of early assessment and feedback to set expectations.

## **8.0 Support**

This chapter addresses the third research question “What support was effective for equine degree students and would other support have been useful?”. The interviews provided an insight into the support services most valued by students, the accessibility of services and students feeling like they were treated as individuals, rather than one of the many. This latter point also fed into other aspects of my analysis, especially in the assessment and feedback and involvement chapters (chapters 9 and 10 respectively).

All interviewees spoke about at least one key experience where they felt they were being heard, being seen and the person or people interacting with them actually cared about them as a person. The experiences ranged from lecturers or tutors reaching out and checking in with students to encounters that empowered students, providing powerful examples of what Tinto referred to as students “matter and belong” (Tinto, 2017; p. 258) to peer-support and group dynamics in the classroom providing a support network. Most experiences were through direct interactions with staff either in the physical classroom or virtually rather than broader mechanisms like student feedback. The role of the student voice – often through student representative- has been studied elsewhere (e.g. Young & Jerome, 2020; Seale, 2015; Alleb & Nicholls, 2017), and, maybe surprisingly, did not feature as a theme in interviews.

Three themes emerged relating to support mechanisms and support experiences from the interviews, with evidence to support each theme in all interviews:

1. “I matter- and somebody listens and cares”
2. “With a little help from my friends (and peers, family and the university)”
3. “Against all odds”

#### 8.1 “I matter- and somebody listens and cares”

The provider my study was a new university, or niche provider, providing an insight into the experiences of disadvantaged students in a smaller setting, priding itself on a culture of “family”. Equine students provided more examples from the lockdown period and their third year compared to their first-year experiences, potentially challenging the disproportionately high research emphasis on first year transition and experiences in relation to student persistence.

All students recalled tutors “checking in” at various stages in the lockdowns, and most saw this as an extension of the support they had been receiving from tutors. Jodie was one of two students with previous experiences at other HE providers, and the tutor check in around the assessment period was an empowering experience, especially during a time when all in person teaching had been suspended and a lot of students were working in isolation really mattered to her, as she felt that she was important as a real person, maybe fitting the family ethos that forms part of this university’s values, and demonstrating the importance of mattering Tinto (2017) and Hallam (2023) discussed in their respective research papers.

“I got an email from [my tutor] asking Ohh Jodie, are you OK? Are you gonna do this? Are you gonna sit the exams? And I was completely baffled by that because no one ever asked me, are you OK? Are you engaging? Are you here with us?”. (Jodie)

The impact of the experience might also have been magnified by the wider context of a lockdown, where Jodie was working in isolation in university accommodation rather than travelling home. Carlana & La Ferrara (2021) reported positive effect of tutor interactions on mental wellbeing and performance of students- for Jodie, this was a turning point, which increased her trust in her tutor initially, and then wider support mechanisms her tutor directed her to, illustrating how powerful such check-ins could be and demonstrating the enhanced sense of mattering and belonging explored by Tinto (2017).

“I needed some time to check if all of this support is real or if it's just or if it's fake”  
(Jodie)

Jodie raises the importance of being able to trust in the support that is being offered to students and trusting that it can actually help her as an individual, and that it is safe for her to ask for the help she needs Jones & Nangah (2020). Jodie's previous experiences have left her untrusting of other people and their intentions, preventing her from seeking support until, to her, there seemed to be no other option available. Jones & Nangah (2020) highlighted those traumatic experiences when growing up impact academic trust in higher education, using an alienation-based framework proposed by Case (2008). Case's framework extends beyond cognitive processes in higher education success and student behaviour to include students' relationships with academic staff and other students- factors that have been established as influential extensively in the research, including Tinto's theory of departure (1975).

Additionally, Wong (2018) reported that mature students tended to be reluctant to access support, and one of his participants recalls how the intervention from one member of staff who noticed them struggling due to an injury, leading to them being more comfortable to ask for help in future. This further illustrates that, regardless of the setting, being “seen” by staff can be an initial relief, but then empowering experience as confidence in support mechanisms develops and strengthens, instilling a sensation of mattering as an individual, potentially leading to improved belonging (Tinto, 2017; Smith & Tinto, 2024).

The relationships, alongside academic performance, was then contextualised to alienation, where alienation was defined as “disconnection in the context of a desired or expected relationship” (Case, 2008, p.325) and contextualised levels of alienation into three categories: entering, fitting in, and staying in- similar to aspects of Tinto’s student persistence model, which emphasised the importance of students’ social connection to peers and their academic encounters. Positive experiences in challenging times could have a positive impact on student persistence, which benefits the university, but, more importantly, on the students’ overall wellbeing and self-esteem, as they were being seen and heard, strengthening their sense of belonging and enhancing their resilience (Hallam, 2023, Tinto, 2017).

Edward’s recollection of the support he received from his academic personal tutors further highlights the importance of trust and the feeling of “mattering” to others in the context of academic support.

“When I’m stressed, I’ve struggled to find ways to go about what’s going on in that certain time, and they were always supportive in helping me saying, you know, these are your options. [...] They were reassuring, and they always gave options in which way I could go.” (Edward)

Edward's experience further indicates the level of trust he placed in staff he turned to for advice, evident through the repeated use of "always" rather than not including an adverb here or choosing something less strong like "mostly" or "usually", hence reflecting the faith in the academic support systems Edward was able to develop over his three years of study on two different programmes. He was able to trust in the wider environment and more than just one member of staff, and elsewhere in his interview spoke about the careers support, as well as wellbeing and financial support he had received throughout the pandemic and after his return to campus.

Whilst research conducted at larger providers, such as the University of Nottingham (Knight *et al.*, 2021), indicated that support services were less accessible to students and staff, both Jodie and Edward's experiences provide examples of continued accessibility in a smaller setting, albeit digitally through tutor check ins, for example, rather than in person, enabling students to rely on a remote support network. This included continued access to learning support, well-being, financial and careers support, alongside the continuation of teaching to the previously published timetable, providing a sense of familiarity with processes and some provision of structure during the pandemic (this is further explored in chapter 9), further cementing trust in the university and its staff being there as each student mattered.

Faulkner (2015) concluded that trust significantly influences the decision-making process of individuals, and a lack of trust could prevent a person from engaging with a process, e.g. a student asking for support when they are struggling. A lack of trust does not necessarily mean distrust, but more a lack of confidence in another person, a system, or a process (Faulkner, 2015). If trust is broken- for example, when a student needs help, but is unsure what kind of support is needed, and they approach a member

of staff and feel they are not being listened to and supported, the breach of trust through lack of clear action can become a significant obstacle for the student to seek help in the future.

Trust in the higher education system, its processes and academics as people has predominantly been researched in the context of access to higher education, and I have discussed the concept further in the context of assessment and feedback in chapter 9.3, where further positive consequences of initial positive support experiences became evident.

“Maybe you just need a little bit of guidance to go in the right direction, but unless you come to them with absolute confidence like this is what I need help with. It’s like you don’t get it. Which is hard because you don’t understand yourself.” (Penny)

Penny’s experience referred to one particular experience in her first year of her studies, but it had left a lasting impression of not feeling heard or listened to when struggling to express what the actual challenges were at the time (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This could be approached in a number of ways, starting with the concept of negativity bias, which refers to a human predisposition to remember negative experiences or negative scenarios better than positive ones, reflecting old survival instincts (Rozin & Royzman 2001). Often this can actually trigger people to want to do better (further explored in Chapter 9), but it can also leave someone with a “bitter taste” and make them more reluctant to engage in similar scenarios in the future (Mapletoft *et al.*, 2023).

The tendency to be able to recollect negative events or experiences in higher level of detail is a well reported phenomenon in a number of education research studies,

including a recent study of the satisfiers and dissatisfiers for vocational students (Ryan *et al.*, 2019). It would be unrealistic to expect that no student would ever have negative experiences in the course of their studies- some lucky ones might- but care must be taken to provide an environment of trust so students feel safe to ask for help, as they feel that staff see each student as an individual who matters, so that potential negative encounters are minimised and, in the long-term, counteracted by a larger number of quality positive encounters (Mapletoft *et al.*, 2023).

This first theme under the support pillar emphasises the importance of students feeling seen and heard, in an environment that cultivates trust in the available support mechanisms. The route by which students access such support changed dramatically from a very social and organic manner to a more formalised and remote manner, using MS Teams, but accessibility and availability of services was not restricted in terms of opening times or ability to book individual meetings. From an academic perspective, the timetable promised at the start of year was also delivered in the new medium, further promoting a trust in academics as people and the university and its processes to deliver the promised teaching sessions.

These conclusions mirror some of those Khan (2020) who surveyed students in England by using an online questionnaire which was distributed on social media and direct emails. Whilst my findings from a small provider whose students are unlikely to have been targeted by this national questionnaire were similar, it was worth noting that out of a possible 2.75 million higher education students, only 349 students from a range of study levels and age groups responded, without an indication of provider or course types. While it could therefore be argued that findings are not representative, the response rate does provide a 5% margin of error at a 95% confidence interval,

which is comfortably within the acceptable margin of error range. The importance of mattering and having trusted support mechanisms was important for equine students, mirroring the results on a national level.

## 8.2 “With a little help from my friends “(peers, family, and the university)

When asked about the most important people who supported participants through their university studies, academic staff were mentioned in all interviews. Most also mentioned family support, despite some areas where family members were less supportive or understanding of demands placed on the students, especially during the remote learning period in the global pandemic.

### *8.2.1 Friends*

Friends were the most commonly named key support students relied on throughout their three years of study in all but one interview. For most participants, friends could be peers on the same course, living in the same accommodation or social contacts made outside of the academic context. Especially during times when students felt pressured, e.g. around assessment deadlines, peers on the course or on campus tended to be the first line of support, as illustrated by Molly when she spoke about her experiences during her first year and her adjusting to life on campus:

I think they play a huge role just because whenever I'm stressed out academically, those are the people I go to just because three of them are from [similar background]. It's like having a piece of home there and it makes it so much more comfortable just because they understand what I'm going through. (Molly)

Most participants, similarly to Molly, recounted how they tended to have a “university-friend” group and a “social-friend” group- mirroring by Brooks (2007) at larger universities in urban settings that classroom-based and other friendships coexist

without impact on each other. The setting for this research is rural, and at significant distance from the next town, which students in surveys often describe as “the bubble” so a concern raised on open days by parents is a risk of feeling isolated, or “being stuck” with the same people, but this does not seem to be the case for the participants here, even for students who spent most of their first year living and socialising on campus. Whilst there is research investigating the experiences of students from remote areas attending university e.g. White & Lee (2020) and Veidemane *et al.* (2021), there does not seem to be research about the student experience on a rural and more remote campus despite this being a common setting for land-based providers, and as such this requires further research to understand experiences of isolation, loneliness and belonging.

Friendship groups outside of their course appeared to be an important part of self-care for Penny and other participants, where conversations were about “normal” topics, providing an opportunity to “switch off” (Penny) from pressure of assessments, for example. Wilcox *et al.* (2005) also concluded that friendships with peers are important, but not as influential in student persistence as friendships formed in accommodation, which is supported by Penny’s quote.

Lucy recounted her experiences very differently- her family circumstances meant that she had started the course on a part-time basis for her first year before attending full-time when she moved into the second year of her course, which she recollect with some regret when speaking about friendships:

“People talk about their unique experiences and friends and that kind of thing...and in that first year, I didn't really make any friendship groups. [...] I did in the second year [...] I just fit into the group [...]. I've made lots of lovely friendships which then carried on so I'm glad I didn't stay part-time. (Lucy)

The university experience is often sold as a time of discovery, step into adulthood and forming friendships for life- sometimes described in research as “social connectedness” (e.g. Brett *et al.*, 2022). This social connectedness was evident in Penny’s and Danny’s experiences, but Lucy’s initial comment demonstrated a disappointment, and feeling of “missing out” on the experiences that seem to define university life for so many other students. This disillusionment can have significant adverse effects on mental health, sense of belonging and confidence to engage in classroom-based sessions (Diehl *et al.*, 2018). Whilst the university cannot force friendship connections between students, encouraging collaborative work in sessions (Thomas, 2012), for example, could be a useful tool to help students form some connections with others over time, especially where students do not live on campus or close to the university (Hunt & Loxley, 2020), allowing students to develop the peer-support network that has been shown consistently to be crucial for student to feel social connectedness (Brett *et al.*, 2022).

Lucy and Penny became part of the same friendship group as they were on the same course and shared most modules. They also became part of a small study group, a source of support both recounted with fondness, and showing the positive impacts of having “Uni friends” (Penny) when completing academic work, especially the dissertation during the final year, with Lucy recounting that “It felt like a little family because you kind of all are going through at the same time”, providing further illustration of the importance of social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Brett *et al.*, 2022).

The global pandemic and associated periods of national lockdowns and campus closures caused significant disruption in many ways, and certainly had a disruptive effect on the levels of social connectedness students had experienced until that time. The move to online learning removed social contact for most students, meaning that what seemed to be the main support pillar crumbled somewhat, and none of the strategies used seemed to be sufficient to overcome this challenge fully:

“So, we had loads of group chats, so we would be messaging on it. But it's just not the same as when you're walking out of lectures and you're talking about the lecture all like, oh, did you enjoy this, or you didn't enjoy this? It wasn't the same. When you're messaging on a group chat during a lecture, it's then distracting. “(Penny)

Social media and digital communication technologies have become a staple in the everyday life of young people over the past two decades, and some platforms, such as Yammer, have been used as a teaching and learning tool, and more common ones such as Facebook, Twitter (now X) and Instagram as a complementary teaching and learning tool - an approach more recently mirrored in assessment strategies at the provider in this research and others, e.g. Escamilla-Fajardo *et al.* (2021) and Chugh & Ruhi (2018). The role of social media in attempting to substitute physical interaction with other people has been explored elsewhere, as has its role in recreating social interactions in teaching and learning during the pandemic across the world (Maphosa *et al.*, 2020; Sobaih *et al.*, 2020, Xie *et al.*, 2020; Papdemetriou *et al.*, 2022; Wang, 2023).

Penny's experiences of trying to recreate the physical classroom environment using digital routes, such as messaging whilst in lectures on Microsoft Teams highlights the challenges in dual tasking effectively in this environment, and the potential for disruption. Students who, in pre-pandemic times managed a healthy social-academic

balance on a daily basis became somewhat lost in attempting to translate their approaches into the digital world, with previous studies, even before the pandemic, demonstrating a reduction in academic performance for students dual-tasking on digital media. Furthermore, research during the pandemic indicates potential adverse effects of the increased use of social media to satisfy the need for social interaction and adverse effects on student mental health (Hong *et al.*, 2020; Bonaksen *et al.*, 2021; Bonaksen *et al.*, 2022).

“Usually, we meet up with everyone from a social perspective, we meet up with everyone after lectures [...] discuss certain things [...] but that didn’t happen during the pandemic and that, I think, was a major setback because I didn’t really get to interact much with my peers.” (Danny)

Students seemed to be mourning the loss of social interaction between lectures and the mixture of content-focused and day-to-day conversations that organically occur in an on-campus setting highlighted the importance of social connectedness, which is one of the three psychological needs underpinning self-determination (Ackerman, 2018, see chapter 2.2; p.32). The impact of its loss, with narratives of failed online study groups, unhelpful conversations dwelling on negative aspects of life rather than “normal” conversations, further adding to the risk factors for poor mental health students were experiencing as a result of social isolation, and limited conversations to support each other’s studies.

“We did try to organise study sessions online, [...] those study sessions online weren’t really serious study sessions- in a way, we were just trying to reassure each other and trying to say, “we’ve got this to work on, and that was it” (Danny)

The increased reliance on online connectivity brought new approaches to learning and socialising, but also created additional challenges for already disadvantaged students. For some, who previously had a strong academic focus, the periods of social isolation

revealed a stronger need for social interactions than previously thought, maybe leading to a different approach of balancing academic focus and social connectedness needs, similar to wider “value shifts” outlined in Fleener (2021) and as revealed by Molly recounting her experiences after returning to study on campus during her final year:

“After coming back to university after the pandemic, I definitely felt the need to be with them, much more inviting them over, constantly talking to them. I thought I would enjoy the pandemic. I thought I would enjoy being stuck at home all the time because I've never been a social person. But actually, I did start to miss that social contact, even if it was sort of the bare minimum.” (Molly)

It appears that social connections are important for students on equine courses, although there seems to be a less weighted importance for some students between having “study friends” and “social friends”- and maybe an indication that both groups ended up merging somewhat after students returned to campus after the final lockdown. The shift in importance of social connectedness alongside rather than in addition to academic connectedness was also explored by Bjornsen *et al.* (2023) in Sweden who suggested that students “expressed a need for social support, meaningful relationships, and a social learning environment to which they can belong” (p. 14), alongside limited online teaching sessions. Students also valued “encouragement and support from teachers and fellow students” (Bjornsen *et al.*, 2023; p. 16) in the post-pandemic hybrid learning environment.

### *8.2.2 Staff support*

Personal academic tutors seemed to be a core source of support for equine students at some point during their studies, with some reporting a specific event where a tutor had left an impression, or as a constant or “safety-net” or understanding how to best motivate each student in individual meetings. The individuality of support mirrored the

positive experiences around personalised and individual feedback discussed in chapter 9.

“Tutors lecturers like [...] just being like you've got this like you just get all of it. You can do it. And. Because I think I work well off that.” (Penny)

Examples of positive learning experiences on the questionnaire generally included short statements, such as “I was lucky to have [...] as my tutor” or “my tutor is super helpful”. The next question asked students to explain how they felt their example provided a positive learning experience for them, which led to deeper explanations of scenarios ranging from normal progress tutorials to advising students who found themselves in a challenging situation to feeling empowered when work was being prepared for conference presentations. There is some overlap here between emotions evident in the “I matter” theme with regards to being heard, seen, and treated respectfully and as the individual person they are. There were certain characteristics attributed to positive encounters with tutors (figure 18), mostly relating back to the fact that students felt heard and seen in these encounters, and a safe, non-judgmental environment could be provided for students.



A cloud of text labels describing positive tutor encounters, including: no-embarrassment, takes-time, enthusiasm, truly-cares, engaging, upbeat, informative, relatable, tailor-individual, provides-resources, empowering, always-help, love-teaching, sympathetic, care-individual, interested, polite, different-options, challenges-self.

Figure 18: Descriptions of positive tutor encounters

The role of the personal academic tutor is a mixture of pastoral and academic advisor roles, and with the increase in mental health problems in young people, more often than not tutors are the first point of contact for a student who is struggling (Grey & Osborne, 2020). The advice at this institution is to listen, but also to signpost the student to the wellbeing support offered on campus, with the aim to move support to staff with specialist training in this area. Therefore, the tutor role has potential to expose staff to stories of traumatic experiences, suicidal thoughts, and other upsetting experiences, without allocation in workloads for staff to be able to offload or process their own emotions (Luck, 2010) before moving on to help the next student or to teach the next session- these challenges fall outside of the scope of my thesis for detailed consideration here.

The setting in which this research was conducted prides itself on being a teaching-focused institution, and most full-time staff members usually have tutoring responsibilities for one or more year group on a programme they teach on. Especially in the first year, being a tutor who also teaches the cohort for credit-bearing modules can aid the student transition. This set up allows multiple interactions with the allocated tutor each week, in addition to timetabled group tutorials and individual tutorials at least three times per academic year. Where tutors and students are well-matched and trustful connections can be made, this process can become invaluable (Kahu & Picton, 2019).

“The whole environment is very nurturing in that way. They don't look down on you if you do make a mistake. So, I think that's really good. (Danny)”

Although most participants had positive examples of encounters with their tutors, some had less positive experiences, which were often a result of personality clashes.

Disengagement with a personal tutor has been shown to be a common factor in students leaving their university course, so the provision of an alternative tutor in the case of a genuine clash should be considered (Yale, 2019). Equally, some students may “click” with one staff member in particular, which in my experience usually happens where students have a complex background, and so that member of staff could be assigned as a personal tutor for the duration of that student’s course. By complex background, I refer to students with a disordered family background, usually significant mental health challenges and occasionally hidden disabilities or illnesses. Often, the student carries a degree of shame about their situation, and keeping the same tutor throughout prevents them from having to explain or share their challenges every academic year (Yale, 2020).

Interestingly, students did not share negative experiences with their personal academic tutors, with negative learning experiences largely occurring in specific taught sessions, linked to assessment and (in class) feedback, so these are explored in chapter 9. This revelation may be linked to the small size of this provider, as research in larger providers indicated more challenging student-tutor relationships due to limited accessibility owing to higher student numbers (Walker-Gleaves, 2019). Wider research also revealed limited authenticity in tutor comments, offering the “same old advice” and “staple sentences of sympathy” (Gravett & Winstone, 2020; p.386), leading to feelings of dismissal and distress in students- the opposite to mattering- with potential long-term negative consequences.

The onset of the pandemic removed any potential of chance meetings on campus, something that would usually happen regularly. Research has shown that students having unscheduled encounters with staff around the campus can contribute

significantly to their sense of belonging and, through recognition and being seen, enhance student wellbeing (e.g. Wilcox *et al.*, 2008; Marchlinska *et al.*, 2023) and support a strong sense of involvement and belonging (Tinto, 2023). It also allows tutors to have an informal check-in with a student who may not have been attending taught sessions, or who has been struggling in a less formal setting, usually resulting in a more relaxed conversation, and again helping students to feel they mattered (Hallam, 2023).

“I always enjoy that face to face talk with a tutor rather than, you know, just over a call or trying to schedule something over a call and then having that sort of a talk because that way you can't really engage as much.” (Danny)

Chance meetings, alongside the in-person interaction rather than scheduled online meetings, increased the perceived accessibility and approachability of staff. A reduction of these meetings raises concerns about students who already struggle to engage with their tutors and potentially taught sessions in a conventional setting, as the online setting facilitates a silent “slip away”- a scenario described by Marchlinska *et al.* (2023) as “feelings of detachment and disconnect from the university” (p.885). Students might still be logging in so attendance is registered, but not really engaging in the materials being delivered- this concern is covered in more depth in assessment and feedback (Chapter 9) and in involvement (Chapter 10).

### 8.3 “Against all odds”

Several of the students spoke about events or experiences in their lives that resulted in significant changes to their plans or their mindset. These ranged from experiences that could be described as a “blow” and the world as the student knew it falling apart, to feelings of isolation, frustration, and the ability to accept mistakes and move forward from them. All of these experiences have allowed students in this research to develop their resilience, and coping strategies for pressured times. I have selected some key examples here, as there were numerous examples of adversity that students overcame and developed a higher level of resilience, both inside and outside of their academic studies.

“. And at first, I was actually pursuing a career in football and never really thought of it like I've always liked horses. But I never saw it as a career until I had a career ending injury. And I just didn't know where to go, what to do.” (Edward)

Edward’s story was one similar to ones Access to Higher Education students recounted in Twigg-Flesner (2018) where higher education was viewed as a safety net or “get out of jail card”, should something happen to stop a professional rugby career. There appears to be very limited research in younger athletes using university studies as a backup plan, so this warrants further research to establish suitable pathways into higher education for these athletes. Interaction with animals, and in this context horses, has a proven positive effect on mental wellbeing in people (Bennett, 2019; Hemingway, 2018; Graham, 2021), leading to lower stress-levels and higher capacity dealing with adversity, as well as improved academic engagement and performance.

