

Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries  
in Higher Education

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL, HUMAN AND  
MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

SOUTHAMPTON EDUCATION SCHOOL

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education

QUESTIONING THE GRADE: UNDERSTANDING  
THE COMPLEXITY OF STUDENT GRADE  
ENQUIRIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Stephanie Frances Allen



## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduates and academics towards grading within one UK university. It explores requests for grade uplift by investigating actual, perceived and anticipated student demands in an increasingly market-driven higher education sector.

The phenomenon of 'grade grubbing', whereby students demand an uplift of their grades, has been identified as a symbol of marketisation and the student-as-customer. There has been little formal research on this topic, however, particularly in a UK context although there is more discussion about grade grubbing in the US.

A mixed methods approach involving the use of questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and concept mapping was used, together with an extensive literature review of marketisation as a key concept, in order to gather empirical evidence about attitudes to grade appeals. The perspectives of undergraduate students and academic staff were sought and compared.

The key finding is that forms of student behaviour labelled as grade grubbing have been over-simplified and misunderstood. Whilst the student voice indicates a consumerist attitude towards the student experience, grade grubbing itself, when defined as seeking an uplift in the initial grade awarded, is rare. Students are much more likely to accept the grades they receive at face value and not question them (grade neutral) or seek more feedback to understand the grade awarded (grade enquiry). They also, less commonly, challenge academic judgment (grade challenge) or demand a higher grade (grade grubbing).

Whilst there are no short cuts to minimising grade enquiries, a review of the landscape affords a more fine-grained understanding of this phenomenon which should be known, less pejoratively, as grade enquiry. The study concludes with future research recommendations to inform university policy.

Keywords – Higher Education, Marketisation of Higher Education, Grade Enquiry, Grade Challenge, Grade Questioning, Grade Grubbing, Grade Bribery, Grade Continuum, Students as Consumers.

Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries  
in Higher Education

**Declaration of Authorship**

I, STEPHANIE ALLEN, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Questioning the grade: Understanding the complexity of student grade enquiries in  
higher education

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date:

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank, unreservedly, the following people for their help and support:

- My supervisors, Dr Michael Tomlinson, Professor Bruce Macfarlane and Professor Jürgen Enders, for their on-going support and guidance, noteworthy advice and infinite patience.
- My colleagues, particularly JB for inadvertently prompting this research, but also to many other colleagues, including EC, MM, SE, PP, BM, LMW and Jonathan, for the extra proofing. Thanks also to my university for funding this doctorate.
- My husband for his understanding and support, and to my children, L and L, who got used to late dinners, no dinners, questionable dinners.
- To all the participants themselves, without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

## Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	i
Declaration of Authorship .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Definitions and Abbreviations .....	ix
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Overview .....	1
1.2 Research Aim of the Study .....	7
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b> .....	9
2.1 Overview .....	9
2.2 HE Expansion in the UK .....	9
2.3 Marketisation and Massification of HE .....	16
2.4 Human Capital Theory (HCT) .....	27
2.5 Academic Role and Identity .....	31
2.6. Students as Consumers .....	38
2.7 Grade Enquiries and Grade Grubbing .....	51
2.8. Summary of the literature .....	58
2.9 Conclusion .....	61
<b>Chapter 3: Research Strategy: Methodology and Methods</b> .....	62
3.1. Overview .....	62
3.2 Research Aim .....	63
3.2.1 Research Questions .....	63
3.3 Research Philosophy .....	63
3.4 The Research Design .....	66
3.5 Sample Strategy .....	67
3.6 Sampling Error .....	70
3.7 Research Methods .....	70
3.8 Data Collection and Instruments .....	72
3.8.1 Overview .....	72
3.8.2 Pilot Study .....	72
3.8.3 Method One - Online Questionnaires .....	73
3.8.3.1 Questionnaires .....	73
3.8.3.2 Evaluation of Questionnaires .....	74
3.8.4 Method Two - Focus groups .....	76
3.8.4.1 Sample Size .....	76

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

3.8.4.2 Focus Groups in Action.....	77
3.8.4.3 Evaluation of Focus Groups .....	79
3.8.5 Method three – Semi-structured Interviews .....	80
3.8.5.1 Sample Size .....	80
3.8.5.2 Interviews in Action .....	81
3.8.5.3 Evaluation of Semi-structured Interviews.....	83
3.8.6 Concept Mapping.....	83
3.8.6.1 Sample Size .....	84
3.8.6.2 Concept Mapping in Action .....	84
3.8.6.3 Evaluation of Concept Mapping.....	85
3.9 Research Integrity .....	86
3.9.1 Construct Validity .....	87
3.9.2 Confirmability/Objectivity .....	88
3.9.3 Internal Validity/Credibility .....	88
3.9.4 External Validity/Transferability.....	88
3.9.5 Reliability/Dependability.....	89
3.10 Ethical Information.....	89
3.10.1 Data Protection.....	91
3.11 Exclusions .....	92
3.12 Limitations .....	92
3.13 Delimitations.....	93
<b>Chapter 4: Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>95</b>
4.1 Overview.....	95
4.2 NVivo 10 and SurveyMonkey Software Analytical Process .....	96
4.3 Data Analysis Verification.....	96
<b>Chapter 5: Findings.....</b>	<b>98</b>
5.1 Student Perspectives.....	98
5.1.1 Overview .....	98
5.1.2 Q1 - Theme One: Motivations for Going to University .....	101
5.1.3 Q1 - Theme Two: Student Expectations.....	103
5.1.4 Q1 -Theme Three: Assessments and Pressure Points .....	106
5.1.5 Q1 -Theme Four: Students: Learners or Consumers.....	108
5.1.6 Q2 -Theme five: Grade Expectations and Experiences .....	112
5.2 Findings from Academics’ Perspectives.....	122
5.2.1 Overview.....	122
5.2.2 Q3 - Theme One: Perceptions of Students’ Grade Views. ....	124
5.2.3 Q3 - Theme Two: Challenges to Student Learning and Teaching.....	126

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

5.2.4 Q3 - Theme Three: Grade Enquiries and Challenges.....	128
5.2.5 Q3 - Theme Four: Grade Leveraging.....	136
5.2.6 Q3 -Theme Five: Customer Service .....	139
5.3 Data Sets Compared and Contrasted.....	148
5.3.1 Overview .....	148
5.3.2 Points of Agreement.....	148
5.3.3 Points of Disagreement.....	149
<b>Chapter 6: Discussion</b> .....	152
6.1 Overview.....	152
6.2 Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) Model.....	152
6.3 Discussion of Student Findings.....	155
6.3.1 Overview .....	155
6.3.2 Q1 - Theme One: Motivations for Going to University .....	155
6.3.3 Q1 - Theme Two: Student Expectations.....	157
6.3.4 Q1 - Theme Three: Assessments and Pressure Points.....	158
6.3.5 Q1 - Theme Four: Students as Learners or Consumers.....	159
6.3.6 Q2 Theme five: Grade Expectations and Experiences of Grading .....	162
6.4 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Academics.....	168
6.4.1 Overview .....	168
6.4.2 Q3 - Theme One: Perceptions of Students' Views on Grades.....	168
6.4.3 Q3 - Theme Two: Challenges to Student Learning and Teaching.....	168
6.4.4 Q3 - Theme Three: Grade Enquiries and Challenges.....	169
6.4.5 Q 3 - Theme Four: Grade Leveraging.....	172
6.4.6 Q3 - Theme Five: Customer Service .....	174
6.5 Summary of Academic and Student Findings.....	176
6.6 Policy Debate (Question 4).....	180
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusions</b> .....	186
7.1 Overview .....	186
7.2 Research Aim and Questions Revisited .....	186
7.3 Contributions to the Extant Literature .....	189
7.4 Grade Enquiries in the Future: Pointers and Actions (Q4).....	190
7.5 Implications for Policy (Q4).....	191
7.6 Further Areas of Scholarship .....	193
7.7 Concluding Reflections .....	196
<b>Appendices</b> .....	199
Appendix A .....	200
Appendix B .....	201

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Appendix C .....	202
Appendix D .....	203
Appendix E .....	204
Appendix F .....	212
Appendix G .....	213
Appendix H .....	215
Appendix I .....	217
Appendix J .....	219
Appendix K .....	220
<b>List of References .....</b>	<b>225</b>

## Table of Figures

Figure 1: Research questions and correlating data collection tools (Author's own)	71
Figure 2: Grade Enquiry Continuum Model	153
Figure 3: Trends in Complaints by Subject (OIA 2013, p.20)	202
Figure 4: Trends in Complaints by Subject (OIA 2014, p.16)	202
Figure 5: Persistent complaint themes (OIA 2013, p.22)	203
Figure 6: Persistent complaint themes (OIA 2014, p.17)	203
Figure 7: Student concept map - sample	212
Figure 8: Student data collection trail via SurveyMonkey	214
Figure 9: Academic data collection trail via SurveyMonkey	214
Figure 10: Grade Enquiry Continuum Model	219

## List of Tables

Table 1: Students' perceptions of undergraduate qualities expected by employers	104
Table 2: Student discussion issues with academics during assessment meetings	106
Table 3: What students view first on return of assessment	114
Table 4: Factors that influence students to question marks	115
Table 5: Number of students who approached university academic staff to question a result and why	115
Table 6: Student reasons for not challenging a university grade	119
Table 7: Students' attitudes at assessment meeting	128
Table 8: Student concerns raised at assessment meeting	129
Table 9: Academics' perceptions of student intentions for assessment meetings	131
Table 10: Student techniques used to leverage a better grade	137
Table 11: Institutional pressures that influence grading	143
Table 12: Academics' perceptions of student identity	145
Table 13: NVIVO Phase 3 Developing a thematic framework	213

## Definitions and Abbreviations

Grade Grubbing:

in which students seek high grades for minimum effort, is often cited as a symptom of the consumer orientation of contemporary college students (Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p.104).

BBC - British Broadcasting Company

BIS - Business, Innovation and Skills

CMA - Competitions and Markets Authority

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

DfES - Department for Education

HCT - Human Capital Theory

HE - Higher Education

HEI - Higher Education Institution

HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI - Higher Education Institute

HEPI-HEA - Higher Education Policy Institute- Higher Education Academy

HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency

ILO – Intended Learning Outcome

MOOC – Massive Open Online Course

NSS - National Student Survey

OAI - Office of the Independent Adjudicator

OFT - Office of Fair Training

ONS - Office of National Statistics

PRP – Performance Related Pay

PTHP – Part-Time Hourly Paid

UCU - University and College union

UK - United Kingdom

UKCES – UK Commission for Employment and Skills

WP - Widening Participation

QAA - Quality Assurance Agency

UCAS - Undergraduate Courses At University And College



## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

Higher Education (HE) in the UK is undergoing a period of intense transformation as it responds to the tensions and pressures provoked by global reforms in the sector, driven by economic and social change, political drivers and technological advances. Obholzer and Roberts (1994) and Pyper and McGuinness (2013) highlight the focus on business indicators such as cost-effectiveness, efficiency and value for money in the HE sector, while Vaira (2004) points out that institutions are exposed to globalisation processes that have brought about a profound revolution in the culture and experience of Higher Education.

*“In sum, Higher Education is witnessing a process of deep institutional change that involves the deinstitutionalisation of its rooted policy and values framework and the paralled institutionalisation of new ones”.*  
(Vaira 2004, p.485)

In this evolving world, change cannot be stopped but can be learnt from for advantageous use. Huczynski and Buchanan (1991) claim that if organisations do not develop, it is unlikely that they will survive. This applies to HE, with Johnson (2001) noting that change is endless when the struggle for control of organisational structure, processes, cultures and individual behaviours are ongoing. Parker (2001) calls this as the industrial revolution of Higher Education, whereby the market-driven reform movement has been intensified by what Deem and Brehony (2005) call the new managerialism in HE, a managerialism characterised by the management of ideology and values, whereby manager-academics attempt to balance traditional university values with management approaches, with variable success. Whilst HE has been adapting and evolving to the new economic and political imperatives, Jarvis (2000) predicted that HE has and is not adapting to market needs as quickly as it should. These market changes consist both of students entering a more transaction relationship and of business requiring more specific skills from graduates entering a more transactional relationship with institutions, and raise the possibility that if

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

institutions fail to meet the needs of their core users, universities may be overtaken by substitute services, providing education through agile alternatives such as Wagner's (2008) "invisible colleges", operating via digital platforms known as MOOCs or training and education service providers in alternative geographical locations.

Furthermore, the language of universities is undergoing change. The term "student" is being replaced by "consumer" (Tumelty citing Wignall 2006), or "customer", and student academic life is being replaced by the phrase "student experience" (Read *et al.* 2003; HEPI-HEA 2014). Two elements of this student experience are assessments and grades. For academics, marking and grading student work in order to achieve an academic award is a complex but unavoidable activity that is expected by all parties. Assessment grading has some value that is perceptually determined by both the giver and the receiver, even though they now experience pressures in meeting changing demands. The grade value can be understood by its perceived utility and may be the cause of an enquiry as to the grade achieved. Furthermore, it may lead to the action of 'grade grubbing', an informal term applied to a grade enquirer seeking a grade uplift, whether deserved or not.

This chapter offers an overview of the thesis, grounding it firmly within the context of the increased marketisation of UK higher education (HE), explains the rationale for the thesis and its location within the wider academic landscape, and finishes with a short overview of the subsequent chapters.

The aim of this study is to explore the expectations, experiences and perceptions of student and academic behaviours and attitudes towards grades with a focus on undergraduate students entering HE between the 2012-2014 academic years. A particular area of interest is grade enquiries and, specifically, grade grubbing within one UK HE institution, hereby referred to as Coastal University, for the purposes of this study, in the market environment post-2012 when tuition fees were increased as a result of the Browne Review (2010).

Coastal University is a post-1992 institution, considered to be a teaching university, with ambitions for a strong Research Excellence Framework arm.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The university has approximately 14,000 students, of which approximately 1,500 are international students from around 120 countries, who are situated within six academic schools. The institution has a strong vocational and professional orientation with a focus on graduate employability and is globally recognised for its animation and media students. It is the only institution with a Centre for Excellence in Media Practice within the UK. In addition, the institution offers courses aligned to the professions such as business, finance, cyber security, law, tourism, accounting and nursing, alongside technical courses such as computing and engineering.

The university has a strong reputation for accepting students from the widening participation sector under the Fair Access agenda, with many students coming from a combination of First Generation family backgrounds.

I am used to the changes that are occurring in higher education and acknowledge the professional disquiet regarding marketisation amongst colleagues. Furthermore, there is recognition of the types of learners entering university, that for some academics raise concern.

I have been working at Coastal University since 2002. My role is that of a blended professional as described by Whitchurch (2010), i.e. that of someone whose work spans professional and academic domains with dedicated appointments. I am involved in teaching, research and third leg activities, such as public service engagement. I entered HE after giving a guest lecture whilst working for a large advertising agency in Covent Garden. Whilst I had industry experience I did not have experience in academic practice, yet I was invited to join the education sector, which suited, as I wanted to leave industry. I took on roles that spanned academic quality and consistency as well as international student recruitment and support.

Currently, I am a lecturer in marketing communications, introductory marketing research, and research methods to first year undergraduates. Furthermore, I teach practical skills to international Masters' students on communications programmes and law courses. Additionally, I am an elected .5 FTE union representative, as

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

well as a doctoral student. Over the years, my roles have varied according to institutional changes and personal needs. In the long term, my role as a lecturer, and any subsequent career trajectories, are seemingly contingent on successfully completing a doctoral degree. On achieving that qualification, it is considered at Coastal University that lecturers should fully engage with the institutional strategic plan that requires staff to be fused across a three-legged structure of education, professional practice and research. Undertaking the doctorate has therefore been the catalyst for moving away from research theory in the classroom to research practice in the real world, seemingly positioning me as an academic authority (Coaldrake and Stedman 1999) as well as a stakeholder in, and source for, institutional policy change.

In addition, my role as a union representative has helped me to understand and challenge poor change-management practices. This role, and subsequent experiences arising from it, has been a guiding force for understanding and challenging policies and practices that could better serve the academic and student community. In the longer term, I aim to make a positive contribution to the institutional strategic goals of student and staff satisfaction and achieve a personal goal of completing a purposeful EdD that will have practical benefits for staff and students alike. My position of authority to make the claims in this research is based on several years of teaching and marking. In that time I have seen the change arising from government papers such as Dearing, Brown and TEF, and have seen academics feeling the strain posed by the brave new world of marketisation. On occasion, I have been exposed to grade enquiries and those of colleagues. Such enquiries have spanned the spectrum from the benign to approaches that have been harmful. I wanted to make sense of student grade enquiries. It is hoped that the changes arising from this research will inform student, staff and institutional understandings of enquiries around grades and thus lead to adaptation of the communication about the academic policies, regulations and processes to address those enquiries. My past experiences with marking and feedback influences the research in terms of situational knowledge, outcomes and impacts on stakeholders. In terms of research acceptance, ongoing communication with academics, staff development, the executive and management affords opportunities for the research to be discussed and actioned.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The research was prompted by a chance conversation within Coastal University. A colleague raised the issue of ‘*further attempts by students to ‘grade grub’’* (personal communication 2011). The issue was not new to staff as the problem had been raised previously with management over several years, and consistently within one academic programme, Public Relations. Several conversations with academics indicated that the practice of grade grubbing, in addition to grade enquiries, was perceived within HE as being likely to arise as a result of the 2012 tuition fee increases. In short, the bleak job market (Collins 2010), social mobility and widening participation issues (Sutton Trust Report 2015), greater ‘consumerist’ demand for first-class degrees (Molesworth *et al.* 2009), culture (Hodges 2013), peer pressure or parental influence (Gude 2014; Schiffrin *et al.* 2014), institutional influence (Yang 2014), self-esteem (Crocker *et al.* 2003), student competency or (in) ability to comprehend rubric and weightings, or fear of reprisal from fee-payers, were all deemed to be factors underpinning grade grubbing behaviours.

I chose to investigate and review grade grubbing, also known as grade bullying as its novelty in terms of title, potential recurrence, behavioural motivation and impact on stakeholders, was a source of significant interest. Both terms refer to students seeking to appeal against and thus inflate the marks they have been given. This can be with or without extra work, without justified reasoning, and using unofficial channels, that of student to lecturer, as opposed to any formal grade appeal procedures.

The topic was propelled into the limelight in the UK after reports of a student attempting to bribe his professor at another UK university hit the national news (BBC 2013a). The interest was further supported by anecdotes from colleagues in London-based, private, HE institutions and personal experiences abroad.

I set out to discover whether the above was an accurate picture at Coastal University, to assess whether the underlying assumption that students have transitioned from learners to consumers holds true and how deep they carry that notion through their attitudes towards their grades.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

There is a concern that there is an emerging student consumer and that the academic community feel that they are under pressure to acquiesce to their demands. I wanted the academic community to understand the wider picture: that the area is grey, that consumerism is not as widespread or inevitable, but that there is a sequence of professional dialogues to be addressed. Coming from a marketing background at times makes me see the student as customer in marketing terms, and thus I tend to see emerging issues. My job here is not to smash down the marketisation of Higher Education but I do recognise the potential implications, particularly around what could be seen as student care aka customer service. I saw perceived 'grade grubbing' as a problem for the institution and wanted to investigate it from the viewpoint of someone who is student-facing on a daily basis, dealing with individuals who are often confused when they raise or receive grade enquiries, rather than approach the topic from a senior management perspective.

The outcome would be useful to inform the institution on the way forward in terms of policy creation or adjustment but also to identify training and process needs.

The distinctive perspective relating to grade enquiries and grade grubbing is provided through investigation of two discrete sets of educational stakeholders, students and academics, focusing on their opinions and experiences. Such personal and subjective accounts lay the foundations for contributing to the literature, in both respected and pejorative print and online, adding depth to the limited writings on the subject of grading in UK HE post the Browne Review (2010). No institutional data exists for historical grade-grubbing or increased consumerist attitudes beyond data collected for NSS or Student Union surveys. Whilst there is concern about the term of grade grubbing, that of being disapproving, contemptuous or pejorative, the issue and related language, is open to subtle variations of meaning and understanding. Since the term grade grubbing is considered too judgemental, the research starts with the terminology of grade enquiries. This study is the first of its kind and will inform those in the HE sector of the need to understand the reported phenomena in context and how perceptions about students and their grade enquiries need to be reconfigured in what is, essentially, a service environment.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The context of the research is post the Browne Review (2010). This review advocated extensive changes to the university funding system to ensure the sustainability of HE. It promoted greater student choice, indicating that a 'consumerist' approach to purchasing a university course was a student entitlement. The expectation that a university degree will lead to employment, at whatever tuition fee cost, was still ingrained in many sectors of society. Whilst the literature is empirically led by US studies, and despite HE systems being globally different, they are informative but not necessarily applicable to UK HE.

The research will clarify whether attitudes towards studying and grades, whether the underlying assumptions that contemporary students have transitioned from learners to consumers holds true, and whether hyperbolic, shocking stories are misleading the public towards "a perceived threat to social order" (Krinsky 2013, p.1) in academia. It explores the viewpoints of academics who set and assess undergraduate (UG) work and whether consumerism is manifest in the perceptions, approaches and attitudes of students, as perceived by the academics. That exploration runs parallel to UG student views and their understanding of, and response to, their assessment grades in Coastal University. Finally, I propose a new model defining different levels of grade enquiries that can be used to identify student intentions at grade assessment meetings.

### **1.2 Research Aim of the Study**

Stories of students attempting to change their grades has been of interest to the media and, informally, within the academic community. With macro and micro forces affecting the student's potential academic and future careers, grades appear to be a central theme for individual progression. The study explores the reasons for student grade enquiries, and the perceived increase in the proportion of students likely to attempt to uplift their grades, by investigating actual, perceived and anticipated change in student behaviour via grade enquiries in the new post-2012 UK HE tuition fee paradigm.

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

## Research Aim

The aim is to understand the reported phenomena of grade enquiries as perceived by students and academics at Coastal University in the post Browne Review higher tuition fee landscape.

## Research Questions

1. What are the background pressures on students that may result in grade enquiries?
2. What are students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries?
3. What are academics' experiences of and attitudes towards students who make grade enquiries?
4. What are the policy implications in relation to student grade enquiring and feedback in terms of institutions' responses to this?

This research is innovative, relevant and timely in the new higher tuition fees' landscape, and is important to several HE stakeholders (see Appendix A).

Chapter 2 presents the Literature.

Chapter 3 outlines the Research Strategy and Methodology.

Chapter 4 reports the Data Analysis Procedures.

Chapter 5 provides the Findings and Analysis.

Chapter 6 provides a Discussion of the findings and presents the

Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) Model.

Chapter 7 presents the Conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Overview**

In order to understand HE as an industry purporting to be a needed agent between school and the workplace (Oblinger and Verville 1998; DfES 2003), a framing of government policies is useful, although detailed rationales for government intervention in the provision and/or financing of education are detailed elsewhere (see Woodley and Brennan 2000).

### **2.2 HE Expansion in the UK**

Briefly, expansion policies have evolved over the last thirty years through three socio-economic lenses. Brennan (2004) described Trow's (1973) three forms of higher education social hierarchies. Firstly, the Elite: that of education belonging to a small sector of society, moulding the character and mind of a ruling class in preparation for an elite role - approximately 5% of 18-21 year olds in the 1960s (Trow 2010); later, followed by Massification, whereby a diffusion of proficiencies and grounding for a wider range of economically and technically privileged roles saw approximately 15-20% of 18-21 year olds participating (Trow 2010); subsequently moving to a Universal system, that of 'University for all' requiring "the adaptation of the 'whole population' to rapid social and technological change" (Trow 2010, p.56; QAA 2015, p.9).

The shape of the current system emerged after World War II with a rising demand from society for more HE being the catalyst for its expansion. This functioned as a stimulus for changes in format and funding to address the move towards universal education (Woodley and Brennan 2000), each with funding implications. Several reports on the HE sector emanating from successive governments and university bodies, have called for greater levels of accountability in terms of economic value, choice, efficiency, service quality, diversity and sustainability (Browne 2010; Dearing 1997; Jarrett report 1985; 2015a) . Each of these elements, have in turn, influenced the move towards newer funding models.

The transition in governmental attitude towards accelerating a single payer model can be seen longitudinally through multiple government reports including

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

cornerstone documents such as Robbins (1963); Dearing (1997); Browne (2010) and the TEF Consultation Paper (2015).

Firstly, the Robbins Report (1963) formally known as the Committee of Higher Education's policy framework identified that approximately 6% of young people were involved in higher education, a number that was considered small.

Briefly, this paper set out

*“to review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs” (p.1).*

The Cabinet (1963) took note that *“The Report emphasises strongly the scale of expansion under way elsewhere, and insists on the need for comparable expansion here in order to keep pace” (p.2)* recognising that HE in the UK was potentially stagnating and that keeping up or leading the way in HE was critical to address the demographic “bulge”.

Of particular note, Robbins (1963, p.38).; recommended:

*“Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.”*

and that all these university institutions ...

*“should be self-governing and financed by grants distributed through an independent Committee; with limited control by Government and accountability to Parliament”.*

It was not clear if there should be some or full accountability to Parliament in terms of quality and academic standards, but it is clear that HE was to expand and that HE should be financed by grants not loans.

Furthermore, it promoted that HE be available for academically able students from wider groups who had been previous unable to access the system. As Tomlinson (2013, p.178) points out, “HE had gradually been reframed as a public good”.

The HE sector widened to accommodate the expansion of student numbers along with the addition of polytechnics and new universities across the UK. The social demand for HE was supported and strengthened by the increasing professional

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

classes that HE itself generated.

A further change occurred in the 1990s with the merging of polytechnics with universities. This allowed the institutions previously known as polytechnics degree-awarding powers under their new 'university' status. Despite the expansion of the system, by the mid-1990s, concerns arose that lower socio-economic groups were still under-represented. This concern aligned with the need to strengthen connections with industry, as HE was considered an agent between school and the workplace, as well as the issue of supporting the continued expansion of HE financially (Tomlinson 2013).

During the late 1990s, the Dearing Report, also known as NCHIE, (1997) focused on how universities should develop strategically and economically, as well as addressing issues of funding and student access. It considered that financial contributions should come from the student body.

The Dearing Report (1997) produced 93 recommendations including continued expansion, changes of funding and maintenance of academic standards, a qualifications framework and an interdisciplinary arts and humanities research council to be supported (HEFCE 2011).

Of particular note is that the report revisited the question of funding sources for HE, stating:

*“The costs of higher education should be shared among those who benefit from it..... those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries, through improved employment prospects and pay”* (Dearing Report 1997, item 90)

and

*“competition, a workforce equipped with skills and attributes; socially just opportunities for individuals to benefit from HE and economic and cultural benefits which higher education can offer the whole nation”* (Dearing Report 1997, item 91).

In addition, it established a body to monitor HE qualifications through the introduction of the QAA body (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Through the late 1990s, the Government still believed that investment in human capital was vital for the UK, but a new funding paradigm was necessary, moving away from government grants towards employer funding and low interest government loans with student contributions to their fees of up to 25 per cent.

The discourse changed again with the Browne Review that heralded a new tuition fee model that would alleviate the strain on public funding and allow students to make choices about higher education.

The Government, in pursuing its objective of “making Britain a more open and meritocratic society in which talent is not wasted” (BIS 2011), implemented challenging policies arising from The Browne Review (2010), which laid out new funding strategies impacting both students and universities alike, bringing English HE more in line with the US and Australian education system (Palfreyman and Tapper 2016).

The progression of governmental dialogue has proposed, over time, expansion, prospects and pay, and financial input from the beneficiary, i.e. the student. The dialogue between government, the media and student bodies supporting or confronting the debates relating to UKHE funding has been evident over recent generations from the 1960's onwards, starting with the Robbins Report (1963).

In response to the Dearing Report (1997), tuition fees in the UK were first introduced in September 1998 set at £1000 a year (Galindo-Rueda *et al.* 2004) . In 2004, legislation was passed to enable variable tuition fees and became the Higher Education Act (2004) In 2006/7, the tuition fee increased to £3000 per annum, reaching £3225 a year in 2009/10. The Browne Review (2010) led the way for UG fees to rise to £9000 per annum and this was implemented in 2012-13, through student loans, rather than grants through HEFCE, thus reversing the recommendations from The Robbins Report, 50 years earlier.

In parallel, the discourse of students becoming a consumer or customer has also been a very gradual process. This terminology was being used as early as the 1960s and 70s in both the US (Shulman 1976; Stark 1975) and the UK, and it has grown gradually since; due to several reasons although fees appear to have been

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

a key dimension. Fees, or money, are the lever for the consumerist movement. With the student positioned as a buyer in post-compulsory education, Stark (1975, p.2) notes that “they have the opportunity to be fussy about the service they receive”. In line with Browne (2010) and others, the consumerist movement was considered a worthwhile gamble, and promoted several key selling points for indenture: students paying a fee would be free to investigate all institutional offerings and choose, as consumers, which product to buy, a notion that students had previously been free to do anyway. This persuasive discourse seemingly moved students away from the idea of being principally in an academic relationship of learning to a relationship which is “structured by purpose and content” (Biesta 2009 in Molesworth *et al.* 2009, p.172) and to students as consumers (Crage and Fairchild 2007; Delucchi and Korgen 2002; Molesworth *et al.* 2009 and 2010) who wish to succeed, “where succeed is defined in terms of graduation” (Potts 2005, p.62 in Molesworth *et al.* 2009, p.172) and secure a good job after graduating (Sherriff 2015). Starting in the 2012-2013 academic year, domestic students studying in England faced fees of up to £9000 per annum (QAA 2012, p.15) compared to the previous rates of approximately £2500 per annum.

The Labour Government’s signal to further expand HE was followed by ambitious target setting to increase participation up to 50% of the age group and increased participation of under-represented groups (see HM Treasury, 2011; Chowdry *et al.* 2013). Willetts (2013) reiterated the call to increase student numbers by 26% from 368,000 to 460,000 places over the next 20 years to address rising birth rates, underpinning the concept of universal education, and, supposedly, improve teaching quality. Piatt (2013) argued that “quality higher education should be prioritised over quantity, especially in times of limited funding” furthering the warning about compromising academic standards. The later coalition government also proposed, in the light of reduced public funding, to cap student numbers whilst at the same time pressurising elite institutions to address social inclusivity by recruiting students from lower socio-demographic backgrounds (DfE 2011).