Edward spoke of feeling alone, and unable to communicate his mental health state with other people, but felt an unconditional acceptance around horses, describing the interactions as “a lifeline at that time”. Feeling isolated and unable to communicate

challenging emotions is a common pattern in student responses here and other studies, e.g. Ellard *et al.* (2023), both as a result of a specific event as in Edward's case, or as a result of prolonged adverse experiences as in Jodie's story.

"I felt very alone. Uh, but I mean I had a bit of a tough life, so I've always been kind of alone. So, I was used to that for me being alone. Or being by myself was safer and easier than having to ask for help or show vulnerability to other people." (Jodie)

Both Edward's and Jodie's stories provide examples of resilience in both students, but for different reasons and in different manners. Resilience as a concept was discussed in chapter 2, as it forms the basis of Tinto's theory of departure (sometimes also referred to as theory of student persistence, which is the student-focused version of retention (Tinto, 2012)). Finding strength to cope with adversity through different strategies, either immersing themselves in a new passion that provides a mental safe place focusing on videos that promote a positive mindset for Jodie (Tashan *et al.*, 2022) provided protective factors at times of increased stress.

Penny spoke about an area of strong frustration for her, and her story was a common one I hear from students regularly in my working life. Penny was a very hard-working and committed student, with bags of passion, but found academic writing and tackling some academic skills challenging. Her attendance was exemplary across her entire degree, regardless of whether these were classroom-based or online teaching sessions. She always prepared her work with a lot of contingency time to make continuous improvements right up to the submission deadline.

She formed a study group with peers who had a similar work ethic, but tended to find some tasks less challenging, and therefore gained higher marks than Penny. Whilst

she did not begrudge their achievements, she did express upset about students outside of her peer group who bragged about completing their work in little time and gaining higher marks than her. She spoke about this being demotivating to the point she did not really want to engage anymore, but, in her own words, was “not a quitter”, and so she trained herself to measure her achievement against herself instead of others (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). Similarly to Edward, Penny’s passion for horses was another major protective factor driving her continued engagement with her studies.

“It was really disheartening when you, like, put everything into it and then you get back a mark and then you see other people that aren’t doing anything. [...]. I enjoy my dissertation, so I’m just gonna put everything and more into that. [...] That for me was like a little lesson.” (Penny)

It was really positive to hear Penny speaking about “enjoying” preparing her final year project, which was in her main area of interest, but challenging to complete at times, and a sense of pride and achievement regardless of the mark at the end of the process, demonstrating how much personal growth and increased self-acceptance Penny experienced towards the end of her degree (Wulf-Andersen, 2023).

Penny’s experiences can be theorised as a construct of self-compassion, which Neff (2023) described as “how we relate to ourselves in instances of perceived failure, inadequacy or personal suffering” (p. 194). She elaborates on the processes that occur or change to make up the concept of self-compassion. Rather than judging herself, Penny allowed herself to show kindness, acknowledging shortcomings whilst accepting her own performance in an academic context (Kotera *et al.*, 2023), demonstrating self-acceptance, which Neff (2023) links to higher feelings of self-worth.

The next process was an active recognition and processing that mistakes are part of life, and that Penny was not the only one who made mistakes or showed shortcomings in her academic work. As she accepted that feelings of imperfection can look different between people but are experienced by all at one point or another (Kotera *et al.*, 2019), she started to accept herself more and felt less isolated, in fact, she even felt pride in her work.

Both male students who took part in the interviews presented a very similar narrative around learning from mistakes and using these as learning opportunities to move forwards, rather than something to linger on and become self-critical in a non-productive manner as Penny did in some parts of her interview (also considered in chapter 9.2). The gender difference in expressing levels of self-compassion has been documented extensively in psychology research, with Neff (2003) in her original work in this topic area suggesting that females were more likely to have negative self-perceptions than males, and as a result tended to dwell on negative thoughts and experience, be more critical of themselves and, as a result, experience more intense isolation and lower levels of self-compassion.

However, in more recent work, Murn & Steele (2019) suggested that while females tended to show heightened emotional reactions to challenges or exaggerated problems to themselves, they were more likely to share those experiences and relate to others in a similar situation, therefore reducing feelings of isolation. Males in comparison were less likely to share their problems and emotions with others and worked through them without the involvement of peers as to not show weaknesses or mistakes to others.

Both Danny and Edward gave examples of their engagement with staff and peer support during their studies in preceding sections of this chapter, demonstrating that both were maybe more willing to share problems and weaknesses with people they perceived to be safe and non-judgemental- notably, for Edward, this tended to be members of staff, whereas Danny shared with peers as well. Danny also shared experiences about his father's advice about taking mistakes as learning experiences, promoting self-compassion, and allowing Danny to move forwards more confidently and feeling safe to expose himself to challenges to develop.

“So, I think now moving on and also reflecting back on it, I think it's better to be out of your comfort zone throughout the whole process. If you really want to progress. And I think this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to set myself that.” (Danny)

Edward had a similar take, although the personality that helped him to become a professional athlete shone through in his comments, showing his competitive nature whilst accepting that mistakes happen, but he had to move forward and “do better” to succeed in future.

“I think I learned from my from quite an early age that you know, things happen and it's not always gonna go your way, but you can choose to either get up and do better or stay where you are.” (Edward)

#### 8.4 Conclusion

The most effective support mechanisms for students were those they trusted and felt safe with. The most commonly referred to support mechanisms were tutors and peers, as equine students had limited engagement with wider support teams as also reported for high-achieving non-traditional students by Wong (2018), seeing them as a “last resort” support mechanism. Experience with tutors that led students to feel they

mattered were most powerful and influential, as previously suggested by Hallam (2023) and Tinto (2017).

Being treated as an individual, and genuine advice were highly valued, whereas generic advice could have adverse influences on student self-esteem and belonging (Case, 2008; Gravett & Winstone, 2020), paralleling findings from another small HE provider (Hallam, 2023) . Positive interaction, especially when students had become less engaged, and during the lockdown period where chance encounters on campus could not happen, had potential for enhanced positive impact in terms of student re-engagement, persistence (Tinto, 2017) and students' sense of belonging and academic connectedness (Bjornson *et al.*, 2023). Students associated a range of descriptive terms with positive tutor encounters (figure 16) which highlighted the need for academic tutor to have strong soft, interpersonal skills to make such encounters valuable for equine students.

Staff had targeted individual students who did not seem to engage in the sudden move to online learning and subsequent lockdowns, but wider individual check ins beyond the standard three tutorials per academic year were limited for students who were attending and submitting assessments. This posed a risk for otherwise self-motivated students that felt a strong academic and social connectedness in “normal” times which increased their risk of becoming non-engaged and develop “feelings of detachment and disconnect” (Marchlinska *et al.*, 2023, p.885), especially as these students were the ones who valued chance encounters and informal conversations with academic staff the most (see Danny's experiences in 8.1).

Peer-support seemed to be compartmentalised for equine students here as they distinguished between “uni-friends” who shared study groups and friends away from

the academic context- a phenomenon previously described by Brooks (2008) and Tinto (2023). Each part of the peer support network played a specific role, which could be module-specific or independent work like dissertations for academic friendship groups, compared to general life and emotional support from “friend friends” (Penny). Having different sources of support which equine students associated with specific types of support helped to provide an “off-switch” from academic stressors, particularly after negative learning experiences or when returned marks were lower than expected.

Peer interactions were a trigger for personal growth and development. Equine students in my interviews all had competitive attitudes, making lower academic achievements in comparison to peers a hard bite to swallow. This was one area where male students showed different coping mechanisms to female students, as both male students felt immediately comfortable to gain support from tutors and learning support services to address academic weaknesses, whereas the female students all explained they needed time to “digest” what they perceived to be “negativity”. While both male students demonstrated high level of self-acceptance (Wulf-Andersen, 2023), and saw weaknesses in their work as opportunities for improvements. Female students took longer to develop attitudes of self-compassion and eventually self-acceptance (Kotera *et al.*, 2023), leading to a sense of pride in their achievement and increased feelings of self-worth (Neff, 2023) without comparing themselves negatively to peers.

Lockdowns forced most social interactions into the virtual world, and whilst equine students attempted to create virtual spaces to mimic social spaces on campus, efforts were largely deemed to be more of a distraction than helpful support, resulting in a negative impact on social connectedness and self-determination (Bonaksen *et al.*, 2022). Eventually, contact with peers became limited to scheduled online teaching which brought its own limitations and negative influences on academic

connectedness, so when students returned to campus between lockdowns, social connectedness became a primary need over academic connectedness, even for previously strongly academically focused students, representing a value shift (Fleener, 2021). There seemed to be a merge between academic and social friendship groups, further illustrating the need for social belonging and meaningful relationships with peers and tutors (Bjornsen *et al.*, 2023).

Equine students often have an interest in horses as a result of previous significant life events, making being with horses their safe haven, especially during pressure points adversely impacting on their mental health, when communication with people was challenging (Ellard *et al.*, 2023). Having a focal point that crosses from academic interests to daily life appeared to bring a source of strength that warrants further research exploration for equine and animal students.

## **9.0 Assessment and Feedback**

This chapter addresses the third research question “How did equine degree students experience and engage with assessment and feedback and overcome adverse experiences?”. This question seemed an important one to ask because assessment and Feedback have been central research aspects for the past two decades, yet the NSS 2023 national benchmark for satisfaction with Assessment and Feedback remains one of the lowest at 79.6%.

The satisfaction score for the overall assessment and feedback question for the provider was over 86%, and the two questions about ability to contact staff and the quality of staff support also exceeded benchmark values (93.1%/84.5% and 94.5%/86.2% respectively). Benchmark scores were also exceeded for questions about clarity of marking criteria (82.5%/79.5%), fairness of assessments (87.2%/83.5%), receiving feedback on time (93.3%/81.6%) and assessments allowing students to demonstrate what they have learnt (85.2%/79.9%), indicating that the student body was relatively happy with these aspects of their course. Due to small cohort sizes on some equine courses, the data for individual programmes contains significant gaps and therefore would be of less value here, and commentary could impact on staff and student anonymity. Exploring equine students' experiences and perceptions of assessment and feedback here therefore could provide a deeper and valuable insight, allowing for improvements to be made for future cohorts.

All students had a lot of examples around assessment and feedback experiences, and these have been captured and presented here in four themes:

1." Talking things through"

2. Impact of feedback tone

3." It's my job to do better"

4.Fair for all

Interestingly, the assessments set in general were only briefly commented on, even when prompted, but the feedback processes seemed to be much more important to students. This may tie into a broad match between course expectations and the reality on the course, with all apart from practical "hands on" sessions continuing throughout the pandemic, as explored in chapter 7 (Expectations).

All students also recognised that feedback is not limited to comments on a summative piece of work, which is marked to contribute towards credit completion and degree classifications. There were very few comments about formative assessments *per se*, but a lot of discussion of in class feedback opportunities on work, as well as accessibility and approachability of staff and communication mechanisms.

### 9.1 “Talking things through”

All students who were interviewed spoke about classroom-based feedback opportunities, not just in the direct context of an assessment, but also to learn how expectations changed at the start of a new academic year. There was overwhelming evidence that verbal feedback and two-way communication was the preferred feedback route. Further positive and negative experiences of feedback are reviewed in subsequent sections and reflected in figure 16, which shows the risk of imbalance of risk and protective factors and adverse consequences for students.

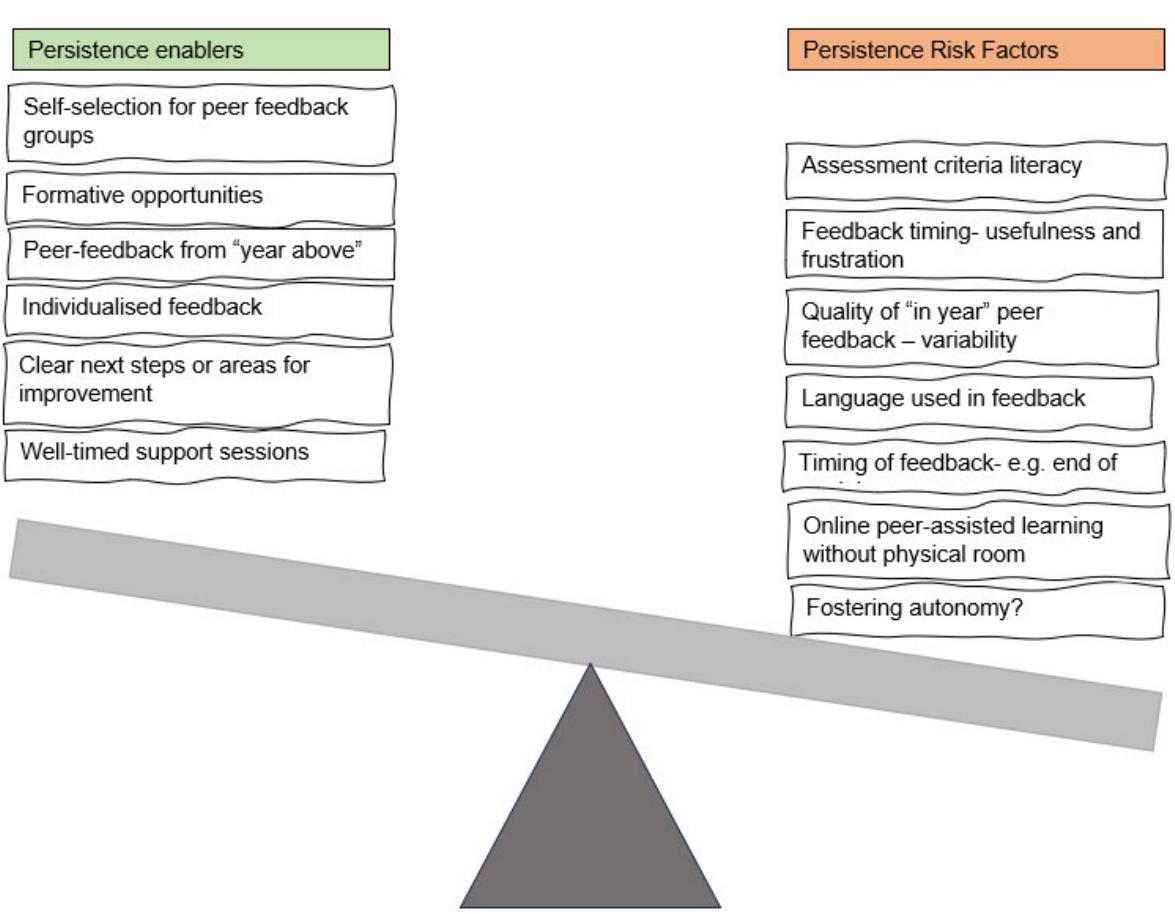


Figure 17: Student persistence risk factors and enablers in assessment and feedback

### 9.1.1 Peer feedback

Some interviewees reported students from the previous year sharing their experiences as memorable influences on their academic journey, particularly at the start of the first year to learn more about what to expect from HE, and the third year, gaining an insight into how to manage a dissertation. Danny expressed how he felt reassured when hearing from students who were now starting their postgraduate journey on his return to campus for the third year of his degree:

“It was good to have that sort of talk and that moral support from her in that session [...] it made you feel like we're all on the same boat. [...] That does ease that tension [...] when you get told that [...] everyone's been through the same thing.” (Danny)

Peer-assisted academic learning was promoted as good practice in the HE sector in the “Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK” report (Keenan, 2014), where scheduled sessions with students a year above facilitated peer-assisted learning. This formalised approach continues to be used in practice a decade later, with universities focusing the support at “problem modules” with lower achievement or target specific groups, e.g. encouraging students with disabilities to seek required support (Matthews, 2023). Students in this research reflected on a less formalised process, with the *ad hoc* contributions of students one, or sometimes two years above, sharing experiences and advice without formalised training, providing an authentic insight into the HE journey.

#### 9.1.1.1 Peer learning in assessment preparation

Students could access individual assessment support for smaller optional modules, or for project modules where they were assigned a supervisor, but for most core modules, the student numbers have made the individualised tutorial support less

workable. Staff compensated for this by offering “assessment workshops” as little as two weeks and as long as four weeks before a submission deadline, allowing students to gain quicker access to feedback to make improvements to their work (Yan *et al.*, 2022; Wu & Schunn, 2023). Students who were interviewed here described this approach as a variable experience.

Peer feedback is advocated as an area of good practice, as the process can help both the reviewer and the reviewee to become more aware of improvements they can make to their work (Davies, 2000; van Gennip *et al.*, 2010). This might relate to changes to the content or structure of the work, or relate more broadly to academic writing skills, providing both engage in the process in a proactive and positive manner and reflection on the experience (Nicol *et al.*, 2014).

However, there are conditions that need to be met to prevent peer feedback from having negative impacts, which have been described in other research as a good understanding of the assessment criteria in relation to feedback (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). Orsmond & Merry (2013) further indicated that students who a higher performing academically tended to engage in higher self-regulation skills and were therefore better equipped to implement feedback than lower-performing students.

Further challenges to peer feedback arose in the move to an online classroom, especially if staff were less familiar with the “usual groups” that would naturally form in a classroom setting. Students were randomly allocated to breakout groups on Microsoft Teams, based on the overall group size engaging in the synchronous online delivery. This meant students could be allocated into the same group as people they would not usually choose to work with, making the already less familiar online teaching environment even more uncomfortable, alongside functionality issues in the breakout

rooms (Grimmer *et al.*, 2020). Students' hesitance to use cameras and microphones rather than the chat function in larger group online lectures carried through to the online breakout sessions, leading to very few fruitful and meaningful discussions in the smaller group (Koh & Daniel, 2022) compared to those previously seen in the physical classroom.

This hesitancy was present in all students, even those with high levels of self-determination and self-confidence like Molly, and students preferred tutor-guided learning to less structured conversations, similar to findings by McCarthy (2017) who provided an online peer-feedback café via Facebook, as this was a familiar online platform for students, and might have presented a more relaxed environment to gain feedback, yet only half of the students preferred a combination of classroom-based and online feedback to the online feedback alone. As the physical classroom was unavailable to equine students during the lockdown, a key mechanism for feedback was limited, impacting on student learning and confidence in the present study.

#### 8.1.1.2 Clarity of assessment criteria

Limitations in the understanding of expectations and how to frame feedback in relation to assessment criteria in peer feedback is unlikely to lead to helpful or constructive assessment criteria (McCarthy, 2017).

“We really struggled to understand the assignment brief and I don't think anyone scored more than 70 in that particular assignment.” (Danny)

Assessment is designed to measure students' ability to demonstrate how they meet a set of learning outcomes within a specified format. This allows performance to be awarded marks that should be fair and defensible, leading to the final module mark and ultimately degree classification (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Feedback is predominantly

designed to help students to improve their approach for future assessments- although the feedback was traditionally used to justify the marks that have been awarded rather than being primarily developmental. Winstone & Boud (2022) issued a warning that assessment and feedback in research, policy and practice have become too intertwined, making it more challenging to consider each in isolation of each other, and evaluations of one always impacting on the other:

“This conglomeration of assessment and feedback has left us with a problem. Whilst both assessment and feedback have important and legitimate roles in university courses, they do not have the same function. However, the ways in which they have become entangled in policy and practice have resulted in a conceptual and practical blurring of their unique processes.” (Winstone & Boud, 2022; p.656-657).

Lucy indicated in an earlier part of her interview that marks “in the sixties” were “a disappointment”, so this part of her interview showed that even academically high performing students can find managing the workload challenging at times, and that therefore the timing of assessment support interventions is critical to fulfil their role, and to be received as positive by students. Penny described her experience as “intimidating” and feeling “embarrassed” and Lucy prefaced her recollection with “I’m really bad”, indicating negative self-perception and potentially adverse effects on self-worth when students are faced with this intervention, despite all good intentions from staff which include being able to monitor student progress, confidence, and competence with the assessment, and supporting students to do as well as they can.

It seemed, from both Lucy’s and Penny’s experiences, that these intentions were not perceived in the same way, leading to mismatch or misalignment in the feedback process between what staff and students perceive as helpful and encouraging respectively. Gould and Day (2013) framed the intentions of staff in this context as part

of a scaffold to develop learner autonomy and improved academic achievement, but if the interventions trigger negative emotions in students, leading to negative self-perception, the impact on student engagement and confidence is likely to be reversed, even if just temporarily, depending on student resilience levels.

Despite some challenging experiences students spoke about in their interviews, there were also lots of positive examples of how staff provided feedback and how students found it very helpful and accessible. Experiences were also mirrored in some findings by McCarthy (2017) who suggested that the learning opportunities through online peer feedback outweighed its disadvantages, but only recognised the limited depth and criticality of feedback and the possibility some students may not receive any feedback as negatives. This neglected the emotional impact of such exercises, which have been significant for Lucy, Penny, and Danny amongst others in this research, and the importance of the potential adverse effects on student confidence to engage should not be underestimated. Further research should consider the impact of “faceless” feedback in an online learning environment, and the mitigation of potential negative consequences.

#### 8.1.1.3 Summative assessment and feedback

Criticism has been levelled at staff for the academic language used (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004), the choice to address feedback to the student rather than focus on the piece of work (Dawson *et al.*, 2018), and staff competency to provide feedback (Henderson *et al.*, 2019). Staff often report students as not making use of feedback that has been provided- but with modular course structures, and end of module assessments to maintain student engagement for the full module, feedback may be perceived as having little to no value (Poulos & Mahoney, 2008).

“You do a piece of work and then you get all the feedback and then because then you look at a piece of work [...] I know why I've got that but it's too late”. (Penny)

End of semester assessments and associated feedback have been described in many papers, including Poulos & Mahoney (2008) where students explained that end of module feedback seems “irrelevant” (p.661) when the module has finished. Boud & Molloy (2013) demonstrated that the use of student self-assessment throughout a module helped to improve the performance of “middle-ground” students but had limited impact for lower and high level-achieving students. The authors concluded that this might have been linked to student motivation but required further exploration.

These findings, in connection with the quotes above, might provide an indication that generic end of year feedback from the previous cohorts- or indeed students sharing their own experiences with the year-group below them- at the start of the academic year. Whilst they may be of limited value to students who have successfully completed the year, common mistakes or challenges could help the next cohort to address such issues, or, at least, become more aware of challenges they can expect.

Even when students perceived their summative feedback experiences as positive, it was noted that an “explanation” was needed to “figure out what the feedback meant” (Olivia), and which actions to take for the improvement of further submissions. Feedback literacy has been researched extensively, involving staff and their intentions when providing feedback as well as students, and how they receive the feedback comments. Burke (2009) built on this when she aimed to establish what students do once they have received feedback on their work. De Kleijn (2023) highlighted the shift in the purpose of feedback from a mechanism to justify the marks awarded or instructions to students to do better next time (Winstone *et al.*, 2020) to a “sense-making process in which both the teachers and students have an active role” (de

Kleijn, 2023, p. 186), reemphasising the importance of self-determination as a key factor in student success.

Limited self-determination and autonomy have previously been documented to lead to increased reliance on tutors (e.g. Rolfe, 2002), and this was evident in some of my interviews. Catherine commented on the support of her research project supervisor, who provided feedback on draft chapters, but also set clear expectations for the next steps Catherine needed to complete to progress with her research project, showing a reliance on not just the feedback, but also the indication of next steps, which some authors would argue contravenes the drive to instil autonomy (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) in higher education students, with problem solving skills often being described as a key graduate skill (Jackson, 2016). Academics who were interviewed and asked about how they would define teaching excellence reported that students would potentially understand this as a hand-holding approach rather than developing a more independent learning approach (Wood & Su, 2017).

Feedback accessibility, the tone of feedback and understanding what the feedback comments mean came through the interviews as strong themes- usually by students who were mid-level performers rather than high achieving students, maybe further indicating a different level of reliance on feedback for future submissions, or to understand why a mark had been awarded (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Where feedback is not striking the balance between informing future work and explaining what went well, and what did not in the current assessment, students can become frustrated and unmotivated:

“I was really, really upset with one of my marks and I didn't understand it at all because I felt so confident, and I'd spoken to so many other people and I felt like I knew so much more and so much more in depth than other people.” (Penny)

As a practitioner, I am aware that students compare marks and feedback comments, very limited research specific to higher education exists in this field, with most research focusing on high school experiences. Any higher education research is tied into additional factors, most commonly socio-economic class (e.g. Hatt & Baxter, 2003). Vasquez *et al.* (2023) shared a case study, where 77 students had been sent an online questionnaire at the same time as releasing the results of a marked activity to establish how favourable or unfavourable comparisons in marks with peers impacted on student motivation.

Unsurprisingly, unfavourable comparisons seemed linked to reduced motivation to study and increased negative emotions and increased negative self-perception-something that is also demonstrated in the first part of Penny's quote. Pitt & Norton (2017) referred to the need to compare one's performance to that of others and an inter-personal focus, where the student found themselves in a self-imposed competitive environment. They attributed this concept to potential sample bias, as their participants were sports students, but Penny's experience indicated a similar mindset in students on equestrian degrees.

Students also spoke about the timing and content in those revision workshops targeting established weak areas in student understanding or skills, and the value of student self-assessment during their interviews. Ćukušić *et al.* (2014) highlighted potential benefits of student self-assessment using online tools including online quizzes as a potentially useful tool despite Henly (2003) reporting that positive consequences of offering online quizzes for formative feedback had a time-limited

positive impact, but student engagement reduced as the semester progressed before increasing again at the end of the semester, presumably to aid exam preparation.

The perceived usefulness of such quizzes in relation to final exam revision has also been shown by Danny- showing a drive to engage with easy access, module specific online revision tools. The easy accessibility was likely to have played a role with stronger engagement, as was the accessibility of academic staff for assessment queries.

“If you got a question about an exam, you can't message directly, but are asked to go to a padlet and then you have to wait like a week for a response.” (Lucy)

Croft *et al.* (2011) indicated that, although email was a common communication method between students and academic staff, it was unlikely to promote the same rapport as in-person interactions. This could therefore have adverse effects on the student-staff relationship, especially when communication targets in terms of response time, for example, are not met. Lucy spoke favourably about Teams and email communications, but also highlighted one module that utilised padlet as a communication basis for questions around lecture content or assessments. Questions posted on the padlet by students would be addressed by the lecturer in the next scheduled teaching session, so all students received consistent messages and answers to queries- but there was a delayed response.

These experience mirrored findings from Deni & Zainal (2018) where students rated the use of padlet as negative due to delayed responses and less natural flow of discussions but were in favour of being able to ask questions anonymously and to view other student's questions to support their own learning. Therefore, using a padlet

and a similar response time to questions as would be seen in email communication might be a solution moving forwards.

The use of padlet can reduce staff workload as each question is answered only once, rather than in multiple emails to students, so it is likely to remain a popular tool, but one that should be managed carefully. As Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Nicol *et al.* (2014) indicated that feedback was most effective when delivered in close time proximity to the learning activity, a shortened response time through daily padlet checks could greatly improve its effectiveness and perception from students.

## 9.2 Impact of feedback tone

All students shared more than one occasion where they had experienced feedback, and most were clear in their response that their main aim is to do better next time, so feedback highlighting areas for improvement, even if initially upsetting, was preferred to “sugar coated” comments by most.

“So, I think tiptoeing around people isn't a good idea, especially in an industry where you're going to get so many harsh comments, so many judgy people. If you're prepared encouragingly but directly at this stage, then I think you will have a better outcome after uni.” (Olivia)

The equestrian industry often has a reputation for being blunt and direct with people who work within its various sectors, with a clear focus on caring for the horses first and people last. Olivia was a competitive international rider, and therefore was very used to the way many professionals still conduct themselves, and the need for a “thick skin” is a prerequisite for anyone looking to enter and succeed within the competitive aspect of the equestrian industry. Olivia nearly saw feedback from assessment as a step to prepare for the often unsympathetic manners staff encounter in this industry- an angle

not previously considered in research unless linked to assessment in work based-learning modules (Norcini & Burch, 2007; Crossley & Jolly, 2011) and maybe providing an insight more unique to students on equine courses who are also actively involved in the equestrian competition sectors.

Most students had a similar view on which type of feedback they preferred, and whilst they were more likely to acknowledge that highlighting negative aspects or mistakes in their work could be upsetting or even “crushing” (Edward), most students found negative feedback more helpful than positive comments on their work. Feedback comments that were highly critical of judgemental have been documented as being “hurtful” (Ryan *et al.*, 2022) in existing research and in the present interviews, with adverse effects on students’ self-efficacy and self-esteem (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), mirroring findings by Poulos & Mahoney (2008) that students who might already suffer from lower confidence were more likely to respond negatively to criticism.

Penny described the feedback as “offensive” and “insulting”, which maybe went beyond negative comments as such, but the way the feedback was presented. As Penny had got quite upset at this point in the interview, I did not ask follow up questions, but moved onto another topic area. However, there was significant research evidence that the way in which feedback was highly influential in terms of students’ reactions and subsequent actions, such as feedback perceived to be unmotivational, insensitive or rude, or not constructive (Blair *et al.*, 2012; Winstone *et al.*, 2016).

There might have been an element of negativity bias, but there is research evidence to suggest that the wording used, as well as whether the criticism was aimed at the piece of work or student could elicit negative emotions and a lack of receptivity and reflective engagement with assessment feedback. Penny shared that there was a

period where she was becoming “disheartened” and “fed up”, so if the feedback was received during a time when Penny was already in a negative emotional state, so this demotivational negative feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2017) hit even more, leading to a stronger emotional response.

Academic staff reportedly used a personal tone in assessment feedback with the intention to provide a more individualised approach to the feedback (Ryan *et al.*, 2022). This could be received well where feedback comments are of a positive nature, but Schartel (2012) suggested that negative feedback addressing the student rather than aspects of the piece of work were likely to result in lower self-efficacy, lowering the students’ ability to engage constructively with the feedback comments and further lowering their self-confidence and self-esteem which seems similar to Penny’s experience.

Both male students shared a similar experience to Penny, using similarly strong adjectives to illustrate how the feedback impacted on them emotionally. Whereas Penny was nearly angry in her expressions, Edward seemed more beat down and upset initially before he re-composed himself and tackled the feedback in a more constructive manner. To use the terminology of Pitt & Norton (2017), this feedback, despite its initial negative impact, could be seen as motivational negative feedback as ultimately both Danny and Edward accepted that despite working hard, they had not met the tasks set and took the feedback comments in a more constructive way to improve future work. Handley *et al.* (2011) described this outcome as having a higher level of self-efficacy or belief that the student can change their approach to show improvements in their work. Edward was no stranger to adversity, as his professional athletic career ended abruptly due to injury, alongside a fairly low socio-economic family background, so “battling on” was very much in his nature.

Hyland & Hyland (2001) cautioned against using excessive positive comments to “cushion the blow” for negative critique as this might distract from improvements students need to make. Ryan *et al.* (2022) showed how this well-intentioned cushioning effect led some students to completely disregard the words after the “but” that connected a positive opening to the feedback to areas for improvement. The use of a “feedback sandwich” remains a popular approach in practice despite some cautionary evidence from education (Molloy *et al.*, 2020; Hyland & Hyland 2001) and business (Schwartz, 2013) research, especially when the positive comments - or the bread- do not seem genuine or too substantial so the criticism of the work - or the filling- becomes lost (Ryan *et al.*, 2020). The feedback structure used routinely at the university in this research has a set format of three comments on the present piece of work, which should combine positive points and areas for improvement, followed by three points to consider for future assessments. The latter tend to be areas for improvements but could also highlight positive practice the student should continue to implement.

“I can be very hard on myself. So, seeing those positives first...It sort of relaxes me and then I'm prepared for the worse bit and then I can take that as a learning opportunity and not be absolutely devastated.” (Molly)

Receiving positive feedback comments before reading comments that suggested areas for improvement allowed students to consider criticisms of their work- a mindset also reflected in work by Rand (2017) who found that students required positive feedback comments as a sign of approval in juxtaposition to constructive advice on how to improve their work in future. Molly elaborated further on her experiences and frustrations around assessment feedback. It was worth noting at this point that Molly was an exceptionally high-achieving student, so a mark that is “not good” for Molly

would equate to marks below 75%, demonstrating the high levels of self-regulation and self-perception that high achievers have, and which allows them to engage with feedback thoroughly and effectively (Poulos & Mahoney, 2008).

Danny provided a nice closing quote for this section, highlighting that mistakes were not something to be afraid of, but to be taken as an opportunity to do better- which was ultimately what all students who took part in the interviews wanted to do.

“I think it's good to make mistakes sometimes because it makes learning better. As humans were always scared of making mistakes, but when we don't make any, we don't get confidence that ohh nothing's gonna touch us. And then...” (*mimics bomb drop*) (Danny)

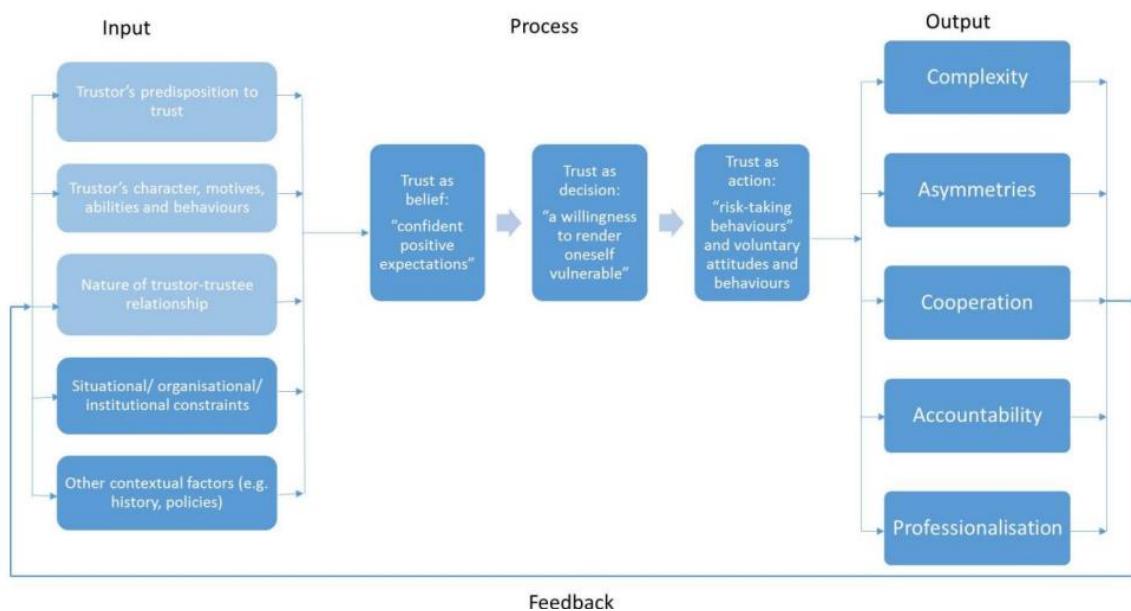
### 9.3 “I need to do better”

There were several instances in the interviews where students took clear ownership of their work, achievements and how they went about implementing feedback they had received. Responses were far ranging, from Jodie not really taking action, to Penny making sustained changes or Molly feeling more confident with every submission,

“Feedback is usually useful, not just one person, but several that I trust. I don't always follow their advice, but it's still nice to hear some feedback.” (Jodie)

Whilst on the surface, Jodie's comment might seem somewhat dismissive, she raised an important point about “trust” in the person providing feedback. The concept of trust is an important one that has been well established in the research of students' views on feedback. Davis & Dagusch (2015) discussed the concept of “academic trust” of students in the person providing feedback, where the academic trust was defined as the lecturer having the relevant expertise alongside a positive relationship with the

students. The relationship was further described as students feeling safe to ask questions, a supportive tone in the feedback provided and students taking action in response to critical feedback. It would usually be a lack of trust that led students to disregard feedback (Henderson *et al*, 2019; Evans, 2013), yet Jodie made a conscious choice here not to act on trusted feedback, which might be reflective of her wider situation and mental health challenges at that time. Cerna (2014) discussed a model of trust in relation to governance, but the concepts covered a very transferable to the tutor-student relationship.



**Figure 18 Factors influencing academic trust in lecturers and student actions (Cerna, 2014)**

The left-hand side considers individual factors that might impact an individual's capacity to form any trust in another person or a process. Jodie's previous life experiences made it challenging for her to trust other people, and she had developed a strong sense of self-reliance. At the centre of the model, trust was considered in a three-stage process, requiring positive experiences and expectations to foster belief

to enable a decision to trust. This might have been a challenging part of the process for Jodie, as this step required a “leap of faith” to act and take risks in changing an approach that has worked in some form to now (Macfarlane, 2009). Making changes to her academic approach could yield better results for Jodie, yet the skill and behaviour modification needed might have been beyond what she was able to commit to at the time.

Most of the female participants saw assessments as a competition with themselves in an intra-personal manner, like findings by Pitt & Norton (2017) and used assessments and associated feedback actively as a “tool to improve [...] learning and performance” (Flores *et al.*, 2020, p.390). Here, this was reflected in conscious decision-making on how to respond to or implement feedback comments, with a sense of ownership evident in most interviews, particularly when discussing feedback to summative assessments. This sense of ownership was more generic for Edward and Olivia, whose expressions equated to “accepting fault” in one way or another, which mirrored research findings that factors such as the study environment outside of the classroom, students’ behaviour and self-motivation and prioritisation of tasks impacted on their academic performance (Devlin, 2010).

“I know I can do better, and I think that's what made me.... And if I'm being honest, I take that one because I know I can ask more from myself. “(Edward)

“But that's more my fault than anyone else's fault. Just time management... “(Olivia)

Whilst both Edward and Olivia took some ownership, and Olivia identified one area of weakness that had adversely affected her academic performance, neither were able to give examples of action they had taken to address their individual challenges, such as access to online resources or academic skills workshops offered by support

services, indicating maybe a lack of either motivation or capacity at the time to make concrete changes (Jones *et al.*, 2021). Edward indicated that he was aware he had to submit work that was “good enough” rather than his absolute best, as his wider circumstances and pressures external to his education limited his ability to fully engage, but he still took some responsibility for his approach (Kent, 2016).

“But I did everything I could, and I didn't think I could do more.” (Edward)

All participants reflected on how they felt they needed to take specific actions to improve their academic results and went back through feedback they had received during their second year, which was a mixed delivery of purely online teaching during the second lockdown, and hybrid teaching for some classes at other times of the year.

“I was getting a lot of feedback saying, “use the ASC classes”. [...] nobody does ASC classes. Then I got to a point where I was like no, I'm not happy with my grades and then went through all my feedback from all my Assignments and the trend was like ASC classes, so then that's why I started. I kept up with them into third year.”  
(Penny)

Penny's initial dismissal of “nobody does ASC classes” was a typical response, but for most students, engagement with ASC support replaced dismissal with tangible benefits to academic confidence. This in turn allowed students to gain higher marks and become more receptive rather than defensive to feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2017), changing a potential downward spiral they had found themselves in into a virtuous cycle of improved confidence, receptiveness, and achievement (Flores *et al.*, 2020).

As a result of the changes in his learning approach, and a higher sense of autonomy, Danny was also beginning to value feedback in tutorials, for example, that allowed him to “find his own way”, rather than being told what the best way forward would be. He used an example from his research project supervision, and spoke about discussing the pros and cons of his research ideas and approaches, rather than being guided

directly towards a certain decision as “helpful” and later “empowering”, especially when he was accepted to present his research at an international conference:

“Not telling me what to do, just nudging me in the right direction.” (Danny)

Danny showed a strong sense of ownership of his project and ultimately pride in his achievements, really valuing an approach that fostered an independent approach to his work (Niemec & Ryan, 2009). Interestingly, Penny was supervised by the same member of staff, and her lower level of confidence in her academic work led to her recounting her supervision support differently, demonstrating that tutors needed to be able to moderate their approach in relation to the student needs to create a good working relationship:

“I work well off people just being very black and white. I don't really work well off the whole like ooh pat on the back like you're doing really well and you're not like I'd rather someone just be like, come on, get on with it.” (Penny)

Once that working relationship could be established, and the tutor found the best way to communicate with Penny in meetings and in feedback on her drafts, she found a sense of ownership, and even a sense of pride at the end of her final year:

“I was like, you know what, I get what I get for this cause I am so proud of it. I know I'm proud of that. Definitely a wow moment.” (Penny)

Penny had a long journey, from feeling like she was “never good enough” and her family “not getting” how hard she worked, how disciplined she had to be during the pandemic, and comparing herself and her work inter-personally in a negative manner to finding a sense of achievement (Vacquez *et al.*, 2023, and developing a much more intra-personal focus and enjoying the pride in her achievements (Pitt & Norton, 2017).

## 9.4 “Fair for all”

The notion of fairness in assessment feedback has been studied extensively over the past two decades, linking to perceptions of lecturers providing feedback (e.g. Gould and Day, 2013, Rezai, 2022), and how students respond to different types of feedback (e.g. Pitt & Norton, 2017; Flores *et al.*, 2020; Ryan *et al.*, 2022). Given that one of the roles of feedback remains the explanation of the marks awarded, alongside comments for improvements, the importance of fairness- both actual and perceived- fairness is essential to foster student learning and positive engagement with feedback (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022).

### *9.4.1 Individual learning and assessment*

Whilst there were limited comments around the concept of fairness in the interview, I felt it was still important to include and consider these here, as they all bring slightly different perspectives to the experience of unfairness. I have chosen four examples to show how students felt that there was unfairness in teaching and learning assumptions linked to assessments, group assessments, the impact of hybrid learning and frustration about perceptions of other students' work ethic. Each of these areas could have formed the foundation of significant discussion, but these fell outside of the scope of the core context of my thesis. The examples included, however, allude to the levels of resilience in some of the participants, providing insights on how staff can modify their practices to enhance resilience and retention in higher education students.

Out of all participants, Lucy had had the longest break from education before starting her degree, and she had also come through the vocational BTEC rather than A-level route, so her exposure to laboratories and microbiology was minimal and non-existent

respectively. Her comments related to a microbiology experiment testing antimicrobial susceptibility as part of an academic skills module in her first year.

“I think the lady taking it at the time thought that people knew more about the lab than they did. So, in the sessions that I didn't have, the [...] let's go back to basics.”  
(Lucy)

It is important for teaching staff to know “who is the room” (Stewart, 2020; p. 5), and what their learning needs might be, as each group brought with them different levels and types of experiences and expertise (Nyamupangedengu, 2017). Academic staff in this context can access information about any additional learning needs as well as widening participation characteristics for each module group, but this list omitted an overview of entry criteria to allow staff to anticipate levels of preparedness for this practical. Lucy's academic performance had always been strong, so on this occasion her struggles to fully grasp expectations, and executing the practical skills required were impaired without the lecturer noticing. Bearing in mind that this was an assessment for one of eight portfolio entries, Lucy's emotions in the situation must have been strong for her to recall this experience at the end of her degree, demonstrating the significant negative impact just one experience could have on student confidence and sense of belonging (Rozin & Royzman 2001).

Once students returned to campus in September 2021, the university in this research was keen to promote on-site attendance as much as possible, with awareness that some students would be unlikely to return, including some international students, students who were shielding or students who lived with someone who was shielding, and therefore experienced significant restrictions in their social and educational interactions (Abrams & Abbott, 2020). There was also a move away from hybrid-delivery (classroom and Teams-based delivery simultaneously) to lecture recording, and recordings becoming available after the lectures finished. Issues arose where

students engaged with recording asynchronously and did not have the opportunity to ask live questions or raise concerns. For example, two students who took part in the present study were studying from home as family financial constraints made returning to campus and the surrounding area unfeasible.

“For the people who stayed online, so I know I'm not the only one. We aren't getting the documents that she's handing out in person; we aren't getting certain things.”  
(Olivia)

#### *9.4.2 Group learning dynamics and assessments*

Group assessments have been described as contentious by many practitioners, with many students not commenting favourably on group assessment approaches in practice, with problems becoming more challenging when groups are set by lecturers rather than chosen by students. Johnson & Johnson (2003) wrote about the collective learning and achievement goals of a group being as important for success as those of each individual within the group in a classroom group, but the same concept could be applied to students completing a group assessment. Students tend to prefer to work in groups with peers from their social group (Cousin, 2012), although Wolfe *et al.* (2003) found limited differences in reported problems between self-selected and staff-implemented assessment groups. Hassanien (2005) recommended that students preferred to receive individual feedback and marks rather than a group mark and perceived this to be a fairer approach.

“It was in a group, and someone didn't turn up and it's really hard when you're in the group because you feel like you can't own your own kind of works if that makes sense” (Catherine)

One of the biggest challenges, as illustrated by Catherine's experience and seen in practice regularly was the way in which students worked “as a group”. This was usually achieved through allocated one part of the assessment to each group member and

then bringing those parts together at the end, rather than working more collaboratively throughout the process. The former approach presented significant challenges when one group member dropped out on assessment day, showing up the lack of a coherent approach for this group, as well as a developmental need for students to manage group work more effectively (Johnson & Johnson, 2023).

### 9.5 Conclusions

There were numerous ways in which students recounted experiencing and engagement with feedback, alongside occasions where assessment and feedback resulted in adverse experiences, challenging student resilience and persistence. For this group of equine students, a strong preference for verbal face to face feedback in a formative context emerged early on in all interviews, with a slight preference for individual rather than group feedback. This preference may have been influenced by their recent experiences of dissertation supervision, for which most informants reflected on the individualised feedback they received during this process. Feedback from students “the year above” was a further positive feedback example, which students described as “honest” and “reassuring”.

A strong difference for feedback preferences in this process became evident, with some students valuing “critical friend” conversations enhancing their autonomy, whilst others reported preferences for very clear, step by step feedback. This illustrates the need for feedback that encourages autonomy in the earlier years of the degree, scaffolding student problem-solving skills to build a stronger sense of autonomy and resilience when students experienced academic challenges in other modules, similar to Gould & Day’s (2013) findings who warned further of potential adverse responses to feedback if it was provided in a manner students found challenging, as there were

notable negative influences on student engagement, confidence and self-determination.