McGettigan (2013), a long-time worker in the public sector, supports the concept of letting new providers drive reform across the sector. New providers, not bound by the way processes and systems have run in a particular way, are unpredictable

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

and in turn drive institutions to raise their game and, allegedly, their quality. The education sector, in being pushed to raise the game, has had to engage with the push-pull factors of the consumer business model.

The emergence of the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice Consultation Green Paper (2015) set out to further marketise the HE industry. After consultation, the government published its HE white paper (2016) called *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (2016). This is a recent key policy lever to open up the HE education market. The aim of the TEF is to rebalance “the relationship between teaching and research” in universities (Forstenzer 2016a). It aims to make the student ‘the heart’ of the system – not uncontroversially - by changing HE providers’ behaviour towards the student market place through assessing teaching quality using qualitative evidence and core metrics. In return, institutions with ‘excellent’ teaching scores will have the right to increase tuition fees aligned to inflation.

The TEF model suggested that institutions could raise tuition fees, based on institutional excellence determined by a relevant and differentiated credential, and by encouraging more students to attend those better-rated universities, but fees could also reduce if institutions do not meet performance criteria. Its key measurement criteria are: Student Satisfaction indicators from the National Student Survey (teaching quality and learning environment); and Retention/Continuation and Employment/Destination data (Forstenzer 2016a, p.4).

One element of the proposed multi-dimensional plan, namely the Transparency Challenge, identified that employers are unable to distinguish between graduates in terms of effort and engagement with their studies (BIS 2015a) and this was to be addressed. Furthermore issues of grade inflation, institutional or otherwise, were of concern. In addition, BIS (2015a) wanted consistency in the award of degree classifications by HE providers, as well as meaningful differentiation between undergraduates in order to for employers to understand the skills and attributes of potential employees.

The TEF White Paper allows for the introduction of “high quality” universities in

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

order to give students more choice; to push institutions to improve teaching quality; to ensure employable graduates are produced; and to ensure value for money.

Like other frameworks, however, it has a number of drawbacks. For example, teaching quality cannot be measured as a continuous standard, as it is given and received by individuals in different ways; retention and continuation are challenging, particularly when a student is registered but fails to turn up to class or submit work and employment/destination is subject to a variety of influences outside the control of academics.

The TEF ignores the benefits of higher education as a societal gift. but places students as having pre-ordained individualistic interests such as gaining skills and employment. In other words, it sets up the student as a consumer/investor (Forstenzer 2016b) seeking not only a student experience but also as an individual demanding a return on their investment based on the marketing message that degree holders earn higher incomes than non-degree holders. The TEF, however, focuses more on the benefits of HE in terms of repaying debt and tax revenue should students gain employment at a higher tax band rather than teaching and learning during university and the wider benefits to society as a whole.

This paper is the latest in the march towards greater HE expansion, in terms of opening up the industry to new providers, and marketisation and is further evidence of the government positioning students as customers.

Alongside the framing of HE institutional social hierarchies, multiple policies, and changes linking to wider issues such as adaptations in society and demographics, economic impacts and globalisation have continually evolved. Within a universal system, elitist education still exists (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge). Despite socially-disadvantaged applicants to HE facing inequality when attempting to access elite universities, the opportunity to attend has increased through social inclusion and widening participation agendas (BIS 2015a; DFES 2003; National Audit Office 2002, p.40) and the Blair policy of creating 'the age of achievement' (Blair cited Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, p.2).

Notwithstanding the seemingly good intentions of the various government

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

approaches to addressing social inequality, their attempts have not managed to achieve a common understanding about what a successful education should look like, although HEA (2016) suggests that employability, knowledge, behaviours, skills and attitudes throughout a student's working life are ingredients.

Furthermore, these different understandings for future success are based on divergent educational heritages and their associated underpinning visions and values.

Higher education has therefore seen a rapid transformation from being a place for learning to a space for personal investment, as designed by a variety of commercially influenced individuals: an economist, (Robbins), a business leader (Dearing), the ex-chief executive of an oil company (Browne) and the department for economic growth (BIS).

Forstenzer (2016a) highlights that the TEF serves imaginary employers, not students, and ignores the societal benefits that an undergraduate education can afford in favour of promoting skills development demanded by employers for a range of high-salary employment opportunities that may not necessarily exist.

An overview of the expansion of UK HE has set the path for a review of HE marketisation, with competition set to increase amongst HEI's, supposedly raising quality and service as a differentiating factor.

### **2.3 Marketisation and Massification of HE**

UK Higher Education has seen rapid evolution since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Historically, there were at least three types of British university: the Oxbridge model - tutorial, residential, character-forming; the Scottish/London model - professorial, meritocratic, metropolitan, and the Civic model, later known as 'redbrick' - aspirational, local, practical (Collini 2003). In addition, the landscape saw polytechnics convert into what are known as new universities. Over time, institutions changed, as directed by government, to meet societal, cultural and political needs through variously marketised education policies.

This section looks at how marketisation and massification has affected institutions, exploring the processes that consider HE as an arena for both standardisation and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

differentiation. This is discussed noting expectations of the notional delivery of quality in the face of institutionally driven cuts, to a diverse student body, with many seeking a student-centred focus as they aim to differentiate themselves as they move towards the workforce marketplace. Under the spotlight, is the issue of quality and how it is measured, as seen by the student. This in turn throws light on the issue of feedback, and students' understandings of the university offering, quality and criteria for success as they progress through their educational journey. The section indicates that a student is exposed to a variety of experiences in their academic career, some of which could be considered confounding.

The corporate world has always been driven by market solutions to consumer demand. Elements that support demand are the number of individuals who can afford consumer choices, based on personal values, aspirations, attitudes and behaviours, and the route through which they purchase these choices (Flatters 2016). In terms of education, McGettigan (2013, p.55) highlights that "market solutions are a key plank of ideology that runs across all parties", and for them, education, a space that was highly regulated and underpinned by tenured specialist employees, needed to bow to the:

*"discipline of the marketplace, the power of the consumer and the engine of competition"* (McGettigan 2013, p.55).

Questions abound about the purpose and processes of universities. Referring to Ritzer's (1993) model of the McDonaldisation of Society, Margolis (2004) alludes that HE has moved away from a place of learning and is now akin to the fast food industry having been "McDonaldised", pointing out that HE has attempted to replicate "efficiency, calculability, predictability and control" (p.232). In replicating the fast food industry, students are told they can consume their course, a standardised product, provided in a prescriptive way that does not allow for deviation from a specific outline. Margolis (2004, p.368) says that the student is given some specific talks and "consumption is offered as a spectacle and recreation" further commenting that the fast food business model is more of a "free floating signifier" than an analytical concept. As a result there is a sense of loss in the academic community, of the passing of control over the scholarships, process and quality of the educational product. Margolis (2004) lays the blame

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

squarely at the feet of this McDonaldisation process. McArthur (2011) considers HE to be understood in narrow terms by users as an institution for scholarly activity in contrast to the corporate vision of a marketised business, and argues that its purpose needs redefinition within wider society. Rickett (2015) considers whether universities are now training centres for employable skills or entrepreneurial businesses continuously seeking alternative profit streams instead of the original institutions that trained thinking.

Whichever role an institution assumes, the discourse surrounding student experience and academic standards is amplified (Read *et al.* 2003; HEPI-HEA 2014) and deserves attention.

Martin (2012) argues that the high cost of education, and quality issues in HE, do not correlate, yet institutions play the marketing perception game that “if it costs more, it *must* be higher quality” (p.viii). Furthermore, the definition of quality is not widely agreed upon. Martin (2012) indicates the chronic cost/quality consequences of projects that suggest “quality”, such as new buildings (p. 101) and inadequate websites (Kinross 2010), yet cause financial shortages, and could in turn, affect ‘quality’ elsewhere, such as service.

Studies indicate that the increasing institutional practice of cost savings is relentless. This has been manifest through staff restructuring and redundancies (Shepherd and Bowcott 2010; Batty 2012), early retirement (Collini 2010), the use of PhD adjuncts (Bedford 2009; Hoff 2014), zero-hours contract staff enduring excessive terms and conditions (BBC 2013b; Husbands and Davies 2000; UCU 2013). The use of transient or short-term staff could undermine the commitment to students and programmes compared to those permanently contracted (Connelly and Gallagher 2004; Kraimer *et al.* 2005, Liden *et al.* 2003; Matthews 2013; Strangleman 2007) and as such, affect the student offering and student experience.

To address issues around numbers participating in HE, universities have employed expansion strategies to break into new markets. Studies suggest universities initiating non-traditional degrees and delivery methods have lowered academic entry standards (Ashworth 1979) to accommodate varying entry routes.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Such strategies have been expanded or employed to meet new markets as a result of marketisation activities. Crudely, in order to fill seats in highly competitive institutions, recent enrolments in HE have, but not always, included students from socially, educationally and financially disadvantaged sectors of society on courses that they are least suited to (Brown and Carasso 2013) and struggle with their studies. Research shows that students facing completion barriers drop out, usually in their first year (Bourner *et al.* 1991; Johnes and McNabb 2004; Havergal 2016) whilst others do not complete at all (Smith and Naylor 2001). In the case of 'non-standard' students (Benn 1995), such as mature, disabled, widening-participation, distant and part-time candidates entering the HE arena, a wider range of teaching and learning styles, support, flexibility (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Munro 2011; Read *et al.* 2003) and customer service skills (Yanovitch 2014) are required to help prevent student withdrawal. There has been a rise of in usage of commercial language, openly referring to students as customers, and service provision levels in staff contracts. The use of "customer service" terminology in the HE sector, indicates an alignment to marketing-speak in terms of transforming and promoting the student to a consumer (Anyangwe 2011; Baker 2008; Browne 2010; Cheney *et al.* 1997; Delucchi and Korgen 2002; O'Brien 2014; Obermiller *et al.* 2005).

However institutions and government refer to students, students themselves have a view on who they are in terms of characteristics and personal identity. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that society is in the midst of a fundamental change, with individualisation the contemporary concern. Whilst rights are considered by civilisations as entitlements, and the desire to be an economic contributor is the norm, the helix of conspicuous and unique personality, the promotion of individualistic behaviours have become paramount.

Prozak (2006) points out that individuals want to be judged on things they can regulate such as personality and appearance, not intelligence or ability; wanting reality to work in their favour, to pay others for things they need, but not to be critiqued as corrupt or selfish whilst pursuing 'freedom' or to be reminded of deficiencies. MacDonald (2014) emphasises that whilst individuality and self-promotion are perceived to be critical, people yearn to be part of a supportive

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

community, to belong, particularly when struggling. Such thinking may be present in university life too. Whilst perceptions of “dumbing down” are noted, Margolis (2004) reports that faculty are forced to pander to students who expect a pleasant experience and good grades (p.369) as well as serve the interests of the institution (Sadler 2011), who may override grades given so as to address the student expectation. To label students in cynical terms, however, does a disservice to the student body.

Rees *et al.* (1997) suggest that students are viewed by employers in a universalistic way and they approach the labour market in stereotypical ways, whilst Abell (1991) theorises that individuals have rationally invested in education so as to become employment ready by making decisions based on cost, and Tomlinson (2008, p.50) suggests that choice “is a utilitarian and self-optimising pursuit towards own labour market potential”.

Students seek to differentiate themselves in several ways that will influence the perception of their abilities and stock of human capital values, such as through extracurricular activities deemed important for employment development (Bills 2003; QAA 2012, p.38) internships, awards, entry to elite educational institutions, language courses or achieving excellent marks recorded through certificates. More recently, study abroad has been added to this list (Minsky 2015). Degree credentials are widely acknowledged as markers that offer access to labour market opportunities (DfES 2003) but it is not obvious which credentials are the most effective in obtaining employment, even though academics are aware that students are cognisant of the vocational aspect of learning for the future. Pearson *et al.* (1999) observe that the graduate route to employment is, therefore, not always direct or clear, and the task of matching skills required and skills possessed is subjective (Holmes 2001). Little research exists to assess the skills and attributes, or the purposes, of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education (Chan *et al.* 2014), particularly when there are limits to credentials and returns on investment (ROI) (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004); and knowing when the ceiling for both has been reached is unclear.

Nevertheless, mass participation in higher education adds a problematic dimension for students in respect to determining quality. First time undergraduate

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

students are assumed to be informed consumers and able to make rational choices in determining courses and HE institutions (Baldwin and James 2000; Reay *et al.* 2005, Browne Review 2010); able to assess the learning experience learning without wider knowledge of the HE system (Baldwin and James 2000), albeit possibly influenced to attend by peers (Sokatch 2006), professionals and educators (Coburn 2006; UCAS 2012a, p.13), and pushed by a discourse that frames them as consumers and measurers of a non-comparable educational experience. Furthermore, measures that attempt to confirm students as qualified measurers are promoted through student evaluation, student satisfaction or student experience surveys (Douglas *et al.* 2006), but students remain unable to know the value, or predict the likelihood, of employment post-graduation.

At institutional level, marketisation requires evidence of quality, whereby teaching effectiveness is based on student evaluations have been “the most common method of assessing teaching quality in HE since the 1920’s” (Brandenburg and Remmers 1927 cited Wachtel 1998, p.191) with the alleged “golden age of research on student evaluations” being carried out in the 1970s (Centra 1993, p.49). This tradition has continued to the present day through a variety of data collection activities through questionnaires at various dates in the academic calendar.

Such surveys cover a wide range of general topics. However, the content consistently avoids a discourse that considers how, as part of the university experience, academics and students are governed through a dictatorial administrative process:

*“one of silence for the academic and of a performer for the student, one who is rewarded with the award of a degree if the performance is satisfactory” (Evans 2013a, p.215)*

providing no free reign for teaching and learning between the academic and the student. Students are often unaware of wider institutional behaviours such as commitment to (or rhetoric of) academic standards (Ecclestone 2001; O’Donovan *et al.* 2004), confused and misunderstood assessment criteria, processes and standards (O’Donovan *et al.* 2008; Rust *et al.* 2003; Sadler 2005; Evans 2013b) or

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

academic integrity and misconduct (Dowd 1992; Sutton and Taylor 2011; Macfarlane *et al.* 2014).

Furthermore, studies show that regulation fails to accommodate student engagement as a determining factor in the measurement of quality (Axelson and Flick 2010; Coates 2007; Kahu 2013) although the notion of engagement is fragmented, contradictory and confused (Baron and Corbin 2012, p.759). In a recent study, students themselves were noted as being unable to define 'quality', in terms of their own learning experience, merely relating teaching practice in relation to their learning outcomes (Cheng 2011) but not, crucially, measuring student satisfaction. Browne (2010) highlighted, in the lead up to his review,

*“that students do not have the opportunity to choose between institutions on the basis of price and value for money’ [as all institutions charge roughly the same] and that value can only be judged in term of ‘the employment returns from their courses’”* (p.32).

Brown (2011) argues that there is a lack of information about the notion of educational quality and what is understood by 'quality', what is to be measured and by whose "standards". Brown *et al.* (2011) determine quality from an academic perspective yet with no universal, reasonable or standard measure on which to base the term "quality", any measurements appear unrealistic and will require further change.

Another data collection body is the National Student Survey, incepted in 2005, which targets all final year students to gather student opinions on the quality of programmes overall on a national level, but does not include the perceived or actual relevance of a student's programme to their job prospects. It could be argued that whilst pre-graduation surveys attempt to provide product service information for future students, they fail to define the intangible term of 'quality' or address employment expectations or outcomes. Such measures can only be assessed later through graduate leaver destination surveys (HESA 2013). Since students cannot foresee the value of their degree in terms of the future employment quality and returns on investment, survey measures of quality are questionable.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Student feedback and teaching effectiveness, has received considerable attention (see Chen and Howshower 2003; Cohen 1980; Dodeen 2013; Felton *et al.* 2004; Kwan 1999; Marsh and Roche 1984; Menges 1991; Ramsden 1991) and is often linked to grades. As such, grading and feedback, in its basic terms, serves only to meet official auditing criteria and “protect academics against student complaints” (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005, p.284).

The literature is laden with criticisms that most feedback was useless or poor (Felton *et al.* 2004; HEPI-HEA 2014, p.8), and where grades conflicted with feedback, i.e. offering positive comments, but low grades or vice versa (QAA 2012), particularly as a supposed tool for improvement, confused students. Furthermore, many students wanted to be involved in the feedback process (Grebennikov and Shah 2013) that may involve the allocated grade, to ensure a sense of fairness.

One element of concern arising from feedback are comments from students who remark on the popularity of a given lecturer. The debate about the rise of the edutainer, and popularity contests, have become a staple within HE (Johnson and McElroy 2010) with attempts to measure this, amongst other things, through student surveys. Discourse about the usefulness of student surveys can be found elsewhere (Aldridge and Rowley 1998; Aleamoni 1981; Arubayi 1987; Ballantyne *et al.* 2000; Dodeen 2013; Douglas *et al.* 2006; Gray and Bergmann 2003; Langbein 2008; Love and Kotchen 2010; Wachtel 1998) reporting capricious value, particularly around grading leniency (Greenwald and Gillmore 1997).

Further, many students are dissatisfied with or misinterpret assessment feedback (Nicol 2010; Orsmond and Merry 2011; Price *et al.* 2010; Weaver 2006) leading to dissatisfaction and grade enquiries, an issue of concern for academics who are mindful of their institutional and personal reputations. Price *et al.* (2010) suggested all parties should co-create the feedback in order to measure its effectiveness and ensure trust between the marker and student. Such a process might include negotiating the grade.

Finally, students still consider high grades important in the first year where grades are perceived not to count, yet are a hurdle to proceed onto year two and an

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

opportunity to access placement and potential jobs (QAA 2012). Such assessments can therefore only represent a snapshot in time from that of multi-dimensional and inconsistent individuals, the “unmanageable consumer” (Gabriel and Lang 2006).

The issue of feedback and grades has been lacking in recent literature, but since the 2012 tuition fee increase, accountability for HE service provision is receiving new scrutiny and provoking debate (HEPI-HEA 2014; QAA 2012; Willetts cited Abrams 2014).

From a massified quality perspective, it could be argued that the area of teaching and learning is undermined by quality assurance agendas and targets. Where quality is considered ensured by the number of graduates with high grades, in order to achieve those high grades, academics might be persuaded to acquiesce to grade challenges, particularly if it appeases the student and their input to external surveys. Student views, therefore, appear restricted by myopic measures of a variable experience of assessment practices, access to tutors, teaching spaces and resources but remain unable to define utility.

Despite the difficulties that students face or understand about how the institution operates, its offering and the roles of the players within the academic landscape, higher education has been set up through government reviews as a career choice. HE is becoming marketised and fixed in government policy and it is important to see why and how this affects the student and their place in Higher Education. The marketisation of higher education, that of putting the sector into the hands of students, the purchasers and choosers of where to and how to study, has placed it squarely in a consumerist spotlight.

Hunt (cited Brady and Dutta 2012) argued that successive governments have changed the nature of university life by “hawking degrees around like any other commodity” and promoting the graduate-premium as a key benefit and thus are partly to blame.

Firstly, a review of these policies does not suggest that, historically, British universities had excelled in their efforts to improve education or social mobility, or

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

that the previous understandings of what university was and should be were in the best interests of society, which is oft implied. Whilst successive governments have promoted policies over time to address shortcomings, the Browne Review (2010) has been the most radical document for the HE sector. With market democracies evident in society, public service organisations have been pressured to reconsider their ideals and values in order to keep up.

Of concern is the notion that undergraduate education is akin to another consumer good is misunderstood, as it is a positional good based on hierarchy, and opportunity. Such a positional good cannot be bought 'off the shelf' but can be experienced and engaged with. Furthermore, the government reforms decisively treat education as being solely beneficial to the student, and miss the associated benefits to the wider public in terms of public citizenship and the general increase in human capital, the factors driving massification. Government need to be reminded that although undergraduates at British universities are customers, they are also doing so potentially without information about how universities operate and their role, as a customer, within the university offering (Molesworth *et al.* 2011).

Secondly, whilst competition for the education sector has been advocated by successive governments and many universities suggest that it is the tool for promoting the best opportunities for consumers (Browne 2010; Dearing 1997; Universities UK 2015), questions arise as to where true responsibility lies when competitive organisations operate outside of a not-for-profit regulatory framework such as the QAA. It could be argued that governments could intervene in the marketplace or that existing regulations will underpin competition in the marketplace. If the latter is the case, then improvements are needed in the regulations and policies that support and favour the student. The HE sector, traditionally the provider of a public good, having been openly marketised by the government to well versed, highly strategic organisations in the business of education, has found themselves competing with those who have acquired the title and status of university to attract potential students. Whichever way this is viewed, society, and therefore students, are most likely to be disadvantaged.

Thirdly, the renaming of students as consumers, is evidence of a reform by government to convert students from learners to consumers. Education was one of

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

the last bastions of the state-funded public services. Changing the name of the learner allegedly capable of evaluating quality, under the banner of student experience, has forced the HE sector through marketisation and financialisation and has seemingly diminished the learner student with it by positioning them as consumers, purchasers of a want or need.

Finally, the UK HE sector has undergone fundamental change. Apart from seeing the promotion of expansion and new entrants to the market, competition for position in potential undergraduate choices, alongside their choice of debt, there is concern that if and when the student understands the transactional exchange, as they should, it may raise students' expectations of what the university will provide. Furthermore, provision is likely to be considered to include the unmeasurable element of supposed quality. Whatever the perceived notions of quality are, as perceived by students, it cannot be known or understood in terms of value, or predict the likelihood of employment until post-graduation, assessed through graduate leaver destination surveys. It could be argued that whilst pre-graduation surveys attempt to provide product service information for future students, they fail to define the intangible term of 'quality' or address employment expectations or outcomes. Although the perceived service product is a student experience in a higher education setting, it may be that when the offering's perceived quality is not enough, then grades may be a service dimension for negotiation.

In effect, the HE sector, whilst being aware of the competitive nature of their landscape on a small scale, has been more recently thrust into the global business market and the notion of marketisation in new ways, requiring piecemeal supply side reforms, without monitored expertise or support. There are two perspectives about marketisation. Firstly, a discourse around the idea that standards have fallen and that academics have lost their freedom, or secondly, that marketisation has provided opportunities that were previously restricted. Similar to other changes within an evolving society, it is difficult to predict the failure or success of the changes without referring to HE in the past.

To summarise, the literature makes clear that marketisation has affected institutions in terms of spend and cuts that have an influence on perceptions of

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

quality. Students have not only been positioned as economic agents in terms of practising purchasing power, but also as individualistic, requiring support as they move towards success and the workforce (QAA 2012).

The (mostly) first time undergraduate, however, is challenged with measuring quality and for their views on feedback and support; a proposed criteria important to understanding their success as they progress through HE. Marketisation has not only influenced the institution, but has, in turn, influenced the student body

I will now look at some of the conceptual links between HE expansion and economic growth and the way in which this has been understood at a conceptual level. This section identifies what can be expected from processes of grade enquiries arising as a result of people confused and frustrated about potential job opportunities, underemployment and civic unrest in the middle classes. With students experiencing positional competition amongst the student and graduate population and higher expectations from employers utilising CV filtering for ability and skills (Blenkinsopp and Scurry 2007; Peacock 2012; Rubenstein 2013; Snowdon 2012), grade enquiries, grade questioning and grade grubbing may be seen as a by-product in a quest for differentiation. In the next section, human capital theory, which underpins the perceived value of a human economic unit will be analysed.

### **2.4 Human Capital Theory (HCT)**

In order to understand people as economic contributors and their place within the workforce landscape, it is essential to reflect on the Human Capital Theory (HCT) concept, which has been an influential determinant within economics since the 1960s (Cohn and Geske 1990; Leslie and Brinkman 1988; Marginson 2015). This section briefly examines the concept of HCT, education as a purposeful dimension of HCT, government rhetoric on the theory, the use of credentialism for personal economics and the use of credentials as a signifier of skills for the workplace.

In line with labour economics, HCT purports that humans necessarily acquire sets of marketable skills in which future employees invest time and money with a view to increasing lifetime earnings (Becker 1964; Little 2003) thereby offsetting time and effort with positive long term benefits (Crook *et al.* 2011). In broad terms, such

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

investments, obtained through firm-specific training or institutional education, are considered as capital, (Crook *et al.* 2011) thus human capital is defined by an individual's wealth of knowledge, skills and characteristics that provide an indication of discrete productivity.

As an economic model, HCT has attempted to determine people as capital units but has not defined education as an economic device (Fitzsimons 1997, p.1). Fitzsimons (1997) posits that "all human behaviour is based on the economic self-interest of individuals operating within freely competitive markets" (p.1) and that education and training is essential to participate in a globalised economy.

Education was, historically, considered relevant for privileged sectors of society, whilst most individuals were constrained to limited forms of labour. In the move towards work regime changes including better technology, flexible working conditions and higher skilled work, Brown and Lauder (1992) argue that education systems have had to adapt in line with human capital that has benefits to the economy and the individual entering and staying within the global labour market. In order to align, UK HE is experiencing a rapid transformation from the old Fordist factory model to a Neo-liberalistic paradigm with its key tenets of free trade and open markets, privatisation and deregulation (Tomlinson 2013).

A neo-liberalistic approach to higher education has been prevalent in numerous countries, more noticeably in the US, for many years. UK HE moved towards economic liberalisation, replacing free university education with low tuition fees in 1998 and thence the current fee landscape following the Browne Review (2010).

Human Capital Theory implies that education necessarily underpins the cognitive and productive capability of an individual or population, highlighting that productivity can only be achieved through investing in human beings via education, and that formal education is equal or more valuable than physical capital (Woodhall 1997). It expands on the idea that the purpose of education is to give students skillsets, knowledge and experience for use in adult life and thus position individuals into the workforce (Halsey *et al.* 1961). Such investment is considered to produce financial and non-monetary returns at a later stage.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Alongside the notion that HCT links to a need for skills growth with HE as a route to providing a high skills workforce, UK government rhetoric has picked up on, and promoted, various skills agenda as the route to employability (Holmes 2001). Such agenda have been incorporated into higher education curricula and marketed as 'transferable skills'; 'key skills'; 'core', 'generic' 'personal' and employability' competences (Coopers and Lybrand 1998). Holmes (2001) highlights that terms suggesting different skill sets are, essentially, homogenous and equate to little more than "common sense" (Fallows and Steven 2000; Murphy and Otter 1999). Despite criticisms of the skills agenda in the literature, it is continually promoted at the institutional and national level (Barnett 1994; Bridges 1992; UKCES 2013) with the onus on employers and individuals whereby "learners will select training and qualifications valued by business" (BIS 2010, p.6), often without teaching staff support (Bennett *et al.* 2000). Whilst higher education is still seen as the bridge between school and employment, as a provider of prepared graduates for potential employers, ready for entry to, and performance within, graduate jobs, grades are still seen as genuine markers of an individual's employability and human capital. Thus grades are seen as vital by some, especially where ideal or traditional jobs are focused on one organisation for life (Burn-Callander 2014; Gee *et al.* 1996) or are limited, particularly in a marketplace hosting a perceived oversupply of graduates (Universities UK 2015b).

Studies suggest that rational choice as a cognitive skill for choosing HE, and the assumptions underpinning human capital paradigms, conflict with credentialist understandings and positional struggles of the association between educational credentials and jobs (Tomlinson 2008). Such positional struggles, those influenced by power and monopoly, are affected by the way individuals and society use credentials for economic and cultural benefit (Weber 1948 cited Tomlinson 2008). Hirsch (1977, p.3) contends that educational qualifications offer "little or no value to individuals' human capital" and that HE expansion and the subsequent demand for more credentials underpins the middle class, creating further pressure for additional credentials for jobs; although it could be argued that in times of economic stagnation, credentials are desirable by all class strata, particularly where social class is still active, as in Britain (Independent 2014; Laurison and Friedman 2015). Tomlinson (2008) points out that whilst credentials are gained, it

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

is out of ritualisation rather than for learning or what Dore (1976 cited Tomlinson 2013, p.74) terms challengingly as “diploma disease“, with no evidence of actual skills; merely knowledge-demands needed to get the jobs, but no skills actually to do the jobs.

In a competitive market place, where grades are considered signifiers of skills, Brown (2003, p.2) suggests that:

*“middle class families are adopting increasingly desperate measures to win positional advantage”*

although Tomlinson (2007) is doubtful about this, finding that across all sectors graduates will apply for jobs that will represent significant ROI, although the ONS (2013) reported that almost half the recent graduates were in non-graduate jobs, thus reflecting Boudon’s (1974) observation that in order to stand still, the middle classes are having to run faster. Following the 2008 global recession, however, the rise in HE applications (Bell and Blanchflower 2011) and post 2012 tuition fee increase, individuals may seek to reposition themselves in terms of grade capital. In other words, where the capital may be a focus for concern, students may be tempted to seek a grade increase to obtain a credential.

This section has briefly reviewed the concept of HCT and explained the purpose of education as a transitional journey to the workplace. It could be argued that the government rhetoric about education and credentials being the key to social mobility constructs the identity, positioning and trajectory of the individual as they consider their approaches to the workplace and employability, which could be considered subjective. As such, students may consider that given strong competition for jobs, and their perceived or actual performance at university, there may be a need to position themselves through grades, the most widely used indicator of performance. Furthermore, an oversupply of students could lower the graduate ROI in terms of job availability and wages and competition for employment, and this may raise the demand, by both students and employers, for higher grades as a factor of differentiation.

Whatever the drivers for students to consider unique grade enquiry behaviours, it is important to acknowledge the dimension of academics within the institution. In

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

the next section, the perceived role and identity of academics within the university sector, is therefore discussed.

### **2.5 Academic Role and Identity**

Within any work landscape, individuals assume an identity that reflects their profession and their location within it. Research suggests that professional identities are supported by a combination of accreditations, professional associations, and a strong sense of corporate cultural affiliation (Clarke *et al.* 2013). Locke (2007, p.5) describes academics' identities as not only being teachers and researchers, but as entrepreneurs and accountants due to the extended duties beyond "being academic". Brew (2006) suggests that the definition indicates the ambiguity of the academic distinctiveness and the job boundaries, skewing the perception of the academic identity.

This section explores the evolving nature of academic roles in HE, the perceived identity of staff and their role, and student expectations of staff and value for money.

Recent scholarly work on academic jobs has emphasised a number of difficulties that have arisen relating to academic staff and their work, and which have strengthened as result of HE expansion, public funding reductions, the marketisation of HE, the allocation of university life costs to the student body in England, the expectations of students, industry, government and the university management (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2012; Gornall and Thomas 2014; Locke and Bennion 2011). Henkel (in Gordon and Whitchurch 2010) argues that academic identity has changed rapidly from working collegiately in a stable community environment towards one that is "a continuous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction" (p.10). In most universities, academics are required to spread their work time across several areas involving not only matters of teaching and learning, but also recruiting students from multi-dimensional backgrounds and supporting them through to graduation; engaging and enhancing the university research agenda by attracting research income and creating research content and results for high profile academic journals and conferences; and through professional practice, increasing the reputation and commercial value

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

of teaching and research. In addition, roles include that of accountant and timetabler, workload planner, entrepreneur, and administrator moving the academic from an “academic civil servant to devolved management” (Whitchurch 2006, p.1). Much of this has taken place through university management agendas of faculty, school or departmental restructuring and creating quasi-academic management roles that operate across the organisation both vertically and horizontally (Whitchurch and Gordon 2010; Locke 2014) making use of digital tools for pedagogical and administrative purposes. Furthermore, changes in working conditions have repositioned academics from practitioners in a stable environment to nomadic entrepreneurs (Evans and Nixon 2015). In a study on the change in academic professions, Locke (2011) suggested that the pressures from external sources impact institutions and academics in multi-dimensional ways such as job conditions throughout an academic’s career timeline. For academics seeking tenure and promotion, teaching, along with student guidance and marking, is not seen as important as research, thus creating a barrier for stability for staff who excel at teaching. In response to institutional expectations, pressures and demands, Locke and Bennion (2009) argue that academics might respond in different ways and can present themselves “in forms of active support, compliance, resistance or subversion” (p.12). Whichever form an academic does practice, it will affect the student experience.

Under the recent reforms of HE, with the student-customer paying the university fees, the student experience has been placed forefront and centre-stage (BIS 2011; Douglas *et al.* 2006; QAA 2012; HEPI-HEA 2014). Such an experience, alongside the use of adjuncts, short contract staff, and research focused academics, highlights an academic paradigm shift that has implications for teaching and learning ideals. The demand for academic time sets all activities against each other: teaching against research or teaching against professional practice. Academics who are measured through workload planning models find that “their effectiveness and productivity are often achieved at the expense of the other” (Locke 2014, p.11). Harman (2003) acknowledges that transitioning to the new HE landscape has left academics feeling frustrated, angry and disillusioned about their identity, but also notes that others have adapted without compromising academic integrity.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Key to the HE experience is the relationship between the student and the academic. In terms of staff/student relationships, Ramsden (1992) and Voss *et al.* (2007) recognised that students desired lecturers who were friendly, approachable and knowledgeable, and to be able to meet with tutors regularly (Woolcock and Malvern 2008 cited Williams 2013).

Whilst students may see academics in a singular role, that of being recognised as a teacher, academics find that their role as such and identity has been expanded to not only allocate their time to the creation and dispensation of knowledge through teaching but also research and service (Cummings 1998 citing Macfarlane 2012; Trowler and Knight 2000).

Through an idealistic lens, the university academic is perceived as a benevolent character of wisdom and guidance to be respected and learnt from. A UCU (2008) report found the majority of students rated teaching quality at their university highly but that their concerns lay with student debt, costs of study and paid employment in order to remain at university. A report by the QAA (2012) showed that students not only wanted teaching that equipped them to meet their course assessments and prepare them for work but also held expectations about what would be considered a quality benchmark for actual teaching. Furthermore, students expected appropriate support and guidance to become an independent learner. Students also demanded consistent feedback styles from all lecturers and the right to decide:

*“which teaching staff should be fired, given what they were paying”* (QAA 2012, p.49)

and to be professionally entertained by lecturers:

*“I thought lectures would be like TED Talks”*

(QAA 2012, p.49)

Such statements appear to feed into discourse about the need to manage “the student experience” and consider the marketing mantra that “the customer is king”. Grayson (2003a, 2003b in Obermiller *et al.* 2005), a critic of customer orientation, suggests that allowing students to be involved in the course teaching would be “tantamount to letting the inmates run the asylum”, highlighting the need to protect the organisation. Whilst HE promotes the student experience as central to HE operations, Hirons (2015), a long standing retailer of products and service training,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

makes clear that whilst the customer is not always right, they are still the customer. To gain competitive advantage, service experience as part of the service-profit chain, is the only differentiating factor for customer loyalty between one product and another (Heskett *et al.* 1997, Vargo and Lusch 2008) and is hard to duplicate (Wernerfelt 1984). The student experience is therefore undefinable and unique. In terms of relationships, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) state that when an exchange paradigm exists, the student-teacher relationship “is likely to be corrosive on both sides of the relationship” (p.269). Molesworth *et al.* (2009, p.43) highlight that a consumerist relativism has grown up and invaded the higher education space, disrupting carefully nurtured student-staff bonds, “reducing them to buyer-seller transactional models towards gaining the degree product.” The QAA (2012a) acknowledge the same, reporting the student focus on value for money. Interpretations of value for money (VfM) are dependent on experiences and perceptions of the dimensions that contribute towards the notion of value, however. In relation to government spending, The National Audit Office (nd) assess it in three ways: economy, efficiency and effectiveness; that of spending less whilst having regard for quality, spending well in a way that evidences a strong relationship between resources and outputs, and spending wisely, which subsequently decides value for money or cost-effectiveness: to use resources to achieve performance indicators and outcomes.

With undergraduates committing to large long-term debts, the management of student expectations of VfM, is seemingly addressed under student experience. When the experience is reflected upon, however, perceptions of VfM might be directed towards the staff, by the student, and might be considered in two ways. Firstly, when VfM is considered to have been achieved, students might consider rewarding their staff by presenting a gift of some nature. The matter of gifting is open to debate. Harris and Moran (1993 cited Adams *et al.* 2005) note that the giving of gifts, or bribes, in business is a common business activity to ensure service. In some cultures, gifting staff is aligned to a cultural behaviour associated with respect and thanks rather than a straightforward bribe (Macfarlane *et al.* 2014). MacFarlane *et al.* (2014) note that the receipt of gifts poses a dilemma since to refuse might be perceived as an offence whereas to accept might imply an understanding for future call. Such a gift could be considered problematic since

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

what works in one culture may not in another. In the case of universities in England, the practice of gifting may be viewed by an institution as an inducement for some future favour, thus in practice, where a relationship may be influenced, the gifting is considered a bribe (UK Bribery Act 2010). Bribes could be considered in many forms. Bowen and Ei (2002) explored ethical implications of personal relationships and grades. Students considered sexual relationships inappropriate but that group activities, such as sharing meals, were acceptable. Macfarlane *et al.* (2014 p.4) highlight works relating to the “negative framing of academic integrity” including close relationships between faculty and students, the accepting of gifts, academic misconduct and adapting grades, but the relationships, gifting and grading are not always interlinked. Sullivan and Ogloff (1988) and Braxton *et al.* (2011) suggested that to avoid potential misunderstandings about academic conduct and protect against possible litigation, more formal guidelines need be put in place.

When perceived value for money is not achieved, this may be expressed in unconventional ways and unrelated to gifting. An anonymous academic (Guardian 2015) commented on the lack of student respect, particularly when under stress. A study by White (2013) focused on harassment and bullying of Health and Social Care academic staff by undergraduates in a post-1992 university in England. The research findings indicated that staff perceptions of harassment were apparent when the stress levels of students were high, seemingly caused by course and social demands, societal changes, and the socio-political agenda of education. To some extent, this study, and the Guardian (2015) article, suggest perceived abuse of staff.

The subject of the bullying and harassment of academics in HE is known, anecdotally to exist, but has not been the focus of much attention compared to other contexts of bullying such as that between managers and staff or between staff (UCU 2008). Where bullying has occurred, this might be due to a breakdown of understanding about shared beliefs and values, and value for money, a consumer dimension, may be a point of contention when assessment grades are given, particularly where the marker is adamant that their judgement of the work and grades given are tightly bound to the assessment brief and marking criteria,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

but customer service is not.

Delucchi and Korgen (2002, p.9) noted that faculty who adhere to stringent grading, in line with academic marking criteria, “need protection in the face of consumer backlash“. Given the demands from students, including those related to grades, academics may feel pressured to become ‘yes’ men to their students.

With regards to marketisation and customer service, Inglis (2011) makes clear that:

*“the principles of the market and its managers more and more deeply suffuse the practices of education... we have handed over meaning to the gangsters of propaganda and their hirelings in advertising”*

emphasising an enforced distancing of the academic role transforming to a service performer, a customer service provider (Bohms 2011; Sharabi 2013; Willetts cited Abrams 2014) with reduced academic esteem, and restraints on academic freedom (Williams 2016), all of which are a cause for concern.

Whether purposeful or not, it can be understood that grade enquiries and questioning behaviours can affect staff health and morale (Shaw and Ward 2014, UCU 2013), individual morals and institutional ethics in terms of how stress is perceived, received and understood (Ganske 2010).

The QAA (2012a) points out that students need to be held responsible for their role in the institution otherwise, as Hazo (1999 cited in Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p.106) points out, “educators in such circumstances do not educate but serve the students”, an implication that the two roles can fundamentally not be combined, but confirming the marketised academic servant.

The notion of academic servantry appears to be anecdotal or infrequently reported, in the national media. A BBC (2013a) article reported the case of a student, who on grade enquiry, attempted to bribe a professor with £5000, stating that he was a “businessman”. After the professor refused, the student was asked to leave. On doing so, a loaded air pistol fell from the student’s pocket. Such a case in UK HE is unique. Whilst the literature on similar cases relating to students attempting to bribe academics is sparse in the UK, Graves (cited in Gibney 2013)

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

stated that this "leaves the question hanging in the air for a lot of people" about the frequency of such incidences.

Academic work has evolved from the traditional teaching and learning model to that of multi-dimensional staff who are positioned across academic and commercial work. Academics who do not see their strengths as lying in the research or entrepreneurial arm of HE, are likely to face difficulty gaining, maintaining or keeping an employment contract if the institution insists on recruiting multi-dimensional individuals. Many academics have understood that their role is hybrid and split several ways. It may be that academics need to accept that in order to meet business needs, and should accept that flexibility and agility need to be practised in the workplace whilst still being in charge of their own academic freedoms.

Through the marketised model of transactional HE and customer service, it could be interpreted that whilst the student has some consumer rights, they do not have management rights. Students might have some sway, however, particularly through a customer service, or student-academic relationship channel. Whilst student views are elicited through surveys, the line of questioning does not necessarily gather feedback that is meaningful for the student as data giver, or the institution as a service provider. As such, students may feel cheated and thus seek recourse. As surveys are not necessarily the right tool for such information provision to the institution, direct communication with academics may be the next step and the conversation may be difficult, particularly when both viewpoints are not accepted, however, they may be focused on students and their grades, and how academics choose to engage with students over such grades.

In summary, the matter of gifting by students, anecdotally, appears to be common. Without specific policy, academics may therefore be left to make judgements based on their own points of reference and moral compass, that may not favour the student, or the institution.

The matter of bribery by students appears to be rare in UK HE, but it may simply be under-reported. Whilst some universities may have an anti-bribery policy in place, it is unlikely that academics would take the time to administer such a

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

document with notifications of the gift of a pen, some wine, or a small cultural token. Finally, if such practices were known by an institution, there would be reluctance to report them in the public domain as such admittance would have PR implications and would undermined the legitimacy of degrees and the integrity of UK universities.

On the matter of bullying of staff by students, this area appears to be under researched, under reported due to confidentiality and legal related constraints. Furthermore, positioning the student-customer as a bully would most likely be considered potentially bad public relations for the institution. Furthermore, it could be perceived that staff might be accused of bullying students through grade allocation.

With the student located as the educational buyer, and in the light of changing academic roles, limited contact time, students wanting to behave as staff managers, the institutional mantra of the student experience and service excellence, issues around gifting and potential abuse, academics may feel pressured to acquiesce to innovative grading requests, against academic judgment, to ensure student satisfaction.

Overall, the study on grade enquiries in UK HE, is under researched, and a study on the matter should be at the forefront of concerns for academics at the coal-face of teaching, learning and marking in order to understand the cohorts that they are working with.

In the next section, the discourse of student as consumer will be discussed. It will focus on how students appear to have changed over time, as seen through various stakeholder lenses, and the role of the student throughout the emergence of the student experience.

### **2.6. Students as Consumers**

The importance of credentials at both an individual and social level (Ashton and Green 1996; Castells 1994; Tomlinson 2008), and for status, is continually promoted, suggesting that graduates, as a distinctive set of human capital elites, will gain social benefits in terms of having skills pivotal to decent work strategies

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

(ILO 2010), thus gaining employment and a private rate of return in terms of salary and benefits. Studies show that the question of whether students, who are seeking to gather human capital in readiness for the workplace, should be called students or consumers has been debated over time.

This section briefly explores the dominant student-consumer discourse and the features of this approach. It moves on to the changing conceptions of HE students as seen through the lens of the government, academics and students themselves. It then looks at the difficulties faced by students, perceptions of quality and value for money, student satisfaction and the auditing culture.

Debate as to whether the student is a product (Obermiller *et al.* 2005), a learner (O'Brien 2014), a customer (Cheney *et al.* 1997; Obermiller *et al.* 2005), a combination of the latter two (Baker 2008; Anyangwe 2011), or a consumer is evident in the wider literature and has been written about since the 1960s in both the US and the UK (Shulman 1976; Stark 1975). Many authors appear conflicted, however, not only in their understanding of what a student could be, but also what they should be and what they seem to be. Understanding what students are differs according to the perspective of governments, academics, and the students themselves.

In the commercial landscape, customers and consumers are viewed differently. Baines and Fill (2008, p.8) make clear that “a customer purchases or obtains an offering but a consumer uses it.” Thus, it is suggested that students buy into an opportunity, as customers to buy a place to study, and it is their choice whether to use it. In addition, customers and clients are also viewed according to the on-going relationship. Both are viewed as individuals that purchase services or products, however, a customer-relationship is viewed as a short-term economic relationship, whereas clients engage with professionals to acquire knowledge and advice for pre-defined specifications in a relationship that is long-term and protected, similar to the engagement of a lawyer or other professional. Godin (2016) makes clear that if the offering is not right, the customer:

*“can come tomorrow. If the client doesn't like what you deliver, [they] may leave forever. Choose your customers, choose your clients. And most of all choose which category you are serving”.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The discourse within government policy identifies students as customers by using consumerist language such as benefits (Dearing 1997 item 91; Browne 2010, p.56) and choice (Browne 2010, p.4) and has confirmed them as such through the fee transaction between student and the institution. Brown and Carasso (2013) clarifies that this terminology confirms students as economic agents in the marketplace.

Academics, however, i.e. those who provide teaching and content to underpin the learning and student experience, have been torn about the matter and a brief overview highlights some perspectives.

In the 1960s, students were viewed as “change agents, radicals and transgressives” (Morley 2003 cited Williams 2013, p.106). Later, Wankowski (1973) found students not to be intrinsically motivated by a desire for subject knowledge. Along the timeline, it appears that university had become the rite of passage for those seeking employment in professional posts and most positions required well-educated individuals with a university degree.

Conway and Yorke (1991) saw students as both consumers and products of education, that of using education for personal use but also as outputs of the education system for industry and beyond. Hill (1995) highlighted students as primary consumers of HE; those who consume HE for private purpose. Franz (1998) suggested that students were neither products nor customers, neither term being appropriate.

Franz (in Obermiller *et al.* 2005, p.2) was also concerned that treating students as customers would ‘lead to entertainment, self-designed majors, grade inflation, and professors whose roles would be delighting students instead of teaching’, however, Obermiller *et al.* (2005) suggest that students engaged in active learning are more likely to acquire new knowledge and thus are learners. Furthermore, Obermiller *et al.* (2005) are clear that education is a service and that the customer’s participation is essential.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Tumelty (cited Wignall 2006), the then president of the National Union of Students (NUS), declared that university had changed completely since the introduction of tuition fees.

*“Students see themselves as consumers and vice-chancellors see them as consumers. It isn't the experience it once was; it's far more stressful”.*

More recently, Hayes (2009, p.17) noted the:

*“changed conception of a student is not an autonomous person embarking on the pursuit of knowledge, but as a vulnerable learner”.*

I.e. seemingly as individuals who were not capable of being self-directed independent learners.

Others, such as Delucchi and Korgen (2002) posit that concerns that tuition fees underpin good grades, based on an unwritten belief relating to financial transactions, was a dimension studiously avoided in all the government policies relating to marketised HE, but nonetheless serves to determine students as consumers.

Motivation for the contemporary student to attend university has been determined as an economic move (Browne 2010). Whether students are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, the nomenclature of those applying to university has also seen change.

Whilst academics' perspectives relating to student roles and positions in HE are multi-dimensional, the view of students is also important.

In a study of undergraduates and their perceptions of themselves as consumers, Tomlinson (2015) found that there was evidence of a growing identification with consumerist attitudes but those attitudes did not align to the expected student-consumer approach.

Despite scholarly works on the subject, whatever the academics and students think they are, and however they behave, government is clear on the matter. With

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

its definitive move into public service modernisation, it has forced universities to acquiesce to the disciplines of the marketplace in order to drive up quality. Through its stream of policies and societal discourse, and acceptance of the marketing mantra, government has positioned the student, no longer as a learner, but definitively a consumer with a wide choice of providers in the sector. The trajectory of this discourse has increased in intensity since the 1960s and is evident in current literature and news media. The focus of students as consumers is a reflection of marketisation and the marketing approach whereby an individual seeks to purchase a good or service for personal wants and needs (Smith 2012). Where HE has moved towards marketisation, the potential or actual student has sought a good/service for personal benefit and thus is seen as a customer that is likely to consume education for personal benefit.

Whether students are seen as customers, consumers, clients or students, by themselves or an institution, they apply to university for varying reasons, however. McInnes *et al.* (2000) report that first year students are seeking a course that both fulfils their interest and offers a good career. The NUS (2008) Student Experience Report highlighted the most popular answers in order were: to gain qualifications; to improve chances of gaining a job; to improve earning potential. From the findings, the report found that there were several types of students: Academic types most likely go on to do a higher degree to be intellectually stretched; Next Steppers taking courses for their intended career; Option Openers choose a course they might enjoy and might be good at; and Toe Dippers are attracted to university for the lifestyle/living but hope opportunities will open up at a later date. Several stated “for the experience”, highlighting that they go “as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself” (p.3).

Whatever the reasons students state for going into higher education, the reality may not match the expectations.

Once at University, first year student experiences are challenging (Lowe and Cook 2003). For example, stress can arise from students transitioning to adulthood (Goldscheider and DaVanzo 1985; Lewis *et al.* 2015), managing workloads, adapting to new teaching styles, understanding expectations, and identifying standards (McInnes 2004). Adjusting to higher-order and collaborative learning

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

(HEPI-HEA 2014) is often difficult, with many reports reflecting negative experiences (Clerehan 2002). Kantanis (2000) suggests this affects continuation or withdrawal, the latter being not in the institution's interest. In a meta-analysis, Bowles *et al.* (2013) report on factors affecting continuation or withdrawal as seen in the USA, Australia and UK, including wrong course choice (Yorke and Longden 2008), poor student or institutional fit (Yorke 2000), financial and personal problems (Lang 2001; Yorke 2000) and previous academic performance (Budden *et al.* 2010; Caison 2005, Lang 2001). Bean (2005) notes key attitudes and self-perception of satisfaction, challenging courses and bureaucratic factors such as how formal exchanges are conducted. Other dimensions include friendships and social integration (Finn 2015; Tinto 1975). Others suggest that withdrawals may be due to student cognitive dissonance of expected student performance (HEPI-HEA 2014; Moore *et al.* 2014) and mental health issues (Jones 2014; MIND 2013, Sherriff 2013) such as executive functioning disorders characterising communication, social interaction and organisational restrictions (Verte *et al.* 2006). Yet Huber (1987) points out that the university has a certain concept of a student. He paints a picture of a "person already autonomous and to be treated as such" (Huber 1987, p.157).

Most undergraduates arriving at university are technically three months away from having left school and the transition to university can be long and difficult. On the academic side, the leap to higher order thinking has to be developed and this can be quicker than for some than for others. In order to address over-subscribed course numbers and the lack of work-loaded marking time and other institutional commitments, teaching short-cuts might be utilised. In a highly marketised landscape, Black *et al.* (2004) suggest that when stakes are high, teaching to the test and a "spoon-feeding" template are evident. Students exposed to this behaviour at school, and that of constant retakes until the "best" grade is achieved, expect similar in HE. Thus student lack, and do not develop, independent study skills. Such skills are a tool to empower students through the constructs of assessment and feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006, p.2) in order to accomplish more, and therefore be more satisfied in their work, maintaining motivation and behaviour during learning (Pintrich and Zusho 2002), than those who are not actively engaged (Pintrich 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). Self-regulation

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

strategies are not “taught” in Higher Education but sign-posted through Study Skills units or one-off seminars, and a lack of research surrounding self-regulation in adults, may require further exploration. In addition, students may face poor teaching, a course weak on personalisation that ignores varying learning styles or individual health, assessments such as class contribution grading, marks for attendance or “presenteeism”, or “hands-up” contributions that do not match the curriculum’s intended learning outcomes but merely reflect teacher “performativity” (Macfarlane 2015, p.338) and are not necessarily relevant to industry requirements.

### Undergraduates and non-traditional students

*“struggle to cope with the independent and self-directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors”*(Lowe and Cook 2003, p.53)

and many find difficulty bridging the gap into university from school with speed or effectiveness (Lowe and Cook 2003). Other students are underprepared for study (Booth 1997; Lythcott-Haims 2016), focusing more on electronics in the classroom (Hembrooke and Gay 2003), not attending time on task (Admiraal *et al.* 1999; Worthen *et al.* 1994), facing shrinking contact hours (Collini 2010) from 40 hours per week (hpw) in the 1960s to 14.2 hpw by 2013 (Sellgren 2014), studying fewer hours (Babcock and Marks 2011), challenging lecturers (Beard 2012), needing parental support (Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) and succumbing to plagiaristic behaviours (Park 2010; Walker 2010). In terms of student character, surface learner students, those extrinsically motivated (i.e., payment), are the most interested in grades, often motivated by a desire to avoid failure (DeLong and Winter 2002, p.163). Students attending university may find their experience of multiple demands and activities overwhelming and, as such, might be tempted by behaviour considered not in the academic spirit.

In the UK press, Barrett (2011) highlighted an epidemic of cheating in British universities that allegedly included bribing lecturers. A later report of attempted bribery focused on one particular case reported by a professor (BBC 2013a) over what was potentially a visa issue. Whilst some students might resort to underhand practice, the literature does not present much on the practice and why, which could be for pragmatic matters. Ruedy *et al.* (2013) report some students enjoy

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

thriller highs; seeking psychological gain through “cheating” and an attempt at grade grubbing may fulfil that need.

Despite widening participation (WP) agendas set to address the social inequality in HE, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw achievement worsen (Chowdry *et al.* 2013; Machin and Vignoles 2004) but has since levelled off (Raffe *et al.* 2006). Studies show that for some levels of the lower socio-economic groups, aspirations for HE do not exist (Archer *et al.* 2003; Reay *et al.* 2005, Piatt 2010), suggesting a student body with

*“no sense of responsibility for their learning and a resistance to engaging in education as a process rather than a purchasable product”*  
(Naidoo and Jamieson 2005, p.269)

The difficulties for students from widening participation backgrounds are the initial life disadvantages. Whilst policy sets out to include more individuals from differing backgrounds, many are unintentionally put off by societal differences through cultural, social and economic and institutional barriers (Action on Access 2005; Archer *et al.* 2003). This may explain lack of engagement, completion and achievement for some, although many WP students have succeeded and gained good employment (BIS 2015b).

The HE sector, particularly post-1992 institutions, have been addressing the government societal agendas, however, and encouraging students from WP backgrounds, whatever their ability, applying flexible entry points in order to attract students across diverse abilities and age ranges. Difficulties arise when institutions who offer a singular type of service aimed generically at independent 18-22 year olds, face a buyer’s market loaded with disadvantaged customers, without putting in systems, processes and services to support them. In turn, such unsupported students create quality issues (Walker 2007) for staff, students and the institution, with standards and benchmarking assessment continuing to be of variable value (Biggs 2001; Ramsden 2006) as staff attempt to address WP expectations and the issues that they face. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) identify that academic success is no longer a student outcome but a teaching success; a consumerist dimension that demands that the product be fit for purpose. In the light of emerging learners

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

entering HE, this suggests that courses and teaching, and learning expectations and boundaries, may need to be clearer and that many academics should not be teaching too far above the intellectual weight of the student at a given point in time.

Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) note the tensions arising from notions of success, as seen from two perspectives. Whilst both students and academics have concepts of “success” in terms of learning and achievement of academic understanding, there is disagreement in respect to the definition of success in the educational experience; the teaching effort and effectiveness equals student results. This suggests that teaching and learning should be carried out student-centrally, to the level of the individual, and not to a large group, in order to create an equal level, even though it could be argued that creating a level playing field is the purpose of the first year.

Van der Velden (2011) identifies pressures from the Students’ Union, clarifying that the Student Union’s role is to ensure that universities provide life experiences based around study with satisfaction, not learning an outcome with a price tag.

Firat and Dholakia (2006, p.152) highlight that “communities imagine, construct and experience meaningful and substantive modes of life”. It can be argued that this also applies to HE, where not only do customer transactions take place, but where HE life is also a place for “enactments of social purpose” (Sharrock 2000, p152). The social purpose of HE may be perceived in different ways by the users of HE; for some students this may be as a place for life skills and education. For others, it may be seen as a space that is a theme park with some learning opportunities. For most students, there are expectations of outcomes such as employment. For all who enter HE, most students seek post-university utility, whatever the, undefinable, achievement and whatever the grades.

In terms of equity and achievement, the QAA (2012a) found that many students expect to achieve excellent grades irrelevant of background and ability. In terms of the marking criterion, Titus (2008) found that students disagree with academics about the factors that should make up the grade marks. Research showed that students considered that the intangible factor of “effort”, and value related to it,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

should be in the grade criteria (Miley and Gonsalves 2004; Titus 2008; QAA 2012a), whereas Adams (2005) reports that, instead, academics see “performance” as important. Macfarlane (2016) found that students were concerned about what constituted fair and appropriate assessment, particularly as performativity aligns with the audit culture and not autonomous learning. Furthermore, Huber (1987) finds that students do not take the role totally but “are persons who among other things, [who] are studying” (p.165) and the issue of what constitutes effort is complicated by the seemingly fewer hours that students commit to (Adams 2005). Cheney *et al.* (1997) suggest that academics merely assess what will make a customer happy, and it should then be given to them. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) suggest the student has set the agenda and logically that could include the grade; in turn, perhaps eroding the value and quality of the student experience and potentially, the respectability of the award giving institution.

In an effort to maintain a veneer of quality and respectability, UK institutions are bound to external bodies that assess university adequacy and accountability such as the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), Gov.UK, Office of Fair Trading, Quality Assurance Association, Which? University, and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), some of which are consumer related bodies and some government quangos. In addition, universities compete for international attention through compliance with the National Student Survey, a league table issued via Ipsos MORI. The NSS, is a widely reported, methodologically flawed tool, yet held systematically to measure and report on variables of ‘quality’ (Attwood 2012; Parr 2014; Williams 2015). Massaro (2010) suggests that such measures are not useful unless the variables are important to society in a manner it can understand, such as employment. Williams (2015) points out

*“that potential student-customers are expected to consult the NSS...before choosing where to spend their tuition fees”.*

Lillis (2012) makes clear that little empirical evidence exists to demonstrate the effectiveness (or otherwise) of the NSS, thus students are without a reliable indicator before entering HE. A potential student can view the ‘world-class’ weights and measures to assess potential suitability but it could be argued that the QAA

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

and other quality associations are merely bolt-on bodies to enhance the sales shine of institutional reputation, masking institutional failures raised by the student, but not addressed in practical terms. Failure by an institution to address issues that cause dissatisfaction will affect the student experience. Clerehan (2002) argues that, whatever the expectations of students, personal fulfilment is not satisfied in the first year experience, but is more likely to be measurable 'post-experience' (Weimer and Vining 1992 cited Brown 2014) and where student engagement and the value of grades, can be reflected upon in the wider context.

In the face of disappointment and dissatisfaction whilst at university, students may choose to withdraw from a programme, pursue the course, challenge the academic, query the student experience, argue against the perceived quality and value for money by requesting some compensation, such as better grades. Where such challenges and demands occur, the dimension of quality, seen as the

*“level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduates”*  
(Dill 2005, p.3)

rather than that imposed by external bodies on the institution, remains, and leverage for academic “achievement” may be requested or utilised.

In a study to examine students' perceptions of themselves as customers of HE, Finney and Finney (2010) found that the relationship between that perception and their educational behaviours and attitudes towards HE was consistent with exchange theory. Students who considered themselves as customers felt more entitled and viewed complaining as beneficial. Those who were not satisfied with themselves as university customers, were more likely satisfied with their university. This led to better educational involvement, however they felt better entitled to outcomes. The outcome of the study was divided and not definitive for a wholesale student body, however (Finney and Finney 2010).