Students reflected on the role of feedback and what they would want to take away from it, which included justifications of the marks given as well as guidance for future development, like the challenges in feedback provision previously reported by De Kleijn (2023) who concluded that students needed to play an “active role” (p.186) in the feedback process. Acting on feedback was a delayed process for equine students, where students received similar guidance for improvement for several assessments before acting on the feedback- for example, engaging with learning support seminars. This appeared to be underpinned by social dynamics, and nearly a sense of shame of the need to attend the seminars, yet once students engaged, they began to value the experience and saw improvements in their work. Further research should consider interventions to normalise attendance at such seminars and aim to understand more about barriers for equine students in this context.

Equine students in this research demonstrated a range of responses to feedback from cherry-picking actions or taking no action to reflecting critically on feedback before implementing it. The latter approach was more evident in students with higher levels of self-confidence and self-motivation, although a lag to “digest” negative feedback was reported. Whilst this still demonstrates a high level of resilience and positive action was taken, it also illustrates that resilience comes in different shapes and sizes. Only one of the interviewed students saw mistakes as learning opportunities and was able to engage critically with such feedback straight away. This student also showed higher levels of autonomy, preferring to be guided more loosely and solving problems independently with limited tutor guidance, further illustrating the individualised

responses to feedback and demonstrating differences in the levels of feedback literacy.

Individual preferences also became evidence when students reflected on feedback structure. Interestingly, most students preferred direct or “blunt” feedback on work, rather than “cushioned blows”, as also mentioned by Hyland & Hyland (2001), rather than confirming positive aspects of their work. Interviews revealed parallels between “blunt” feedback for assessments and the likely format of industry feedback, which some students had previously experienced, and hence felt this was good preparation for the workplace. This parallel seems unusual but provides an insight into working conditions within the equestrian sector (as explored by Davies *et al.*, 2023; Williams and Davies, 2021) and warrants further investigation from an academic and industry perspective. Equine students also highlighted the need for trustworthiness of feedback, adding that clear commentary on their work by a member of staff they respected were more valuable and “understandable” than comments worded in a careful manner- providing the feedback was about the work rather than the students’ ability or skills sets. Comments perceived as personal comments had high potential to trigger negative responses in relation to self-perception and hence student persistence.

The move to online learning changed students’ perceptions of positive experiences around feedback in particular, owing to the changes in communication to written formats using the chat or padlets over verbal communications as previously explored in chapter 7. Peer review exercises provided positive experiences, as students could select whom to work with, and would usually select friends on their course for these exercises. In the online environment, breakout rooms were used to mimic the small group work experiences, but often group memberships were assigned automatically

rather than with social dynamics in mind, leading to lower confidence levels to participate in students with lower self-perception and self-confidence.

The asynchronous use of padlets as a central tool for all students on a module to ask questions, which replaced whole class discussion in the physical room, was perceived as a useful tool, but also created frustration about delays between questions arising and answers being provided. Timeliness of formative feedback was nearly valued more than final summative feedback on assessments, hence formats in which formative feedback can be provided online alongside the physical classroom should be considered further for equine students.

The interviews revealed multiple challenges students experienced in relation to assessment and feedback, yet most reflections at the end of their degree recognised the learning opportunities and skills development as a result of these challenges, indicating that personal growth was enhanced through being challenged.

## **10.0 Involvement**

This chapter aimed to address the final research question “How did wider experiences in and academic and social content aid the involvement of equine degree students during a global pandemic?”. As indicated in figure 4 (Chapter 3, page 36), successful involvement is reliant on experiences, assessment and feedback underpinned by appropriate and accessible support, so this chapter reviews how students felt they developed over the course of their degree, and how experiences discussed in the three previous chapters impacted on their involvement.

The extent and quality of student involvement in an academic and social context could play a significant role in student persistence (Smith & Tinto, 2024), in addition to individual factors maybe best discussed using one Bourdieu’s thinking tools, capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The analysis of transcripts revealed two main themes, and two subthemes, with the latter reflecting internal (university-related) and external (wider community) experiences that impacted on student involvement and sense of belonging. My analysis was further influenced by Ackerman’s (2018) explanation of the psychological needs underpinning Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), and the role relatedness in the context of involvement.

The themes identified were:

- Personal Growth
- “We are family”
  - Culture Club
  - Happy Places

## 10.1 Personal Growth

Most students felt that their self-confidence and professional confidence had developed a lot during their time in this university, whether it was Edward “realising that support is not a bad thing, you don’t need to feel bad for asking for help” or Danny reflecting that his confidence to challenge training and husbandry approaches in the equestrian sector had “increased heap loads” as he learnt to develop effective evidence-based arguments.

“Thinking that has only come through going through university, especially critical thinking. I mean it, it was there before university as well, but not as confident.”  
(Danny)

Danny predominantly spoke about the academic context that allowed him to develop in confidence, alongside his continued work in the equine industry, especially once he found an employer who was “thinking as progressively as the university” (Danny) and encouraged Danny to question common protocols and procedures and test alternatives in a managed and safe environment. Molly, on the other hand, addressed her reluctance to speak to strangers through taking on a student ambassador role, followed by committee positions in multiple student societies in her final year as she felt that sharing her passion for horse welfare would be beneficial to others (Stanier et al., 2017).

“It gave me sort of that sense of you know, I want to do things better. I think I have good ideas. I want to put myself forward and have those ideas [...] to put my point across. [...] If I can express that to someone else, I think it can really help them [...] to find their passion here.” (Molly)

Tinto (1987) highlighted the relationship between confidence, strengthened by appropriate support mechanisms and students’ abilities to meet their own and institutional expectations, which could build into a circle of positive reinforcement and continuous strengthening of confidence, so when adverse situations occur, students

feel better equipped to deal with them. Both Tinto (2012) and Kahu (2013) emphasised the importance of appropriate learning activities and feedback mechanisms to enhance confidence levels in all students, including those who might be unable to engage with extracurricular activities through external commitments, like Lucy.

“I think it's groups of people because I look at our [third year module]. It was a small class; it was really nice. I like the module anyway. But like it was just so lovely cause everyone was nice. Everyone got on. (Lucy)

Several researchers, including Ahn & Davis (2019) emphasised social and academic connectedness in an educational setting as the predominant influence on a sense of belonging, but also concluded that surroundings and personal space were two additional “domains” of significant importance. The surroundings domain covered living areas, the geographical location and surrounding area, whereas the personal space domain consisted of the “psychological aspects of belonging in higher education”, (Ahn & Davies, 2019; p. 630). This domain covered a wide range of factors relevant to student identity and self-esteem building, and how much value students put on their experience and satisfaction with the university experience.

For some participants in this research, there seemed to be a different balance between these four domains, as they only recalled feelings about social belonging when prompted about social connections in questions. Their horse's welfare had potential to significantly influence the students' sense of belonging and connectedness, maybe re-emphasising the importance of the role of horses for this group of students, and could therefore be considered as a fifth domain in addition to academic and social belonging, surroundings, and personal space (Ahn & Davies, 2019). The impact of perceived adverse horse welfare was powerful, both in terms of current industry and

industry practices examples as well as concern for the students' own horses or loan horses:

"It didn't go badly, as in I didn't have any accidents and he didn't have a problem, but just mentally for him it wasn't good, which then made it worse for me." (Olivia)

Others shared experiences of going home at least every other weekend during non-COVID times as their horse "would have struggled on a big yard like here" (Penny). Unlike students who had access to a horse whilst at university, Penny spoke a lot about making new friends and settling in socially, but she also described the weekend visits "to see [her horse]" and an opportunity to "refresh [...] with the dog and being able to ride all weekend [...] to come back and then carry on with work and see everyone", illustrating how important that "time out" with her horse was for her own mental fitness and ability to tackle her work.

The impact of horses in this context has been previously underexplored and should be a consideration for educators in the equine and animal sciences, with wider significance for other students who leave a horse at home to come to university and might well have further implications for students who were used to having pets whilst living at home and then find themselves in student halls without. As a practitioner, I have many student stories about the impact this has during the transition stage and during times of increased stress, e.g. assessments, and this is an area that requires further investigation. Horses and potentially other pets, therefore, should be considered as an important addition to the four domains highlighted in Ahn & Davis (2019).

Horses were also mentioned as a mental "safe space" in Edwards story, and for Catherine, gaining access to the loan pony allowed her to manage her ADHD much

better for the remainder of the final year. For Molly and Danny, learning more to take back out into the equestrian industry to “be the change horses need” was a key motivating factor, further highlighting the importance of horses for these students beyond physical interactions with horses, competing or the social element of keeping a horse on share facilities (most common approach). The passion for core topics and drive to have an impact had not previously been reported for this under researched group, but shows parallel to research in other vocational areas such as nursing (Halperin & Regev, 2021) or lecturing (Clegg *et al.*, 2006)

Maintained passion and perseverance are two attributes often referred to as “grit”, describing students, for example, who persist through challenges and adversity and not lose sight of the reasons that brought them to higher education (Almeida, 2016), therefore promoting resilience and reducing the risk of student drop out. Self-determination theory was often coupled with investigations of grit as a concept, as this allows an insight into personal and psychosocial factors that influence “grit” (Lozano-Jimenez *et al.*, 2021). Danny reflected on, despite otherwise describing experiences indicative of high self-determination, a self-motivation workshop when he returned to the campus in his third year. Other students spoke about the remote setting “pushing” them to become more self-motivated and self-reliant (Sapiro *et al.*, 2023):

“Right now, I can't rely on other people. I just need to pull myself together and do it. [...] Although it was really hard -I could do it out of the typical learning environment. [...] I did show myself that I can do it. “(Penny)

Penny was a first-in-family student, and she referred to herself in this context predominantly in relation to her experiences during the national lockdowns, recounting limited understanding of the higher education demands by her family during the lockdowns, and the loss of the peer support she had benefited from for the initial part of her studies, so her realisation that she could depend on herself and overcome

obstacles in her studies was a “revelation” (Penny). Penny was able to reflect on strategies and support she shared with peers during her on campus time and used these to strengthen her approaches with a positive impact on her performance, enhancing her motivation to continue to improve her work- or improving her self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993).

## 10.2 “We are family”

The provider in this study often likens the culture on campus to a family, albeit a highly diverse multicultural one. As it became apparent in the interviews, the sense of family was applied in different ways by students, ranging from the wider campus culture to specific groups on a module or smaller peer study groups.

### *10.2.1 Culture club*

Students who took part in the interviews shared several experiences where their background conflicted with the culture they had entered. Some of these encounters were benign, like slight language differences (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017), as Danny recalled:

“When everyone actually has tea, they don't really have tea, they have their dinner. So those were the little, little things like that...” (Danny)

Language differences were noted by three of the students, but none were considered to have a major negative effect on their student experience. Two students, Jodie and Molly, recounted experiences they classed as racist encounters in the surrounding town, but never on campus. They also both felt that, because of their accents and different cultural backgrounds, people in the city nearby were less helpful than they

might have been to a local person. Penny also spoke about the difference in culture between “Northerners” and “Southerners”, but then modified her recollection by deeming it to be normal that “not everyone is gonna get on with everyone” although one food shopping encounter was mentioned twice in her interview, maybe signalling how unsettled Penny was at the time.

“I feel like Northerners are more friendly than some Southerners and I always got that feeling. I don't know why. Like sometimes you can just say “ohh have a good day” at a checkout and they'll look at you like you've got three heads.” (Penny)

Penny's experience is supported by lay and press articles, but it seems less so in peer-reviewed research, where social attributes and interactions may be mentioned, but the research was generally focused on linguistic (e.g. Montgomery, 2015) or economic differences between the south-east and the north of the UK. The limited education research considers distance to university in relation to participation (White & Lee, 2020), but little is known about this specific cultural element in the wider literature in relation to the student experience. Penny's experience here was also outside of the higher education environment, similarly to Jodie and Molly's experiences, but they showed parallels to the experiences of students in Reay *et al.* (2009) where some experiences seemed to reflect deeper social class inequities and associated self-perceptions.

An underexplored issue, maybe due to the limited courses where gender participation is as polarised as it is on equine-related courses (Speck, 2022, Lopez. 2018) with male students often being the only male in a module classroom, and across a department cohort, for the university setting studied here, there might be six or eight male students in total, alongside 170 or more female students.

And being the only boy on the course, that was another big social dilemma as well. But I made it through and in the 2nd year I made really good friends and I'm still in touch with them. (Danny)

This gender distribution presented an emphasised version of the gender distribution of horse riders in the UK, where 67% were female and 33% male- interestingly non-binary was not considered in this report (Jones, 2022). According to research findings, males tend to come into equestrianism through family connections, and aim to compete (Larsson, 2006 in Forsberg & Tebelius, 2011). Lower-level competition and leisure aspects of the equestrian industry were found to be female dominated, with a more equal gender balance at the elite level for the Olympic disciplines (dressage, show jumping and eventing), and racing remaining a male-dominated sport in terms of jockeys. Traits that have traditionally been associated with one gender or the other, e.g. risk-taking, and brave behaviours were deemed to be more prevalent in males, yet this seems less true for equestrians, as for example, eventing, the most dangerous of the three Olympic disciplines, was slightly female dominated at the elite level (Hedenborg & White, 2012; Dumbell, 2022).

It seems unusual that the gender distribution at the elite level only has a limited female bias, yet university education has a huge imbalance in the female: male student ratio. There is no research to consider the male student experience on equestrian-related degree courses, but exploring the motivations, challenges and success of these students could provide a valuable insight into barriers that might then be addressed by relevant higher education providers.

The final area that emerged from the interview was a cultural clash between mature students and their younger counterparts, usually in relation to classroom behaviour or

attitudes towards group tasks and assessments. Lucy and Jodie shared a few examples, which are probably best summed up in one statement made by Jodie:

“I came from a job mentality. So, there were a lot of behaviours that I had difficulty tolerating” (Jodie).

Both Lucy and Jodie made multiple references about the being at university for education rather than the social life, but this could lead to a lack of social connectedness with peers, as Jodie and Olivia experienced, and frustration with “immature behaviours (Lucy) in the teaching environment (Christie *et al.*, 2008). Group work was another area of frustration, where Lucy often found herself taking a leadership role, especially where group marks were allocated to prevent adverse impact on her own marks and degree classification (Mallman & Lee, 2014).

It would be debatable whether these frustrations were a result of a simple age gap, or whether the life experiences, previous work experiences and familial costs of attending university had a more significant impact here. Mature students are those who are 21 years or older when enrolling onto the first year of a university course, but the commitments, restrictions, and barriers somebody in their thirties or forties might experience in terms of mortgage costs and family responsibilities are different to a 23-year-old who has taken a few years out of education to travel or work (O’Shea & Stone, 2011).

More recently, researchers have been considering a “student parent” group in research as a subgroup of mature students to recognise one aspect of the diversity in the mature student group, but this is nearly as problematic, as student parents could be older students who are living independently, or young students who still have parental support (McCune *et al.*, 2010; Fragoso *et al.*, 2013). This illustrates how

challenging it is to capture mature students' experiences in an effective way, with most research focusing on the difficulties rather than successes of mature students in higher education. In terms of the equestrian courses, higher education could provide riders, grooms, and trainers with a professional development opportunity to either raise their industry credentials whilst actively competing, or to provide an alternative route into roles following retirement or career-ending injuries to retrain and stay within the equestrian industry.

#### *10.2.2 Happy places*

All students had a preferred space they would use when not in lectures, and interestingly most preferred the quiet or group study spaces in the university centre over the library or the study lounge. The chosen study spaces were smaller, and nearly all students referred to them as being "quiet"- interestingly previous cohorts seemed to favour the study lounge with some optional quieter spaces as it was next door to the student bar and coffee bar, and offered a very flexible learning space, which previously had been reported as the preferred study environment (Higgins *et al.*, 2005). However, all students reportedly preferred quieter and individual spaces, which might be related to studying during the global pandemic and the continued social distancing between the two national lockdowns.

I tend to go to slightly quieter places rather than the study lounge unless I'm just  
Yeah. If I'm going to be doing work, I'll go somewhere quiet. (Catherine)

The provision of flexible learning spaces students felt comfortable in and took ownership of have become increasingly important with growing student numbers and to support autonomous approaches to learning. Webb *et al.* (2008) highlighted that student learning is not limited to classrooms but can happen all over the campus when

the right facilities are available. Individual work tended to be completed at home, and work on campus was usually collaborative work, hence spaces to facilitate small group activities were most popular and confirmed a preference for quieter spaces to study (Beckers *et al.*, 2016).

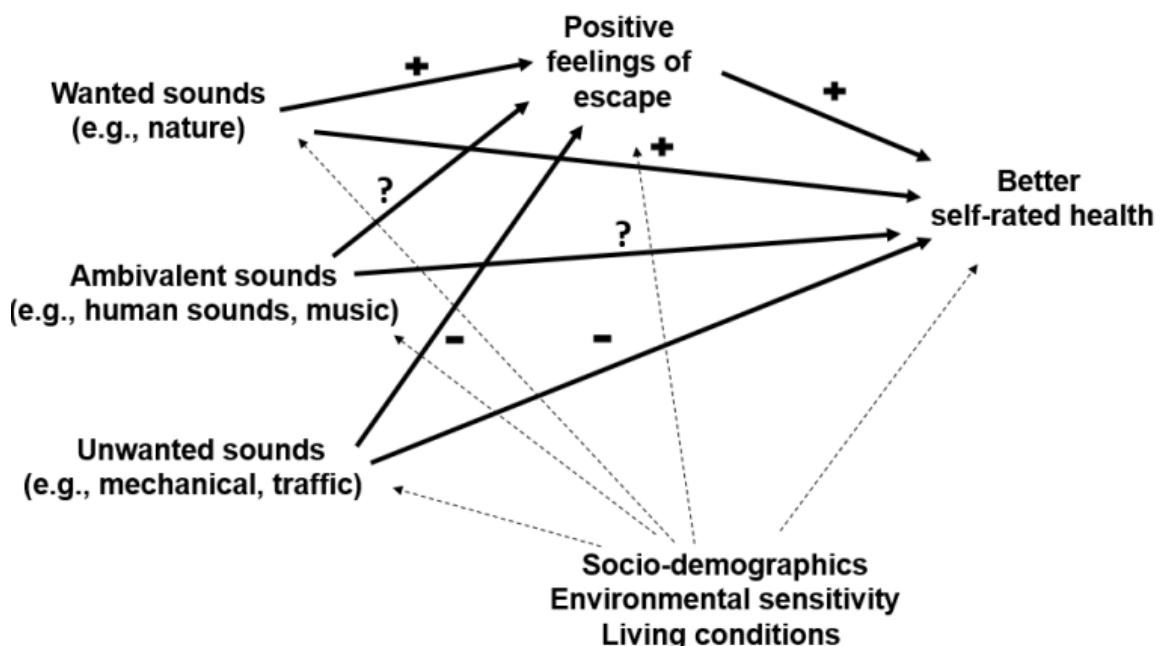
The pandemic further accelerated the use of teaching and learning tools that facilitated virtual learning approaches, such as flipped classroom activities, for example, and therefore driving a need for more collaborative spaces. As Molly indicated (chapter 10.2.1), once students returned to campus full time during their third year, peer contact and peer support became more important than it had at any other point during their course.

Danny explained how he was living on campus during the first national lockdown. Interestingly, his description of the campus emphasised the quietness, rather than it being picturesque, a nice place to be, surrounded by nature or tranquil.

“And I was in the main house, so it was a lovely place to be nice and quiet. The campus is, it sounds really horrible doesn't it, but the campus is beautiful when it's quiet, isn't it?” (Danny)

The quiet Danny referred to her was relating to the lack of noise made by large groups of people moving around the campus for most of the day, and throughout the weekend with sporting and equestrian events. Nature sounds, such as bird song, increased during lockdown, and were often subconsciously associated with a peaceful environment (Chaudhury & Banerjee, 2020; Derryberry *et al.*, 2020) which might explain Danny's positive attitude towards the quieter environment, even if this was a direct result of a global health threat (Caniato *et al.*, 2021). The positive effects on calmness and own health (figure 19) could explain why Danny felt nearly more settled

and like he belonged during the lockdown, as he was living with a small group of other students in an environment shown to stimulate physical and mental health (Dzhambov *et al.*, 2021). When students returned to campus, ventilation protocols were in place to limit the spread of COVID-19, which resulted in higher background noise from neighbouring classrooms and people passing the building (de la Hoz-Torres *et al.*, 2022). Exposure to unusual background noise after a prolonged period in very quiet environments might explain the student preferences for quieter study spaces, even for group work, although the research evidence is lacking in this area currently.



**Figure 19: Conceptual framework of hypothesised pathways between sounds in the home and self-rated health during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 (adapted from Dzhambov *et al.*, 2021)**

Edward touched on an important second aspect to campus spaces beyond their physical characteristics and suitability as a workspace, describing the campus as comfortable and welcoming. The need to feel safe in a learning- and for many first-

year students, living environment, was paramount for positive learning experiences and developing a sense of belonging for all students.

“Basically, I think the whole campus is quiet. Makes you feel quite comfortable. There's [...] no area that you're particularly excluded from.” (Edward)

Molly gave a similar explanation, highlighting the campus as a safe place because of the people she encountered on campus and the support they provided for her throughout her degree. She mentioned the university rather than the campus, indicating the continued support and feeling of safety interactions with staff and peers during the lockdowns, showing a psychosocial dimension rather than a preference for certain physical aspects of the campus.

“I think [university] in that sense was my safe space because there I, you know, I relied very, very strongly on the help of staff and other students. So that was my safe space (Molly)

Molly found safety in positive relationships with tutors, lecturers, support staff and peers, autonomy, food for her passion for horse welfare, personal growth and increased self-acceptance and wellbeing (Vuckovic *et al.*, 2019). Molly developed the confidence to lead committees, have academic debates with peers and staff and to present her research project at an international conference just after completing her final year.

The concept of “safe space” has been the source of recent debates in research, with critics maintaining that higher education should develop confidence in students for calculated risk-taking to drive innovation- and that might not be perceived as “safe” by students who are placed outside of the comfort zone. Molly did not seem to have the same definition of the term, as she acknowledged challenges during the remote learning periods and during her final year on campus, when she took on committee

roles for multiple student societies alongside her studies and a very complex research project for an undergraduate student. She summed her final experience up as:

“I've never regretted it. [...] There have been harder times, but there's never been a day where I was like I really regret this. I wish I'd done something else. Not at all. Just because there has been progression in every single area of my life.” (Molly)

Molly recognised that personal growth and progression were unlikely to be achieved without moving forward and out of her comfort zone, but she recollected elsewhere how she managed to do so in a managed and therefore “safe” way- for example, working as a student ambassador giving campus tours on open days to gain more confidence speaking to groups of people. This improved her confidence in classroom discussions, presentations, and oral exams to leading committee roles and the academic conference presentation.