More recent reports that feature key tenets of student HE encounters are provided by the QAA (2012) and HEPI-HEA (2014). The first, called *Student Experiences and Expectations of Higher Education*, sets out student choice, attitudes and expectations, student aspirations and expectations from their institution, whatever their entry level. It pinpoints several themes: students' views on HE; course-level

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

quality and standards for students, the role of students in the institution; and the transition into HE. It concludes with recommendations to work with, not for, students to enhance HE. Furthermore, it aims to guide universities and colleges 'to act on what students say' (QAA 2012, p.4).

The later report by HEPI-HEA (2014), called *The Student Academic Experience*, also contained several themes: it researched student wellbeing; the overall academic experience compared with expectations; class size; contact time; and workload alongside value for money. It found that increased tuition fees were having an impact on perceptions of value for money, but the amount institutions were investing in the education was unchanged. On the issue of fees:

*“students are resigned to its reality and take comfort from the income-contingent nature of fee repayment”* (Tomlinson 2014, p.22).

Furthermore, it found that expectations in relation to satisfaction had not changed.

The HEPI-HEA (2014) report did not set out to be judgmental, but to provoke debate on matters in UK HE, with a focus on engaging and satisfying students as well as conveying the value of the academic experience (HEPI-HEA 2014).

Macfarlane (2017), however, sees students as being treated worse than customers, citing students being characterised by institutions through targets, audits and controls, such as attendance, reflective assessments, evidence of performativity and timings as to when they should happen, and grading. Macfarlane (2017) contends that “a “performative” customer is a paradox, an oxymoron” as they are legally adult, paying to undertake voluntary education whilst being subjected to a dictatorship that demands control over student learning.

Despite the notion that the student is now considered to be a consumer by government and the HE institutions, the literature seems to indicate that academics have not yet decided, and neither have the students themselves. This indicates that the entity of student as actual consumer, as perceived by the student body, is under researched and possibly will not be clear until longitudinal research under the higher tuition fee paradigm is recorded. Individuals who do express consumerist views may be undermining and damaging to teaching and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

learning, encouraged, hopefully unwittingly, by neoliberal agendas that have not been reflected upon.

The reason students seemingly go into HE, is to learn and to practise how to become individuals with the skills required by the workplace with a view to employment. Attending a university that purports to be an agent between school and the workplace could be considered as akin to a professional agent, hired by the undergraduate for up to four years. Such a student would be considered, in a professional's eyes as a client, with the professional service to guide the individual from entry to employment. Students do buy into an opportunity, as customers to buy a place to study, and it is their choice whether to use it. It is worth remembering that their purchase is year on year, to engage with the professional. Thus the student should be considered as a client, and treated as such.

The quality bodies that HE works alongside are intangible services that are bolt-on mediators to oversee provider-to buyer treatment and fairness by espousing the setting of product or service expectations through terms and conditions to ensure that all parties are clear on contractual agreements.

It is evident, therefore, based on the literature and student requirements, that students are, technically, clients to be nurtured and guided by their academic professionals. Furthermore, where clients employ professionals, in the current context to the sum of approximately £40k + overall, such clients should not be audited in such a way, nor should they be audited for an experience that does not meaningfully prepare students for the workplace. It also raises the question of how HE should be engaging with their student-clients in terms of performance and behaviour, monitoring and assessing through auditing tools and processes. From a professional perspective, it can be argued that students have been reduced to poorly treated clients. As such, it also exposes debate about the purpose of grading the client, a practice that does not happen in any other professional-client relationship.

In the next section, grade enquiries and grade grubbing are discussed.

## **2.7 Grade Enquiries and Grade Grubbing**

The last section discussed the identity of the student as perceived by the institution, the government, the academic and the student. The student is perceived as no longer 'just a learner' and is positioned in several ways such as customer, consumer and client. This topic has become more pertinent in recent years in the UK as result of the introduction of student paid fees. There are some problems that underpin the nomenclature and perceived change of student character, such as fee-paying, performative issues, alleged misbehaviour of students and student demands for universities to offer services different to those provided, including grade enquiries and changes upon request. Having established some factors that lead to such practices, it is possible to make a link between this chapter and the overall issue of grade enquiries and reported grade grubbing.

Grade grubbing, as a topic, appears to get people excited. Much of the discussion has, evidently, come mostly out of the US, however, where the marketisation of HE and higher tuition fees have been the norm for many years. Even there, however, most of the discussion has been informal and online. As marketisation and expansion of HE is in its formative and evolving stages, the topic is worthy of early exploration to understand its prevalence in the adapting HE sector.

In this section, I will begin by examining the definitions of grade grubbing,

then move on to identify why grading is viewed in different ways. A review of UK HE institutions' policies and attitudes towards challenging academic judgement and grade appeals is presented. A brief overview of grade challenges evident at the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) is presented noting the subjects prone to institutional grade challenges with the adjudicator. I will finish by reflecting upon the HE market discourse that underpins grade enquiries and grade grubbing. It is important to note that these are not topics that are disconnected but are key elements that contribute to the chapter argument that defines grade grubbing and places it in the context of student as consumer.

There is limited understanding of the action of grade grubbing but some definitions exist:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*“in which students seek high grades for minimum effort, is often cited as a symptom of the consumer orientation of contemporary college students” (Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p.104).*

*“in which ‘students beg professors ... for higher grades with or without legitimate reason” (Hinton 2008).*

Franz (2010, p.412) uses another terminology for grade grubbing as students’ nuisance, that of “students’ pestering the professors for better grades.”

It could be argued that these quietly established set of definitions seem to position students as lazy individuals and may explain the lack of widespread formal recognition within academia. In this study, the term grade enquiries is used as a conceptual umbrella to encapsulate the plural modes of understanding when discussing grade enquiries; thus, this study includes all grade enquiry exchanges occurring within the literature and the research.

Grading may be of dubious value but it is vital to a culture that stresses success, achievement and a system that requires social and economic inequality, demanding that students get ahead with grading as a way to crown winners and losers. Kohn (1992, np) identifies that competition is a way of life, and suggests that education is in trouble as it

*“favours sabotaging self-esteem and ruining relationships, rather than building character, turning the playing field into a battlefield”.*

The topic of grades and enquiries is complicated and it could be viewed in different ways. Firstly, from the student view, whereby they are seeking better grades with or without school-like support in the self-study university environment; the academic view that craves freedom to grade or not to grade and at what level (Buglear 2011); and the institutional view to maintain the prerogative to control grading standards (Sadler 2011). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that marking is a complex, intuitive and tacit activity and thus, an unreliable way to distinguish between students’ performance (Bloxham *et al.* 2016, p. 466). For example, where a student has not, through a turn of events, achieved the desired, competitive grades in unit or yearly assessments, they may seek clarification, recourse, or attempt to persuade the teaching staff to reconsider their

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

achievements, rather than go through the formal grade appeal process (Franz 2010).

There appear to be multiple reasons for student approaches to staff about marks. Rolfe (2001) suggests that achievement is more likely on vocational courses whilst those on academic courses are less willing to engage in independent study having been taught to conform at school; not knowing what they are doing but knowing they have to get ahead (Brown 2003). Lieberman and Remedios (2007, p.379) found that years 2, 3 and 4 students

*“were substantially less likely to want to master their subjects than students in year 1, being more concerned with grades and less likely to expect to enjoy their courses”.*

Others have argued that student competency and less stringent grading may be a factor (Birnbaum 1977; Kolevzon 1981), or that domestic and financial dynamics have an impact (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Read *et al.* 2003). Alternatively, a lack of task understanding, alongside needing grades for entry to the next level is a proposed cause for grade enquiries and challenges (OIA 2013; 2014).

Whatever the reason for a student seeking discussion with their academic, many face policies that discourage grade meetings.

There is currently a lack of scholarly research on policies on academic judgement agreed by UK universities. In April 2014, I undertook primary empirical administrative research of the Academic Appeals policies of 135 UK universities. The results evidenced an inconsistency of policy around the concept of challenging academic judgment (see Appendix B). The research highlighted a mixed economy of stances towards the practice. Institutions attempting to prevent grade challenges in any format firmly implied that students are not positioned to challenge the knowledge and judgement of academics. This raises conflict with the philosophy that HE is the place to be an independent learner and challenge the status quo. Furthermore, universities may be breaking consumer protection laws (Young-Powell and Ward 2014; CMA 2015) by not resourcing academic time to field enquiries or offering an obvious customer service desk to service such. As a result of an obvious lack of discussion opportunities or recourse, students may be

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

tempted to seek redress through informal routes across any programme (Jones 2011).

Students who may have spoken with their academic and/ or university panel and not received the desired grade, can apply for independent adjudication on the assessment, although the OIA make clear that they are not subject specialists and that grading is a contentious area.

The OIA (2013; 2014) note that in terms of complainants by subject, social studies courses are more significant (see Appendix C). This remains in line with studies in the US by Cheong (2000), Franz (2010), Prather *et al.* (1979) and Sabot and Wakeman-Linn (1991), who note that these courses have been open to institutional grade inflation. This may be due to the subjective nature of the arts and humanities programmes that could be open to wide interpretation.

The OIA (2013; 2014) note that in terms of complainants by issue, academic status is more significant (see Appendix D). Academic status is defined as a student complaint to the OIA after unsuccessfully appealing against a final assessment or degree outcome or failure to progress between years (OIA 2014, p.20).

Shepherd and Williams (2010) report that student complaints by academic year rose by 37% between the two-year period 2008 and 2010. A further 20% more complaints were received between 2011 and 2012 when higher tuition fees came into effect (Adams 2013), and a further, slight increase, in the 2013-2014 period, (OIA 2014) indicating students want more from their university. It can be argued that the data is unstable since the OIA measure their year by calendar year rather than academic year. The issue, nevertheless, remains: overall, complaints have risen since 2008, however, over 55% of complaints were not justified (OIA 2013, p.13). The data seems to indicate a correlation between the fee increase and the number of complaints but it is not clear if wider external factors were linked. Furthermore, there is no open data on the number of cases that are specifically grade focused.

The literature is littered with scholarly works relating to grade inflation. These focus

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

on grade enhancements at institutional or departmental level in the US, where a higher tuition fee marketised model has been in place since the 1990s. For interest, the literature on grade inflation is reviewed since grade inflation could be mistaken for grade grubbing, even though the latter is undertaken at an individual level. What is currently unknown, is if the two are in any way connected, although this research does not directly explore that question. Nevertheless, an interest in the subject areas that seem to cause most discussion around grading is worth discussing.

In the US, 'absolute' subjects unlikely to see grade inflation are quantitative fields such as mathematics, engineering, chemistry, economics and language that are less open to contest, or by a lesser amount, due to generic institutional grade inflation at undergraduate level (Anglin and Meng 2000). On the other hand, softer disciplines, often open to interpretation, were affected including business, social studies, humanities, political science, the arts, philosophy, English literature and music (Prather *et al.* 1979; Sabot and Wakeman-Linn 1991; Cheong 2000). Jewell *et al.* (2013) found that, in one institution, predicted grade inflation differed markedly between departments and could be placed to individual teachers, trends in funding or policies to attract students. They suggest that grade inflation may be beneficial and that, possibly, some departments seem little more than service departments (or cash cows) and raising grades is in their best interests (p.14). Moreover, achieving high grades in dry, abstract STEM subjects is harder than in non-STEM fields, and challenging for unprepared students, potentially leading to higher dropouts (Taylor 2011). Furthermore, to obtain a degree, students may be inclined to switch to the humanities subjects where grades are easier to achieve (Light and Silverman 2011) and thus prone to consumerist dimensions. In the previous chapter relating to HE marketisation, the literature highlighted governmental funding reductions in UK HE for humanities subjects. Whether this was a mechanism by UK government to address the perceptions of quality is not understood. The mechanism may apply to institutions hosting service departments that deliver cash-cow programmes within a marketised institution, however, and can only be noted at this point, as the literature is not clear. Furthermore, whilst it is not evident in the studies, grade grubbing may have played a part, albeit small, in an organisation's overt or explicit decision to engage with grade inflation.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

There is an overall lack of literature on grade enquiries, grade challenges and grade grubbing. Grade grubbing, the informal route to grade enhancement, has been cited as a symptom of the consumer orientation of contemporary US college students (Delucchi and Smith 1997a, p.104), but in the UK, it is rarely reported.

One way for academics to acquiesce to consumer requests quietly, is to consider or actually change a grade. Mansfield (2001, p.3) suggests that in some universities, “high grades cost professors nothing”. Franz (2010, p.420) reports that in terms of time, energy and effort,

*“as the unit cost of studying is high, the reward of pestering is high and the cost of pestering is low”*

students will take the chance. It could be assumed then, that if a staff member is approachable, they may be targeted. Delucchi and Korgen (2002, p.104), however, found that students expect markers to consider non-academic criteria, such as personal and financial needs when grading and note when students

*“do not receive the grade they ‘need’, they are apt to simply demand it”*

suggesting ‘need’ rather than approachability as the driver. Such demands could be considered bullying but there is a dearth of literature on the matter. Yet, Kohn (2002) urges that whilst academics “may lapse into blaming students as grade grubbers” there is a need “to understand the systemic sources of the problem” (p.103).

Molesworth *et al.* (2009) argue that the current HE market discourse promotes a mode of existence, where students seek to “*have a degree*’ rather than ‘*be learners*’, knowing how to ‘play’ markets to maximise self-interest, based on experiences in commercial marketplaces” (p.279). Others (Gose 1997; Trout 1997) posit that student believe that high grades should follow as result of paying for tuition, which confirms Delucchi and Smith’s (1997b) and Delucchi and Korgen’s (2002) concerns that tuition fees underpin good grades, also supporting Caru and Cova’s (2003) financial exchange paradigm. These studies indicate a solid belief that monetised transactions amongst the student body will create selfish consumers; however, there is little evidence that such consumerist

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

behaviours are widespread. Thus, these views appear predictive and potentially baseless.

Molesworth *et al.* (2010) argue that HE has been framed as an economic move, with students regarding university as just another marketplace, the grade being the product for employment, thus implying that any reason behind a grade enquiry is simply a diversion from this basic reality. This suggests that students are shoppers and that purchasing a grade will make a student eligible for employment.

Furthermore, if students are perceived simply as transactional consumers rather than learners, and that hurdles to achieving high grades to gain a degree are enforced, then it could be argued that they are simply overworked economic pawns in the HE business. Thus, students are paying to be processed through university rather than being accepted into an academic community.

This section has explored a topic that is not widely covered in the academic literature. There are some reports from grey sources, such as the media, of negative student behaviours towards academics and their grading practices. These limited sources, tied in with anecdotes from informal information, suggest that this is worth exploring so as to determine the prevalence and depth of poor behaviour within the UK HE sector, post 2012 when the tuition fees increased threefold.

The matter of assessments and grading is complex. These dimensions align to accountancy and audits that suggest the HE institutions are little more than bean-counters weighing out their income, purchases and re-sales in a similar way that stock-takers in retail outlets do. The sale of a seat (£9k per annum income) is compared to the “successful” graduate who has an opportunity to receive knowledge and put it into practice and to exit as an enriched individual fit for industry. The key measure in HE, although not necessarily in industry, is the grade. Yet the purpose and value of the grade is disputable because of its intangible and impermeable nature that implies multi-dimensional meanings, and because it represents only a snapshot in time and in relation to the task at hand. It could be argued that grades are divisive and should not be applied, yet where students are not individually coached or closely mentored, alternative valid measures of achievement of skills obtained are unavailable. To test this out,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

institutions, especially post-1992 institutions, could consider re-introducing courses that are fit for purpose that are truly vocational in nature with guidance and mentoring throughout the journey of educational life crafting. Where programmes and educators continue to use the clumsy measuring tool of marks, grade and assessment enquiries should not be discouraged.

Furthermore, in the matter of grading, the assessment papers are written for the markers inside university, not for those outside, such as potential employers. Employers have no way of actually knowing, compared to real-world standards, how the students have actually performed, nor their likelihood of success in a particular industry setting. Thus, grading, for future employment opportunities, is perhaps obsolete.

Throughout this literature review, it became evident that researchers have had different understandings of and uses of terminology relating to grade approaches and their effects. For example, papers discussing grade inflation (Jewell *et al.* 2013; Jewell and McPherson 2012; Kohn 2002; Kolevzon 1981; Mansfield 20012; Suslow 1997; Tucker and Courts 2010) were different to grade grubbing (Delucchi and Smith 1997; Franz 2010; Hinton 2008) with an absence of nomenclatures in between. The literature made for confusing reading and interpretation, and it has become evident that the leap between grade inflation and grade grubbing was missing meaningful distinctions to explain and understand what student's intentions were when approaching an academic for a meeting about assessment grades.

Furthermore, a review of the literature has attempted to locate the disciplines and courses most likely to see grade grubbing. Whilst there has been some speculation in articles about grade grubbing in Higher Education, there is a lack of evidence with nothing based on empirical work. This is why I am exploring the topic of grade enquiries.

### **2.8. Summary of the literature**

The literature has highlighted the need to understand the dimensions and pressures in society that motivate students to go to university. Government

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

literature suggests that higher education, as an investment in human capital, will lead to employment, and that this is a strong motivation for going to university.

It highlights students' expectations: that students see university as the agent between school and the workplace, and that a degree with a good grade is key for employment attractiveness.

The literature also presents the pressure points for students: factors that potentially hinder success and achievement in their academic career.

Within the review, there is debate about whether students are learners in the traditional sense or whether they are consumers of an education product, subject to varying degrees of quality, that are open to negotiation.

Finally, the review explores the validity and consistency of assessment processes and grade enquiries.

The Browne Review (2010) committed English students to higher expenditure in order to be a member of HE. Based on the notion of the oft-cited 'graduate premium', that positive rates of return will result, combined with a competitive employment market, global recession, lack of clear guidelines for employability, issues with personal identity compounded by CV filtering challenges and consumerist attitudes brought about through the exchange paradigm, students might be tempted to enhance their grade achievement, one of the most subjective milestones that exist in education. Where grades appear to be the hurdle between getting an interview, but are not necessarily relevant to getting a job, it can be seen that the competition for high marks is likely to be fierce. If graduate qualifications are not matched to complex desired-skills for industry, a higher grade may increase the disconnect between education and required competencies. Appeals policy may affect students' perceptions of acceptable behaviour. Faced with odds stacked against them, paying high fees for the marketised commodity of education, students may see that commodity as a valued item to buy and to have, rather than to learn and to earn; a commodity that provides no employment guarantees may cause students to resort to unethical, competitive behaviours. As such, grade questioning, following a grade enquiry,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

may be considered an acceptable haggling behaviour to ensure receipt of the best of the product in the market, thus confirming the perceived value of university.

Whilst studies have approached grade inflation from a generic view, such as how grades have inflated longitudinally or institutionally, there has been no formal work in the area of grade enquiries that lead to grade grubbing, with the exception of Franz's (2010) work on pestering behaviour and outcomes in a US context. Anecdotally, there is no doubt that novel behaviours do occur but there is no formal evidence to suggest this is prevalent in UK HE, and thus this may be little more than a moral panic that appears to threaten societal values (Cohen in Krinsky 2013, p.3). The business-interdependence view, however, that "when America sneezes the world catches a cold" may well be established in the UK: that is, the long-standing US prevalence to novel grading questioning behaviours may also be prevalent in British universities.

My interest is to research the background pressures that may lead to grade enquiries, as well as attitudes towards grade enquiries from the perspectives of students and academics alike. The thesis holistically considers the data as part of a bigger grade enquiry picture within Coastal University in order to assess levels of similarity/difference in relation to the literature findings from, predominantly, the US. It investigates students' approaches to academics in order to enquire about, challenge or attempt to grub a higher grade, and discover the motivations behind them, in the post-2012 fees landscape. To conclude, a new model of grade enquiry distinctions is presented.

The work of Franz (2010), Delucchi and Korgen (2002) the QAA (2012) and HEPI-HEA (2014), in terms of topic and content, are nearest to my field of interest. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) suggested that consumerist students believe that tuition fees should underpin good grades; Franz (2010) suggested that for competitive students, it was easier to nuisance [bother] a busy professor for a better grade. What is absent from the literature, is open discussion of grade enquiries and novel behaviours, that of grade grubbing, as a phenomena in post-2012 British higher education, and this gap in the knowledge has led me to look at students as consumers, their expectations and factors for approaching academics in the form of grade enquiries, challenges or grubbing for a better grade. This

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

research, therefore, builds on the work carried out by Franz (2010), Delucchi and Korgen (2002) and QAA (2012).

### **2.9 Conclusion**

The topic of grade enquiries, challenges and grubbing, a topic that is rarely openly discussed, either within the institution or the media, has never been more pertinent to consider than in the early days of the higher tuition fee model. Setting out in a landscape of global economic stagnation, where long term jobs are limited in a marketplace of many and where graduate differentiation is hard to analyse (Franz 2010), students may employ competitive behaviours to reach their goal of a good grade.

Whilst there is heat in the grade grubbing terminology, the issue is more nuanced.

The topic has received mixed responses ranging from an open welcome to complaints of being pejorative, suggesting that the topic is scornful, derogatory and critical of the student body, alongside admonishments that this research is 'not in the spirit of the academy' (personal communication 2015). Whilst academics have some freedom to explore what is of personal interest, critics must be careful about objecting to a new body of evidence, even if whistleblowing (Baker 2008) is an outcome. There has been enough discourse amongst academics, the media (Baker 2008; Parr 2013), and students, to warrant exploration and give voice to those who may feel persuaded that the topic should "be seen but not heard" rather than leaving it open to others, such as the media, to jump to unfounded conclusions without substantiation.

This research identifies the mood of academics and students and will have considerable bearing on how the institution under study operates to meet student needs in terms of grade expectations.

The next chapter discusses the research strategy: methodology and methods.

## **Chapter 3: Research Strategy: Methodology and Methods**

### **3.1. Overview**

It is acknowledged that this study of potential grade grubbing in the UK is based on its known existence outside the UK as identified in the literature review, and from the experience of the researcher working in non-UK institutions. The researcher holds the personal belief that grading corruption in UK HE is generally unacceptable and occurrence is limited. With the new edu-consumerist dynamics post-2012, however, and influences from external cultures, both student and staff, may reveal a different reality. A perception of new trends in terms of grade enhancement and a “proven” return on investment – the grade at graduation – may indicate that UK HE is merely a transactional product, hidden in plain sight, whatever the price, whichever the institution. The literature, along with a pilot study carried out in 2013, the second year of the higher tuition fees model in England, suggests that higher tuition fees may possibly lead to perceived, or actual, increases in novel student behaviour, including that of increased assessment questioning or grubbing for grade increases, outside of formal institutional processes.

The literature review refined the research into four areas of focus: HE and Tuition Fees (as the consumerist trigger), Student as a Consumer (as a result of the fees), Customer Service (a consumerist expectation) and Assessment Grades (grades as the product signifiers used as leverage with potential employers). These serve to contain and manage the proportions of the thesis, allowing a better focus on the reported phenomenon of grade grubbing and the factors influencing it. The data instruments were created after reviewing the research aims and questions that provide the background for the research design in this chapter.

Stories of students attempting to change their grades have been of interest to the media, and informally, within the academic community. With macro and micro forces affecting the student’s potential academic and subsequent career, grades appear to be a central theme for individual progression. The study explores the supposed increase in student attempts to uplift their grades by investigating actual,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

perceived and anticipated change in student behaviour towards grade grubbing in the new UK HE post-2012 tuition fee paradigm.

### 3.2 Research Aim

The aim is to understand the reported phenomena of grade enquiries as perceived by students and academics at Coastal University in the post Browne Review higher tuition fee landscape.

#### 3.2.1 Research Questions

1. What are the background pressures on students that may result in grade enquiries?
2. What are students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries?
3. What are academics' experiences and attitudes to students who make grade enquiries?
4. What are the policy implications in relation to student grade enquiring and feedback in terms of institutions' responses to this?

The methodology for this study takes the pragmatic approach and uses a mixed method research design. The choice of methodology was devised to meet the aim of exploring the views of participants, in depth, at one institution. This chapter deliberates the methodology considered to answer the research questions under investigation, the methods used, the sampling and research integrity. The approach to data collection and the instruments used are evaluated. Coding and analysis are discussed, noting the importance of the participants' voice throughout. Consideration was given to ensure credibility throughout. The chapter concludes with an assessment of relevant research ethics, limitations and delimitations and how these were addressed.

### 3.3 Research Philosophy

This chapter follows the Creswell (2003) three step research design process; i.e. a philosophical discussion, followed by a research design that develops into the methodology and method for data collection. Creswell also recommends that

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

knowledge claim positions must acknowledge pluralistic participant voices to address a problem that is oriented in real-world practice.

This study, interpretive in nature, intends to explore both the perceptions and experiences of the participants in one institution so as to ascertain the realities relating to the research aim and questions. The author recognises the shared institutional work and study space as well as the shared realities that both sets of participants experience.

An exploration of the ontological and epistemological positions of a researcher is a common process to identify the researcher's worldview.

The ontological position influences the way we judge what constitutes reality and how we understand existence (Silverman 2010), and thus ultimately the data collection method to answer the research question. This leads to an epistemology, which influences understanding of valid knowledge and how it can be gathered (Moses and Knutson 2007) and into the methodological framework of research, otherwise known as the worldviews of research (Creswell 2013a), which, as Grix (2010, p.27) notes "can lead to different views of the same social phenomena".

The inevitable imbroglio of research, based on personal and individualistic characteristics and variables, highlights, as Macfarlane (2009, p.3) puts it, that "Real' research is about the stuff of human life: hope and disappointment, loyalty and betrayal, triumph and tragedy". I expected to find a combination of all of these in the data.

In order to address my specific questions, which are set in an educational landscape, and arise in everyday practice, I wanted a research method that would be systematic, rigorous and methodical. The data to be collected was to be, in the most part, empirical in nature: that of explanations and descriptions of events or experiences. Consideration was also given as to whether the data could be generalisable, which is considered noteworthy in natural sciences and also the model for other forms of research (Usher and Scott 1996), however, whilst this might be desirable for other researchers, I consider that not all research can be generalisable since variables affect the outcome, including the variable of time and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

human response. Whilst natural science is favoured amongst certain types of researchers, the research methods do not necessarily function for social sciences, the area in which this study lies.

There are a number of research paradigms available for the researcher to align themselves with. Each were explored so as to assess their suitability for this thesis and the research aim.

Firstly, a pragmatic view was taken to fulfil the research. Since Higher Education is a service, and the students are considered consumers of knowledge, and humans in a social landscape. I considered students and academics, like all other humans in a shared social setting, as inconsistent, contradictory yet insistent, and thus a pragmatic, interpretivist view was considered, since I was searching for trends and patterns in the data to be reviewed interpretively and inductively. Pragmatism can be considered as a bridge between a paradigm and a methodology. Greene and Caracelli (2003) consider pragmatism as a particular standpoint at the interface between philosophy and methodology. The pragmatic perspective was most closely aligned to my approach of taking in both objective and subjective viewpoints (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, p.88); by not committing to one philosophy, reality or complex social framings of the nature of truth, but focusing on the research problem and operable logistics rather than classical considerations. A pragmatic approach facilitates a more mixed-methods approach and keeps open possibilities of interpretation beyond a rigid social framing of reality.

Secondly, the social constructivist and interpretivist viewpoint was considered. Social constructivism focuses on understandings from an insider viewpoint and posits that interactions with others enhance cognitive functions, such as learning, that is constructed socially and culturally and is not therefore undiscoverable (Gredler 1997; Ernest 1999). Thus, knowledge, according to Schunk (2012) is an outcome of interactions between individuals in groups in a specific environment.

This research aims to explore and understand diverse viewpoints, behaviours and motivations, as well as experiences and understandings (Mason 1996) of the grade enquiry phenomena, in order to build new knowledge. Acknowledging that

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

reality is complex and idiosyncratic, this thesis is open to multiple interpretations, including my own. All data collected and interpreted is as the respondents and readers themselves and, therefore, subjective.

When an institutional reality is to be examined as a social construct, and the participants are the sample target, the literature supports a pragmatic approach (Creswell 2003). Creswell also supports a pragmatic mixed method approach for a study that seeks relevant human experiences, interests and voices in a particular location, such as education, reflecting a critical realism and where problem-solving is a daily requirement.

Furthermore, Bryman (2006) recommends mixing methods for the purposes of validity in order to corroborate qualitative and quantitative data; to draw on the strengths and weaknesses of both and to provide a comprehensive picture that one methodology would not provide alone. Bryman also highlights that qualitative data can explain quantitative results and vice versa; both types can answer different questions.

The key methodology is qualitative using interviews, observations, case studies and life history narratives as data sources, supported by and triangulated with, quantitative data as a secondary methodology to answer the research questions.

### **3.4 The Research Design**

Mixed methods is the mixing of methodologies within a research design (Creswell 2003). It involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collected in parallel, separately analysed and then merged for 'exploration, interpretation, triangulation, complementarity, expansion and explanation' (Bryman 2006, p.105). The quantitative data highlights the respondents' attitudes towards a dimension of the question in statistical terms, whilst the qualitative explores the background, highlighting the richer, in-depth and more inductive data this approach produces, in order to generate multiple and contested notions of a purported reality, i.e. grade grubbing and the student as consumer. Mixed methods allow for mixing of tools that "can also expand the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn from a set of data" (Spector 1994, p.387), and this was considered the best way to gain a full understanding of the subject matter of this research. The mixed method

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

design gives importance to the collection of wide-ranging data sets that allow for rich immersion using constant contextual comparison and quantitative data to combine angles and variety of data to reach some insight and meaning. Mixed methods data provides more evidence for a study, with the prospect of providing better solutions and integration through inter-disciplinary input and can have a stronger impact for policymaking, particularly in areas that are complex and messy (O’Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl 2007a,b). The use of mixed methods was considered more efficient compared to the apparent inadequacy of quantitative methods alone to explore the complexity of research in higher education.

Some questions were influenced by or connected to work done by Franz (2010), Delucchi and Korgen (2002), HEPI-HEA (2014) and QAA (2012) but moved beyond those works to gain insights in the post-2012 fee paradigm.

In short, the research design is flexible. My research design preference is empirical and cross-sectional, driven by pragmatism. The research has the possibility of generalising to other post-1992 institutions, within the UK.