The process Molly underwent and was part of could be described as transformative learning, which enables students to question previous beliefs and approaches to develop deeper and broader understanding (Craddock, 2022 in Cruickshank & Abbinnett, 2022). This could be an ongoing process throughout a degree programme, or specific individual learning moments that allowed students to think about a scenario or concept differently and creatively. Danny described this process earlier as “pushing the comfort zone”, a term based on Vygotsky’s “zone of development” (1978). The “zone” referred to the difference between the current level of a student in relation, for example, to academic skill and the level they could potentially reach with carefully scaffolded learning experiences. These experiences could be classroom based, which some of Molly’s experiences were, but also be supported by the wider team within a university, and to reach full potential, aspects of this experience involved temporary discomfort where Molly had to “push the zone” to progress. moving through the levels

within the zone also had a positive impact on mental fitness and self-efficacy. One of MacGlone's (2023) participants described the process as "I'm uncomfortable but let's see where being uncomfortable takes me. It's funny, but being safe means, you can feel uncomfortable" (p. 6).

Ultimately, all students who were interviewed concluded their interviews with a brief reflection on whether they felt coming to university for an equestrian-related course was worth it, and whether they had any regrets. Olivia was the only interviewee who openly stated she regretted starting the course, which was not the right course for her, but which she ultimately became "stuck" on because of paternal pressure discussed earlier. It was therefore not surprising that she was not finding it easy to have positive final comments, although she felt the interview helped her to "close this chapter of her life" (Olivia) and move forwards.

Jodie experienced a lot of academic and non-academic difficulties during her time at this university, but her ultimate statement reflects the transformative process she experienced, and left her ready to plan her next step in her career in equine rehabilitation and therapy:

"In a sense, there were some things I could have done better, but of course I could. I couldn't do them in the state I was at the time, so I could do better from now. Now onwards [...]." (Jodie)

Danny, Penny, and Lucy were positive about their emotions and perceptions of whether coming to university had been the right thing to do for them:

"And that is literally what led me to university. find answers for those questions, or at least have the ability to try and find those answers for those questions. And I think so far, university has definitely done that for me. "(Danny)

Danny always had a focus on what he needed to “get out of” coming to higher education to continue his practical work, although he moved into postgraduate education and equine health research for the time being. He did say in his interview that he “loved research”, but never quite knew where to take it, so it seemed he had found his niche - for now.

In her peer group, Penny struggled the most, with low self-esteem at times, little understanding of what her studies entailed by her family during the lockdowns and significant family illnesses during her final year, but her closing statement showed her sense of achievement and reflected the personal growth she had experienced.

“I did show myself that I can do it.” (Penny)

### 10.3 Conclusion

Involvement represented the peak of the pyramid in figure 4 (p.36), illustrating that expectations, support and assessment and feedback set the foundations that determined the strength of equine student involvement during their time at university. One of the biggest personal transitions seen in this group of equine students was developing the confidence to ask for help early and knowing what help to ask for, which is a skill anecdotally seen as weakness in equestrians. “There is a reticence to access support services and ask for help [...] despite the range of resources available” (Davies *et al.*, 2023; p.10). The same authors also confirmed that “negative perceptions of help-seeking could increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness” (Davies *et al.*, 2023, p.12). Equine students would have been exposed to the common mindsets around help-seeking in industry prior to entering university, so this was a

significant personal development, and maybe on more challenging to overcome for these students compared to other academic disciplines.

For example, Payne *et al.* (2023) concluded that first-in-family students effectively sought help when needed, and used peers and tutors to find out the most appropriate source of help if they were unsure. Delaney *et al.*'s (2023) suggested that help-seeking was more nuanced, with first-year students being more motivated to ask for academic support than wellbeing or financial support, recommending that university's proactively offer targeted support to students at a higher risk of dropout. Similar mechanisms might encourage equine students to engage with support mechanisms other than tutors and peers earlier on, rather than once they hit "breaking point".

The strengthened self-confidence was also evident in all interviews, whether this was linked to public speaking skills or critical thinking and problem-solving skills that emboldened students to challenge current practice. These skills could develop in a safe environment that fostered academic belonging, accompanied by the level of social involvement individual students desired.

Ahn & Davies (2019) suggested two additional domains that impact student social and academic connectedness, geographical and personal space (referring to the psychological value of the university experience as explored in Chapter 10). Equine students in my research unanimously reflected on a feeling of safety on whole campus, highlighting the importance of safety and comfort in the geographical domain to promote student persistence. All informants avoided areas on the campus out of personal choice and necessity, rather than feeling excluded from parts of the campus, similar to Thomas's (2015) findings about the use of campus spaces by part-time mature students. Equine students perceived the campus as a safe place physically

and mentally, accompanied by classroom experiences in safe learning environments, which might have positively impacted on their motivation to seek out support mechanisms once trust was established; positively influencing the personal space domain.

My research suggested that there was a further domain of significance of equine students in addition to those explored by Ahn & Davies (2019): horses and equine welfare. The importance of horses in the drive to persist was evident, whether this was in the context of the students' own horse or horse welfare in a wider industry context. Contact with horses provided downtime important for positive mental health and provided a healthy approach to stress management for equine students. Gaining the confidence to become involved in the equestrian sector through volunteering or paid work, and challenging established practices with the aim to improve welfare requires high levels of self-motivation, self-compassion and ultimately self-confidence and "grit" fostered during equine students' university experiences (Almeida, 2016).

The drive to improve horse welfare, alongside the graduate skills and evidence-based understanding of challenges (Freeman *et al.*, 2014) has already empowered equine graduates to evoke change at a precarious time for the equestrian sector, becoming "critical citizens in the workplace" (Lavender, 2020; p.152). Davies *et al.* (2021) reviewed workplace conditions and injuries in racing (significant part of the equestrian sector), reporting a higher-than-normal staff injury rate even for non-riding staff, a culture of presenteeism, and minimisation culture personal challenges over equine health considerations. A previous chief executive of the British Equestrian Federation triggered an independent investigation of this governing body when she raised concerns "about bullying, about elitism and about a toxic culture within the equestrian world " (Salmon, 2018 in Nathanson, 2018; np). Watson *et al.* (2024) suggested an

“omnipresence of bullying” (p.374) after interviewing a group of female professionals in the equestrian sector. Incidences included the use of verbal and physical aggression, extreme workload expectations and destructive feedback, which led to negative influences on confidence, equine welfare, and professional persistence, as a result of reduced relatedness and belonging (Watson *et al.*, 2024). These negative findings, in addition to equine welfare concerns reported in mainstream media have resulted in significant and sustained threat to the social licence to operate and the future of equestrian sports (Williams, 2023; Heleski, 2023), and also highlight high levels of resilience as a necessity to pursue a career in some parts of the equestrian sector.

This particular cohort of equine students had the unique experience of mixture of on campus, online and hybrid teaching approaches, which enhance the development of self-dependence and “grit”, pushing the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and ultimately developing a sense of pride in their achievements. Most interviews closed with the acceptance that, given the global disruption and personal challenges, the group of equine students did best they could, and that was ok. One student with regrets they chose course but felt participating in interviews helped to “close this chapter”, showing strength in being able to move forward, which maybe is the ultimate test of resilience.

## 11.0 Conclusions

I set out to explore the experiences of a diverse group of equine degree students on their HE journey, which was affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic to learn about their experiences while studying during a global pandemic. Undoubtedly, their journey was impacted by the same challenges reported for society as a whole- social isolation, limited financial means, adverse effects on mental health (Appleby *et al.*, 2022) -but this research focused predominantly on the academic experiences and social aspects related to that journey. Equine degrees at the university in my research are popular with a diverse range of students, with nearly equal proportions of traditional and “non-traditional” students, providing me with an opportunity to learn how they experienced their journey through higher education at a specialist provider, and how this differs from the reported experienced of students at civic and red brick universities (e.g. Reay, 2019; Winnard, 2021; Macqueen, 2018).

The aim was not to compare the two student groups, but to learn about their journey as individuals, and whether they ascribe and value a label in relation to their degree studies. My underlying motivation for this research stemmed from my experience as a practitioner and the frustration of the continued classification of students as traditional- without problematic individual characteristics- and non-traditional students, who were largely presented in the research as challenging, often based on a single or very small number of bureaucratic characteristics or labels, leading to a continued dominance of a deficit discourse in education research about non-traditional student journeys. I do need to re-emphasise here that I am not doubting the importance of social justice research and the push for higher levels of equality and inclusivity in higher education at all, but the current national education policy approaches and research approaches have brought limited progress in the stories of non-traditional

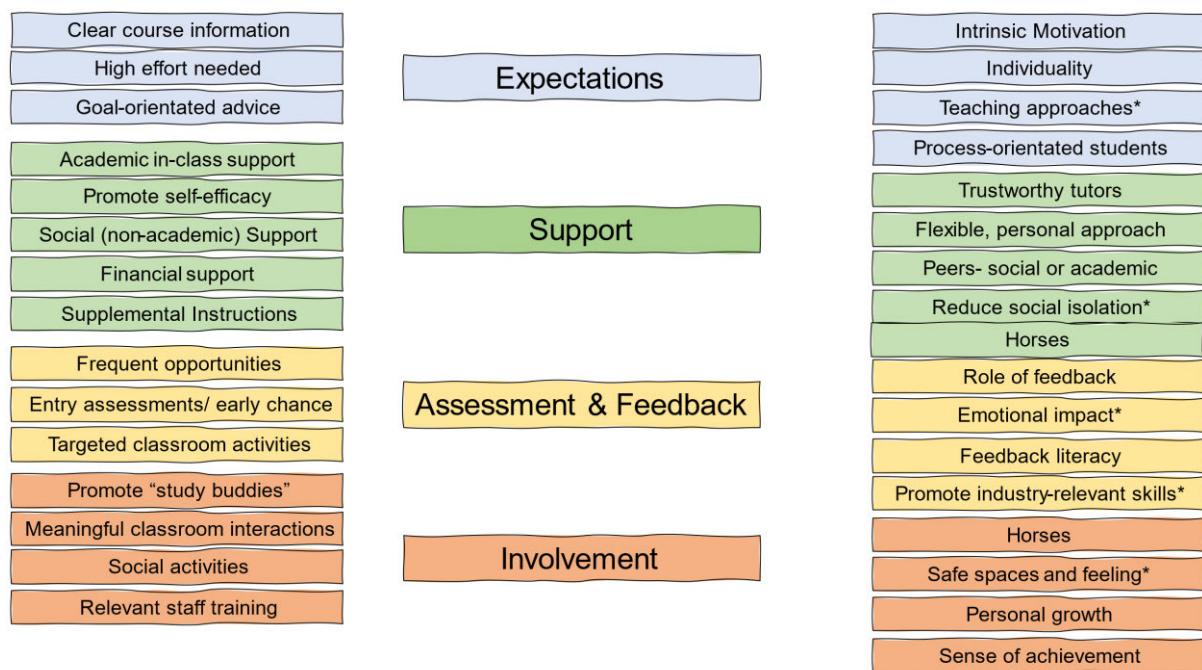
student experiences in education research (Reay, 2022), nor have they led to impactful practical changes in higher education with sustained success.

I chose Tinto's four conditions for student success as an underpinning framework to structure my literature approach, interview structure, and data analysis (Tinto, 2012) despite the most common criticism of his early student persistence models emphasises a need for "non-traditional" students to integrate rather than considering cultural changes in universities (Tinto, 1975). He identified expectations, support, assessment and feedback and involvement as core areas under institutional control to support the individual, creating a learning environment in which individual students matter. Smith and Tinto (2024) emphasised the importance of "micro-engagements" (p.539) with staff- the chance encounters on campus and unscheduled conversation that play a strong role in student belonging.

There were four research questions I was aiming to answer with my research, which reflected the areas Tinto (2012) identifies as conditions for student success:

1. How did equine degree students' prior experiences and course information expectations about their HE course, and how were they met?
2. What support was effective for equine degree students, and would other support have been useful?
3. How did equine degree students experience and engage with assessment and feedback, and overcome adverse experiences?
4. How did wider experiences in and academic and social content aid the involvement of equine degree students during a global pandemic?

I used a thematic analysis approach to analyse the interview transcripts, using hybrid coding approach, where the conditions for student success were applied in an initial deductive approach, followed by inductive coding of data within each deductive theme, and an evaluation of the subthemes in relation to the wider education literature. This process allowed me to identify areas where the experiences of equine degree students seemed to mirror those considered in other research using Tinto's work and other lenses as a framework, but each area demonstrated additional areas of importance (Figure 20). I now move on to consider the conditions that I found were of importance for equine students in addition to Tinto's conditions for students success, explaining how they relate to his work and, where relevant, student characteristics.



**Figure 20: Tinto's conditions for student success and additional conditions for equine students**  
(\*indicates conditions impacted by pandemic-related restrictions)

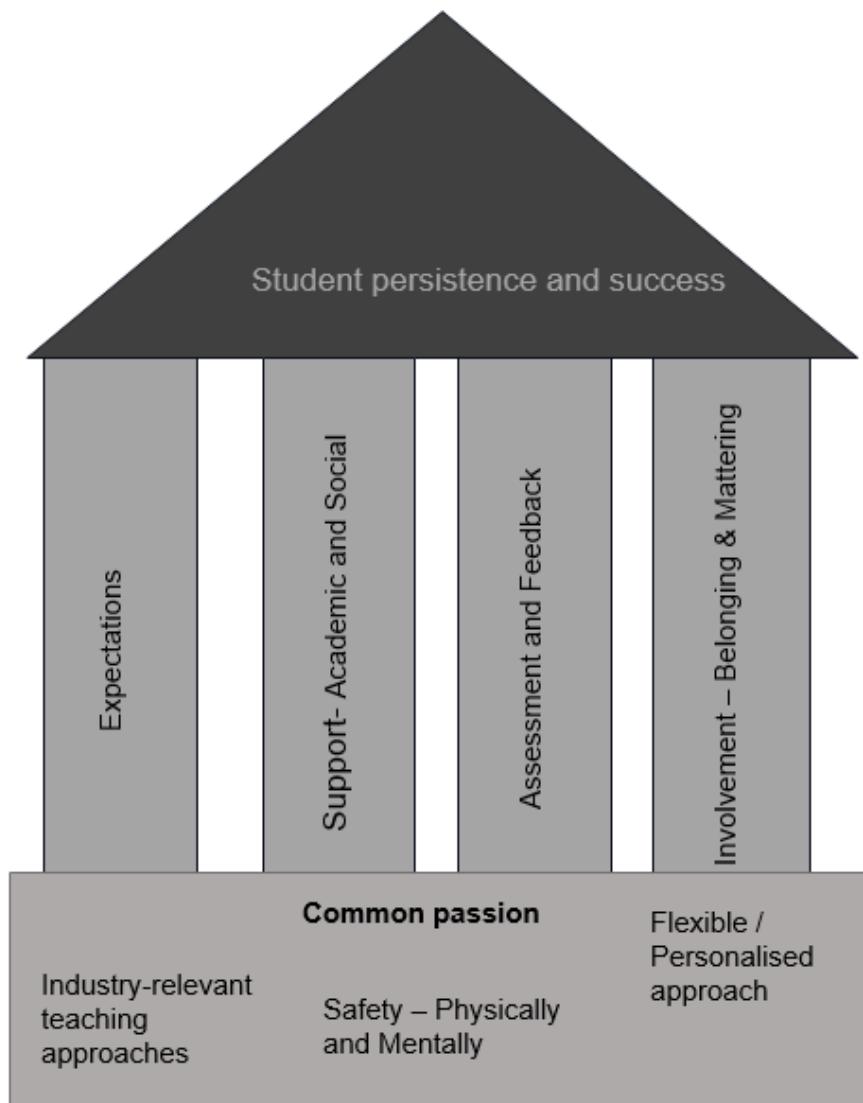
### 11.1 Passion as “the glue”

There were overarching characteristics in all of the students in my research, regardless of how they described themselves, such as a passion for horses as motivator, the ability to step back and evaluate their own mistakes to improve in future and the drive to succeed. These characteristics might not be unique to equine students, but have been suggested as the psychological traits that support riders progress to elite level (Lamperd et al., 2016) and people's motivation to own horses in the first place (Bornemann, 2020).

Whilst some might dismiss the relevance of these findings in the wider context of higher education, Eslan et al. (2023) built on the scarce research to date recently and demonstrated the main aspect of self- organisation seen in equestrians were built on self-efficacy, perceived risk of mistakes and the ethical awareness of wellbeing of horses and peers. All of these were evident in my interviews, illustrating an overlap between equestrian characteristic and desirable skills in higher education students that support student persistence. Students who have practice experience with horses' pre-entry are likely to show these traits, albeit at variable levels- potentially linking to the nature of their involvement with horses, e.g. whether their engagement is a leisure activity or elite sport (Lamperd et al., 2016).

Equine students felt it was important to be seen as the individual they were, rather than one of many in a room, and provided a range of examples that illustrated to them that they mattered to staff, which was an important aspect of belonging (Hallam, 2022, especially during the online and hybrid teaching periods. There were additional factors that underpinned all areas of their degree studies, influencing all conditions for student success (2012), which included strong industry links in teaching and wider

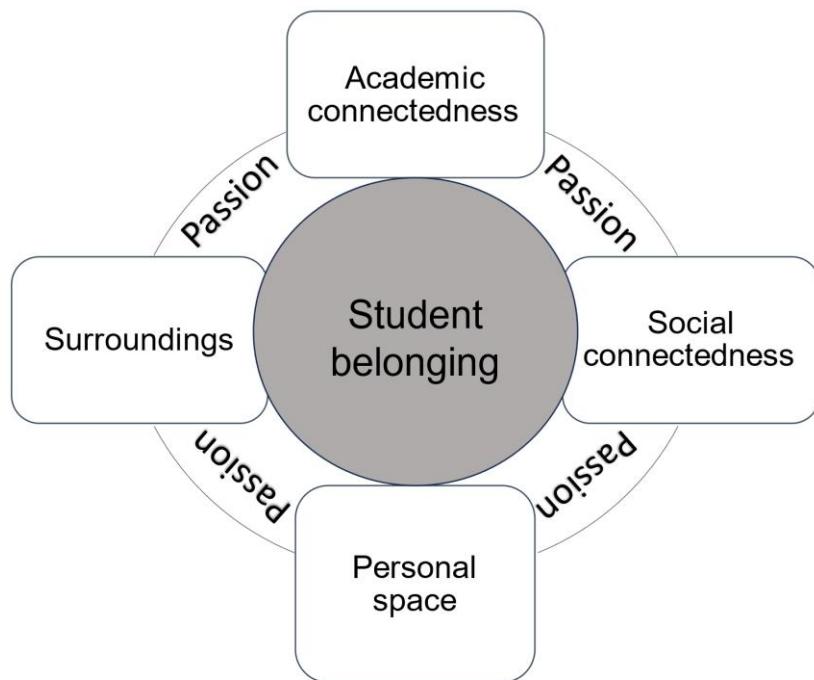
opportunities, a sense of safety on campus (physically and mentally), being treated as individuals and a common passion – horses and equine welfare, which connected students to peers, and also to staff (see figure 21).



**Figure 21: Tinto's conditions for student success and foundations for success**

I highlighted the limitations of Tinto's (2012) models, including his conditions for student success in chapter 2, particularly the lack of consideration for individual student factors, and why two students who "on paper" seem to enter HE from comparable backgrounds can have different experiences and outcomes. Hence I have

suggested that an adaptation of Ahn & Davies (2019) that in addition to social and academic connectedness, surroundings and personal space, horses, and equine welfare – or passion- as the “glue” that binds all other conditions together to support belonging (Figure 22). It must be noted that the passion does not equate to intrinsic motivation, as the extent to which passion drives deep learning approaches is variable. Students passion- in this case, horses, forms the connection between all areas of their university journey, and while not all areas played an equal role for individuals, there remained common ground for all students and staff. I now move on to briefly explore the importance of passion in several aspects of the university experience in equine degree students, and then relate it back to revise Tinto’s conditions of student success.



**Figure 22: Passion as “the glue” for the equine degree students**

### *11.1.1 Passion in teaching, learning and assessment*

Equine students brought passion for horses with them to HE in one way or another, whether they were actively competing, riding for leisure, or looking to “make a change for better welfare” (Danny). Their passion was mirrored in teaching activities, assessments, and informal conversations with academic staff. In fact, passion in teaching has been described by Serin (2017) something that an individual feels is important and “deeply excited about ideas that change our world, and [...] interest in the potentials and dilemmas of [...] people who come to class” (p.60). The combination of passionate staff and a shared passion for horses fostered the intrinsic motivation of equine students, enhancing belonging for equine students and providing an important protective factor against drop out (Messerer *et al.*, 2022), especially during the lockdown periods, further illustrating how much a common passion fostered a sense of community outside of “normal circumstances”.

Teaching and assessment approaches that mirror and develop industry-relevant skills feed into the shared passion between staff and students, similar to concepts outlined by Freeman *et al.* (2014). Gaining confidence and pushing the comfort zone to reflect on current practices in the equestrian sector, developing skills to influence human behaviour change and empower students to drive change are all important outcomes for equine degree graduates, as especially the “hands on” aspects of the industry, working directly with horses, do not provide an easy working environment (see discussion in chapter 10.3). Exposure to safe scenarios that foster industry- relevant skills, and in the current industry context most importantly self-compassion – the ability to reflect on skill and knowledge gaps and accepting these then allows a feasible plan to move forward and an improved sense of self-worth (Neff (2023). This is a skillset currently undervalued in the equestrian sector, but with burnout and

compassion fatigue causing a staffing crisis, self-regulatory skill to support resilience and persistent will be crucial for equine graduates. Their passion for horses and horse welfare- the passion in this example- provides an added protective layer.

The exposure to unexpected teaching approaches, e.g. the use of dissections, or having to coach in front of peers, and moving between in-person, online and hybrid teaching had potential for disrupting academic connectedness and self-confidence by negatively impacting on self- and academic confidence (Flores *et al.*, 2020) as these events disrupted equine students expectations about their degree journeys. Access to support mechanisms, especially practical interventions to reduce the impacts of digital poverty described by other authors (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021; Webb *et al.*, 2021), mental health and financial support limited the impact for equine students on their physical study spaces and social isolation from peers. This was an experience shared by all students, regardless of whether they would be deemed to be traditional or “non-traditional” in the wider literature context.

Equine students, as suggested by Tinto (2012) valued frequent opportunities for feedback on formative assessments and their in-class learning, particularly at the start of each academic year to understand how staff expectations developed between the levels. The tone in which feedback was provided was preferred as “cushioned blows” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001) highlighting weaknesses for formative assessments by most, while feedback on end of module assessments was preferred as forward-facing, process-driven feedback by equine students. Feedback reflecting on weaknesses in end of module submissions rather than recommending improvement for future assessments could have adverse effects on student motivation and self-determination, as it was often perceived to be “too late,” mirroring findings from other research (Poulos & Mahoney, 2008). Feedback literacy was also discussed in

interviews, again showing a preference for clear and direct comments for most equine students, and only highly self-motivated students feeling a combination of positive and negative comments about their work beneficial, so they could process and action comments. For others, direct and uncushioned comments reflected the potential tone of industry interactions, and hence might prepare students for an industry with some challenging conditions. Whilst this was a realistic reflection, the adverse impact of poorly delivered feedback on student motivation, confidence and persistence are too great to recommend this as an approach.