### **3.5 Sample Strategy**

The sampling design was purposive, comprising undergraduates, and academics working with undergraduates, at Coastal University. This section clarifies the populations, units, sample sizes, sampling frames, sampling bias and sampling techniques for both sets of participants. The first part looks at the sample strategy for the student respondents.

The population at Coastal University comprised approximately 14,000 undergraduate students per annum across both part-time (n=650) and full-time (n=13350) format, including those on associate degrees) studying a range of disciplines. Undergraduates were chosen as the issue related to UG students affected by the higher tuition fees that came into effect from 2012 (Browne 2010). The existing research has shown that students do have expectations arising from the fee-paying environment (HEPI-HEA 2014; QAA 2012), but no research exists relating to grade expectations of UG in the UK from 2012 onwards. The student sample size varied according to the method (see the discussions of each method below) and comprised: 197 first years, 70 second years and 48 final year students

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

with 87 students failing to identify their year. Data was collected from a total of 402 students. Twenty-seven questionnaire responses were incomplete but data was kept as any data is useful data.

Undergraduates were chosen, not for the purposes of keeping in line with other grade-related studies, but because of their location in the post-2012 increased fee landscape and was considered representative of the population at post-2012 universities in England. The sample age was open to capture responses from the perceived traditional student aged 18+ and those falling into the non-traditional category who might also be part-time, online or mature learners compared to those committed to full-time campus based programmes.

Sampling bias, that of units (aka students) who did not reflect the population for inclusion in the sample (Bryman 2002) were excluded from the survey through the use of a screening question in the survey (i.e., "Are you a current Coastal University Undergraduate?"). Whilst this gatekeeping was not strong, I did not want to ask students to engage with password protection as the survey tool did not provide a password protection function. At the same time, I did not want to ask for their student number as it would breach the ethical principle of anonymity. In the case of the focus groups and concept mapping, respondents were conveniently based on my own campus and were easy to access. A non-probability sampling technique was used. This allows for the subjective judgment of a researcher at the point of selecting students from the overall population to be included in the research sample. The choice of units was based on insights from the literature, experience of the population and institution and related to the research topic. As I work in a university and thus sharing the same workspace and HE landscape with the population, convenience sampling was used to gain some representation of the student population within participating faculties and across methods (see the discussion of limitations later), by approaching individuals or seeking volunteers via their academics. Snowball sampling, whereby respondents who were part of the same network and homogenous group (Braun and Clark 2013) of the invited and voluntary participants were also accepted as long as they met the criteria. Convenience sampling with potential snowballing may result in over or under-representation of units or groups within the sample. This result, in turn, may create

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

a bias on a particular campus and, thus, this sampling strategy may not be the appropriate solution for the study. On the other hand, this sampling method allows for data collection relatively quickly and inexpensively compared to other techniques that require time, effort and permissions (Bryman 2002) to access employee and student lists within the university. This convenience sampling also applied to the academic sample.

The second part looks at the sample strategy for the academic unit respondents.

The population comprised academics in the same HE institution (approximately 1350 units (staff) in a range of contract formats, including those on associate degrees) across a number of disciplines. The demographic chosen were academics who had been involved in marking undergraduate students' work from 2012, when the higher tuition fee model came into effect (Browne 2010). The existing research has shown that academics do have expectations for fees, particularly from a consumerist standpoint (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Molesworth *et al.* 2009; QAA 2012) but no research exists relating to grade expectations of UG from 2012 onwards in the UK. The academic sample size varied according to the method (questionnaires 172; Interviews 6 and concept maps 4) and comprised of academics across several campuses, but mostly from the main campus and mostly from the media and business faculties. The unit sample size varied according to the method (see each method). The segment data relates to academics, teaching students located in the post-2012 increased fee landscape and was considered representative of the academic population at post-2012 universities in England. The sample age ranged from 25 to 74 years old indicating a diverse age population. Academics were in posts ranging from hourly paid through to long-term contracted staff reflecting core demographic factors that might influence responses to questions about their work experiences.

Academic-related staff who did not reflect the population for inclusion in the sample (Bryman 2002) were excluded from the survey by the use of a screening question in the survey (i.e., "Have you marked work from Undergraduate students in the last three years"?). Whilst this question was not an absolute determinant of a respondent's relevance, a password protection function within the survey tool did not exist, thus exclusion of non-related participants cannot be fully assured,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

however, given the participant reach and qualitative responses relevance to the topic, I am convinced that the data is appropriate for inclusion. In terms of identifying respondents, I did not want to ask academics for their names as it would breach the ethical principle of anonymity. In the case of the interviews and concept mapping, respondents were known, as they were conveniently based on my own campus, however, anonymity was applied to the maps. The sampling technique was the same as for the students and for the sake of economy, is not repeated here (see previous page).

### **3.6 Sampling Error**

Sampling error, such as non-response, was evident. From a potential population of 1350 academics and 14,000 students, only 178 of 1350 academics, and 402 out of 14,000 students overall contributed to the research study. Factors included little or limited access or engagement with online surveys, lack of engagement with email, survey fatigue, workload issues, departmental forbidding student to student research, contractual availability, attitudes towards the topic or privacy concerns. Whilst the literature suggests that small sample sizes may be difficult to support claims (Lincoln and Guba 1985) or theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1990), it was recognised that a pragmatic approach to understanding the respondents was key in order to fulfil the study requirements in a given timeframe. Furthermore, the response numbers for students were considered sufficient to underpin a larger project for the future (5% confidence interval) but a slightly weaker sample for the academic respondents.

### **3.7 Research Methods**

The research questions were answered through the use of several methodological tools (see Figure 1):

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Research Questions	Research Intentions	Data Sources	Methods
Q1. What are the background pressures on <u>students</u> that may result in grade enquiries?	This question sought to identify why students might make grade enquiries, rather than how many. This question had not been tested and I wanted to explore it.	Students and academics	Focus groups, questionnaire and concept maps
Q2. What are <u>students'</u> experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries?	This question sought to understand students' individual experiences and their attitudes towards those experiences. This is an emerging area of research and I wanted to understand it.	Students	Focus groups, questionnaire and concept maps
Q3. What are <u>academics'</u> experiences and attitudes to students who make grade enquiries?	This question sought to identify the experiences of academics in respect to grade enquiry situations. This area is under-developed and I wanted to give voice to academics regarding this issue.	Academics	Interviews, questionnaire and concept maps
Q4. What are the policy implications in relation to student grade enquiring and feedback in terms of institutions' responses to this?	This question sought insights from both academics and students that would inform the institution on stakeholders' views on policies to address the issue of grade enquiries.	Academics and students	Interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and concept maps

Figure 1: Research questions and correlating data collection tools (Author's own)

### **3.8 Data Collection and Instruments**

#### **3.8.1 Overview**

This section identifies the data collection instruments, their purpose, success and limitations. It includes an overview of the sample size and sample error, as well as detailed description of the methods employed.

Several tools were utilised for data collection using a mixed methods approach comprising a review and analysis of the literature; two quantitative online questionnaires featuring open-ended responses. In addition, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews; focus groups and concept mediated-maps. It should be noted that the words “mark” and “grade” are used interchangeably.

All data was collected contemporaneously between February and May 2015, in the third year following the significant tuition fee increase, with no priority given to any method. The working title for data collection was “Students and their Grades” to ensure that both sets of respondents understood the research context.

#### **3.8.2 Pilot Study**

A pilot study was carried out to confirm the accuracy of the sample choice as well as the interpretation of the meaning of the questions by respondents. Furthermore, it was designed to assess whether sufficient information could be gathered, as well as indicate any weaknesses in the questions (Sarantakos 2013). The pilot study highlighted a few questioning flaws, such as asking respondents to recall several historical incidents from the last three years, which they might not recall very well. The data capture function in the survey tool was hard to design but more importantly, respondents’ could not recall all incidents. The study was reworded to ask about the most extreme or most recent incident that respondents might recall. As this question was of importance, it was deemed appropriate for exploration within the in-depth context of one-to-one interviews and focus groups so as to achieve rich data.

All methods had some question similarities. The content was somewhat mirrored across the questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and concept maps across both

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

academics and students. This allowed for triangulation of response commonalities, providing dependability of findings (Daymon and Holloway 2002).

### **3.8.3 Method One - Online Questionnaires**

Online questionnaires were used to survey both students (n= 369) and academics (n= 172) and were designed to gather enough data to address the research questions without producing excessive detail by focusing on questions that were vital for the research (Denscombe 2007, p.162). Since motivations and perceptions are not easily captured in quantitative data, this method was used to determine demographic information and tap into descriptive information about respondents' situations, experiences and attitudes. Furthermore, the questionnaires were useful as triangulation for the qualitative data.

#### **3.8.3.1 Questionnaires**

The questionnaires opened with a participant information front sheet, including an ethical information and consent form. In addition, the first few questions included some validation questions to determine whether the respondent was a relevant match. It incorporated some traditional demographic questions as well as questions about experiences in HE, and knowledge of university regulations, leading up to the topic of grade enquiries. Views on bribery were explored for moral perspectives. Links between perceived or actual grade grubbing and the higher fee paradigm were explored. The questionnaires covered all the areas of interest across the four main research questions. This was done to ensure that some data was gathered in case in-depth data was not collected in focus groups and interviews due to a lack of candidness amongst participants.

The question types and response scales were chosen to address the question in hand. For example, descriptive questions were asked to gather data on what is known or perceived such as the demographic information about gender, faculty and age (Bryman 2002). Descriptive questions were used to measure or observe respondents' views on the topic under investigation. In addition, several questions were designed to be relational, in terms of looking at the relationship between two variables, that of academics and students. For example, both sets of respondents were asked whether they thought bribery was acceptable, thus studying the relationships between academic status and a societal attitude. The research design avoided causal questions; those that are designed to determine when variables cause or affect outcome variables, as those belong to the experimental domain (Babbie 2010), however the question asked of academic staff "How do you

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

feel the following factors influence students to question their marks?" could be considered causal. This question was answered using a quantitative matrix/rating scale and responses were interpreted for potential causes rather than factual causes.

Multiple questions were indirect to avoid perceived confrontation and a potential accusatory tone, and thus to encourage openness: For example, an exploratory question asked of students, "In some cultures, bribing lecturers for an increased grade is common. All things considered, do you think it is acceptable to bribe staff for an increased grade?". Whilst students may not be able to predict the attitudes and behaviours of others, it is possible that students will draw on their own experiences and attitudes in order to offer a response. Thus, the responses are based on some sense of a reality and some perceptions. As such, the responses can only be used as a subjective guide rather than absolute facts and this subjectivity is recognised.

### **3.8.3.2 Evaluation of Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was carried out online for purposes of speed and cost-efficiency over other offline methods (Grossnickle and Rashin 2001; Ranchhod and Zhou 2001) but with potentially low response rates (Sheehan 2001).

The questionnaire was promoted through institutional email, a tool widely used in the environment for communication. To achieve representation in the research an online questionnaire, available to all faculties/departments/schools, was a suitable choice to avoid bias rather than data gathering from a single faculty/department/school (Bryman 2008, p.174); however, there were limitations. For example, a large number of responses are deemed necessary to reduce bias (Bryman 2008, p. 188), however this was not fully achieved from either respondent group.

The survey of undergraduate students was highlighted through email promotion via institutional gatekeepers such as Heads of Faculty, Student Experience Heads and academic group professors who sent it out to students' university email accounts across levels, their own programmes or own seminar groups. A problem with online surveys is the likelihood of the introductory email being ignored or deleted, or potential respondents simply not using their university account. Furthermore, students may feel that their privacy might be exploited or they may have reading challenges, however, the online approach had benefits to capture

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

data from those not in fixed geographical locations where paper surveys or interviews are carried out, such as those undertaking online degrees.

The survey to staff was highlighted through networks of Departmental Heads, as faculty gatekeepers, and union representatives to all academics on the university payroll.

Potential problems here were transient staff, who are not paid to engage with surveys, those who are time poor, those leaving the institution, those concerned about confidentiality and those simply not interested.

The data was analysed in two ways. The SurveyMonkey tool provided data that was both quantitative and qualitative, the latter through open box comments.

The quantitative data was exported from SurveyMonkey into spreadsheets and converted into graphs and tables in JPEG format. Pertinent data that had been analysed, and which aligned to the qualitative themes arising from the semi-structured interviews, focus group and concept map data, was imported into a Microsoft Word document. The findings were amalgamated, with survey data either complementing other methods or presented alone such as descriptive data, e.g. location of study (students and staff were located across multiple sites).

The qualitative data within the SurveyMonkey data was uploaded into NVivo and subsumed into the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, focus groups and concept maps for analysis using Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) Constant Comparative Process Method (see Appendix I). This process for data analysis is critiqued in the section on concept mapping.

The overall response rate from students was 2.6% (369/14,000) and 12.7% (172/1,350) from the academics, which could be considered low. However, it could be argued that additional data may not have added new information and this response rate may have achieved data saturation (Morse 1995).

There were multiple limitations with the questionnaire: it sought contained amounts of information, could not interpret respondents' emotions, could not assess if the respondents were truthful or had interpreted the question in context. Such

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

deficiencies indicate a potential lack of validity (Bryman 2008). In terms of strengths, this tool was useful as it gathered data in organised sections through online channels without the need to approach individuals who may not have had the time, or wanted to respond at a time that suited me. This tool was open for the respondents to complete at a time and place of their choosing, in confidence without prompts and distractions.

The data collected was useful in terms of understanding how many individuals agreed about a dimension of the topic under discussion. This data could be aligned to the qualitative data to understand why participants responded to a particular issue within the phenomenon that was being researched.

### **3.8.4 Method Two - Focus groups**

Focus groups were conducted with undergraduate students to see how the topics were discussed in a group environment, rather than in individual responses, observing how the views build up out of group interaction (Bryman 2008). It can be difficult for respondents to articulate behaviour and attitudinal motivations because they are not of conscious importance to research participants (Morgan and Krueger 1993), however, focus group interactivity provides enablement opportunities for participants to engage with and expand on the articulations of others (Litosseliti 2003).

#### **3.8.4.1 Sample Size**

Five focus groups were utilised and included one first year, 15 second years and 10 final year students, mostly female (due to course gender imbalance). The sample frame was non-probability based using convenience and purposive sampling for ease of accessibility to relevant participants that match the study (i.e. undergraduates at one institution). The students who volunteered were all undergraduates and were accepted on the basis that they were, or had been, studying at Coastal University since 2012 when the tuition fee increase had taken effect. At the point of the focus groups taking place, the students would have already had some assessments marked and received feedback, although it is acknowledged that first years would have received less than final year students. The focus group data was used to complement the online questionnaires.

### 3.8.4.2 Focus Groups in Action

Following the guidelines in Flick *et al.* (2004), participants were approached either through their programme leader or in response to their peer invitation, in order to their elicit interest as a group member, and the framework of the focus group was explained before the day, including the topic, the purpose and use of the focus group data, the expected duration and agreement to use an audio recorder.

The focus groups took place in pre-booked quiet rooms around lunchtime. Food was provided and students signed a participant information sheet that clarified what the session would cover (Knodel 1993) as well as a consent sheet before proceeding. Each group ran for just over an hour.

Several pre-prepared semi-structured questions (see Appendix E) asked about perceptions and experiences, as well as allowing for spontaneous group member-led questions to be considered. This two-pronged approach allowed for flexibility in responses and levels of engagement. A funnelled approach to questioning was used (Oppenheim 1992), starting with general enquiries about motivations for going to university through to any specific grade enquiry experiences, and the questioning was left open so that I could explore responses that were not expected (Knodel 1993). The script led the students through discussions relating to receiving grades and how they responded to them; how they perceived the value of grades in the course and after graduation; experiences of grade enquiries; knowledge of grade leveraging; and, knowledge of academic policies. The guideline questioning allowed for other themes to arise. The focus group guide can be found in Appendix E and evidences how the questions were linked to the questions one and two, and conceptual ideas.

The questioning approach used to “penetrate the barrier of awareness” (Oppenheim 1992, p.211) was the projective questioning technique. This technique was used to ask participants to, amongst other points, consider a hypothetical grade enquiry situation (Oppenheim 1992). This required participants to extract references from their own experiences, attitudes and perceptions and apply those to this imaginary approach, using them as “building blocks” and revealing their own motivations across the questioning piece. Krueger and Casey

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

(2015) highlight that the best way to achieve openness in a focus group is to choose participants who share the same backgrounds and concern but do not know each other. The focus group participants were invited to attend via their academics, thus they were part of the same departmental academic network and each formed homogenous groups (Braun and Clarke 2013), that of being undergraduates. This reduced the need for intervention from the researcher as there was a “ready-made interactional familiarity” within the groups (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.115) serving an advantage that comfortable familiarity allowed them to elaborate or challenge each other’s viewpoints (Braun and Clarke 2013). Although participants knew of each other from their academic department they were not necessarily from the same course, seminar or social groups. However, there was acknowledgement that each member was from the same campus. Furthermore, to encourage a sense of openness, particularly with younger people, Krueger and Casey (2015) highlight the importance of avoiding accusatory questions, but to invite information. This was put into practice by asking questions such as “Have you heard of students trying to get a marker to change their grades?”. Students were quick to give their views and at no stage were there any hesitations in providing perspectives.

A flip chart was used to note elements that arose during the session and each element was put into order of importance to each individual in the group. To gain greater insights on specific topics, further interrogation on grade enquiries was followed through.

The focus group discussion was digitally recorded to capture participants’ views whilst key points were noted on paper in coded form as a point of interest on the recording. This helped keep a fluid and permanent record of the group conversation for later transcription, as well as allowing a trusting relationship to develop between the participants.

Questions covered key topics arising from the literature and the research focus, eliciting valuable data that had moral and ethical implications, but that also captured topics the respondents were interested in pursuing, thus providing other themes for consideration in the future.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Each focus group closed with a personal thank you, a follow up email to thank each individual for their time and a copy of the transcript for review. An opportunity to review their data was provided. No changes were forthcoming from the focus group respondents.

### **3.8.4.3 Evaluation of Focus Groups**

The strengths of this method allow for discussions about a shared topic between the moderator and the group within a specific setting. Each group member is a stakeholder in the interactive discussion and has an opportunity to express views that might not be forthcoming or considered unless a catalyst voice raises a point. Furthermore, hearing other participants discuss their views on grade enquiries allowed individuals to compare and contrast their perspectives and articulate their own motivations and perspectives (Morgan and Krueger 1993).

Limitations of this method include the potential for respondents to feel pressure to give similar answers to their peers, or go off topic, and may not be representative of the population under study.

The latter was recognised, as it was not possible to access online or part-time students using this method. The method was successful with a number of students, however, due to the incentive provided, that of tailored refreshments over lunchtime periods, and the casual atmosphere that led to several frank discussions.

This method provided in-depth, rich data that was not possible to gather from the questionnaires and concept maps, combined or alone. Information gathered using this method gave group members a way to express their views unrestrained by methods such as the online survey, and provided comparable and reliable data for triangulation with concept maps and questionnaires. The method responses explained some of data provided from the survey results that could not be predicted. For example, the survey data indicated that students blamed academics for a lack of student support.

### **3.8.5 Method three – Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi structured interviews with academics were designed to gain insights from academic professionals in HE who have supported students during academic and emotional times. Similar to focus groups, the semi-structured interview approach was used heuristically to expand ideas rather than to just gather “facts and statistics” (Oppenheim 1992, p.67). Through an open invitation and self-selection recruitment approach, I was able to interview willing participants who were stakeholders in the research issues that interested and affected them, and myself. To improve the confirmability of the study, I attempted to be impartial, avoiding allowing pre-existing relationships to affect the interview (Braun and Clarke 2013).

#### **3.8.5.1 Sample Size**

Convenience and purposive sampling was utilised for the interviews for ease of accessibility to participants. The purposive sampling strategy may allow for some generalisations from the findings (Bryman 2008, p.183), however, it is recognised that not all participants are representative of all university academics as individuals are unique and unmanageable (Gabriel and Lang 2006). A sample size of six was chosen because the interviews were long and in-depth, providing a considerable amount data that took over 60 hours to transcribe, and approximately 11 hours to interpret. Thompson (1996, p.392) noted and justified this by recalling that his work

*“follows in a tradition of consumer research that emphasizes developing a more in-depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants”.*

The number of respondents required for interviews appears to vary across educational research. For example, numbers range from five participants up to 15 (Van der Mescht 2004; Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* 2002; Creswell 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994) whilst Becker (in Baker and Edwards 2012, p.5) suggests it may also “only take a few interviews to demonstrate that a phenomenon is more complex or varied than previously thought” and finally, Smith and Osborn (2003:54) suggest that the sample size depends on the “richness of the individual cases”.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

I sought participants who had had experience assessing and marking the work of undergraduates since 2012, since these individuals were judged to be those most likely to have had grade enquiry experiences. The participants who volunteered represented their faculty and were ranged across the basic academic levels of employment (gender, age, experience and pay format) and were known as semi-distant colleagues to the interviewer. Since the general study was already on the knowledge radar of many staff, and the subject was of interest to many with recommendations to engage through word-of-mouth, this helped avoid the need to create a rapid interviewer-interviewee relationship. The limitation is that this route risks attracting those with the most trenchant views on the matter, and potentially disproportionately omitting a “silent majority”. Despite wide promotion across the university communication systems for interviewees across all the subject areas, only a few were available in the research timeframe. The academic participants were aligned to the subject areas of business, media, hospitality and biological sciences.

The staff interviewed included adjuncts and those with tenure, of both genders and across the age spectrum and views were sought on perceptions, experiences and anticipation of students’ potential grade expectations in the post 2012-tuition fee paradigm.

### **3.8.5.2 Interviews in Action**

Following the guidelines of Flick *et al.* (2004), each interviewee was approached to elicit interest as a participant, and the framework of the interview explained before the interview day including the topic, the purpose and use of the data collected, the expected duration of the interview and agreement to use an audio recorder.

The interview was set within the participants’ staff office at the convenience and comfort of the academic. Tailored refreshments were provided from the university café. Similar to the focus group and concept map procedure, a participant information sheet and consent sheet was provided and signed before proceeding. Each interview ran for approximately between 1-1.5 hours. A discussion guide supported the structure and flexibility of the interview (Gillham 2005). The use of funnel-type questioning aimed to direct the interview discreetly from one topic to

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

another to avoid making obvious the key information being sought (Oppenheim 1992) and the questioning was left open so that I could explore responses that were not expected (Knodel 1993). Thompson *et al.* (1989, p.138) highlight the importance of the interview technique as being “attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experiences”. This allows the participant to “reflect on past experiences and consider their personal significance and meaning” (Thompson *et al.* 1994, p.434). This method was appropriate for my research, which is about understanding participants’ actual lived experience of student enquiries after marking assessments in HE, and the meanings they attached to those experiences.

The semi-structured questions were standardised with key points to ensure that most material was covered; the order of the questions was at the discretion of the interviewer, however, and maintained a conversational rather than staccato style approach to achieve the required depth of response. Additional data was recorded and analysed, providing unexpected insights.

The academics also completed the questionnaire in order to respond to questions not covered or likely to be missed in the interview, and this was considered acceptable as the interview allowed them to explain certain topics in depth. The combined methods ensured that research questions one and three were addressed. The choice of semi-structured interview was to avoid the same rigidity in questioning that was seen in the online questionnaire, and to allow me to see how the participant would respond to particular questions and thus to explore their thoughts as responses catapulted from one train of thought to another. In terms of respondent openness, Kvale (2008, p.20) highlights that the

*“openness and intimacy of the interview may be seductive and can lead to subjects to disclose information they may later regret”*

To mitigate this, the data was reviewed with the respondent for approval to proceed, reconsider or delete.

Each interview closed with a personal thank you, a follow up email to thank each individual for their time and a copy of the transcript for their own record. An opportunity for participants to review their data was provided. Only one academic

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

reformatted two lines of the data as it related to an anecdote provided and they were keen to give the correct detail.

The interviews were recorded for transcription. The recordings were transcribed and uploaded for open and onward coding through NVivo in order to identify and categorise key themes arising from the data (Saunders *et al.* 2009) using Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) Constant Comparative Process Method (see Appendix I). This process for data analysis is critiqued in Section Four for concept mapping.

### **3.8.5.3 Evaluation of Semi-structured Interviews**

The strength of this method is that it is useful to gather experts' perceptions, attitudes, practices, beliefs and opinions on past and present behaviours or experiences, techniques commonly used in policy research (Harrell and Bradley 2009, p.32). Whilst semi-structured interviews can be time consuming they are more likely to produce better data than focus groups (Wimmer and Dominick 1997, p.140) as they are focused on spontaneous, possibly rambling, views from one individual as opposed to competing voices in focus groups. The data I collected was considerable and directly relevant to the phenomena under investigation as seen from the perspective of academics who may have had experiences and developed attitudes towards grading and student behaviours as a result of marking assessments and receiving grade enquiries. The method was good for the purpose of getting a nuanced picture of academics' views of the HE landscape.

### **3.8.6 Concept Mapping**

Concept mapping is a visual tool and has been used in HE research to reveal patterns of student (non-)learning (Hay 2007), for the purpose of enhancing teaching quality in HE (Hay *et al.* 2008) and as an alternative method to other code- or word-based techniques such as open-ended survey questions (Jackson and Trochim 2002).

According to Daley (2004), researchers find that qualitative enquiry poses challenges in relation to the data analysis process. The process requires the interrogation of vast amounts of word-based data and reducing the text through sorting it into several sets of themes. The data is iteratively reduced from a large

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

number of themes until the key themes present themselves (the detail is discussed in Chapter 4 and a sample map can be seen in Appendix F).

Novak and Gowin (1984, p.15) describe a concept map as

*“a schematic device for representing a set of concept meanings embedded in a framework of propositions”*

which can be used as a framework for the research project, and to analyse interconnections both within a study and by connecting through the data by linking top end hierarchical concepts with other ideas that can be included (Novak 1998). These maps helped focus on meaning and concepts that respondents displayed in their interlinked writing.

Concept maps elicit data that can extend beyond typically sparse responses to contextual questions of importance to the mapper (Geer 1991; Sproull 1988). This method has been applied in a number of instances and with positive reviews for data gathering and analysis providing pictorial input to the verbal and written routes.

### **3.8.6.1 Sample Size**

Participants (students  $n = 7$ ; academics  $n = 4$ ) signed a participant information and consent sheet before proceeding.

### **3.8.6.2 Concept Mapping in Action**

Concept maps had an important function in providing an alternative perspective to that of the focus group verbal data while providing visual support for the focus group conversations, illustrating the wider story. Concept mapping was explained and a visual of a previously created map for fruit salad was provided to ascertain that the respondent understood the task. They were then asked to draw a concept map (see sample in Appendix F) that covered broad perceptions around grade enquiries, behaviours, institutional policies and personal attitudes towards grade challenges and perceptions of self in the HE landscape. Each prompting question was brief and time was allowed for the respondent to reveal their insights, at their level, in their own words rather than known jargon. Participants were encouraged to explain concepts, procedures and situations to expand their thoughts as

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

committed to paper. These maps were uploaded into the NVivo software for word or sentence capture and filed or grouped into new or existing themes that arose in the data and could be cross-referenced with the other methods used. The concept maps served as a triangulation tool rather than a key data collection tool.

For concept mappers going on to interviews or focus group, following the QAA (2012) example of the application of concept maps, examples were used as a starting point for discussion.

Mappers were able to make links and relationships between key phrases considered important to them. This also enabled me to compare data concepts so as to get a better understanding of the bigger picture as seen by the mappers and participants involved in other methods. For example, one mapper (CM:ME:3:M:7) connected the starting topic of 'The Academic/Student Relationship' with '*odd*' extending out to '*professionalism*' and '*friendship*' and later linking 'professionalism' to '*lack of respect for academics*' and '*students demand more 1-1*'. On '*friendship*', the mapper connected '*inconsistencies*' and '*minefield*' linking these words back to '*odd*'. This indicated that the student/academic relationship varied according to the individuals and highlighted potential future research on staff/student relationships.

An holistic overview of the maps inspired codes for contemplation. "Invalid" themes were coded and noted for consideration for future research projects, or eliminated.

### 3.8.6.3 Evaluation of Concept Mapping

The strength of this method was the provision of "at a glance" data that could be used to corroborate other qualitative responses. Participants mentioned that they enjoyed the silence that allowed them to provide maps of their thoughts without having to stop and explain, this was similar to a visual brain-dump. One participant requested a copy to use as a basis for a PGCE reflective assignment indicating the therapeutic quiet time this method provided. This method, however, whilst useful for the visual key points provided by participants, lacked real depth compared to interviews and focus groups, although it did provide triangulation data that was easy to cross reference with data gathered elsewhere.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Limitations for this method were respondents with weak visualisation and drawing skills who reverted to writing lists or wanting to talk about the topic, however, it was possible to gain some understanding from the headline points and single strand linkages provided. For example, a year 2 mapper (CM:ME:2:M:8) on 'Attitudes to grades' recalled the attitude of '*60+ = I'm happy/less=unhappy*', while the statement '*students struggle to see how a grade is arrived at, may not understand criteria*' indicated confusion about grading processes. These comments related to question two and were used for triangulation purposes. Novak and Cañas (2007) make clear that the subsuming process of concept mapping, and their ensuing interpretation, makes it difficult for successive researchers to comprehend the data findings. Of concern is whether the reader can rely on the credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of the process. If the perception or understanding of the process is compromised, then there may be doubts about qualitative findings. This is acknowledged, however, the ongoing audit trails evidence my thinking as data was continuously subsumed into hierarchical headings.

Across the range of methods, the data highlighted content that appeared invalid. For example, there was only one comment from a student who had expectations of famous lecturers on campus, there was no wide evidence in the data for this, and so was excluded. In addition, there was only one reference to lost pieces of work, one comment relating to online teaching, one comment about staff unable to crowd control a lecture, one comment where there was an expectation for staff to have industry experience and one comment regarding league tables having linkage to employability (source: open coding sheet 232). These outlier themes were kept but did not contribute to the reporting of the overall findings. The most useful concept map related specifically to grade enquiries and corroborated the data from focus groups with students and semi-structured interviews with staff.

### 3.9 Research Integrity

The research sought to find explanations for a phenomenon that produced comprehensible responses to understand how those forces affect the daily lives of those studied.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The research reflects a social science that allows the researcher to argue that reality is fluctuating, temporary and complicated. In turn, these are elements that can pose a threat to validity. In terms of being accepted, checks were carried out to assess if the “research is measuring what it is intended to measure” (Winter 2000, p.3). The validity was scrutinised by feedback and this is discussed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four measures that confirm the integrity of qualitative research: confirmability; transferability; credibility and dependability.

For quantitative research, Cohen *et al.* (2000), meanwhile, include measures such as objectivity; construct validity; internal validity; external validity and reliability.

### **3.9.1 Construct Validity**

Construct validity testifies to how well the results obtained from the use of the measure fit the theories around which the test is designed (Sekaran 1992, p.173). This was addressed by designing the research in line with the multiple literature sources, subsequently compared to the data gathered with the phenomena being viewed from a variety of angles, transparently processed through SurveyMonkey software and NVivo 10 software, the latter having data treated through Maykut and Morehouse’s (1994) Constant Comparative Process (see Appendix I).

The data gathered perceptions and experiences that were both spontaneous and lived. With no pre-defined categories for grouping responses, categories emerged from the data and were processed and combined through inductive reasoning to produce a model giving insights into the investigation. This method involves analysing individual incidents (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that leads to both explanatory and descriptive categories (Lincoln and Guba 1985) that change in terms of content and definition during each iterative analytical process.

Whilst this method is similar to the principles of thematic analysis in terms of extracting themes from within the textual data, it allows the user identify and describe differences of a social phenomenon systematically in varying circumstances (Boeije 2002; 2010). Thus, this method is suited for discovering concepts and processes from experiences.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The concepts were developed through an ongoing process of comparing and grouping specific items of data (Taylor and Bogdan 1984) as they made sense to me.

Furthermore, the validity was scrutinised by multiple thesis supervisors throughout the data analysis stages as presented in wide format printouts for discussion.

### **3.9.2 Confirmability/Objectivity**

The confirmability/objectivity of the research was verified by supervisors and other researchers. Respondents and participants can confirm engagement with the study. A chain of evidence of responses from anonymous respondents exists via NVivo 10 and SurveyMonkey allowing an external observer to follow the trail of progression from start to conclusion, confirming transparency and authenticity. The signed transcripts from interviews, focus groups and concepts maps are held elsewhere and could be corroborated if required.

### **3.9.3 Internal Validity/Credibility**

Internal validity / credibility in a case study deals with identifying phenomena in a credible manner that assists in clarifying suggested aspects of lived experiences (Merriam 1988); and has been established through analysis of pilot studies, the development of visual data to evidence links between the collected data and the literature and through the credibility established through triangulation, peer debriefing, ongoing engagement with respondents and participants, multiple supervisory meetings and the viva panel (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Merriam 1988).

### **3.9.4 External Validity/Transferability**

External validity / transferability determines whether the findings can be reproduced elsewhere in terms of generalisability (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984; Yin 1994). This study set out to generalise within the study with the research bounded (Brown 2008). Whilst transferability is considered only to be applicable in a multi-case study scenario, the findings can be applied into broader theory (Perry and Francis 1997) and the researcher suggests that this research could be repurposed and applied to other institutions, with some acknowledgement of institutional variation and subject to local conditions.

### **3.9.5 Reliability/Dependability**

Reliability /dependability addresses the issue of whether other researchers can recreate the study to achieve the same results using different methods at different times. Due to the impermanence of a single reality, reliability tests exist to evidence protocol throughout data collection, including ethics permissions, interview and focus group protocols and the existence of two data sets (see Merriam 1988; Parkhe 1993) and concept maps, which can be accessed by external viewers (Yin 1994) and evidence transparency. The data can be audited through the NVivo and SurveyMonkey software data trail (see Appendix G). The outputs were reviewed at stages by the supervisors, with outputs acting as auditors. The NVivo software management was overseen by the software providers, NVivo support, thus evidencing dependability. The reliability of the techniques are open to scrutiny, particularly as the researcher may have been subjective in their coding thus making the confirmability pathway choices subjective; however, employing the multiple techniques and tools identified previously suggests that a more dependable understanding of the phenomena being examined (Hirschman 1986) is probable and evident since the absolute truths of a small number are likely to be contradicted by several truths (Guba and Lincoln 1998).

### **3.10 Ethical Information**

An ethical approach to social science research is considered important by researchers, HEI's and the funders of any research project. In their Framework for Research Ethics, the ESRC (nd) highlight six principles that researchers should address: the quality and integrity of the research, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, avoidance of harm, and research independence and impartiality. These principles inform this study.

Firstly, the quality and integrity of this research can be verified through the awarding university agreeing to allow this research to proceed. The study has been observed and guided throughout the duration from inception to completion by supervisors, the ethics panel, an external examiner and the university ratification board. Secondly, voluntary participation was addressed at the start of each data collection method, "free from any coercion" (ESRC n.d). Each method started with

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

a consent form, either in paper format for the interviews, focus groups and concept maps, or as the first page of the online questionnaire; in each case indicating that if the respondent proceeded beyond the first page, they would be deemed to have given consent. Participant consent (see Appendix H for sample, adapted according to each method) was sought, however, following a written and verbal explanation of the study for use of data collected for this study and related future papers. With regards to compensation for participants, academics were offered small café refreshments for their involvement whilst students could be included in a small prize draw. The ERSC (nd) states that there is no clear guidance on this topic of compensation even though Alderson and Morrow (2004, p.2) insist that “no persuasion or pressure should be put on participants”. To avoid accusations of coercion or bribery, compensation offers were made at the end of the data collection method rather than at the start. Thirdly, informed consent was achieved through the provision of an information sheet (PIS) to read before signing the consent form. As the data highlighted some pastoral care issues (see FG3:P4 comment) any psychological concerns relating to student responses that arose were addressed through privacy and confidentiality considerations. Confidentiality and anonymity was highlighted and assurances were given to participants to ensure that anyone outside of the study would not be able to identify them. In order to access confidential data from individuals to understand very personal viewpoints, as a truth, I posed myself not as an academic working at the university but as a researcher, a student studying at another university. Although I positioned myself as a student for this study, it was known that I also worked at the university, however, the respondents willingly gave information, particularly if they felt strongly on a line of questioning ‘for the record’. Their identities are anonymous in this study.

In order to protect the identity of the institution where the research took place, the home university was renamed. For the purposes of this study, it has been identified as Coastal University.

Finally, independence and impartiality were considered, although it was noted that as I work in the same work space as the respondents, full independence was unlikely, partly because, I knew some of the academic interviewees and the

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

institution where data was being collected which made impartiality impossible.

The design of the research closely follows the University of Southampton Ethical Code of Conduct. This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee and is recorded under identity codes 11318 and 4402 in The University of Southampton ERGO software and assessed by the Ethics panel to ensure the rights and the safety of participants and respondents. This process also helps to protect the researcher and the organisation against potential legal claims, particularly against accusations of having failed to address ethical dimensions of research.

The study was targeted at those aged 18+ and no wider consent was required.

All data was coded numerically. Names were stored separately from the coded questionnaires. All online data with confidential details volunteered was extracted from the output. Cookies and personal data stored by a web browser were not used in the survey.

### **3.10.1 Data Protection**

All the data collected in this survey was held securely. Results are confidential to the institution. The researcher agreed not to identify any individual when reporting results internally or externally, and used best efforts to ensure that no individuals could be identified by implication.

The full dataset was available to the researcher in order to conduct data analysis, and all results were reported in an aggregated and anonymised form. The researcher could be contacted by email at any time.

In general, there were no expected casualties, however consideration was given to the following:

- Concerns over confidentiality preventing respondents engaging in case of institutional retribution.
- Concerns over identifying the university providing 'world class education' through the pseudonym used.

### **3.11 Exclusions**

Individuals such as those on short-term student exchange, staff exchange and study tours from outside the UK have been excluded.

It was recognised that assuming commonality amongst the respondents in this work was not appropriate as each person is unique with differing worldviews, but themes arising from NVivo used to address the research questions do reflect much commonality due to the environment and population purpose.

### **3.12 Limitations**

Due to the nature of the thesis timescale, a longitudinal design was not possible, nor was there control for other influences, i.e., investigation of a participant's behaviour can be explored, but there are no controls for perceptions. This could be a topic for future investigation.

In terms of self-reporting, comments that were seen, in the author's view, as idiosyncratic or personal, relating little to reality, were extracted to avoid any questions about relevance and validity.

Numbers of students were limited due to institutional barriers for surveying students eligible for the NSS, Unit Evaluation or Student Experience Surveys, being carried out at the time. Despite best efforts for representation across all UG levels, the number of final year students involved in the research was small, although some views were captured. This could be explored in the future.

There was concern about the undergraduate age range. Although the majority of participants were at the traditional point of entry, those who were mature were still classed as undergraduates. Their interpretations and perceptions of questions could be different, however, due to life experiences, and this may lead to more research in the future.

Lack of representation from both sets of respondents within several schools was a result of the fallout of ongoing department and school mergers into new faculties over the duration of this study. Finally, certain schools/faculties/departments opted to withdraw from the study on political grounds although a few representations

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

were observed. In hindsight, the faculties/schools/departments that did engage were considered the best representatives for programme areas considered subjective such as business, humanities and social sciences, however, the self-excluding departments may be worth exploring in the future.

The research methods chosen for data collection were driven by the need to approach the research phenomena from multi-dimensional angles so as to address the ontological issue of “multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality” (Creswell 2007, p.20). There is recognition “of the complexity, historical contingency and fragility of the practices that we invent to discover the truth about ourselves” (Lather 1991, p.7) so the instrument choices for the mixed method approach was critical to in order rebuff potential challenges as to the research integrity.

The methodology was chosen to explore and discover perceptions and experiences related to the phenomena of grade enquiries from both the student and academic perspective but it was recognised that there were limits to the research, acknowledging the challenges of working with complex individuals and unmanageable consumers (Gabriel and Lang 2006). As Ryan (2006) identifies, however, research is engaged with to provide and demonstrate support for conclusions.

Consistent evidence is unlikely to be seen until several three-year cycle UG programmes have completed, or there is a significant upturn in the global economy, increasing the demand for highly educated, rather than skilled, labour.

### **3.13 Delimitations**

The boundaries set for this study were clear.

The research specifically excluded international, Masters and PhD students, as they were subject to a different fee regime compared to the domestic student fee for a number of years.

### **3.14 Conclusions**

This research adopts a “developed country” perspective which poses alternative,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

and perhaps significant, challenges for any comparisons to high fee issues as seen in institutions in emerging countries. This may be explored in the future.

The literature relating to students rights, consumer law and legal challenges has not been explored due to the emerging nature of the topic and the researcher's inexperience in the field.

Finally, the study avoids deep statistical data drilling and analysis. As an emerging researcher, I do not find comfort in large numerical datasets. Personally, I struggle with numbers, preferring to know and understand why individuals react or respond to a given situation and believes simplicity in interpretation is the most likely arbiter of a truth and affords opportunity to make change where change is required.

Furthermore, as Fred Menger allegedly said, '*if you torture data sufficiently, it will confess to almost anything*' (nd) thus supporting the notion that any research and data are subject to inconsistent interpretation.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

### 4.1 Overview

Previous research in the literature showed an extensive use of empirical administration, a referral to documentation, and some qualitative work. The data in this study was analysed using two tools: SurveyMonkey Premium and NVivo 10 software, the latter a tool capable of cross-referencing data sets from multiple sources, which, as yet, does not appear to have been exploited elsewhere in the literature.

All qualitative data was converged into NVivo 10 for analysis, integrating the information in the interpretation of the overall results to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011, p. 277) and deemed appropriate for this study that did not require deep multivariate analysis of survey data or deep analysis of qualitative data (Driscoll *et al.* 2007, p.26) with descriptive statistics considered acceptable, as the study is primarily in the present. In addition, questionnaire data was interrogated via SurveyMonkey, the software through which the data was collected.

Pilot testing of each method prepared the coding touchpoints for the main data gathering.

The analytical strategy employed was that of the Constant Comparative Method (Maykut and Morehouse 1994) utilising a framework inspired by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Since the majority of this data draws on qualitative data where

*“words are the way that most people come to understand their situations; we create our world with words; we explain ourselves with words; we defend and hide ourselves with words”* (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, p.17)

this was considered a useful process for data analysis through NVivo (see Appendix I).

The data design was framed by a focus of interest: an investigation of the phenomena of grade enquiries since the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2012.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

It explored the phenomena from both the academic and student perspectives, with an interest in the reasons cited for grade challenging behaviour and perceptions of likely changes in such behaviour in the new higher fee paradigm.

### **4.2 NVivo 10 and SurveyMonkey Software Analytical Process**

Considerable data was gathered and software was employed to manage documents and coding to evidence analytical processes through audit trails allowing for plausibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Data processed through SurveyMonkey underwent singular scrutiny in terms of top level descriptive statistics to assess how many individuals reacted to questions. Whilst providing 'poll like' evidence, it did not provide the 'why' responses to the questions: these were unpicked using NVivo and categorised and themed.

Using NVivo, the qualitative data analysed from the semi-structured interviews, concept maps and focus groups was administered, as defined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) through a Four Stage Analytical Process with ten individual cycles that included three cycles of coding, two cycles of code management, one for initial open coding, one for reduction of data and three for writing leading to findings and conclusion (see Appendix I). Due to data quantity and variety, considerable time and attention was given to each phase.

### **4.3 Data Analysis Verification**

Considerable effort was devoted to ensure the credibility of the data analysed and presented in this thesis. In turn, validity, that of whether a measure devised of a concept does what it says it will do (Bryman 2008, p.32), has been carefully considered to ensure that the quantitative element of the research is trustworthy.

Firstly, the axiological questioning of my values as a researcher has been presented (Sykes 1990). Secondly, I have explored several studies to assess whether analysis processes were credible. In terms of generalisation, some findings are considered applicable, however, the notion of generalisability is always debatable (van Manen 1990), depending on the study and the output purpose. Horsburgh (2003) notes that the argument is common, particularly when

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

data arises from the small sample sizes that often underpin qualitative work. The qualitative data for this study has been presented through a [relatively] small number of respondents but who were selected for their ability to relate to and provide data about the topic being researched. Friction can occur when there is a craving to concentrate on the features on participants' lived experiences, and to highlight elements that have applicability in broader contexts and that can enhance or further the extant literature.

Todres (2007) notes the challenges of extremes, so that the issue fails to provide strength or provide an account that lacks any "general implications" (p.9) and thus the reader cannot relate to the work in any way. It is hoped that the findings presented will be relatable to the reader and that it can be seen that grade enquiries could apply to other institutions.

The methodological processes have been laid out for '*replication and extension*', although Bryman (2008, p.158) points out that in social sciences, repetition is an uninspiring pursuit. I disagree, finding merit in replication in other countries to assess other perspectives of grade enquiry behaviours. Further information on the subject would be useful to highlight the need for HEIs to understand service expectations of students from pre-enrolment through the subsequent course of their academic journey and thus to align students to the institutional offering in a more focused way than is currently evident in British universities.

Evidence of validation has been via the ongoing involvement of three reputable supervisors from the University of Southampton who observed and guided the process, from concept, across to literature review, research design, analysis of data and findings through to viva. This academic audit determined that the research practice was consistent with other accepted academic research.

This chapter has explained the data analysis. The next chapter presents the findings.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### 5.1 Student Perspectives

#### 5.1.1 Overview

The purpose of this research was to explore the background to students who have chosen to attend university, factors affecting their student experience and the reported phenomena of grade enquiries as perceived by students and academics in one English university in the post Browne Review higher tuition fee landscape. This chapter contains findings from the student data pertinent to the research aim and questions. Each question contains themes, with some themes containing sub-themes that were considered important in understanding the phenomena.

A considerable amount of data was collected from the mixed methods utilised: two surveys, focus groups, interviews and concept maps. Anonymity was ensured by assigning a code that could be back-tracked through NVIVO for the data but not the individual(s). The data interpretation process is outlined in Chapter Four. Several models for the layout of findings and discussion are available to the researcher (Crombie 1996; Parahoo 2006; Rees 2011). Briefly, each model offers a different mode for presenting information according to the data collection methods used. Crombie (1996) is used for qualitative or quantitative, Parahoo (2006) for quantitative, and Rees (2011) for quantitative and qualitative. The models offer guidelines for reporting findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations. Whilst the guideline models are recognised as standard, this thesis following the Parahoo model for pragmatic reasons rather than classic mixed methods pre-designed grounds. Thus the findings and discussion chapters have been separated for ease of reading.

The following covers key findings from a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. The findings have five key themes and represent the views of the respondents researched. The sub-themes within main themes were pre-determined after engaging with the literature and are evidenced based and used as a strong organising frame for the findings and discussion of all the data types. An explanation about data analysis and arising themes can be found in Chapter 4 (and Appendix I). Owing to confidentiality concerns and word count, student

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

identifiers have been reduced to codes and can be found in the data reports. Due to the amount of data collected and the extensive number of code identifiers, the example provided in parentheses provides guidelines as to data originations. For example, the coding for the Concept Map, CM:ME:2:F:3:2 indicates a concept map (CM), affiliated faculty/school (ME = Media School), question number (2), gender (female), participant number (3) and photograph number (2). For Focus Groups, FG1:1 indicates Focus Group 1, Participant 1. For Interview respondents, Academics have been identified as Academic 1, Academic 2, Academic 3 and so on). The codes can be interpreted, by the researcher, as the code creator, to find the exact comment collected manually from a particular data collection method and coded before storing in the data analysis tool, NVivo 10. This coding assures anonymity in the thesis but should a particular piece of qualitative data require back tracking, the coding indicates where the original data source is located.

Student method composition:

369 online surveys, 5 focus groups, 21 concept maps, 1 interview.

Student by Faculty composition:

323 Management Faculty, 71 Media Faculty, 6 Science and Technology, 5 Health and Social Care and 30 unassigned. Total n = 435.

Gender composition: 176 males, 231 females, one self-identified transgender (bias not stated), 27 unassigned. Total n = 435.

Undergraduates were key to the student side of the research as they represented those at university in the higher tuition fee paradigm. The majority of the respondents were first and second years with a lesser number of final year students, all post 2012-entry.

### **Question 1: What are the background pressures on students that may result in grade enquiries?**

This section explores why students go into HE, their expectations, factors affecting their studies and their identity within the university.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**The first theme** looks at students' motivations for going to university in terms of social pressure, choices, desire for independence and employment. The author wanted to understand their reasons for committing to a 3-4 year course and explore the background pressure on students to do so; pressures that may then result in grade enquiries.

**The second theme** covers student expectations in terms of the perceived benefits of a degree, employer expectations and employment opportunities; through understanding the perceived utility of a degree, student career expectations and their understanding of the state of the job market, all of which may generate grade enquiries.

**The third theme** covers assessments and the pressure points for students. This includes problematic internal and external factors that may affect a student's performance and may result in grade enquiries.

**The fourth theme** covers the role of students in the university: whether students saw themselves as learners or consumers of an education product to assess whether the "student as consumer" label applies and if so, whether this is a factor for grade enquiries.

**Question 2: What are students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries?**

This section explores undergraduates' grading and assessment experiences.

**This fifth theme** covers students' grade expectations and experiences of grading at university and is integral to the research aim, understanding what students expected and experienced in terms of their anticipated grade. It gives insights to the key factors leading towards grade enquiries and, potentially, grade grubbing.

The following presents the questions and findings by theme.

### 5.1.2 Q1 - Theme One: Motivations for Going to University

This section set out to discuss the motivations for going to university.

Qualitative responses fell into several sub-themes: Social Pressure, Post-school Choices, Independence and Employment.

This question was considered important in order to understand why students would, in a period of financial stagnation, want to go to University, in a higher tuition fee paradigm of £9k per annum.

When exploring social pressure, not all students recognised why they applied to go to university but did recognise the social pressure put on them to do so:

**P2:1** *Back to high school, I didn't know why I should go to university because everyone told you should go to university because there is social pressure to do so. The higher ranked the university, the better.*

**SI:1** *Both my parents went to University. As did my sister.*

Many respondents, however, articulated that HE was the next step for education, particularly in order to get a job. Others identified that the drivers to go to university were peers and parents. Many students identified that they were influenced by secondary school educators:

**P2:2** *Wasn't my decision but was, from high school, pushed onto us, particularly when UCAS came round so it was, kind of like, oh, I need to apply for a course. I was in the position of I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I picked these courses because I kind of like what's going on them, but I didn't think too much into it.*

**FG1:4** *..and that whole UCAS shebang where UCAS goes to your school and say 'in general, people who go to university end up earning more than people who don't' so that is what people think when considering university.*

That educators applied the pressure was an oft-repeated story, more so than any other peer groups such as friends or family. None mentioned social media or specific university marketing material. Only one mentioned the university reputation.

As a result of post-school choices, several students expressed little resistance or regret about applying for university:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**P1:2** *Yeah, expectations. I remember looking up courses and felt like it was a natural way to go but mainly because I felt there weren't too many other options and I didn't consider any other options.*

Others, lacking articulation, stated that they felt that going to university was necessary, essential for a job or something that interested them.

Many focus group students had a positive outlook on going to University in terms of independence, connections and volunteering.

**P1:1** *It's a good experience, especially for freedom. In high school I lived with parents and they were in charge of me but when I came to university, I became responsible for my life – food, travelling, clothes, making my own decisions.*

**P5:3** *University for me is a completely different world. Here I can escape and read about different topics. I like lessons and learning new things. University is making me conscious on what I should do to improve my strengths.*

Some students found that university was a measurable milestone:

**CM:ME:2:F:7:3** *Companies/jobs. If you don't have grades you haven't achieved much at university?? You go to university for the grade, stepping stone in life??*

Many others stated that the social life was key:

**CM:ME:1:F:3:2** *I wanted to experience the nightlife.*

Others did not clarify what that entailed beyond meeting and mixing with their peers. Meeting and mixing with academics was rarely mentioned, suggesting that socialising, hedonistic or otherwise, is an expected element of university life within the same peer group.

Others were clear that they wanted to make connections and gain work experience, which, for some, was crucial. The research confirmed that work experience was considered a key driver, with university as the key to opening doors to industry that the students felt they could not achieve alone:

**P4:4** *Well, the placement year really, better chance of getting a grad level job, also there was a lack of opportunities for young people where I am from, also the economic crisis when I left college means that getting into*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*university for 4 years meant it could be better finding a job when the economy was more stable.*

Whilst many students identified that university was chosen for meeting new connections, be it social or networking, only one student (P4:4 above) referred to placements and the economy when discussing reasons for attending university.

### **Summary of Theme One**

Students' motivations for entering university were independence and the freedom to experience new situations, make new friends and to forge their way in life. Whilst many students identified motivations for attending university, others were unsure of why they went, citing external influences such as UCAS and educators, but had not researched the alternatives.

### **5.1.3 Q1 - Theme Two: Student Expectations**

This section set out to discuss the student expectations of a university degree as an agent for employment. This was important because a successful degree is expected to lead to a placement, and in turn, a job and, therefore, potentially leads to grade enquiry pressures.

Qualitative and quantitative responses fell into three sub-themes: Perceived Benefits of a Degree, Employer Expectations and Employment Opportunities.

Of 347 responses, the majority (92%) of students were adamant that they expected a job in the field of study. There was an almost equal divide, however, between those (43%) who would accept any job and those (43%) who were not prepared to accept a job unrelated to their degree.

Some students held the view that university is the key to the employment market:

**P1:4** *I believed that achieving a degree in my field would excel my chance in my likely career.*

**P7:5** *I believe that higher education is essential to secure work in my industry with a future.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

noting the current economic climate:

**CM:ME:2:F:7:3** *Recession, so difficult to get a job.*

Gaining knowledge from their programme was perceived as essential for entry into their specific job area, particularly the events management students whose job is vocational by nature. Specifically, those that had aspirations into management more readily identified the importance of the degree compared to students on a more service-oriented track such as events management or radio production.

It was important to understand what students thought their future employers wanted from them (Table 1) as an indicator of student awareness of workplace competitiveness.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of undergraduate qualities expected by employers

Answer Choices	Responses	
An industry-related degree	<b>58.79%</b>	204
High grades in any degree	<b>21.61%</b>	75
High grades in a related degree	<b>42.94%</b>	149
A second degree (ie, a Masters)	<b>9.51%</b>	33
Work experience	<b>62.82%</b>	218
High grades and work experience	<b>56.77%</b>	197
The University's reputation	<b>38.04%</b>	132
Don't know	<b>2.88%</b>	10
<b>Total Respondents: 347</b>		

Of 347 respondents, students believed employers sought work experience (63%), an industry related degree (59%) a combination of work experience and a high grades (57%), high grades in a related degree (43%), the university reputation (39%), high grades in any degree (22%), or a Master's degree (10%). Only 3% did not know.

Some students were aware of the hurdles set by potential employers:

**FG1.10-11** *From my experience of researching the job market, those big employers such as KMPG and Accenture and things like that, normally they*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*require you to have a degree from a good ranking university and then you need have at least a 2:1 degree.*

Others were mindful that employers were moving away from a reliance on degree classifications and valued other skills:

**FG1:6** *There was an article online recently that showed that some employers were not looking at people with Firsts but that had, instead, social skills.*

**FG2: 2** *Well, in my field, it's more about talent rather than grades. Most radio presenters, you will find, don't have a degree, but that said, if you are going for a radio apprenticeship, it is going to have an impact.*

Whilst others were emphatic that good grades were still determinants for job opportunities:

**CM:ME:2:F:7:3** *If I don't get a 2:1 uni becomes pointless? 2:2 Desmond. Imagine a 2:2 in PR? What if I want to work in a bar for the rest of my life? People are very judgemental.*

In terms of job opportunities, the majority (87%) of 347 students indicated that although the job market was competitive, they believed that opportunities existed. Some (9%) indicated that although the job market might be full, they still chose to study their course. 5% did not know. A positive few (1%) indicate unlimited job opportunities in their field.

### Summary of Theme Two

Students' perceptions and expectations of a university degree as an agent for employment and master's study is placed squarely with the expectation of knowledge for a job and that a return on investment is expected.

Overall, the responses suggest that the majority of students believed that credentials were essential for employers to differentiate them, with the exception of areas where talent was more important.

The majority believed that work experience was essential, as was an industry related degree; however, some believed that high grades with work experience were important to employers. Others felt the university reputation was important

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

for facilitating good connections with industry. Overall, a combination of work experience, a relevant degree and good grades were perceived as key.

In terms of employment opportunities, students gave the impression that they have a good command of these in their field but knew that competition was strong.

### 5.1.4 Q1 -Theme Three: Assessments and Pressure Points

This section set out to explore assessments at university with a focus on factors that might hinder or boost student learning and development, in turn, possibly leading to students making grade enquiries.

Qualitative and quantitative responses fell into one sub theme: Pressure Points.

It was important to understand student issues that might arise when discussing assessment with academics (Table 2).

Table 2: Student discussion issues with academics during assessment meetings

	Yes	No	Total	Weighted Average
A STRUGGLE WITH ACADEMIC LEVEL (ie, study/skills leap between academic levels)	<b>80.12%</b> 278	<b>19.88%</b> 69	347	1.20
STRAINED RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHING STAFF (ie, student/staff relationship possibly impacted student task performance)	<b>37.65%</b> 125	<b>62.35%</b> 207	332	1.62
ADMINISTRATIVE ERROR (ie, a mark misrecorded as 35% but stated or documented elsewhere at 53%, or vice versa)	<b>62.20%</b> 204	<b>37.80%</b> 124	328	1.38
ATTENDANCE ISSUE (ie, not attending class)	<b>35.37%</b> 116	<b>64.63%</b> 212	328	1.65
INCORRECT ADVICE (ie, study/ assessment advice sought from friends, resulting in undesirable grades)	<b>43.81%</b> 145	<b>56.19%</b> 186	331	1.56
HEALTH ISSUES (ie, physical or mental health problems hindering study/achievement)	<b>63.64%</b> 210	<b>36.36%</b> 120	330	1.36
PRACTICAL ISSUES (ie, problems such as accommodation, job, financial or family issues/commitments)	<b>52.13%</b> 171	<b>47.87%</b> 157	328	1.48
SELF ESTEEM (ie, wanting to achieve 'good' grades as a reflection of self worth)	<b>47.27%</b> 156	<b>52.73%</b> 174	330	1.53
PEER PRESSURE/BULLYING (ie, feeling peer pressured/bullied to get good grades or 'keep up' )	<b>31.60%</b> 103	<b>68.40%</b> 223	326	1.68
GRADE LEVEL MAINTENANCE (ie, previous grades achieved at a certain level, such as an B or 65%, therefore a lower grade is inconsistent)	<b>66.47%</b> 220	<b>33.53%</b> 111	331	1.34

(note: first column compared to second column for interpretation).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Of 355 students, 81% reported struggles with academic level, grade level maintenance desires (67%), health issues (64%), admin errors (63%), practical issues (53%), self-esteem (48%), incorrect advice (44%), strained relationships with academics (38%) attendance issues (36%), peer pressure and bullying (32%).

A common theme highlighted the desperation of some students and how they felt about being in HE:

**FG3:P4** ...*That I am struggling. I don't think I should have come to university but I don't want to tell anyone. It would be a shame on me.*

**SI:1** *That I get really stressed before exams.*

Others were less anxious but expressed confusion over feedback:

**P5:3** *Well, sometimes I have very good feedback on my assignments ...where are specified the areas where I should improve and the skill I have developed. However, most of the time there is not even a comment and they expect me to understand what I have done wrong with a question mark.*

External factors affecting academic work were evident:

**FG3.1** *I have to work so I am limited to give time over to studying but I do put in effort in the time I do have and it's often not enough to get all the learning done or the assignments right.*

Whilst others were able to articulate a problematic connection between studying, assessments and mental health:

**FG1.1** *if they got bad grades, yeah, they feel like hopeless about passing or getting anything good in tests, and if they are depressed, they don't try and then continue to fail.*

### Summary of Theme Three

Responses indicated that students were most concerned about their struggles with the expected academic level, grade level maintenance and issues. Of relative less concern was peer pressure/bullying, class attendance or strained relationships with staff. Just under half indicated that they wanted good grades as a reflection of self-worth. Approximately one third of students identified strained relationships between the student/staff population.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

### 5.1.5 Q1 -Theme Four: Students: Learners or Consumers

This section sets out to understand how students see themselves in terms of being learners or consumers; seeking to learn, earn or buy an education product for future employment utility. Responses identified the multi-dimensional expectations that students have of themselves, and the institution, that may explain why students might want to grade enquire.