Passion for the core aspects of the course, in this case horses and horse welfare, needs to be harnessed to have a positive impact on the student experience, teaching experiences and student persistence- a concept previously shown in research about the intrinsic motivation of agriculture (Karimi & Sotoodeh, 2019) and nursing students.

#### *11.1.2 Influence of life experiences and passion as protective factor*

Equine students in my research had various adverse experiences prior to starting their studies, and during the course of their degree. As might be expected, this was the only area where this group of equine students acknowledged WP characteristics relevant for them; for example, mature students reflected on their social and academic connectedness were interchangeable, as they spent little time on campus outside of scheduled teaching session, but they valued staff and peer interactions on campus.

Tinto (2012) recommended institutional action to create “learning communities” (p.71), which are small groups of students sharing on or more modules to facilitate the formation of “socially supportive peer groups” (p.71). Mature equine students formed bonds with peers for study purposes, but this doubled up as social opportunities for mature students, matching Tinto’s (2012) intended consequences, whereas younger

equine students tended to compartmentalise, and make a clear distinction between “uni-friends” (or learning communities) and social friends, at least prior to the lockdowns (Brook, 2007; Tinto, 2012).

There was a marked removal of the compartmentalised approach at the start of the final year for this student cohort, with peer-learning groups becoming the main social and academic link to campus outside of classes, maybe as a result of social isolation during the lockdowns, and ongoing restrictions on social contact when students returned to the campus. This findings might be unique to this cohort as a result of the pandemic, but it must be considered that the balance between social and academic commitment is dynamic, with final year students often placing more importance onto their academic performance.

Hence there might not be a need for institutional action to artificially create learning communities at smaller HE providers, as such groups seem to form organically without additional intervention for the equine students in my research, and it remains to be investigated how significant the influence of shared passion is in the formation of such groups and their perceived success. None of the equine students reported a satisfactory digital approach to recreate the social connectedness they felt on campus, raising future areas for investigation, especially for courses that have maintained a level of hybrid teaching post-pandemic (Finlay *et al.*, 2022).

Students did not use WP labels in most of their interviews, even if they had selected on in the recruitment questionnaire, indicating that equine degree students in this context took responsibility for their own learning, even when faced with unexpected obstacles. This level of autonomy ultimately can encourage or discourage motivation for change (Jones *et al.*, 2021, and so a personalised approach by tutors and

“knowing” their students is crucial in this context, allowing interactions that help students feel like they matter (Hallam, 2022). I am not saying that staff should not be aware of student conditions that are likely to require support, but staff should aim to create a safe space where students feel empowered to ask for help when they need it, and in which support mechanisms available to all students were highlighted regularly. Involving “year above” peers proofed to be a successful approach with equine students, and should be equally useful in other contexts, provided that advice given by “older” peers is authentic and supportive to strengthen new student autonomy, self-compassion, and self-determination.

The resilience of non-traditional students as a result of disadvantage has previously been established extensively in education research, including for mature students (Brewer et al., 2019; Chua et al., 2023, Twigg-Flesner 2018a,b), students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2017; Kong, 2020), ethnic minority students (Crozier et al., 2019; Mulrenan et al., 2020) and first-in-family students (O’Shea, 2020; Campbell, 2020). These papers, and preceding ones, have been used in to suggest “resilience frameworks” to develop higher levels of resilience in the student body, aiming to reach higher levels of student retention and attainment, e.g. Tinto, 2017; Cotton et al., 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2019) yet these frameworks do not seem to be widely implemented in practice. Rather than institutional action *per se*, action at departmental or course level could be considered, harnessing positives of shared passion, and using it to drive student interest and engagement for a smoother transition into HE, forming a foundation for resilience and persistence and therefore strengthening protective factors against drop out early on.

### *11.1.3 Belonging everywhere- or self-selection?*

Universities aim to have a welcoming and inclusive campus, where all students can feel “at home” in all areas- yet research has demonstrated that previous experiences, personal preferences, and wider life commitments make this less achievable in reality- Carruthers Thomas (2018) demonstrated that the “avoidance” of some campus areas by mature students was simply related to the lack of need to access those areas, rather than feeling actively excluded from them. Similarly, my findings showed a strong preference for all students for quieter areas to meet on campus, where most were focused on academic work rather than socialising (11.2.2 Happy places) and used socialisation as a break from most study aspects.

Wong (2023) recently proposed a timely model to explain the factors in spatial belonging of university student, which considered the impact of the physical and virtual spaces post-pandemic students operated in, and how these were influenced by relational spaces and their meanings for individual students and the structural space (such as power balances, societal expectations etc.). This could become a useful tool to understand contexts and spaces in which students work most effectively and comfortably, so a range of appropriate study and social facilities can be offered on campus to cater for the diversity of needs. The authors acknowledged that this was a preliminary model that might require additional spaces, such as a temporal space, and that the model was less suited to individual needs, but more so to provide a tool for institutions to include at least one space on campus every student feels they belong.

### 11.3 Contributions of my research

The main contributions of my research are insights into the journey of a diverse and previously underrepresented group of students completing a range of equine degrees.

Whilst there were some parallels to previously published research, and most of Tinto's conditions for student success applied in the equine student context, there were also some marked differences to the model that warrant further investigation.

The most notable finding was the shared passion between students, their peers, and academic staff, creating a cohesive approach to all areas of the experiences of this group of equine students. Passion had the potential to promote intrinsic motivation and deep learning approaches, but this depending on the origin of the students' passion – in this case for horses. Furthermore, the equine sector finds itself at a juncture, needing to critically reflect on practices, behaviours, and attitudes if the sector is to have a future (Williams, 2023). Students embracing the change tended to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and critically evaluative approaches to learning, aiming to become “critical citizens in the workplace” (Lavender, 2020; p.152) on completion of their studies. Equine degrees could be equated to other vocational degrees in the context of passion, but research considering the aim to become drivers of change have been shown in nursing students (Halperin & Regev, 2021).

In relation to Tinto's conditions for student success, there were many parallels to the wider research on student transition, assessment and feedback and persistence (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2023; Kinsella *et al*, 2022), although a gap between students who would be deemed traditional and “non-traditional” was not as evident as shown for other universities (e.g. Veidemane *et al*, 2021; McTaggart, 2016; Mallman & Lee, 2016). The smaller student numbers on a rural campus facilitated the creation of a

space in which students felt safe, had access to all facilities and support services needed for their studies, and were likely to develop close working relationships with both their personal academic tutors and module teaching teams. Equine students were able to move on from isolated adverse experiences, such as unexpected teaching methods, or a tutorial in which they felt dismissed, but this was mainly because these were counteracted with positive staff interactions, promoting a sense of mattering in students, similar to findings by Hallam in college students and their experiences during the pandemic (Hallam, 2022; 2023; 2024).

Tutor and peer-support were the most effective support mechanism, with family support having positive impact where parents believed in their children and supported them emotionally. Adverse impacts of parental influences arose from a lack of parental interest and dismissal, limited understanding of university demands and parental pressure to complete the degree, but interestingly these developed higher levels of self-reliance, ability to critically reflect on experiences and stronger abilities to show self-compassion, self-acceptance, and pride in their achievements.

The experiences of equine students warrant further research attention, exploring specific aspects of their degree journeys and success strategies to overcome challenges. The nearly equal split of students with traditional and “non-traditional” students provides a different setting to those extensively covered in education research, which have mostly concluded a continued misfit for students with certain characteristics. Exploring a rural, smaller setting rather than urban ones also adds to a wider understanding of England’s diverse student body.

## 11.4 Limitations

When this project was designed originally, I had planned to include students from all departments at my university to establish success strategies and challenges for both non-traditional and traditional students, and I started data collection including interviews for this project before the pandemic. Due to poor health I had to pause my studies for a year, by which point the COVID-19 pandemic was just starting to take hold. As a scientist and quantitative researcher prior to turning to education research, I felt that experiences pre- and post-pandemic for different students would not make a suitable comparison, so I redesigned the project to focus on students who graduated from equine-related degrees in 2022, which meant that they had started higher education before the pandemic and continued to study through the pandemic years. All interviews were completed in April and May 2022, and data analysis started in parallel with the interviews before I had to take another prolonged break from my research. The gap between initial coding of the interviews and development of the final codes therefore might have been influenced by gaps in my engagement with the data.

The group of students I interviewed self-selected, and I did not offer any incentives. This approach tends to encourage either students with a strong connectedness to the university, or students who had negative experiences and want to share their dissatisfaction. While the interviews and analysis represented the experiences and realities of my informants, a longitudinal approach with more frequent interview opportunities could yield richer data whilst experiences are fresh, and also allow reflective approaches at distinct stages of the degree.

There were limitations to the coding approach, which was mitigated as outlined in chapter 5.6.3, was that I was the only coder, whereas good practice in qualitative research would be to have at least two coders who review the data individually initially before comparing and agreeing codes to move forward with (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). This weakness was mitigated through the use of a set of questions considered during the data collection, and an assessment of codes by informants. The fact that the email was sent approximately 15 months after the interviews were conducted may have made this step to ensure data validity less effective than it would have been within a shorter period. Informants retained access to their interview recording, and so had the opportunity to watch their own interview and compare this to the coding, but I cannot be certain the six who responded would have done so reliably and fully.

The range in interview durations could be seen as a limitation, as shorter interviews were likely to provide fewer deep responses than longer ones, and whilst this seemed to be true for some aspects of the shorter interviews (Catherine and Edward), both informants did discuss a number of experiences in significant depth, so rich data was generated and was relevant to my research aims. I had been working with Edward (and five of the other informants) and was acutely aware of recent challenges he had encountered, so to avoid upset to him I did not follow up on some of his answers as much as I did with other students, or as I might have done if I had not known about his background. This affected a small part of the interview and was offset by rich responses in most other areas of his interview. I had not previously met two students, Jodie, and Olivia, who were pleasingly open in their answers, and sharing parts of their higher education journey they had not spoken about before, indicating that the interview approach and quick rapport built provided a safe and non-judgemental environment, but there were occasions where I did not “probe” as much as I could

have done in order to protect my informants and our day-to-day professional relationship.

The sample size of eight students was relatively small, and I justified this with evidence from Braun & Clarke (2021) that foregone conclusions about required sample sizes cannot be drawn with certainty, and saturation in its entirety can perhaps never be achieved. Therefore the repeat emergence of the same themes with limited emergence of new codes was deemed an indicator that themes reflected key experiences and emotions. Further interviews could have added additional perspectives, and this was accepted as a limitation of the approach in this research, as a result of a convenience sample from a small research population to start with. Experiences of participants in this setting on an equine course might not reflect the experiences of students on animal science or sports courses, or those of equine students studying with another provider.

Despite these limitations, the project provided a novel insight into the journey of students on equestrian-related degrees which had not previously been explored in depth for students in the UK. Some research existed in the USA, but courses tend to be more strongly focused on practical skills rather than being as robust in terms of academic writing and scientific approaches as the UK degrees in this particular area. There are only a small number of universities who provide equine degrees, with most providers in the UK being either FE colleges or university centres who validate their higher education provision through a partner university, so the setting is unique in that respect as well. Finally, the informants studied through unprecedented events, and while some of their experiences of online teaching mirrored those reported in research at larger universities, my research provided some insights unique to this student group.

Equine degree students, and the land-based higher education sector have been neglected in education research, and whilst typically these providers attract small student numbers, they deserve to be represented in education research.

### 11.5 Closing comments and further research

My research has provided an early insight into the experiences of equine degree students in the UK, which are markedly different from experiences of students on equine degrees in the USA. I highlighted areas for further research throughout my thesis, but I will summarise the main recommendations here with a brief justification.

Equine degrees, by nature and need of access to appropriate facilities, tend to be taught in a rural setting, which might impact on the social support structures students rely on (Brooks, 2007). Benneworth *et al.* (2024) also highlighted the lack of consensus around the definition of “rural campus” in England, as international comparisons are of limited value here. The settings have an associated risk of feeling isolated, adversely affecting student mental health and student persistence at rural providers.

The present study and my previous research (Twigg-Flesner, 2017a,b) have identified higher education as a route for retired elite athletes from a range of sports. Whilst there is literature covering the impact of retirement on elite athletes (e.g. Chen & Bansal, 2022), there is a limited understanding of how retired athletes take steps into higher education. The setting I work with has elite athlete scholarships and training programmes, so there is an element of practitioner as well as research interest in this context.

Equine students showed a passion for their subject areas, which seemed to act as a protective factor of student persistence in this research. A wider exploration, through

a longitudinal study with interviews at the start, middle and end of the academic year could provide richer data to explore the experiences of equine degree students. The cohort in my research was impacted by a global pandemic, hence their experiences are likely to differ from equine degree students in “normal times”.

Finally, interview data indicated barriers to engagement with support programmes and services for equine degree students, yet research evidence, including findings in the present research (see 9.5) indicate that engaging with support programmes has positive effects on student confidence, self-determination, mental health, and persistence. This research initially would be conducted at the same provider through focus groups with students across all departments and year groups.

Finally, my research has highlighted the passion for the subject area – in this case horses and horse welfare- as a main driver for students to engage with their studies and persist through more challenging aspects of their studies. Passion here can be seen as a two-fold concept: the impact of studying on the welfare and management of their own horses as a direct, practical consequence, and the desire to influence change in the current equestrian sector with all its challenges. The latter might indicate that, at least for some students, equine degrees are not just the next step after school, but lead to a professional identity and desire for an impactful role in the industry.

Contrary to the “structural and cultural factors that ignite access and success for students from “non-traditional” backgrounds that need to be addressed” (Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2023; p.106) on nursing programmes, equine degrees already attract a large number of previously underrepresented groups, providing an alternative research insight of interest to providers of equine degrees, the equestrian sector and other providers of vocational degree, building on the novel insights shown in my thesis.

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## Appendix A Copy of questionnaire

### Traditional, non-traditional or just diverse? An insight into the academic challenges and support needs of HE students in a small institution

Please ensure you have read the project information sheet fully, and you understand the purpose of this research.

\* Indicates required question

Traditional, non-traditional or just diverse? An insight into the academic challenges and support needs of HE students in a small institution

Project information sheet

1. What is the study purpose?

The purpose of this study is to learn how students would predominantly describe themselves and the key milestones in their higher education studies to date. These may include moments of success, or challenges (and ways in which students have coped with particular challenges)

2. Can I participate?

You can participate in the study if you are a registered higher education student at University Centre Hartpury, you are competent in reading, understanding and speaking English and over 18 years of age.

3. What does the study involve?

There are two parts to this study- an online questionnaire, and a follow up interview with survey participants who are willing to be interviewed further about their experiences.

4. What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

There are no immediate disadvantages or risks of taking part in the study, but you may skip any questions that you feel would be upsetting or too personal.

5. How long will it take?

The survey will take usually 10-15 minutes to complete, and follow up interviews will usually take 30-60 minutes (to take place at a mutually agreed time, refreshments provided).

6. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Yes. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be shared between the researcher and her doctoral supervisor. Data will be anonymised in the case of publication, including a doctoral thesis, to prevent participants from being identified in the write up of the findings.

7. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The data collected during this study will be analysed. The data will be anonymised and you will not be identified from the data. Data will form the basis for a doctoral thesis, and the findings of this study may be presented at conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals.

8. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

The Ethics Committee of the School of Education at the University of Sheffield and the Ethics Committee at the University Centre Hartpury have reviewed and approved this project. If you have any concerns, please contact Dr David Hyatt ([d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk)) at the University of Sheffield or Dr Alison Wills (Ethics Chair at University Centre Hartpury [Alison.Wills@Hartpury.ac.uk](mailto:Alison.Wills@Hartpury.ac.uk)).

9. What if something goes wrong?

Should you wish to raise a complaint, please contact the researcher ([anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk](mailto:anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk) or [atwigg-flesner1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:atwigg-flesner1@sheffield.ac.uk)) or the supervisor of this project, Dr David Hyatt ([d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk)). Contact for further information

For further information, please contact the researcher: Anke Twigg-Flesner ([anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk](mailto:anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk) or [atwigg-flesner1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:atwigg-flesner1@sheffield.ac.uk))

1. Please click the following statements to participate in this study \*

*Tick all that apply.*

- I confirm that I have read and understood the project information provided explaining the research project, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project (where questions arose)
- 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. Additionally, should I not wish to answer any particular question(s), I am free to decline. If I have any concerns, I can contact the researcher by email ([anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk](mailto:anke.twigg-flesner@hartpury.ac.uk)) or phone (01452 702348)
- 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(s) that result from the research.
- I agree for the anonymised data collected from me to be used in future research.
- I agree to take part in the research project.
- I am 18 years or older and a current Higher Education Student at University Centre Hartpury

Part 1: Please tick the boxes that apply to you most for each of the statements

2. Which age category do you best fit into? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 18-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-49
- 50-59
- 60+
- Prefer not to say

3. Which gender do you most identify with? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

4. Which programme are you currently enrolled on?

*Mark only one oval.*

- BA (Hons) Equine Business Management
- BA (Hons) International Horseracing Business
- BSc (Hons) Equestrian Sports Coaching
- BSc (Hons) Equestrian Sports Science
- BSc (Hons) Equine Management
- BSc (Hons) Equine Science/ MSci Equine Science
- BSc (Hons) Equine Science with Therapy
- BSc (Hons) Racehorse Performance and Rehabilitation

5. How would you describe your ethnicity? \*

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6. What was your highest academic qualification on entry to your current programme? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Access to Higher Education programme
- A levels
- BTEC
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Did you have a break from education before coming to university? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- No
- Yes, to travel
- Yes, to work
- Yes, to have children
- Yes, but would prefer not to provide reasons
- Prefer not to say
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you took a break before coming to university, how long was your break?

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9. Did any of your close family members go to university (choose all that apply)? \*

*Tick all that apply.*

- None
- Both parents
- Father
- Mother
- Sibling(s)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. How would you describe yourself in the university environment (Choose the one term you associate with most, or state an alternative) \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Student
- Traditional Student
- Non-Traditional Student
- First-in-Family Student
- Disabled Student
- Ethnic Minority Student
- Working-Class Student
- Disadvantaged Student
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

11. If you are thinking about your current studies, do you feel that: \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- You are performing at the best of your academic ability, and feel comfortable to meet the academic expectations and standards
- You are performing at the best of your academic ability, and feel stretched to meet the academic expectations and standards
- You are performing at the best of your academic ability, and feel you can meet the academic expectations and standards with targeted support (i.e. learning support or tutors)
- You are not challenged sufficiently currently, and would like to be stretched more
- You are not challenged sufficiently currently, but you are happy with the situation
- You are challenged beyond your academic abilities, but you have not accessed support services or tutorials to address this
- You are challenged beyond your academic abilities, despite support from tutors and support staff
- You are not performing at the best of your academic ability, but manage to cope with access to support services
- You are not performing at the best of your academic ability, but manage to cope on your own

## Part 2

The following section is asking you to reflect on your own experiences in Higher Education at University Centre Hartpury. If you would prefer not to answer these, please write "no answer" to continue.

12. Thinking about your time in Higher Education only, can you describe the most positive learning experience you have had, \* involving a member of academic staff?

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13. What made this a positive experience for you- e.g. the way in which the situation was handled, the teaching style, individual approach? \*

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14. Thinking about your time in Higher Education only, can you describe the most negative learning experience you have had, involving a member of academic staff? \*

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15. What made this a negative experience for you- e.g. the way in which the situation was handled, the teaching style, individual approach? And how do you feel this scenario could have been handled better? \*

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16. Have you used any of the support service, e.g. ULC staff, student advisors, ASC, ICE or learning support? If so, how \* would you describe your overall experience?

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17. Which areas of the campus do you feel most "at home" in? Why do you think this is the case? \*

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18. Which areas of the campus do you avoid as you do not feel comfortable there? Why do you think you avoid these areas? \*

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19. Lastly, would you be happy to take part in an individual, follow-up interview? As with the questionnaire, any data gathered \* will be anonymised. Please leave your preferred email address if you are willing to participate.

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## Appendix B: Final codes and associated quotes

### Expectations

Themes	Subtheme	
Caught off guard	Highway to happiness- or taking the backroads?	<p>3rd year, yes, we were made clear that, you know, things are on another level now. So we better pull our socks up. And I I did, but I think I personally feel disappointed in, in, in the whole year and how it went from, from my own experience the staff had made it clear what needs to be done and all of that and in terms of the level as well.(Danny)</p> <p>Yeah, that was that was that, that was definitely another thing as well. So I I did set myself a challenge because while second year I coped with it because of the online</p>

exams. But this year I definitely felt the pressure. Working alongside and I I'm I think I definitely didn't do myself any good by setting myself this challenge.(Danny)

The level of everything, the level of writing, the level of reading and the level of critical thinking that we had for 3rd year. I think that was that that caught me off guard in a way, because it it actually let went up from level 2 to level 8 in a way it felt like it went from level 2 to level 8 in a way.(Lucy)

n the 1st and the 2nd year. And there isn't really much expectation in a way or there's no pressure at all. Because we're all already really intimidated, in a way, because we're coming into the academic setting having to, you know, make this transition. So I think that in that sense it it was a really good thing. But then come the end of second year or and I actually mid second year, third year is when we start getting through all that you

know. It's getting a bit more serious now. Your grades are getting counted towards the degree. So it's, you know, do or die in a way. (Danny)

Come second year, that's when I saw a bit of a drop, but then I thought maybe that's a pandemic or or maybe just a bit of lack of motivation or not, you know. Or maybe it's because the level has actually increased And come third year is when I have realised that I haven't really put in enough effort and. I think I saw this with a couple of my modules where I actually did put in the effort, even though last minute I did put in the effort. I scored really well, so contemporary issues. For example, I left that assignment to the very last minute because I, you know, wasn't sure on what topic to go on. And in the end I I that was my highest scoring module because I put in the effort last minute. But I put in the effort and then I got into a mindset that I can only work last minute in a way. And I think that. Went through out the year followed following through the year.