The section explores the students' views of academic staff including the confidences students wish staff knew about them, students' views on fees and expectations of support and service that indicate the student as a learner or consumer. Finally, it relays students' perceived expectations for future grade enquiry encounters.

Qualitative responses fell into three sub-themes: Student/Staff Relationship, Learners or Consumers, and Future Grade Challenge Demands and arose from NVivo themes.

Professional relationships between students and academics providing support were considered integral to the university experience. Some students were happy with their academics:

**FG3.3** *The university had a good lecturer and she was efficient, passionate about the subject, interested in developing and improve my skills and potential.*

**FG4:P2** *Wants to get to know the students and understand how they work. I like when a lecturer pushes us to work harder and believes that you can do well. And provides personal help to the students.*

**FG4:P5** *....Able to explain things clearly, available to help anytime.*

Others noted the business end of the relationship, finding it impersonal:

**FG4.P2** *Yes, we pay money that should include guidance, help, advice. University shouldn't be business-like but personal.*

Issues of learning differences were evident, asking not for grades but the need for extra time to manage information:

**FG4:P2** *I need more time on repeats of lectures. The ability to talk freely on my opinions is important.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**FG5:P** *I put a lot of time and effort into everything I do and need a lot of time to do/process things.*

And some commented on a sense of hostility of being invisible:

**FG5:F** *I sometimes don't feel welcome when asking for help regarding assignments.*

**FG5:R** *I wish they knew my writing style, my working style, my learning style, my name.*

Others, however, expressed unspoken confidences that academics were unaware of due to the perceived distanced relationship:

**FG1:P2** *What troubles I will have for attending a certain module.*

**FG5:M** *Dedication to attending lectures, high grades from hard work and not from help by peers.*

The question of whether students are Learners or Consumers, as perceived by the students, was important in order to understand the modern undergraduate.

From the perspective of being a Learner:

**FG4:2** *I feel I have learned a lot and gained confidence.*

**FG3:Q** *Learning different concepts, gaining knowledge, socialising.*

**FG2:P1** *...How curious I am about learning. How much I would like to go and see what they do first hand.*

At the same time, a consumerist tone emerged:

**FG4:1** *If we pay a lot of money, we deserve high quality of teaching.*

**FG5:L** *That I attend every lecture and get no reward for it.*

**FG5:O** *How they could help me specifically get better grades and how I can write better essays.*

**FG2:3** *When you are paying £27 grand, you should get everything you want.*

When asked if the increased costs of HE might encourage students to challenge their grades, students were divided about the cost of HE and grade challenges, rather than enquiries.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Some felt that tuition fee costs had little influence:

**FG5:P33** *No, because it is normal to be charged £9k a year, it makes no difference.*

**FG3:P4:3** *No, because the mark shouldn't be affected by how much it costs to be there.*

One student considered the fees against the amount of student engagement:

**FG4:P1** *No, don't see the difference after cost increase, I do question the quality of learning.*

Whatever the perspective on fees, many identified that assessment feedback was a key issue:

**FG5:P11** *I just feel we should have more feedback and guidance for the increased cost.*

One student highlighted limited student-staff time for feedback:

**FG4:P2** *The lack of contact time. I like to be able to repeat information, to really know what I am doing, so it means something.*

Another student reflected on peers' attitudes towards university assessments:

**FG5: P31** *I think increased costs and lack of feedback makes students feel resentment towards higher education.*

But the perception that grade enquiries and challenges were not encouraged was evident.

**FG5: P9** *No. Because nothing gets changed.*

Furthermore, some students indicated that high fees would encourage more grade challenging based on ability, debt, service expectations, entitlement and value.

One student suggested that students do not take responsibility for their learning:

**FG5: P6** *Yes. Everyone constantly tries to find someone to blame for their lack of effort.*

Whilst another fore-fronted personal economics for an expected service:

**FG5:P7** *Yes. "I pay £9000" is a constant reasoning for expecting higher standards of teaching and to the university in general.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**FG5:P18** *Yes. Paying £9k should mean higher service – lots of students = rushed marking.*

**FG5:P19** *Yes, the outcome is very important considering the price paid for education.*

Whilst others were specific about their intended learning outcome:

**FG5:P20** *Yes, £9000 a year is a lot of money to be given a grade you don't deserve.*

**FG5:P21** *Probably! For £9000 you would expect your grade to accurately reflect the work.*

**FG5:P23** *Potentially, as I feel committed to coming more so don't want investment to be wasted.*

Some students highlighted the desire for value for money:

**FG5:P27** *Yes. Because you want to get your money's worth.*

### Summary of Theme Four

The student/staff relationship can make or break the university experience for both parties and is a factor that defines the student as a learner or consumer. Students wished staff knew, at least, their names. Students wished staff also knew of student troubles such as a poor social life and inability to connect with others, difficulties in, or non-recognition of, presentee-ism, differing learning styles and self-doubt. Troubles were further exacerbated by how the undergraduates saw the vagaries of assessment, accusing the institution of creating a stressful environment and not providing full student support. In terms of being a co-producer, there was a little recognition by the student of this concept, but more a sense of the academic to be used as a commodity, a resource rather than a person of value.

There was some evidence that tuition fees might encourage grade challenges. Some students saw fees, at any price, as the norm and should not influence the grade, but that work should be marked fairly whatever the price. Students felt that feedback and guidance was an essential service.

Students saw a connection between fees and assessment enquiries, expressing themselves by way of keywords such as '*expectations, worth, price, commitment,*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*deserve, best, success, investment, waste, and parents'*. There was also an undercurrent of distrustfulness between the students and staff; for example, around marking as suggested by comments such as academics can be 'wrong', 'biased', practising 'favouritism', and 'human error/biased thinking' whilst others simply wanted support.

The majority of the qualitative data in this area was skewed towards a consumerist view, indicating that money, as an exchange tool, should buy support to fulfil their expectation for help to achieve a 'good grade'.

Many students saw themselves as learners but, at the same time, were conscious of the financial implications of being a student. Many students felt they had little control over their progression. There was evidence that blame for lack of self-study success lay elsewhere.

On future grade challenge demands, the connection between fees as a tool to buy a service was evident. The term 'deserve' was presented several times in the data, expressed as a right. Second and final year students were more forthcoming about the financial paradigm, however, across all years, a consumerist tone emerged. In the literature, students can be seen to be both learners and consumers and there is evidence of this within the research, however, there appears to be a fine distinction between the two descriptors. Students appear to be both, perhaps more learners in the first year, being mindful of their commitment, but with more attention to the course outcome and its utility by the final year.

### **5.1.6 Q2 -Theme five: Grade Expectations and Experiences**

This section set out to explore student's grade expectations and encounters at university in line with its perceived utility post HE; what students understood of the perceived importance and utility of a degree with good grades, and whether they were prepared to work for this. This insight may be a key factor to students making grade enquiries.

Qualitative and quantitative responses fell into five sub themes: Grade Expectations, Grade Enquiry Encounters, University Protocol, Unchallenged

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Grades, Morals and Ethics.

I wanted to understand how significant grades were to undergraduates.

Of 355 students, 98% indicated that grades were important to them.

Some students attributed grades as a motivator for learning:

**FG3:14** *The grades are very important for me but if I receive a good feedback that helps me develop my future grades then I'm more interested in the learning process.*

Competition and employer expectations were linked to grade achievements:

**P1:3** *Of course they are important. As so many people have a degree. You need to find out from employers what they really want, high grades or experience. Or even both I suppose.*

A degree with good grades was, therefore, seen as a stepping stone for the future.

**PI:3** *I've applied to do my Masters and that only requires a 2:2 from this degree and I am very confident of that but if I didn't know what I wanted to do, then I think it would be more important to sort of, well, like "bank it", bank the good grade.*

On the other hand, others were less concerned about grades and more about non-academic activities:

**FG5.P2:5** *Not particularly, more about the extra-curricular experience/personally, however, university gives you the opportunities and extra help to improve CV.*

The majority of students indicated that grades were very important as a stepping stone, although some suggested that grades had less importance due to other factors such as other qualifications, employer expectations, networking, socialising or life experience.

Whilst comments about feedback were cited as important, an exploration of what students look at first, when receiving assessment returns, showed surprising results (Table 3).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 3: What students view first on return of assessment

Answer Choices	Responses	
The feedback comments	5.92%	21
The grade	93.24%	331
The name(s) of the marker(s)	0.56%	2
I do not read it at all and hope for a pass	0.28%	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>355</b>	

Of 355 responses, 94% of students indicated that their grade was the first information reviewed whilst 6% stated that they read the feedback first. Even less were interested in the marker (1%) or simply did not read the returned work at all.

To highlight how students communicate their grade achievement, of 355 survey responses, 70% of students admitted that comparing assessments with friends was a key activity, evidencing competitive behaviour. Many (50%) agreed that they would spend time reviewing the comments whilst 24% shared the assessment feedback and grade with home or others. Some (19%) said that they did not discuss the grade. A few students (4%) stated they would go find the unit leader.

When discussing grade achievement, students noted the numerical grading values across educational spheres, noting that the pass mark bar is lower in HE, but harder to reach:

**CM:ME:2:F:7:3** *Only 60 out of 100, doesn't sound very good, at school, that was a low grade.75% in one unit this year, so so so HAPPY! 😊*

When considering factors that might influence students to question their marks, of 355 responses, 94% perceived a specific grade-dependent job as a factor for questioning marks. A large number (90%) perceived good grades to be a requirement for a good job. Many students felt that university had not lived up to their expectation, promoted or imaginary (62%). Over half felt that the choice of the wrong course (56%) and tuition fees (55%) may have influenced students to question their grades. Under half (37%) indicated that cultural habits, such as re-grading at secondary school or those studying at schools abroad, was an unlikely factor to influence students to negotiate grades at university (Table 4).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 4: Factors that influence students to question marks

	<b>Very likely</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Not likely</b>	<b>Not at all likely</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Weighted Average</b>
GOOD GRADES = GOOD JOB (ie, concerns that a good job is not possible without good grades)	<b>46.80%</b> 117	<b>42.40%</b> 106	<b>9.60%</b> 24	<b>1.20%</b> 3	250	1.65
JOB OPPORTUNITY (ie, concerns that work may not be offered unless s/he can prove a particular grade for a specific unit or final award)	<b>41.60%</b> 104	<b>52.00%</b> 130	<b>6.00%</b> 15	<b>0.40%</b> 1	250	1.65
COMPETITION FOR JOBS (ie, students see grades as a lever to differentiate themselves in a competitive job market)	<b>39.20%</b> 138	<b>48.01%</b> 169	<b>9.66%</b> 34	<b>3.13%</b> 11	352	1.77
PARENTAL/SPONSOR PRESSURE (ie, student faces financial from sponsors/parents)	<b>13.11%</b> 46	<b>39.32%</b> 138	<b>36.47%</b> 128	<b>11.11%</b> 39	351	2.46
TUITION FEES (ie, the presence of tuition fees influences mark expectations)	<b>17.61%</b> 62	<b>36.93%</b> 130	<b>33.81%</b> 119	<b>11.65%</b> 41	352	2.39
STUDENT EXPECTATION AND EXPERIENCE MISALIGNED (eg, the university experience has not lived up to expectations, promoted or imagined by the student)	<b>16.48%</b> 58	<b>45.45%</b> 160	<b>31.25%</b> 110	<b>6.82%</b> 24	352	2.28
CHOSE THE WRONG COURSE (ie, another programme may have been better suited)	<b>13.39%</b> 47	<b>42.17%</b> 148	<b>31.91%</b> 112	<b>12.54%</b> 44	351	2.44
CULTURAL HABIT (ie, in some cultures it is normal to negotiate any or everything, grading is no different)	<b>6.61%</b> 23	<b>30.17%</b> 105	<b>41.67%</b> 145	<b>21.55%</b> 75	348	2.78

(note: first two columns combined and compared to second two column for interpretation).

The survey question asking students if they had approached university staff to question a result was very popular (Table 5).

Table 5: Number of students who approached university academic staff to question a result and why

<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
Yes: to question if a grade was reasonable	<b>13.52%</b>	48
Yes: Seek clarification of a concept	<b>11.55%</b>	41
Yes: Seek advice on how to improve for the future	<b>16.06%</b>	57
Yes: because I wanted a better grade	<b>4.79%</b>	17
No: Not at all	<b>54.08%</b>	192
<b>Total</b>		<b>355</b>

Of 355 responses, 55% students indicated that they had not approached staff to question a result, 17% had in order to seek improvement advice, 13% to see if the grade was reasonable, 17% to seek concept clarification and 5% to change the grade (5%).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Comments indicated that students considered intangible 'time spent' and 'hard work' as important topics for grade enquiry:

**FG2:P3:** *Well, if you work hard on it, and I do spend lots of time on mine, then I would deserve a good grade, even if there were bits wrong. Perhaps we were taught improperly but if we submit our work, we do deserve a good grade.*

Whilst philosophical, pragmatic and sympathetic considerations towards marking were articulated:

**FG3:P2:**  
*Yes, everyone can make mistakes, even lecturers marking our work.*

With regards meeting with markers, concerns around money and power paradigms were expressed:

**FG2.9**  
*University still makes us feel we have no power. Lecturers do not give us their time as they are too concerned about other years or their own research. We all pay £9000, we should have equal importance!*

From the student survey data, grade discussions in specific subjects were identified and were in the majority of cases, across subjective topics.

Of 105 responses, and from 102 subjects identified, the topics related to Business Studies (n=51), Law, Business Media (n=16) Communications (n=8), Arts based Animation (n=8), Accounting (n=5), Economics (n=3), Politics (n=2), Nursing (n=2), Ethics (n=2), Research (n=1), Computing (n=1), Argumentation (n=1), Personal Development (n=1), Project management (n=1).

Where students had assessment discussions, the outcome was important in order to understand grade discussion outcomes.

Of 169 responses, 60% identified that advice for improvement was given, over a quarter (27%) were given concept clarification, 10% (n=16) did receive a grade change and a few (6%) were redirected to another service.

Respondents who stated their grades were changed (n=14) were as a result of admin/computer (50%), or they knew it was wrong (36%), or the academic agreed

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

to a grade change (15%).

Students commented on some of the issues that had caused them to enquire about their grade, some students described administrative errors:

**FG4: P1** *the marker had missed several pages and didn't include these in the final mark.*

**FG3: P4** *I got diagnosed with dyslexia after I submitted coursework but received the mark after. I wasn't happy with it so wanted them to remark it with ALS guideline.*

Another found fault with academic judgement:

**FG3:P6** *Some of the feedback contradicted the essay and was wrong.*

Several students were unable to interpret assessment comments:

**FG3: P5** *Yes, I think it was for unclear feedback.*

Whilst others complained about severity of grades:

**FG3:P33**  
*Very difficult to argue on the fact that we have been harshly/unfairly marked.*

**FG1: P1** *If you believe the work you submitted elicited a better grade than you received.*

After meeting with the marker, just over half (51%) of the students were either pleased or happy with the outcome, just over a quarter (26%) were displeased or unhappy and just under a quarter (24%) could not remember.

Of 138 responses, 55% of the students agreed that their grade enquiry was justified with 11% identifying, in hindsight, that they should not have enquired. Many (48%) were unsure if the grade enquiry was justified.

Comments indicated that students are checking on fair grading.

**F3: P5** *Yes, because they can be wrong.*

Whilst others genuinely wanted an explanation of the work and grade in order to improve for the next assessment:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**F5: P27** *To help understand where you went wrong and improve for the next grade or if you feel the grade is unjustified.*

Justice for understanding feedback was, for some, fore-fronted by the tuition fee:

**FG2.2** *When you are paying £9000 per year, you kind of have a right to question it, now*

Whilst others wanted detailed feedback on demand.

**FG2.3** *If you want your feedback very, very quickly you should get it and more detailed feedback.*

Students were asked if they thought first year UG students read and understand university rules and processes (i.e., marking criteria, marking procedures, marking panel, external examiners, exam boards) for grades and achievement before submitting assessment work.

Of 347 responses, 30% said students did know the rules in the first year, 26% did not whilst 37% indicated that first years' looked at the rules only when necessary. 10% did not know.

One comment showed that students thought the university was unprepared to deal with large volumes of grade enquiry or questioning:

**FG1.3** *The university won't emphasise those rules, but they will emphasise that you must not skip 60% of lecture or if you need an essay extension or how marks are deducted but not 'how to challenge your grade'. I think they are avoiding troubles.*

Students were asked if academics should take into account, when marking, the grade a student 'needs' for the work marketplace. This was a popular question (n=347) with a near equal split between yes and no, marginally in favour of the latter but divided on the matter.

One first year student aimed misguided blame and frustration at the marker:

**I:SB1Yr1** *Yes, I admit I did not follow the instructions but this is my future, you have ruined my future, it's all your fault, I want an apology.*

Exploring students' moral or ethical perspective of conceptual bribery was necessary to understand how important grades were to them and whether they

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

thought bribery was a route to achieving desired grades. This was another popular question (n=347) with 85% considering bribery to be unacceptable, 10% considering it acceptable and 8% whom did not care.

Many students were adamant that bribery had no place in HE:

**FG2 I:3** *Definitely not, no. I can't think of any reason at all. Is there one? No, there isn't. It's morally wrong. No.*

Considering that markers in British HE were above reproach:

**FG2: P2:** *I guess you hear it on the news but never heard it here. I guess it could be possible because you know your markers for your individual pieces of work, but I would never expect our markers to submit to a bribe, they've got too much self-pride.*

Yet, there was an undercurrent that some students might be flexible if there was opportunity:

**FG5.1-2** *Yes. "If I put £20 on my assignment will you give me a First?"*

**FG5.5** *If you can get away with it.*

**FG2.9** *Now if there was a degree in Bribery then it would absolutely more than suitable.*

Whilst there was focus on the importance of grades, grade enquiry or challenges, an interesting dimension is why students did not grade challenge (Table 6).

Table 6: Student reasons for not challenging a university grade

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do not know	Total	Weighted Average
My lecturer knows more than me in the subject area	32.80% 61	43.55% 81	4.84% 9	7.53% 14	11.29% 21	186	2.21
It is unethical	2.16% 4	14.05% 26	25.95% 48	42.16% 78	15.68% 29	185	3.55
I will not pay for grades, I will work for them	27.42% 51	37.63% 70	9.68% 18	11.83% 22	13.44% 25	186	2.46
I am doing this course for pleasure	2.72% 5	30.43% 56	25.54% 47	28.26% 52	13.04% 24	184	3.18
I do not need high grades, my future path is already determined (ie, family business/marriage/inheritance)	0.00% 0	4.37% 8	10.38% 19	71.58% 131	13.66% 25	183	3.95

(note: first two columns combined and compared to second two column for interpretation).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Of 187 responses, 82% indicated that high grades were needed, 77% indicated that lecturers were likely to know more about the subject, 66% stated they would work for the grade, 34% said that the course was for pleasure.

Students felt that it was not necessary to challenge a grade:

**FG5: P24** *Never done it. Just important to discuss work and understand why.*

**FG5:P1** *I wouldn't particularly question academic judgment unless I really felt I had a solid reason to.*

One student highlighted the importance of feedback clarity before considering a challenge:

**FG3:P5:3** *No, if they are clear with fluent feedback, there is no need.*

Others expressed concern over displaying a lack of self-confidence.

**FG5: P1:** *No, don't want to feel judged if the work does end up being of poorer quality than expected.*

Some students felt that first year grades did not matter, or were still learning about their grade place compared to their peers and that challenging grades was not yet an issue:

**FG2.3** *Being a first year, I don't think they do that yet, because they don't understand yet how you are doing and where you are going as a career, so I will have to go to them, as they are aware that the majority of the class won't really care to hear how they are doing..... I don't think the majority of the people care because it is the first year and we have pretty much had it drilled into our head that the first year pretty much doesn't count.*

A few were unconcerned with challenging grades but seeking alternative experiences:

**CMME2F32** *As long as I get a degree, doesn't matter what grade I get, want to have fun, enjoy my time without worrying.*

Whilst others saw no point suggesting if the marker is not engaged with the marking then grade changes were unlikely to produce better results:

**FG2.18** *I have found that when it comes to the argument of getting the grade changed, everyone usually puts their effort towards their anger at the*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*problem but they never really take it any further. There was a group project in the second year where some of the feedback [it] was clear that she hadn't read some of our work ... we felt it wasn't worth the effort to get it changed because we felt it wouldn't get the mark changed that much. But you feel the lecturer hasn't put 100% into marking your work and that is kind of insulting at times, you know?*

Exploring the personal, rather than the conceptual view of the likelihood of ever challenging a grade, this question was popular (n=219). Having never challenged a grade before raising the survey question, 47% indicated they would, 37% indicated they did not know, and 17% said they would not.

### **Summary of Theme Five**

The majority of students indicated that grades were important to them, due to the perceived link with employment prospects. Students also believed that course choice or tuition fees could influence students to question their marks, however, grade negotiation was perceived to be unlikely.

Students meeting with academics about grades and assessment reported they were given clarification and guidance about how their grade was reached, and how to improve for the future.

Reasons for grade changes are multifarious, many of which relate to guidelines, perceptions of absolute grades or a sense of grade justice. In subjects where 'shades of grey' marking could apply, such as in subjective programmes and where marker inexperience or overwork occurs, grades were open to challenge.

Younger students appeared to be unsure about their ability to fulfil assessment to achieve good grades. The data suggests that meeting with the marker to discuss the assessment, with or without a grade change, fulfilled the student need for guidance and reassurance their work.

As far as University protocols relating to grade enquiries and challenges were concerned, many students said they understood the protocols, although the extent of that knowledge was not researched. The data suggested that students were aware of the rules and processes before submitting work but were nonetheless mostly subject to utilitarian needs.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

In terms of students' perceptions and beliefs that academics should take into account the grade a student 'needs' for the workplace, it was clear that students have a sense of fairness when it comes to grading. Alternately, there were students who indicated that regardless of the quality of student work, the marker should grade in favour of the student as they proceed towards the workplace. Overall, the student body appears to be torn: those who believe in academic justice and those who feel academics should compromise their marking position to the advantage of the student, competent or otherwise.

On the point of bribery, in whatever format, most students indicated that bribery was not a culturally acceptable behaviour at Coastal University, with expectations of fair play from both students and academics alike. Some students though were open to the idea of bribery if not caught out.

Students who had not previously challenged a grade stated expectations, or experience of lecturers being more knowledgeable, as having deterred them, suggesting that the knowledge power paradigm weighed in favour of the teaching staff. When it came to questioning a grade, however, students saw it as a service to be available, citing fairness, standards, thoroughness, the need for detailed feedback or getting the best for their tuition fee. For future assessments, many students indicated that they would consider challenging a grade.

The next section looks at the findings from the academic perspectives.

### **5.2 Findings from Academics' Perspectives**

#### **5.2.1 Overview**

The student discourse highlighted motivations for going to university, their expectations of the perceived benefits of a degree, future employer expectations and employment opportunities; study pressure points in terms of internal and external factors impacting on student performance, their grade expectations and experiences of both university grading and their own role at university.

In comparison, the academic view related to how service provision was received and academic perceptions about grading issues students raise or cause.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

This chapter reports and discusses the key academic findings from a mix of the qualitative and quantitative data.

The findings have five key themes arising from question three.

Academic method composition:

172 online surveys, 6 interviews, 12 concept maps.

Faculty composition:

59 Media Faculty, 39 Science and Technology, 36 Management Faculty 25, Health and Social Care, 29 respectively. Total n = 188.

Gender composition: 89 males, 68 females, two self-identified transgender (bias not stated), 29 unassigned.

Academic achievement composition (survey tool):

2 Higher Doctorate, 68 Doctorates, 7 MPhil, 50 Masters, 18 UG, 17 Professional qualifications, 1 GSCE/O-Levels, 29 unassigned.

Age composition:

The majority of respondents were aged between 45-54, closely followed by those between 35-44.

Academics have been given pseudonyms to protect identity.

The following is a reminder of question three then leads specifically into the findings of the five themes related to the question.

### **Question 3: What are academics' experiences and attitudes to students who make grade enquiries?**

This section explores academics attitudes and perceptions of student views on grades and investigates the experiences of academics in grade enquiry situations.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**The first theme** investigated academic perceptions of what student views on grades were prior to relating such findings to potential pressure in a grade enquiry situation.

**The second theme** explored academic views on perceived challenges to student learning and teaching. This section provides insights on academic experiences with contemporary students in terms of teaching, and challenges with student learning ability that may lead to grade enquiry behaviours.

**The third theme** investigated grade challenges from students as perceived or experienced by academics, inclusive of student degree attitudes, assessment and feedback issues, grade enquiry experiences, course hotspots, and academic welfare.

**The fourth theme** investigated academics' perceptions and experiences of leveraging and bribery for better grades.

**The fifth** and final theme covered academic attitudes towards students and their grade enquiries: whether academics perceived customer service as playing a role in grade enquiry situations by examining their views on rules and processes, student rights and academic questioning, league tables and institutional pressures, grading behaviour, students as consumers, customer service or servantry, fees and grade expectations.

The following now presents the findings of Q3 by theme.

### **5.2.2 Q3 - Theme One: Perceptions of Students' Grade Views.**

This question sought to explore the academics' perceptions of students' views on grades, and a number of pressures on the student were evident.

Of 148 academics, 85% of respondents perceived that both job opportunities may be dependent on grades, and that there are grade pressures on students for desired employment, whilst 81% agreed that grades are a differentiator. This was particularly evident to academics who noted students' placement ambitions:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

### **Academic 2:**

*... for the more ambitious students who have got their eyes on the top graduate training schemes, and the holy grail of a 2:1, yeah, it's a big deal for a lot of students.*

Academics did also experience students not interested in grades, however:

### **Academic 4:**

*I've got a student at the moment on her dissertation and she is a very, very bright young lady, she should be getting a First. She basically partied through her first and second year, scoring mid – 2:1 averages and now she is her final year and I said we could turn this around and she said 'I'll get my honours degree' or 'once I'm in industry for a year or two it's not going to make much difference anyway'.*

Conversely, another academic noted that for some students, the prize is the grade at graduation:

### **Academic 3:**

*I think it can be answered especially for the tuition fee environment where it has shot up to £9k..... they think they are signing a contract for a grade, they are not coming into study as such, they are coming in to achieve a grade and that's a different mindset, and when you think the average student will be £44k in debt, they are thinking they are becoming £44k in debt for the certificate. So it's not for the education or learning, that is cemented really by the certificate, so all they have learnt or achieved is reflected by the grade outlined on the certificate.*

Academics were aware that the pressures on students to achieve at university came in several forms:

### **Academic 1:**

*For some, a high grade offers better job opportunities, some have a sense of ambition, others have familial pressures.*

## **Summary of Theme One**

Most academics believed that students perceived that grades were important for progressing into jobs and training programmes, and that grades were the differentiator between students. Other factors, such as pleasing family or non-academic careers were expressed. Both sets of study respondents agreed that the

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

grades were seen as very important to the student body and that educators are collaborators in the discourse for achieving success through good grades.

Academics perceive that most students consider the grade as the most important marker of ability in assessments.

### 5.2.3 Q3 - Theme Two: Challenges to Student Learning and Teaching

This section provides insights into academic experiences with students in terms of both teaching and of whether academics perceived any relationships between learning challenges and grade enquiry behaviours. One academic put teaching and learning issues down to student disparity:

**Academic 2:**

*There are more mature students, more from lower socio economic classes, more students that have children or families, those who have to work long hours to support their studies and ability wise, there is a lot more variation in ability.*

Whilst another academic highlighted the difficulty students had adjusting from school experiences to university educational expectations:

**Academic 3:**

*I think they are under prepared and that the expectation is that university is spoon-feeding in much the same way that they have had education delivered to them before in what has been a passive experience.....then going to university and expectations of them being able to write an essay, to develop and write an argument, and I haven't seen that sit so well with students coming from different academic backgrounds.*

Attendance as a signifier of commitment to the programme was a common theme:

**Academic 1:**

*I told them about this, "when I was at university; Monday to Friday 9-5, if you are in classes you are classes, if not, you are in the library. You do that, you'll be fine". They just look at me as if I am crazy. So, I think Time Management is getting quite bad on their part.*

Student manners were also highlighted by academics as problematic:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

### **Academic 4:**

*Talking in class. Just being disrespectful. No, doesn't happen often. You've got to entertain. You've got to deal with a very short attention span, and I think years ago, if the class was boring they would just sit there and scribble notes to each other and pass them under the table and do things like that but they wouldn't disrupt, but now, if they are bored, they do actually just turn round and start a conversation with someone else. Someone referred to it as 'edu-tainment'.*

A sense of entitlement reflected in the shifting of performance blame onto the academic was a common theme noted by staff:

### **Academic 1:**

*Students expect lecturers to be teachers like at school, students blame me for their problems, "Your job is to get me through university", sense of entitlement, "I pay your wages", "I am a customer".*

One academic focused on other internal services that were considered to encourage repetitive, immature behaviours:

### **Academic 5:**

*Students react to the environment. First years replay school behaviours at uni. I blame the student union which is always looking for 'wins' for students, with the uni letting the student union set expectations and feedback reactions, the uni is piling on pressures on academics.*

*There is too much infantilisation. The uni has "imagined" students.*

The prevalent use of IT affecting engagement and participation in class did not escape observation:

### **Academic 2:**

*I struggle with the laptops in class as well, you know, the guys on the back row with their laptops open, who may or may not have ALS, who may or may not have the material on the screen that you are working from. The ones that are problematic are those that are fragmented, where there are cliques, groups that have fallen out with each other, where there's maybe, not bullying, but low level ostracisation...it's very much to do with the attitude of the students and their willingness to learn, to participate.*

## **Summary of Theme Two**

Factors affecting students' learning were family commitments, being

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

underprepared, non-attendance and non-academic activities. Challenges for teaching students included students talking off-topic in class, mixed concentration levels, entertainment expectations, school teaching and spoon-feeding expectations, mixed qualification entry and variable ability for university thinking and writing, immaturity, student attitude and effort towards participation, non-attendance and personal electronics.