And it all went to shambles. And now there are reflect back on it I think. I'm planning a good slap on my face.(Danny)

And it's it's a very progressive organisation altogether and I think we're on the forefront of of equine research and equine industry. So I wouldn't change a thing. (Danny)

I guess I had high expectations always had heard about it and it was it always sounded like this amazing place this, you know amazing facilities and blah blah blah. And I'll be honest it didn't disappoint when I came. (Edward)

I was a bit disappointed. I was a bit disappointed but I faced it. In the sense of saying, OK, nothing is perfect. I did create a lot of expectations in my mind, and that's not [...] fault. Uh, so? It was a bit of my fault in the sense that I should have managed my

expectations a bit better and not expect everything to be a highway to happiness And the highway to success. No, it's a many times we have to go through the back roads. So I was disappointed, yes, but I.don't Blame [...] .(Jodie)

And the the lessons weren't being recorded that second half of the first year and I when I came and looked round, everyone was like, ohh yeah, it's it could be quite flexible and that's the one thing that probably from looking around has then been harder because it just it hasn't, it's not it's not flexible really kind of thing and initially if you missed the session you missed the session the notes on like the PowerPoint.I didn't know that lectures wouldn't be recorded as well. Actually at the time. And my sister went to Uni and all sorts and obviously all of theirs annotated. So she was like when she came and looked around with me actually, she was like, well that's fine because if you missed it.I don't know...(Lucy)

And varial between staff members, if that makes sense. And certainly like especially stuff like Kirsty, you very much know. Lay out your Level 6 students. Now we expect this to assist or level 5 or whatever. And the whole way through which actually I think helps more than the ones that are like a bit more wishy washy. No, you'll be fine because you know you know what because expected to suppose isn't it and But yeah, to a level everyone's kind of said what's expected, but just to different levels as to which lecture you have.(Lucy)

I would do the same thing again just because I didn't. Think sort of the academic side would be a problem for me, but I saw all the other degrees and they didn't have the same practical aspect to it and I had never worked before coming to university. (Molly)

I Think in terms of what we did sort of working on the yard. I did expect it to be that way. I didn't. I didn't think we'd touched on so many areas of the industry. I thought it was

going to be very focused on performance. You know how horses compete. But actually we've done quite a bit on racing, which I didn't expect. I didn't end up enjoying it, but I didn't think we'd focus on that. Then we focused a lot on anatomy. I definitely was not expecting the dissections. I wasn't aware we could do that, but definitely everything we did do, I did end up enjoying a lot. I just expected it to be more specific, but I definitely don't regret it being more sort of opened up to other areas of the industry as well. (Molly)

I've continued sort of in that way, but I think. I've seen a lot of progression. I've seen a lot in my ideas have like opened up a lot, seeing lectures being also sorts of things in the equine industry, nutritionists ethologists that's opened up my mind so much I didn't. I thought of myself as a very open minded person while I was here, but actually I didn't think those careers were actually possible in the equine industry (Molly)

	<p>if I can be very honest, the only thing that I don't regret is getting my student loan of out of it.(Olivia)</p> <p>ademically, again, it's just like a massive jump Umm that you don't really Expect for I even though it was academically more challenging, I've enjoyed it five times as much. Just being in the environment and being able to talk to people. (Penny)</p>
The comfort zone	<p>I think it because before I came and just being not really doing anything with COVID, it kinda took a while to kind of get started into the swing of things again. But I think I've managed to kind of get into it a bit better now.</p>

It's pretty achievable. You do need to like work hard towards it. So it's not easy, but it's definitely a good challenge point. I think for me anyway.

(Catherine)

Coming back into education after three years of a gap was the sort of thing that I was worried about. But knowing that, you know, everyone was on the same boat in first year and, you know, getting a hang of scientific literature and how to go about reading and writing all that literature as well. (Danny)

And but it's all very proactive as well. The expectation it's not like [...] you need to score so much and so much if you want to get a good job or if you want to get a good career. There is no pressure as such in terms of that, so it's very proactive, it's. It's there that

expectation is there, but it doesn't put a pressure on you in a way which is good because you don't really, you know, feel like you have to please them. (Danny)

I must admit. First year I didn't really put in a lot of effort and I actually achieved good, good grades. I mean I didn't get any, I didn't score below 70 in any of my modules first year. So I think that that was when I got a bit confident that Maybe perhaps the effort that I'm putting in is enough.(Danny)

That's what makes this difference, as humans deserve, because we've got everything given to us, we've got a roof, we've got the all the resources. So we don't really have that scare. The fear of not doing good or you know of not doing enough. And we get too comfortable. And I think that that really got me because I was in my comfort zone in a way. Although I worked last minute, I was in my comfort zone throughout and then last minute I was. Uh, I'm going at it as if my life depended on it. And I still fail. In a way.

So I think now moving on and also reflecting back on it, I think it's better to be out of your comfort zone throughout the whole process. If you really want to progress. And and I think this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to set myself that. If if I'm if I feel like I'm gonna comfort zone, I'm not progressing enough.(Danny)

I'm very good at scaring my things. Uh, myself to things, so I actually I I made out to be a lot worse than it was. The foundation was it wasn't easy, but it was kind of very manageable. (Edward)

And and and being in that kind of environment and and I had to work cause I've said I didn't laugh to me first And that first year and I haven't done science or anything like that and it's like GCSE, so I had to go back and study quite a bit just I think she did sounds or something like that.

(Lucy)

I wasn't disappointed with the course itself. And with a, the change in career. But I was disappointed with the fact that I thought There were more rules and people were gonna follow more rules (Jodie)

When I started, it was just kind of juggling and feeling. I felt really guilty because I was leaving Ashley. And whereas both boys I was with all the time and actually I felt guilty because I was like....Leaving her and then obviously when I came back, I had bits of work to do, so I was leading when I came home like she didn't know my full attention, so it was probably the the biggest kind of challenge (Lucy)

I found it. I did find it very helpful and the fact being able to say that I had the opportunity to do them. That's quite amazing, because even in other universities I know they do dissections, but not as thorough. They only, for example, dissect a limb. They don't have all those parts that we had, but it definitely took me by surprise. It's not something I would be extremely comfortable with. I did wanna be a vet when I was a child, but the reason I didn't become a vet was the fact about with all the blood and everything that isn't something I am comfortable with. (Molly)

Academically, I didn't find it as challenging as I thought it would be. I expected university to be very academically challenging. However, I don't think that reflects on the quality. I think it's the fact that I'm very passionate about what I'm doing. Just I like every single subject, so I put my everything into it and I don't struggle looking for information into it or studying it just because I actually do enjoy it, I think. Yeah, it's, it's, it's just more enjoyable. So I don't find it as challenging in that sense. However, the standard is very

high when I talk to my friends and everything, but it's just more enjoyable in that sense.(Molly)

So I did minimal science and then to go there and find out with the selecting horses is really that was quite a shock. I was not expecting that at all. Uhm, didn't enjoy that bit. (Olivia)

having the opportunity. It is something very, very unique and I did. I do think I learned quite a bit from it and I do see horses in another sort of light after that, seeing what happens internally. A video is not the same as seeing it live, so it's a bit of both definitely. (Catherine)

So it didn't really match up either, because again, I thought it was gonna be a very UM, practical based thing I I was expecting to spend But as a coach to start off as a coaching course, I was expecting to be taught how to coach and we would just sort of checked in in arena and We we all floundered a bit. We didn't really know what we were doing. And although I I understand their point of view of let's get you out there, get you comfortable into your arena and talking. It's a bit hard to do that when you don't actually know how to teach.(Olivia)

I think the the thing that hit me the hardest was the the lab work because that for me is really OK. So we actually have to Do writing and learn stuff, not but learn stuff on paper, not learn stuff in practice .Umm. And it's very, yeah, no, I wasn't impressed by having to do all that time in a classroom instead of Learning. I thought we would be we would be doing Uh coaching. I thought the main academic stuff would be Obviously a bit of

learning well, quite a lot of learning about the horse, maybe a bit of science just to understand it better And coaching theory. (olivia)

I personally don't think it was that clear, cause everyone I spoke to no one was expecting it to be as big of changes as it was. And I think it was only realised once. You then got like your first mark back and then it was like Oh my God like what what you're in and then it was like ohh we need to be doing things so differently and then that's when you start talking to lecturers and stuff and they're like Oh yeah like it's not the same because I feel like that wasn't. (Penny)

So obviously they did try to make us get used to it, explaining everything sort of step-by-step having those. Initial like assignments and everything they did try to make us feel very welcome in that sense, just because I they can appreciate we've never done that style of writing before. However, since the very beginning, even though they knew those those first year grades don't really sort of count towards your final mark, they still

		<p>made you strive for sort of that perfection just to get you used to that and then making it easier to transition into second year. So I definitely think you know they did make it easier. They did explain things more, but they still said That that sort of criteria quite high.(Molly)</p>
		<p>think the transitions have gone from like they've been made easier actually from first to second year. I really enjoyed second year because I had my optional modules and same the top up. Actually I think it's it's been the easiest transition, although academically it is more challenging because of like our dissertation and the level we're expected to. Be at, but the transition has been easier just because now I mean, it's mainly choosing what I'm passionate about and sort of very focused on that future (Molly)</p>

The Uni C word (Criticality)	<p>Like from the start I was always pushed to think more critically. And that's always been helpful cause I've it's it's meant that it's always been in the back of my mind. And it's, I feel like it's been helpful coming into this year with the research project. It's, you know, it's not come to a shock that I've had to do that. So the fact that my lectures of especially one lecture she's always pushed for it, I think it's been very helpful. (Edward)</p>
	<p>I didn't have a clue. No clue. I was story just meant. Read more papers and Uh, I never really thought of it is analyzing the papers better and things like that. I'm but as obviously as I've gone through at fashion made that very clear, but I still always struggled on how to do that.(Edward)</p>
	<p>It's really like almost a low dig to like, say numbers are low in the study, she said because that's like people can't help that. So like, she then went through things that could be critical. And saying like other aspects of the study and variables and that kind</p>

of stuff. So yeah, following that. And then I did and I know they covered it bit on the critical writing and fundamental skills in the year 1 and but I say poorly those sessions are just switch off. And then yeah, following my activity, that chat with Rachel was really helpful. (Lucy)

Am I still so like I chat to the girls and I showed us like ohh, I love being critical. Are we all put apart and I find I do find it quite hard some. Unless something kind of give glare in the obviously their method that you think ohh or something. They said you think? Ohh well it could also be that I do find it quite hard because tical still I think I found it easy (Lucy)

They say it's all your questioning everything and that kind of thing. Well, actually it makes it sound really hard. And it makes you you end up reading everything trying to find out what's going on. We're actually, you're just looking for things that they could

have done better next time or why that might be a result. So it's it's easier that it's made out to be. (Lucy)

It did take quite, quite a long time. I did not understand it, I.Because I thought at first critical was being like judgmental towards the research and taking out the negative bids. But actually having that session saying, you know, critically evaluating isn't saying, you know, this research is horrible because of this and this. It's stating the good part, stating the bad parts but evidencing, you know, putting some evidence behind it. (Molly)

It took a while for that to click. I definitely that was what I struggled with most. I didn't understand what they meant by it, and I've heard sort of several confusions about, you know, I thought I was being perfectly critical, but actually they were looking for a bit more evidence behind it and sort of a bit more development. (Molly)

		Oh my word. I think more. I was from Chris go, spent like putting more references in and stuff like that. Like is it like backing myself more with things I was saying rather than actually. Looking at what the research was doing and. Etcetera. (Penny)
Horsing around	Horses on courses	<p>The only thing is I expected more riding, but I'm not. You know, when I came, we still had that in the first year and I wasn't disappointed. You know, it's, you know, we're doing a degree it it was never gonna happen but we still had the options of riding especially through the... Was it riding club anyway so you know it. Yeah, it it. It met my expectations, to be honest. (Edward)</p> <p>I went to a careers event that my school held and there was The SEC was there and they had the coin course, so I spoke to them and kind of realized that was actually an</p>

option and. And so yeah, I decided to go for that and because I figured that you know if I'm working doing something that I really like, then you know that's quite a good, good place to start anyway. (Catherine)

I got to do volunteer with them. When Julian Higgins came to do the courses inside out lecture and then she asked some of us to go with her to your horse life. So that was like. By the way, he's like opportunity. I was very, very glad though it done that that was really cool. The kind of thing that I wouldn't really have opportunity to at home like up here. There's just nothing of that scale really. And it was awesome. (Catherine)

Yes, I think in a way, it's me trying not to miss out on the practical side of things, because if I do end up going on the desk. sometimes feel like I'm not going to be fit enough or not going to be competent enough. When I go back out in the field and that

in a way scares me because that is literally why I started a career with horses or plan on starting a career working with horses. (Danny)

The fact that there's a choice to do something that's more practical based, I think that's been really helpful for me and it's been my, they've all been my most memorable parts. (Edward)

I definitely wanted that equine degree. I simply started looking [...] was the first option. I didn't look at any other equine sort of related universities just because it's stood out in immediately for me and the yeah, that's alright and the the course I chose specifically. It really spoke to me in the sense that it had that very practical aspect, which I was after. I didn't want to go to university to do something equine and leave, sort of that practical aspect behind just because I couldn't take my horse with me. (Molly)

That was actually a harder decision than it probably should have been. I think it's because I knew that if I came out of education, I would struggle to get back into it.  
(Olivia)

Uh, it's not that I'm not academic, but I don't necessarily enjoy it. A lot of the time, I thought a more practical course would suit me better, and because I'm...I love riding, I thought, well, I would learn as a coach, I could apply to my writing and to myself. So yeah. I probably also mean sitting in a classroom all day, isn't? So I'd much prefer to go and do something practical and sits. I go do a course that means I'm like law for example, where you're learning, learning, sitting in rooms and nonstop more brain power than physical power. (Olivia)

	<p>That is literally what I was like most looking forward to like the chance of like the riding and the training, like the arenas and going down to the therapy center and stuff like that. Like I wanted to do it all. (Penny)</p>
Horses - passion and lifeline?	<p>I've got a loan pony at the moment. So I've been there adding her and more, which has been more than enough for me. And then, yeah, the vaulting societies are great. They just sent out an email every week. But what places they have and you just look at it, which is great. So I've been going pretty much every week apart from the odd one, which I've had to miss. (Catherine)</p>
	<p>Initially I had absolutely no intention of ever returning to work with horses, but after working in different jobs for a while, I was just realised that there wasn't anything else I would rather do. (Catherine)</p>

I had a friend who had horses.Umm. And at first I was actually pursuing a career in football and never really thought of like I've always liked horses. But I never saw it as a as a career until I had a career ending injury. And I just I I didn't know where to go, what to do. And my friends started taking me to his horses. Every, every every chance he I had. Really. And yeah, after he sat me on his on one of his ponies. That was it, really. I decided there and then that I wanted to try and chase something with horses. So I went to college with him, to Sparsholt college. And yeah, that was the start of my... Yeah, my journey. (Edward)

It was really changing because I I was honestly in a terrible position. I didn't know what I was gonna do. I never really thought about doing anything else and I knew I was didn't wanna sit in an office full day that would. There was no chance that that was happening. So and I was in very academic, especially in school. So my choices were always limited

when it came to that so. Yeah, I'm. Him taking me to those horses really did change a lot for me.(Edward)

Why did I decide to come to [,,]and just change everything? Basically, I always loved horses since I was little. But I come from a traditional family in the sense that working with horses is not a serious job. Uh, like a serious job is being a doctor a lawyer? I don't know stuff like that. So horses. Wow, it's really nice, but just get a proper job and you can ride horses on the weekends. Basically this was my answer, and of course I was. I was 15 at the time and I didn't quite have the strength to say ohh no this is what I want to do and I'm not gonna do anything else so. (Jodie)

I was almost hitting my 30s and that got me thinking about my life and everything. And that's when I found out about [...] Online. And I was just in love. I thought, no, I have to. I have to change my life. I have to change things otherwise.I mean, I was just dying.

My body was alive, but my soul was dying everyday. And so it got to a point where I had to make this change otherwise. Well. I don't know it it it wouldn't go well and that's how I ended up coming to [...] (Jodie)

So I found out about heart very specifically when I was about 13. I always wanted to do something related to horses, but there wasn't anything sort of university like here, like an equine degree. But I am very academic person, so I did want to have that qualification specifically and I just did not see myself doing anything else.(Molly)

go to uni like do it like what are you passionate about horses at the time I was very close with my horses physiotherapist and I was very interested in everything that she did and how it worked and how things contributed to each other. So that's how I kind of made the decision go for the experience and do what I'm passionate about and just see where it takes me kind of. (Penny)

		<p>Academically, I didn't find it as challenging as I thought it would be. I expected university to be very academically challenging. However, I don't think that reflects on the quality. I think it's the fact that I'm very passionate about what I'm doing. Just I like every single subject, so I put my everything into it and I don't struggle looking for information into it or studying it just because I actually do enjoy it. (Molly)</p>
	Influence for better horse welfare	<p>It sort of kicked in that I didn't know enough to actually continue because there was still.. I was quite sciencey from the beginning but then looking at the traditional way of starting young horses, I wanted to sort of connect the signs to it. And that inspired me to get back into university and then and that's how it all started,</p> <p>(Danny)</p>

And in the coming future, I do want to work out in the field. I mean, I would love a career and research, but I actually like working out with horses out in the field. You get to put your thinking hat on and challenge the previous practices. So I mean it's quite prevalent in, in, in, in, in in the equine industry anyways. But you have to have that thinking hat on to challenge the the previous traditional methods or. All the different ways that have been followed so far, which I think is brilliant because that's the only way to progress on to, to, to actually bettering the welfare of the horses, because that's what we're here for. (Danny)

So I really like research. I would love to be paid to do research. Scientific research, think it's really fun, and there's a tons of things to do. Not enough people, not enough time to do everything, so there's tons of things to work out and to fix in the horse world. (Jodie)

want to sort of take that heartbreak legacy forward because I know not everyone can come to [...] whether it's economically not everyone knows about [...]not everyone thinks it's it's something serious. So actually taking that legacy forward into everything I do, if I go into something practical, I wanna do it sort of with that evidence I have behind me. I want to improve the equine industry, equine welfare with everything I have.(Molly)

think the knowledge I've gained can really make the industry a better place and that's I think why we're studying at [...] to use that research in in our favor. And the horses favor. So yeah, taking all that knowledge and actually seeing change happen in less than, I don't know, 10 years. I've seen there's so many other ways I can sort of help in the industry and everything. I think the biggest hurdle I have had though was at one point I felt like I was losing my passion for the practical side of things. I was very all

		about writing, all about competing. That was everything for me, and that's what I always wanted to do.(Molly)
You win some, you lose some		I think in my second year I think anything. That where I thought for our this is too much or I can't do this anymore. It's always been in my second year. I'm I had choir fee feedback around just like ohh no, I can't do this anymore. I did actually in my second year almost think of not coming back for this year. I'm not all my contemplated it for a long time actually, but. Yeah. It's just one more year and it was it was bad to just get it through. But yeah, no, there were. I think I had about two assignments where I just thought I can't do this anymore. Is this too much? I know I can beat myself up for no reason. So you know, I'll say. I've also kept that in mind, but it has it is pushing me to do even better this year, so you know. (Edward)

The first first session and blood cells and I was completely lost. So it was just going back and reading up. And then once I did that, it was kind of all fitted in and it was fine (Lucy)

I hadn't written kind of in the style that you needed for uniforms. I didn't even have to do that in college. And so that was kind of a bit like getting your head around. (Lucy)

And anatomy was hard and kind of getting my head round every some bits are easy because it's stuff like, you know, like the breathing inside of it and spits like that. But other bits that would really silently bits have to go and read away. And that's probably the module I've had to work like the hardest on to it the whole time at Uni, just to catch up. (Lucy)

And now I feel very confident writing sort of academically and everything. So I, I do think it's been sort of easier, even though the the academic level has gone up. (Molly)

I think fear of academic failure, but just because in high school it went hand in hand, I guess I wasn't good socially, but I did Uhm, a reason why people became my friend was because of my academic skills. (Molly)

So I think first year, you know I've always known that was sort of my weakness being shy. But I do I do well when I'm confident in what I'm speaking about. So even though I've never liked public speaking because I was very shy when it was something I knew I could do well, I was confident in it anyways.(Molly)

When I understand things, I find them quite easy so Once I got the hang of it, even if I didn't enjoy it, it was quite Easy and it was actually getting to be a bit boring. Because I'm getting good results. Writing things at the last minute, so I sort of felt like I could get away with it, which then made it feel quite easy because I could justify doing it at the last minute.(Olivia)

so academically, first year I found it really good. I just the biggest struggle was probably the anatomy because there was so much to take in. But no, academically I enjoyed first year and I found it alright. It was more the shift into second year and then being online which I found really hard. (Penny)

<p>The other C word (Covid- 19)</p>	<p>"Unprecedented changes" "</p>	<p>Couldn't do our equitation exam because we couldn't go and write the horses so...That was a big one. Yeah. And we had a a group work project that was for organizing an event and module. And so obviously we couldn't actually run the event. So everything was verified, hypothetical. (Catherine)</p> <p>I found it very difficult. It was. Yeah, it was horrible. Umm, I think I'm I'm someone who? Uh, of course. You know you had the "It online" and you still had some kind of practical expect to hear, but what helped me, I think especially in my first year was the fact that for some lectures, if I didn't understand it, the practical side like I was able to then transfer that to the theory and understand it better. But with, obviously with the caveat that was that was not very possible. (Edward)</p>
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So the end of the first year, I forgot that I had lectures because on nine was just not a concept really. But when we got to the second year, I thought I played, adapted quite quickly and I was able to set a better routine for myself and it just to me it went very smoothly. I was very happy with How everything started and the support that we were having from the lecturers and the UNI online was really good. I was very happy with that (Olivia)

ike online courses, which I did find really quite difficult to to focus on and and if I have to catch up on a lecture cause I've missed it, it is really useful having recordings and everything. But even then a different it quite difficult to focus on them, especially like if I'm at home there's lots of other things that...Could distracting that kind of thing.  
(Catherine)

It was not what I expected at all. It knows if I thought ohh yes. OK, you know, wake up five minutes before Lexus do the lectures and you're done. Uh, it wasn't that easy. That did not make it easier at all. (Edward)

And it's pretty much been a year since I went since I've been home, so I was supposed to have gone this the last Christmas, but of course everyone was talking about a possible lockdown again, and I thought, well, I'm not gonna take the risk again and be stuck there. Well. In terms of studying, I I didn't do I I didn't do anything while I was home and that was my main concern. That's why I I wanted to be here (Jodie)

Because back at home, well, I don't have my own space anymore. My father married. He moved out. So I would pretty much be spending a few days with my mom. Then a few days with my sister, then a few days with my dad and my sister has kids, so I didn't have my own quiet study space and there was just lots of family drama going on. So

basically I just didn't study at all or even watched lectures. And then I ended up having seven resits to do on my second year. Which I passed everything. (Jodie)

I didn't enjoy the online just because I didn't. I find it very difficult to focus. You know, I did it and it was it ended up being fine, but I did not enjoy it the same way as I did, you know, face to face just because. You get distracted by everything around you, staring at a screen was very hard for me. (Molly)

I just rather be in class. You get your breaks, you walk around. This being sat on the couch looking at the screen. That was very, very hard for me. And just yeah, see, the interactions are much better in the classroom. I feel more confident talking to the lectures, talking to the groups around you online. (Molly)

I don't really know why, but for a live lecture 2 hour lecture I'd be able to write everything down, but because some reason with the lectures that are recorded and we have to catch up on a 2 hour lecture. Takes me at least four hours to catch up because I'm pausing trying to write stuff trying to figure out what they've written on the board that we can't see, so it takes up so much more time time that I don't have. (Olivia)

First year I felt good. And. it was the change into second year but it didn't help that it all went online.

I think it was that shift because I think because I felt so settled in this study environment. At first, and I felt like first year went really well, then having to go online, I don't work as well online as I do in person. I just don't take it in as well and I think not having my study friends around me to like talk about it and...Like refresh. That's what I found most difficult and I think that's why I've struggled so much and and I had home distractions

as well, like things that were going on at home. It just wasn't the same study environment as being at UNI.

(Penny)

Again, because the lecturers were also trying to get a hang of a delivering lectures online, it was very difficult and the worst bit according to me was when when no one interacted online, when you know, put blacked out screens and just the lecturer, you know. Phone and no response, no answers, and that that was just heartbreaking initially. Like is, it felt like, you know, the lecturers will actually giving out so much and, you know, trying my best to interact and they never got anything back in there. And then, you know, I say that myself, even I was one of those blacked out screens. There were moments when I would, you know, turn the screen on. But then I would be the only one with the screen on. (Danny)

		I couldn't do that if I were a lecturer, I couldn't do that. I don't know how the lecturer is cope, but I honestly couldn't have (Danny)
	Put my head down and do it	<p>t's always the one and I think because it it's got a bit more intense. I I think what I felt was that second year especially because I mean of course the pandemic did not help.</p> <p>But second year especially I felt a bit left out. (Danny)</p> <p>You know I include myself, but it was very hard to put the camera on. I don't know why, but it was and that made it much more difficult to participate. So it was just much slower.</p> <p>So yeah, but I I do understand it was the only way to do it and I think it was a good way to cope, but I definitely prefer much more being face to face.</p> <p>(Molly)</p>

I think everything was you know on top because you know we got extra resources as well along with the lectures and you know having the the liberty of having those. Lectures recorded as well and being able to access them back again. (Danny)

I found it really hard learning online because I just get distracted and I yeah, you'd end up going to make a cup of tea or playing your phone or doing something where it's coming back in. It was really nice. It was nice seeing everyone and yeah much prefer it in. (Lucy)

I'd say definitely the pandemic has affected in the sense that when I came back friends that I didn't really, I mean, I did get along with them, but I didn't particularly need to see

them every day after coming back to university after the pandemic, I definitely felt the need to be with them, much more inviting them over, constantly talking to them. (Molly)

I don't want to say that COVID helps. But it helped me because I got to finish my year early. Really because I was going to. I had scheduled my horse to go home at the beginning of April. And I was going to just ..Fight out the last few months on my own. Just Put my head down and get through it. But the fact that I was able to go home with him early actually helped me quite a lot. (Olivia)

And like if you had other things to do work fitted in around that, and if you knew you had, if you were busy at this time, it had to be done by this time. And then during the pandemic, it was more because you had all that time it was having more of like a time structure throughout the day. So it was like this time this time I'll be doing this and then that time I can have a break and then so on and then after the pandemic, it was kind of

a mixture of them both. I feel like I'd learned more of And time management and discipline. But then also real life takes over again, and there are other things that are gonna crop up. So then it's like those that time schedule that was done in the pandemic just kind of is still done, but it just gets moved around a little bit and it's a bit more flexible. (Penny)

Because back at home, well, I don't have my own space anymore. My father married. He moved out. So I would pretty much be spending a few days with my mom. Then a few days with my sister, then a few days with my dad and my sister has kids, so I didn't have my own quiet study space and there was just lots of family drama going on. So basically I just didn't study at all or even watched lectures. And then I ended up having seven resits To do on my second year. Which I passed everything. (Jodie)

	<p>Blessing in disguise?</p> <p>I think everything was you know on top because you know we got extra resources as well along with the lectures and you know having the the liberty of having those lectures recorded as well and being able to access them back again. (Danny)</p> <p>In terms of the COVID helped in that aspect with dealing better with the theory and learning how to. For me to connect it better, but also I think the the practicals we did do were enough for me to look especially like cement those foundations anyway. And then I use them to connect with whatever else I was doing. So yeah.</p> <p>(Edward)</p>
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then COVID hit around February? And that, for me, was a blessing because everyone went home except for myself. Uh, so I had the flat to myself and I spent a few months until May. (Jodie)

And the the lessons weren't being recorded that second half of the first year and I when I came and looked round, everyone was like, ohh yeah, it's it could be quite flexible and that's the one thing that probably from looking around has then been harder because it just it hasn't, it's not it's not flexible really kind of thing and initially if you missed the session you missed the session the notes on like the PowerPoint. I didn't know that lectures wouldn't be recorded as well. Actually at the time. And my sister went to Uni and all sorts and obviously all of theirs annotated. So she was like when she came and looked around with me actually, she was like, well that's fine because if you missed it. I don't know...(Lucy)

So actually the whole COVID and recorded lessons has really helped me and I can see why people don't like it because it maybe it means people don't turn up. (Lucy)

I've done my third year this year online as well and but I actually preferred the second year that was online with interaction to my first year that was on site. I feel, I think it was just. For people who are shy, it gave us more. UM, courage to speak up and ask questions and. It was. I feel like I'm more relaxed schedule so having horses and other animals. It was easier to go and sort them out and do my own stuff and then I will watch the recordings or be able to watch the lectures on the go. And I feel like I was able to concentrate longer online than I was actually sitting in in a room. (Olivia)

I don't speak up a lot when I'm in person in the class and too many people and too shy, but I was able to write in the chat or the questions I had and opinions and. I feel like people are actually. More supportive of opinions and questions than they would be in

the classroom because in the class is like when is this going to end sort of thing, but online it's just a bit more cooler and if other people are bored and people speak up that are OK, I'll listen to that. (Olivia)

I don't want to say that COVID helps. But it helped me because I got to finish my year early. Really because I was going to. I had scheduled my horse to go home at the beginning of April. And I was going to just ..Fight out the last few months on my own. Just Put my head down and get through it. But the fact that I was able to go home with him early actually helped me quite a lot. (Olivia)

Themes	Quotes
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<p>"feedback accessibility"</p>	<p>actually, we've received them in class work as well. And in terms of some of them where where specifically based for helping with assignments or exams and things and you know we've received them in (Edward)</p> <p>first year, most of the feedback that I got, it was very clear and I quite liked the way the whole thing went and we even got the opportunity to discuss our feedback with the tutors which which was great because you got an explanation of of the of the feedback rather than just, you know being given a paragraph and you having to figure out the rest yourself. (Danny)</p> <p>We really struggle to understand the assignment brief and this is in second year. We really struggled to understand the assignment brief and I don't think anyone scored more than 70 in that particular assignment. I think that was the only challenging fit and we never really got around getting a good explanation on on the feedback as well for that particular assignment. (Danny)</p>
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I think all the future is so far have been supportive in a way I would say not just explaining the whole content but also later on rerunning. A few revisions, or maybe touching those Weak points that we had.

(Danny)

Even even discussions with [tutor] about the future and whatnot during our personal due to the sessions with, I mean the group due to the sessions have been very helpful as well in a way because we always got feedback on, I mean not generic feedback on what the previous cohort did. And that sort of helps us then act on And not make the same mistakes, even though we do end up making some of the mistakes and I think that's the only way to learn (Danny)

If I've had any issues like didn't like, [lecturer] is the easiest person to message because I can do it on teams and they probably hate it cause I've bugged them all the time. But I on teams or email or anything where is like someone like [another lecturer] - if you got a question about exam you you can't messages directly or ask to go to a padlet and then you have to wait like a week for a response and just if it lectures

depending on who it is you know how much, how kind of it's not that they're not gonna help you but it's just not gonna be as easy to get it. (Lucy)

, I think I'll lectures have done a really good job in illustrating sort of what we've done wrong and stating I know we've done loads of sessions about typical mistakes people do and those are really helpful because I think we can all learn from everyone's mistakes cuz. We all make them, even if it is accidentally. So yeah, just sort of illustrating an exemplifying what you did wrong and how you can fix it, because sometimes I know I did something wrong, I just don't know how to fix it. So having that session to explain it, that's very helpful. (Catherine)

I was really, really upset with one of my Marks and I didn't understand it at all because I felt so confident and I'd spoke to so many other people and I felt like I knew so much more and so much more in depth than other people. And I had got such a lower mark and I did pull it up and and I don't know, I kind of felt like I just got dismissed a bit and it was more like, I feel like the way I got spoken to was more like, it's more hassle than it's worth. (Penny)

They were good, but it was kind of intimidating with everybody else, in a sense, what do you kind of feel? A little bit like ohh. If I'm not to speed, as other people are kind of feel a little bit like, well, I'm not like that or I'm not there and it can be kind of intimidated. And you always feel a little bit embarrassed to be, like, honest that you are struggling and you are unsure because there's other people around you that are like, Oh yeah, I get this and that's easy kind of thing. So it quite intimidating. (Penny)

I want to do better	<p>They've always had the uses, whether it's small or huge to my work and it's always made a difference. So for me, as long as it's made a difference for the better, I don't think you know, neither is better or worse. (Edward)</p> <p>ASC Would you call them workshops. Yeah. And they've given a lot of feedback as well and that's been very helpful as well. In terms of this year. (Edward)</p> <p>It's it's so crushing sometimes UM cause sometimes the ones like that are the ones you put like everything into and you almost, you know, not hope but like expect a good mark. And then when that comes back sometimes and it's not nice. It's yeah it's so crushing but You know, that's it. It's OK. And there's always another time to make something else better so. Yeah, I think sometimes those are the ones that push you too much to do better, though the ones that. Really are like, wow, that that's helpful. So yeah, just. It's part of the process I guess. (Edward)</p>
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think it's good to make mistakes sometimes because. It makes learning better because. As humans were always scared of making mistakes, but when we don't make any, we don't get confidence that ohh nothing's gonna touch us. And then... (*mimics bomb drop*) (Danny)

what I don't, I don't enjoy much is I do expect like a lot from myself I you know I have a very high criteria and I understand it university expectations are different. But I like to have a very clear reason for what I have done wrong to then avoid that. I like to focus on that, see what I can improve on, see of what I agree. So I don't enjoy getting a grade that I don't find particularly. good per se, and not having that reasoning behind it telling me oh, you did wrong this and I, you know, I've taken out so and so many points here, but then actually, you know, getting that grade I didn't. Umm, I didn't expect and then talking to the lecture and them saying ohh you did a good job for you know, not not in my eyes

(Molly)

It's sort of hard to get negative feedback because it's all very trying to be very encouraging and positive. So actually getting negative feedback or telling someone that's not how you do it or you know you need to review that is quite rare, I'd say (Olivia)

"I found that very useful, but also. I loads of lectures very they focus on the good points 1st and then say you know you could improve this and this. But I really liked this and this. So that to me is important in the sense I it doesn't make me feel like a complete failure. I can be very hard on myself. So seeing that those positives first. It's sort of relaxes me and then I'm prepared for the sort of. Worse bit and then I can take that as a learning opportunity and not be absolutely devastated." (Molly)

I actually preferred negative feedback because Then at least I know where to go and what to improve, because if it's all positive, I'm like, OK, that's good. What isn't good. But if it's negative, it's OK. Well, this needs to be changed. That needs to be changed and I need to progress in that area so I can do that. And

if they didn't mention that, it means it was good. And I think that was. The worst feeling feedback, but probably the best feedback. (Olivia)

not very constructive, but just a bit like offensive. My friends have in the sense when you work hard and then something. Something comes back with feedback and you're just like... Feels insulting to what you've put in, but obviously if that's the work and that's what it says, then I do get it (Penny)

My job to do better (honesty, accountability)	<p>I know I can do better and I think that's what made me. And if I'm being honest answer, I take that one. I'm because I know I can ask more from myself. (Edward)</p>
	<p>But I did everything I could and I didn't think I could do more. It's always nice to know that, OK, this is what you can work on and this is what can make you better. I'm so now in on in the majority of things, it's never made me feel like I haven't done my best, but there are times where you're just like, oh, I can't do anymore. (Edward)</p>
	<p>feedback is usually useful, not just one person, but several. That's I trust. Not I not always follow their advice, but it's still It's still nice to hear some feedback. Uh, But yeah, I'm I'm more comfortable now (Jodie)</p>
	<p>So now so now I have set myself some boundaries and I've said to myself that right, I'm going to have proper time management in place. And I am already starting to work on my feedback, so all the feedback</p>

that I've received so far from all of my assessments, I've tried to make a little matrix, which would summarizes all of the feedback pointing out my weaker points and also pointing out my stronger points.

So I have a better idea of what I really need to work on and at the moment it's definitely time management. (Danny)

Not telling me what to do, just nudging me in through the right direction. And I think that I found quite helpful in a way (Danny)

I think I can still improve about. It's more. It's more about being concise. Now what I do is when I'm critical, I think I put a bit too much evidence into it. I struggle sort of, you know, you know this is this because of this and this moving on to the next point, I spent a bit too much on one point, but with the concept in general, I think I'm quite happy. And yeah, I feel confident a bit more, yeah. (Molly)

But that's more my fault than anyone else's fault. Just time management... (Olivia)

So I think Tiptoeing around people isn'tA good idea, especially in an industry where you're going to get so many harsh comments, so many judgy people, if you're prepared encouragingly at this stage, then I think you will have a better outcome after unique. If you can take criticism and edit affects you or not affect you positively or just let it Go. I feel like that would be Better for everyone (Olivia)

Tutors lecturers like yourself just being like you've got this like you just get all of it. You can do it. And. Because I think I I work well off that. Like I work well off people just being very black and white. Like I don't really work well off the whole like ohh pat on the back like you're doing really well and you're not like I'd rather someone just be like, come on, get on with it. (Penny)

You you do a piece of work and then you get like all the feedback and then because then you look at a piece of working like whoever got that and then you look at it. And I'm like, I know why I've got that But

it's too late. If you're not. I mean, it's kind of like you learn as you go, but Your grades have to take the sacrifice, which is sad. Which is? That's what. That's what's of it. Sad, it's...Yeah... Because then it's like, oh, we should have done that better. (Penny)

I was getting a lot of feedback sitting like OHH utilize the ASC classes. And then it was like ohh let's say ASC course nobody does ASC classes. What is that and then got to a point where I was like no, I'm not happy with my grades and and then went through all my feedback from all my Assignments and the trend was like ASC classes, so then that's why I started and then that's why. I kept up with them so much into third gear cause I saw any friends in grades. Once I Ben and then once I've been. I was like ohh. This is what critical writing is ohh like. I never knew this kind of thing. And and then that's why I kept going. (Penny)

I get it	research project and Vicki's been, I'm really good with the feedback on that and to put pretty clear comments and stuff and and lets me know what things I need to be and working on which is really been very helpful. (Catherine)
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## Involvement

Theme	Subtheme	Quotes
Personal Growth		<p>I think the support has been really helpful and I think that that really came through to me in my second year when I realised, wow, I need some help here and there's no way I can do this on my own anymore. And asking for help through my tutor and realising how much easier that made it to be able to do things. I think that was the start of realising why, OK. support is not a bad thing. You don't have to feel bad for asking for help.(Edward)</p> <p>Has that diagnosis influence how you see yourself in an academic context and how you tackle your work, like has it, you know, explain some of the frustration that maybe you've experienced beforehand, or is it just carrying on as normal? Yeah, kind of was already fairly convinced that that was, you know what I had. So it was kind of just just a bit of a relief to kind of have that confirmed. And because, you know, there's always that part of you that thinks, oh, maybe you're just, like, reading into it too much,</p>

overreacting, that kind of thing. And so yeah, it was definitely a bit of a relief to know that that was actually the case. (Catherine)

I've decided that I want to play and be quite driven to get there. So I think because I've kind of really wanted to succeed in this industry ... I really wanted to have all of the skills and the knowledge that would push me above your average person so that was quite a big motivator for me. (Catherine)

You think your confidence is developed after you always come in as a quite active person in that way? I think personally it has developed a heap load.because I don't just.think about, I mean I if someone would were to suggest me something, a new idea or whatever way certain thing is done. I would listen to them, but at the same time I would then go out and check the facts. and then get back to them and maybe perhaps discuss and if they are open minded, I would then challenge. If you know these facts can improve or these things can improve, and then discuss potential new ideas for the same thing. And I think that. thinking that has only come through going through university, especially critical thinking. I

mean it, it was there before university as well, but not as confident. I mean, I was always questioning different methods and whatnot, which always led me to classical dressage and which is why I went to Portugal in Spain, because they are more focused on classical dressage methods because they don't have pressure. I mean, they do pressure the horses sometimes, but they don't pressure them in a way that, you know, you have to achieve something and there's no goals set as such. (Danny)

And we spoke about how we can try and work on gaining that motivation back. by ourselves, rather than expecting it from someone else or somewhere else. That, I think, was really good in a way. And also we we. spoke about personal things as well as to how socially we were affected because it was. We were still under the Blues from, from the pandemic. Umm, so we still discuss those things, but then we, you know, ended on a positive note and I think that was a really good workshop. (Danny)

And so I'm gonna have to be a bit more flexible in my approach, and that's been a bit sad for me. I'm still in the process of accepting that I haven't accepted it fully. But I'm in the process of doing that. So I will. Yes, I want to do a masters, but because I only have one chance For a masters, because my savings are gone. (Jodie)

I asked [...] if I could use one of yours, and basically that's what I've been using. The laptop I use. It's a hard free laptop, but of course I'm. I'm gonna finish my degree, so I have to give it back. So I'm gonna have to buy Those two things, the car and the laptop. (Jodie)

helped me transition into sort of those societies and everything I did first joined the equestrian Club and the Polo Club. Just for fun. I'm just to participate, but then it gave me sort of that sense of, you know, I

want to do things better. I think I have good ideas. I want to put myself forward and having those ideas  
(Molly)

Self discipline... You really like... Right now I can't rely on other people like I just need to pull myself together and do it. And I'm surprised that it was quite a nice little life lesson in a way, because it showed me that- Although it was really hard -I could do it out of the typical learning environment. And it wasn't the same. Though I did show myself that I can do it. I should. You just have to get on with it. I just. That's what it was. Not just, like, get on with it. (Penny)

I feel like I'd learned more about time management and discipline. But then also real life takes over again, and there are other things that are gonna crop up. So then it's like those that time schedule that was done in the pandemic just kind of is still done, but it just gets moved around a little bit and it's a bit more flexible.(Penny

		<p>One of my friends was on the course with me. And so that sort of...Because not every of us liked it, we sort of stuck together and we got each other through it. But she actually ended up dropping out for the same reasons as me. But for I didn't drop out.Olivia)</p>
We are family	Culture club	<p>And being the only boy on the course, that was another big social dilemma as well. But I made it through and in the 2nd year I made really good friends and I'm still in touch with them. One of the lecturers, actually one of my tutors, actually wrote the letter for UCAS for me. (Danny)</p> <p>And you know, when everyone actually has tea, they don't really have tea, they have their dinner. So that was the little little things like that. And so it was it, it was much easier. I would definitely say after college coming back into the university was much easier and it was even easier because coming back</p>

to the same place. You know, having some known faces around and, you know, connections around it, it made it even easier. (Danny)

Yeah, I mean that that was clear thankfully because we had a lot of multicultural students in the beginning. We made a little group with ourselves and yeah, that that actually helped because then we all had our own little social niche social group and and and it just made it easier settling in socially. (Danny)

That was tough. That was really tough. First, yeah, I came from a job mentality. So there were a lot of behaviours that I had difficulty tolerating and but I I mean in the classroom it's OK. But the worst part was that I decided to go to a student accommodation. And I ended up i [...] living with six other girls in the same flat And It didn't go well Basically. They made my life hell. (Jodie)

	<p>I feel like Northerners are more friendly than some Southerners and I always got that feeling. I don't know why. Like sometimes you can just say like ohh have a good day at a checkout and they'll look at like you've got 3 heads. I don't just like that's normal but stuff like that. Yeah, but yeah, I just think it's just nice. Normal, like, that's like, anywhere. Not everyone's gonna get on with everyone and that's. Yeah, just it's not a bad vibe.(Penny)</p>
Happy Places	<p>I think I feel that way about most of the campus. I just, you know, felt like picking one and the one that makes me feel the most like that. But I've never really gone to many of the places on campus and felt like Any other way? Basically I think the whole campus is quiet.Makes you feel quite comfortable. There's nothing. About it, where you feel uncomfortable because there's no area that you're particularly excluded from. (Edward)</p> <p>I Tend to go to slightly quieter places rather than the study lounge, unless I'm just Yeah. If I'm going to be doing work, I'll go somewhere quiet. If I'm just like I forgot like 1/2 an hour between lectures kind of</p>

thing. I'll just go sit in the study lounge and scroll through Instagram profit just to kind of unwind for a little bit But can't do any studying in there as far too loud. (Catherine)

I now have a loan pony and ride the pony a couple of times a week, so that's like it's usually a Tuesday morning and once the weekend kind of thing. So it's like a routine so I know. (Catherine)

I don't think so. I think because I don't drive in Gloucester rains that you know it's easier to get around, go out, do things..And stuff like that. Whereas if I was on campus or probably end up not really leaving campus very often. And...So yeah, I'm quite enjoying being in the city for a while anyway. (Catherine)

I mean, it was lovely because I was. I mean, there were a few other students and we were all on our own. And I was in the main house, so it was a lovely place to be nice and quiet. The campus is, it sounds really horrible doesn't it, but the campus is beautiful when it's quiet, isn't it? (Danny)

Do you know what, when, like I look at, uh, I think it's groups of people because I look at like our neonatal class, I see. But because it was a small class, it was really nice. And like I really, I like the module anyway. But like it was just so lovely cause everyone was nice. Everyone got on. (Lucy)

And every time I'm just walking through campus, I just remember my first day, I was so lost. I didn't know where to go. And actually knowing exactly where I'm going now, it's, you know, it sounds silly, but it did make me like I belong because I know exactly where everything is. Is and UM, yeah. I just feel more relaxed. It does feel like home. I spent a lot of time there, so yeah. (Molly)

I think [university] in that sense was my safe space because there I, you know, I relied very, very strongly on the help of staff and other students. So that was my safe space (Molly)

	<p>It didn't go badly, as in I didn't have any accidents and he didn't have a problem, but just mentally for him it wasn't good, which then made it worse for me. Because it wasn't going well and I'll work and stuff, it just wasn't...We weren't coping with that environment. (Olivia)</p> <p>Uh, because it was quite time and if I went with a friend, we would...We'd have fun without disturbing anyone, but it would still be fun, but there wouldn't be any distraction, so we would have to work. Uhm. So did I vary the student lounge and the equine canteen were fun to be in. And But then again, the equine canteen was, it was funny if you got there and got a table (Olivia)</p>
Final thoughts	<p>And that is literally what led me to university. find answers for those questions, or at least have the ability to try and find those answers for those questions. And I think so far, university has definitely done that for me. (Danny)</p>

I did show myself that I can do it. I should. You just have to get on with it. I just. That's what it was. Not just, like, get on with it. (Penny)

I've never regretted it. I've enjoyed every single one. Bit of it there. There have been harder times, but there's never been a day where I was like ooh I've. I really regret this. I wish I'd done something else. Not at all. Just because there has been progression in every single area of my life (Molly)

Really happy. I don't get me wrong. I'm really pleased. In May when I feel like I'm. I'm done but...No. Loved it. (Lucy)

In a sense, there were some things I could have done better, but of course I could. I couldn't do them in the state I was at the time, so I could do better from now. Now onwards because I know Uh, how to do

		better, but I couldn't do it at the time because I didn't know how to do better. So do I have regrets? Well, I regret that I didn't know better. (Jodie)
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