These findings show that academics experienced considerable pressures from the student cohort and illustrated that classroom etiquette was absent. Academics highlighted factors that might underpin learning challenges and grade enquiry behaviours.

### 5.2.4 Q3 - Theme Three: Grade Enquiries and Challenges

The third theme investigated grade challenges from students as perceived or experienced by academics, through perceived student degree attitudes, assessment and feedback issues, grade enquiry experiences, academic welfare and grade grubbing.

Academics noted that during or after assessment questioning meetings, students often made passing comments or complaints that gave insight to student thoughts about their experiences and expectation, hinted or openly stated, whilst at university (Table 7).

Table 7: Students' attitudes at assessment meeting

	Yes	No	Total	Weighted Average
An apparent misalignment of student expectation and experience	57.43% 85	42.57% 63	148	1.43
They do not want to 'waste time' by taking resits	29.17% 42	70.83% 102	144	1.71
They do not want to 'waste money' to take resits or retake a year	40.28% 58	59.72% 86	144	1.60
They are buying a degree rather than an opportunity to study for one	27.89% 41	72.11% 106	147	1.72
Everything is negotiable	19.72% 28	80.28% 114	142	1.80

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Of 148 academics, 58% stated that students reported a misalignment between the student expectation and the student experience, with some reporting that students did not want to waste money taking resits (41%), or waste time (30%).

Furthermore, 73% did not believe that students considered degrees purchasable or that everything was negotiable (81%) but that academic support and explanation is sought.

Academics noted that some students had limited time and money, but this topic did not come up elsewhere in the data. In terms of students bringing marketplace behaviours such as negotiation or haggling, a skill possibly practised on holidays abroad, many academics disagreed with the idea that students categorically believe they are buying a degree, rather than an opportunity to study for one. The data indicates that students were not of the mind-set that everything is negotiable.

Students did have other problems that they shared with academics that might affect assessment grades, however (Table 8).

Table 8: Student concerns raised at assessment meeting

	Yes	No	Total	Weighted Average
That health issues hindered normal progress	<b>76.55%</b> 111	<b>23.45%</b> 34	145	1.23
That problems outside class have impacted on study	<b>80.14%</b> 117	<b>19.86%</b> 29	146	1.20
That expectations of staff support are greater since higher tuition fees were applied	<b>37.24%</b> 54	<b>62.76%</b> 91	145	1.63
That they feel peer pressured to get good grades and 'keep up' with their peers	<b>33.80%</b> 48	<b>66.20%</b> 94	142	1.66
That they are concerned by parental or sponsor pressure	<b>39.31%</b> 57	<b>60.69%</b> 88	145	1.61
That they must maintain a particular grade level	<b>84.14%</b> 122	<b>15.86%</b> 23	145	1.16
They think they are being treated unfairly compared to other members of the cohort	<b>44.44%</b> 64	<b>55.56%</b> 80	144	1.56
They want to maintain their self esteem through good grades	<b>44.29%</b> 62	<b>55.71%</b> 78	140	1.56
None of the above	<b>3.64%</b> 2	<b>96.36%</b> 53	55	1.96

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Of 148, 85% academics said that students who came to visit them after assessment discussed their need to maintain grade levels; some identified problems outside of class (81%), or reported health issues (77%). Fewer responses are noted regarding maintenance of self-esteem through grades (45%), unfair treatment compared to others (45%) or parental pressure (40%).

Communication of those problems may not necessarily be shared with their tutor such as issues outside the academic boundaries:

### **Academic 6:**

*So they are bottling up problems that are not academic....housing, relationships, family, their health, health of someone in their family.....*

Academics are, however, mindful of self-imposed, imagined or economic issues that students face:

### **Academic 5:**

*Also, upset with themselves, under self-pressure and shame....also comparing themselves with others, so peer-pressure. Self-grading – did not understand the rubric and the qualities required. They have to work, part-time jobs. In order to keep the job, they need to balance the study with the job. If they leave the job, they lose money and do not know if they will get another one after uni. It's all about protecting their income.*

On occasion, students may seek an appointment with their marker to discuss an assessment. Academics noted that whilst students might have specific reasons for that discussion, academics were not always aware of the exact issue to be discussed nor the student's desired outcome. On reflection, academics were able to identify past meeting experiences (Table 9).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 9: Academics' perceptions of student intentions for assessment meetings

Answer Choices	Responses	
To, ultimately, change the grade (whether subtly or directly)	52.00%	78
To query your own marking (not change the grade)	14.00%	21
To query a colleague's marking (not change the grade)	5.33%	8
To seek advice on how to improve for the future (not change the grade)	8.67%	13
To seek clarification of an aspect of the work (not change the grade)	8.67%	13
To complain strongly	4.00%	6
Other (please specify)	7.33%	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>150</b>

Of 150 responses, 52% academics had been approached by students to change a grade, query the marking (14%), seek improvement advice (9%), seek clarification (9%), query a colleague's mark (6%) or complain strongly (4%).

Respondents were keen to answer this question. Academics responding through the survey tool stated that students met with the ultimate view to change their grade, yet the interview data suggested that there were nuances that did not always lead to the student asking for or being given a grade change.

Academics noted that students might open the discussion with a broad enquiry about their work before focusing on the concluding question or outcome:

### **Academic 3:**

*Once they have received the document back outlining the feedback and the grade, it's quite common, especially for final year students... to seek clarification, additional feedback, feed-forward on their grades, anything in relation to their work. Apart from not getting a First, it's mainly an open question in the beginning, as to "please can you explain why I achieved this grade, why I didn't do so well, I am just looking for further information", so, it will be a broad opening gambit, which is do with the grades so it will be a question of the grade bracket not other aspects of the feedback. ...some might, at the end of the conversation say "what can I do to achieve a better grade next time?" but usually that question is asked if they have to repeat the coursework or the exam. So if the ILO has to be repeated then they will ask questions about that but generally, few questions are asked.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Academics noted that students compared previous work as a marker for future grades or that following certain instructions would fulfil a specific grade criterion:

### **Academic 4:**

*... they will say things like 'in all my other units I have been getting a 2:1' or 'I don't think I should have got a 2:1 for this because I did x,y,z' or 'you said in the lecture we needed to and I have done so why haven't I got a 2:1'*

The number of markers was a matter of concern for some students:

### **Academic 6:**

*If there are two markers, they want to make sure that both markers are being fair.*

It was clear that students sometimes did have cause to enquire about the grade, however:

### **Academic 2:**

*Students might be justified in seeking explanation as to why they got the mark they got. I have seen one or two incidents where I did agree with the student that the mark was probably not fair, either by the quality of the work based on my reading of it or the comments that went with it and typically, that was with very inexperienced markers.*

A large number of academics reported that students came to see them to specifically change the grade:

### **Academic 3:**

*Yes, that is the conversation, and it's a bit of a joke between staff in my department... Deal or No Deal... it becomes like a game show where you sit down with the student who plays the role of the contestant and you as the banker and the role is to negotiate the grade and I don't play it, I make it very clear when I post the meetings we have, being explicit about what the meeting is about and my role is and that the grade won't change.*

One academic identified that conversations around awarded grades may be subjective:

### **Academic 6:**

*Usually they will come and argue that the answer they have given is correct or is better than originally marked.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Whilst another stated that where regrading was requested, caveats were necessary should the student insist on a grade review.

### **Academic 4**

*We do say to the students that the second marker may look at that grade but also the grade may go up or it could go down but the grade does not stand until the external examiner has seen it anyway. If the student is still very vocal about it, we will say that we will make sure that the paper goes to the external examiner.*

Another academic commented that threats occurred, sometimes with telling observations of favourable comments from unrelated programme voices as perceived authority:

### **Anonymous (SurveyMonkey #22)**

*Students seem to feel if they bully and get threatening with escalating it to appeal they will get their marks changed. My favourite comment 'my mum is a university lecturer and she says it's a 2.1 so you would change the mark'.*

In some cases, meetings were about grade maintenance; the assumption that completing a task alone justifies an expected grade without understanding the depth required; unpicking group work peer-marking; or intention to increase the grade masked by entering discussion via the feedback route.

The outcomes of assessment meetings indicate a trend in responses by academics to student enquiries.

In terms of the outcome of the assessment query, the top three outcomes for students were advice on improvement (41%), policy clarification for questioning academic judgement (28%) or a grade change (14%). Only 3% (n= 2) cases were moved to the formal Appeals Procedure.

Academic responses to the range of emotions observed at meeting outcome varied widely with 68% 'disappointed, unhappy or upset', 21% 'aggressive, threatening or violent' and only 18% perceived 'cheerful, happy, pleased'.

Whilst the perceived emotion choices in the survey were limited, academics clarified their experiences, but there were no positive reactions:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

### **Academic 4:**

*If they come back very quickly it does tend to be quite angry. And that's also because they haven't read the feedback, they'll have read the grade, seen a 52% and say 'right, I'm going to see my tutor. Angry is no.1 and then upset would be no.2.*

### **Academic 6:**

*I have had crying actually, where students have other things going on in their life, they should have asked for help, not necessarily with their studies, but about something else and they just don't.*

### **Academic 3:**

*It ranges from very aggressive to dissatisfied to anxious to quite withdrawn. There's a range of personalities that lend itself to different questions and behaviours, some of them more difficult and challenging, particularly the aggressive ones because, again, they had a certain grade in mind...they thought they had put a certain level of effort in and expected to be regarded for that effort whether or not it actually achieved the ILOs.*

Academics reported that students displayed a range of emotions and responses to grade enquiry meetings with many negatively affected, expressing distress, unhappiness, tears, frustration and disappointment. Whilst the picture is mixed, the overall two key themes were disappointment or to a lesser extent, acceptance of the outcome. The negative response is not surprising when good grades are the expected outcome of assessment.

In hindsight, academics tended to consider the meeting for its purpose and value and whether the student was justified in the grade enquiry. This was a less popular question, but the majority believed the questioning to be unjustified (70%), whilst some agreed (21%) and few were unsure (11%).

The subject area, and academic school, for assessment questioning was considered important to assess any trends and commonalities with previous studies in the literature. The largest proportion of grade enquiry incidents appearing from the raw data was from Media and Communications (43%), Science and Technology (25%), Health and Social Care (14%), Business (14%) and Tourism (3%).

When reflecting on the student's level at the point of grade enquiry and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

questioning, academics noted the differences. Whilst this question was skipped by many respondents, assessment queries were more frequent amongst final year students (51%), followed by second years (28%) and some from first years (19%) indicating that final year students are more mindful of the importance of their degree grades as they head towards graduation.

Academics found that approaches for grade enhancement fell into several broad themes. The limited academic response reported that students claimed they deserved a better grade because (in highest order first): the grade was an inaccurate reflection of their work (96%), the student wanted to stay on the programme (50%), the student had missed classes and key information for assessment (48%), the brief was not clear (34%), the expected academic performance level was too high or inappropriate (31%). Some students articulated the importance of the grade in order to access placement opportunities. Academics perceived that students who fore-fronted the amount of *effort* put in, the utility of the grade to progress and, absenteeism, were after a better grade and thus grade-grubbing.

### **Summary of Theme Three**

Many academics agreed that they perceived a mismatch between the student experience and expectation, be it positive or negative, but there was a sense that the mismatch was a criticism.

Academics reported students fore-fronting reasons for a meeting after assessment including non-academic problems, but having expectations of non-timetabled support from staff.

The findings suggest that academics perceived students as consumers in behaviours more than learners, wanting to change their grades, but also recognise many as learners seeking clarification, improvement advice or other process concerns. Reports of grade checking suggest a lack of trust between students and academics, with some students seeking justice.

Academics who experienced assessment meetings, whether justified or not, were also affected by the encounter. The responses reflected the impact of student

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

behaviour on the well-being of the academic.

Academics perceived students were after a better grade despite the initial intention of the meeting. Despite perceived intentions, students negotiating for a better grade were not widely evident, suggesting a sense of honesty, but that academic support and explanation is sought. If academics were inclined to give a better grade because they acknowledged student 'needs', however, then students would be happy.

### **5.2.5 Q3 - Theme Four: Grade Leveraging**

The fourth theme investigated academics' perceptions and experiences of leveraging and bribery for better grades.

Academics were not keen on the question of grade leveraging, with just over half responding (n=68). Of that number, just over half (n=36) had experienced students trying to leverage, through manipulative behaviour, a higher grade.

In terms of manipulative behaviour, there was few response (n=36), suggesting limited unethical student behaviour. Of the reported techniques that were recorded: emotional pleas (95%), reasonable argument (16%) threats or actual reports to senior staff (14%), legal challenges (14%), physical threat (12%). There were reports of friendship (12%), small gifts (9%) such as pens or chocolates. There were no reported leverages of financial payment, blackmail or other extensive offers (Table 10).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 10: Student techniques used to leverage a better grade

Answer Choices	Responses	
Emotional plea	<b>94.44%</b>	34
Reasonable argument	<b>44.44%</b>	16
Legal challenges	<b>13.89%</b>	5
Sexual favours	<b>2.78%</b>	1
Financial payment	<b>0.00%</b>	0
Physical threat	<b>11.11%</b>	4
Blackmail	<b>0.00%</b>	0
Offer of a holiday	<b>0.00%</b>	0
Small gift (ie, pen, chocolates, alcohol)	<b>8.33%</b>	3
Friendship	<b>11.11%</b>	4
Report to senior staff	<b>38.89%</b>	14
Personal reputation threat (ie, playing the racist/ageist or sexist card)	<b>8.33%</b>	3
Bribe (please state in 'Other' Box)	<b>0.00%</b>	0
<b>Total Respondents: 36</b>		

The findings indicated that academics are exposed to students prepared to negotiate on an emotional or some intellectual level, rather than engage with financial exchange for grades, although discussions have arisen over the academic's price:

### **Academic 3:**

*Emotional blackmail, yes, but with cash, no, I would hope it would be rejected outright but perhaps these things don't come to light.*

### **Academic 4:**

*One did ask me what my price was. I think I sold myself short as we team-taught. My colleague said 'a million' and I said '£150,000' jokingly. I must say I was quite interested as it was the first time she'd asked and I said I would need enough for Jaguar XJS's, one for me and one for my wife, with matching number plates. I said it would cost you £150,000....Well, I think because I turned it into a bit of humour, she just said 'ohhh' and went to my colleague ... I said to him 'I've just been bribed for the first time ever' and he said 'oh, so have I, what was your price? So I told him and he said 'oh, you are too cheap Charlie, I asked for a flat million'.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Whether the leverage is overt or unintentional, the issue of transactional gifts as a bribe for better grades was of interest. Bribery as a transactional advantage to influence academic judgement was considered unacceptable by 99% (n=147) of academics. Anecdotes of other colleagues possibly engaging with bribes was questioned with 93% (n=63) reporting they had not heard of colleagues accepting bribes, but a very small number 8% (n=5) allegedly had. With regard to leverage, the issue of bullying for a grade was discussed. The academics interviewed had mixed views on how bullying was interpreted.

One academic gave an explanatory view of his experiences as a manager of other staff:

### **Academic 2:**

*Not me, but I do know of several academics who are not from the UK and whose experience in the UK is fairly limited who have been under pressure from both students and colleagues to review their marking and typically it's because they're marking students pretty harshly..... we are trying to get to the bottom of 'are students particularly weak' or 'are the tutors particularly demanding', is it that tutors are used to teaching students of higher ability.... I think nationality is a factor but age and experience is a bigger factor. I think tutors that most commonly come under pressure to change marks or review marks or whose marking is questioned are those who newer to teaching, marking, younger PhD students particularly and often that's because they are easy prey but also because they have not developed mechanisms for protecting themselves, they don't have robust marking schemes, they haven't written their feedback that is the most helpful, it might be so, it sort of comes with the territory.*

Another academic highlighted the need to display resolve in difficult situations:

### **Academic 3:**

*I wouldn't say bullied, but there is a professional line that has been tested a number of times... and I have dealt with it as best I can.*

One academic was forthcoming with a recent example from a student with a professional background:

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

### **Academic 1:**

*... it's just happened today. Not to me but someone else where someone has had to be taken in to be told "you are bullying lecturers to get a better grade". I don't know if you know about this person, oh, he's 'delightful'. Emm, he was the one who said "I pay your wages", he also told someone what his grade should be, but he is a teacher from somewhere and has been told that unless he gets a degree he will lose his job, so he's coming here with preconceived ideas of how intelligent he is so, he is the most extreme case possible.*

Students bullying academics was highlighted by another academic, an example that affected academic well-being:

### **Academic 5:**

*..... Stropky, bullying individual, acting like his father. Very nasty business. [I was] angry and distressed. Then had to go off sick.*

### **Summary of Theme Four**

Academics were exposed to students leveraging manipulative behaviour in order to persuade for a higher grade. Manipulative behaviours were emotional, not financial, leverages. Bribery for grades was considered unacceptable by academics, evidencing that staff have an ethical outlook towards their own academic practice. There was negligible evidence of bribery for grades. The findings indicated that staff had been bullied by students and with some having been exposed to verbal or physical threat affecting academic wellbeing.

### **5.2.6 Q3 -Theme Five: Customer Service**

The fifth theme covers the attitudes of academics towards students and their grade enquiries, including whether and, if so, how they perceive customer service to play a role in grade enquiry situations, by examining views on rules and processes, student rights and academic questioning, league tables and institutional pressures, grading behaviour, students as consumers, customer service or servantry, fees and grade expectations.

As with most consumer items that individuals buy, an operations or instructions manual is commonplace. At university, the equivalent documents are policy and assessment guidelines, aimed to act as a signpost to the institutional boundaries.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The reading of rules and regulations is not monitored by the institution but expected by the university. On questioning academics' perceptions of whether students were familiar with the documents, many academics (51%) reported that students did not read and understand the university rules, 37% indicated that students did but only on a need-to-know basis with 6% indicating that students did know the rules.

Reasons offered by academics for students allegedly not reading institutional documents were observed:

### **Academic 6:**

*I don't think they [rules and regulations] are simple enough for the staff. Just to give an example of Mitigating Circumstances (MC). Both the students and myself find it confusing that when they have a MC and they are going to miss a test or need an extension, that the Unit Leader (UL) is not the person who sorts this out, the UL is cut out of the process..... the UL is the one doing all the marking of the test, so it is useful to know if the student is going to hand in late for a valid reason or not...and I keep on telling students that as confusing as it sounds, I am not the one who is going to grant the extension, and I do ask them to inform me if they have requested one, I just like to know for my own planning, but they do not have to do that.*

Others noted that signposting and access to documents do not guarantee them being read:

### **Academic 3:**

*Through email, first week induction, it's all on the internet and the problem with it being on the internet is that, instead of being codified as it is at Oxford and Cambridge, where every student at matriculation will be given a what is called a 'doorstop', it's a thick codified book/text of rules and regulations, it exists. ... to show students that it exists, and that it is going to be right in front of you in your room. When it sits on the internet, we can access it at any given time but we don't, which is the irony, so it's not made explicit.*

Others pointed out the document language as a barrier to reading:

### **Academic 2:**

*The number of places this information is available is enormous, it's everywhere but it doesn't necessarily mean that students are aware of it. ... not a lot of our stuff is student friendly, a lot of the policies and procedures are written in bureaucratic speak .... It's not just here, it's at many*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*universities, most universities, anyway, and so, we don't make it easy for students*

### **Academic 6:**

*I know there is Appeals Process guidance, I am not aware of any guidelines for students requesting feedback.*

In a comparison exercise with 135 British universities that I carried out in 2013, Coastal University's Academic Appeals policy relating to questioning academic judgement was reviewed. It indicated that not all universities had the same policy (see Appendix B). A few universities encouraged grade enquiries or questioning of academic judgement (yes =1, maybe = 3, 4= no policy) but most actively discouraged it (n = 127). Despite Coastal's policy that discouraged challenges to academic judgement, of the 147 academics who responded to questions about their beliefs regarding student rights to question academic judgement and grades, 93% indicated that students have a right to understand how grades were achieved, but 89% concurred that students disagreeing with the academic judgement does not, in itself, constitute grounds for a grade reconsideration, whilst 73% agreed that students have a right to question their marks. Respondents thus believed that students should have and practise rights to assessment enquiries but are hindered by the student unfriendly policies.

Furthermore, academics perceived that students did not read the rules and guidelines, and evidence suggested that academics themselves were not necessarily fully up to date in terms of content or document location.

One academic reflected on the recent history of grade enquiry rights, processes and where advice could be sought:

### **Academic 4:**

*During the period 2012-2015 there was no policy or guideline regarding approaching an academic to discuss assessment and grades (before considering lodging an appeal), however, it was perceived or expected that there was one. They used to be in The Blue Book when I started, somewhere on the website, I would be able to find them but they are under the generic headings, under university assessment, they come out every examination board and I used to know them once upon a time... Mmmmm. They are referred to in their course handbook on about page 36 towards the end. With a weblink. That's it...but then again, the students*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*do have the student union support service here on the campus for that sort of thing anyway.*

Even with the student union being named as the de facto non-academic voice for grade enquiries signposting, one academic was cognisant of the potentially large number of students seeking feedback being sidelined in an institutional effort to dissuade the enquiry:

### **Academic 2:**

*Yeah, I think it is in the student and staff handbook and if I remember rightly, it's in our regulations and it's around...the statement isn't exactly 'you may not question academic judgement' but it is effectively that, I think it is one of the principles on which the university, not just [this] university, is founded, and I guess you have got no choice, and if you were not to have something like that, you would have students questioning marking left, right and centre and it says, it's partly a recognition of the experience and the qualifications and the expertise of staff and also a pragmatic thing to make it less easy for students to complain or appeal, I guess.*

Despite institutional attempts to avoid resourcing academics to provide more contact time, many staff felt obliged to discuss grades with students even if not part of their workload plan. To get a better understanding of the pressures on academics to provide good grades (Table 11), the majority of academics across all factor variables (over 56%+) stated that they did not feel pressurised to give better grades as a result of wider institutional pressure. Those who did, stated they felt pressure from Student Unit Evaluations (44%), the NSS (41%), performance outcomes (41%), course ratings (40%), PRP (16%), and being offered further work, i.e., PTHP (14%).

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 11: Institutional pressures that influence grading

	Some pressure	Slight pressure	No pressure	Total	Weighted Average
National Student Survey (NSS) results	16.33% 24	24.49% 36	59.18% 87	147	2.43
Performance Related Pay (PRP)	3.47% 5	12.50% 18	84.03% 121	144	2.81
Student Unit Evaluations (SUE) or similar	9.52% 14	34.01% 50	56.46% 83	147	2.47
University League Tables (ie, Times Higher, The Guardian, The Complete University Guide)	6.21% 9	17.24% 25	76.55% 111	145	2.70
High ratings for course(s)	9.72% 14	29.86% 43	60.42% 87	144	2.51
Performance outcomes for a programme	9.72% 14	30.56% 44	59.72% 86	144	2.50
Being offered further work (ie, PTHP)	3.57% 5	8.57% 12	87.86% 123	140	2.84

(note: first two columns combined and compared to final column for interpretation).

Despite the perceived lack of pressure from external forces felt by most academics, including the high tuition fees, academic attitudes to marking were explored. One interviewee discussed the value of the grade and how it could influence marking for institutional benefit:

### Academic 4:

*You know, I think there has been a slide, as we move up [in fees]. ... a 2:1 used to be very good and it is slowly changing the language which then justifies the change of the grades. So it's almost as if a 2:1 isn't worth what a 2:1 used to be worth. Are the fees affecting it? .... I think there are subtle influences coming in and coercing you and if your programme is underperforming ... you think 'well, all we have to do is up our grades a bit and we will be safe' so there is that pressure in existence. I'd like to think we didn't and we haven't, but I say there are a lot of subtle tendencies.*

Another view was that the grading process had not changed but that, for some courses, the tools and the assessment stringency had:

### Academic 3:

*[I] think it already has but ...not necessarily the grading process, that has to be kept objective or seen to be, but it is everything else that goes behind it, so the grade may stand... the marking process may be vigorous, but the pernicious effect of tuition fees is that courses have become less rigorous,*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*because of the need to placate students and be seen to be awarding them grades they seem to think they deserve.*

*Students are complaining about their grades, it needs to be explicit how they have achieved their grades, the easiest way of doing that is “to hell with the two essays, the easiest way is to have an MCQ”...when compared to an essay where you see “well, you haven’t quite developed this point” and then an argument ensues about who is right and the result is dissatisfied student, demoralized staff.*

Yet some academics were adamant that their teaching and grading had not bowed to appease the students but that warning and protective mechanisms were employed to signal that studying was required:

### **Academic 5:**

*Does not affect the grade I assign... It does affect the teaching design and feedback. I have been told off for over-engineering feedback to protect myself.*

### **Academic 6:**

*I’m hoping it will not. .. in the end, it’s like going to the gym... that analogy, you pay your subscription to the gym and you get out of it what you put into it, and if you don’t go to the gym.....*

In order to understand academics’ perceptions of student identity, either as learners or consumers (Table 12), of 184 academic survey responses, 84% stated that they perceived students behaving as consumers of HE, 64% reported that they perceived students identifying as independent learners rather than consumers. This indicated a specific identity blur that suggests students are *both* independent learner and consumer.

On the question of forecasting student grade enquiries in the future, academics (58%) predicted more requests for increased grades would be forthcoming, whilst 70% believed there would be more grade enquiries. Whilst there is subtlety in the survey question design, grade enquiries rather than grade increase requests are expected.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Table 12: Academics' perceptions of student identity

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know	Total	Weighted Average
Students perceive themselves or behave as is they are consumers of HE (ie, motivated by customer values)	38.51% 57	44.59% 66	8.11% 12	4.05% 6	4.73% 7	148	1.92
Students still see themselves as independent learners rather than edu-consumers	2.70% 4	22.97% 34	39.19% 58	24.32% 36	10.81% 16	148	3.18
There will be more grade questioning (rather than grade inflation requests) from students in the future	29.93% 44	39.46% 58	8.16% 12	2.72% 4	19.73% 29	147	2.43
There will be more requests for grade inflation from students in the future	23.65% 35	33.78% 50	14.19% 21	4.05% 6	24.32% 36	148	2.72

(note: first two columns combined and compared to final two columns for interpretation).

It was important to understand not only the pressures that academics perceive students experience but also any pressures that students contribute to staff academic identity. Academics reported negatively about how students see the academics as their own employees:

### **Academic 6:**

*I think most of them think I am working for them rather than with them. I think some postgraduate students do also, unfortunately. But I would say it is the bulk of them. But those who are working in the high 2:1s and the firsts are obviously working with me or they take my teaching as a starting point. The middle ground and poor performers want us to work for them than with them.*

### **Academic 3:**

*I think at UG level where the numbers are high and the interaction is lower, I would say, I am seen as a servant by them and the university; whereas at PG level, that distance is less so, so there is a greater feeling of interaction, but that's purely to do with the numbers and delivering things differently to a smaller group than you could possibly do with a cohort of 300.*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

One academic felt that *some* students did not display etiquette skills:

### **Academic 1:**

*I get the feeling that I am a facilitator, a means to an end if you like. I didn't expect the level of respect that I gave my tutor when I was at uni, but that was in the 1990s when I did my first degree, which.... I might call someone Dr. Howard, for example, until he told me otherwise, or if he didn't. I don't expect that, something must have shifted, I don't know what but maybe it's a shift in manners generally, but I don't feel respected as an academic by students, I do by my peers but not by students.*

Whilst resentment of some of the students was evident, it could be argued that the institution is in some part to blame for the academics' views by observing the names of compulsory training programmes for academics:

### **Academic 2:**

*Yes, I am working for them according to the university mantra. Have you seen the Service Excellence training? That says it all really.*

Where academics feel that they are customer service staff rather than educators, based on their experiences, there was a sense that grade increase requests, whether justified or not, would rise.

An element of frustration underpinning grading and assessment is the landscape within which HE sits and positions itself, and which, in turn, encourages students to have expectations beyond institutional delivery capabilities and shapes student identity and how they would behave towards staff:

### **Academic 2:**

*I think it is inevitable, not only with the introduction of tuition fees, that the whole climate, that it is situated within, that students see themselves as customers or consumers. The way that courses are marketed to students, the fact that terms like student engagement, and student experience, and service excellence are used increasingly with and about and at students. All of those things contribute to a wider climate which promotes the idea of students as consumers or customers. And I can't remember which report it was, a government report from 2011 or 2012 explicitly talked about the idea of students as partners in learning and also as consumers of education.*

*In fact, to be honest, at the moment, the majority of issues that I am dealing with or am involved with or are happening at this school are less about*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

*grade chasing or grade questioning are more about 'I'm a student. You're a teacher. I expect you to answer my email, I expect you to turn up on time, I expect you to make my class fun, I expect it to be entertaining, I expect you to mark my assignment within three weeks'.*

*There's lots and lots of expectations and I think we make it hard for ourselves as an institution, as so much effort is put into marketing our degrees and university....we sell a dream, we sell a utopia of a university where everyone is fantastic, and every tutor is amazing, and every experience will be wonderful and yet the fact is no university in the world can live up to that hype and so we often inflate the students' expectations before they even get here.*

There was a concern about future potentially negative student behaviours:

### **Academic 5:**

*Inevitable it will increase. There are increased expectations amongst disciplines... ..small and unpleasant groups of individuals.....enlarged sense of entitlement....all swallowing the language of the media and university.*

With one particular concept underpinning student expectations, followed by the sense of staff resignation to the demands to keep students happy:

### **Academic 1:**

*Yes, more. ...all about enhancing the student experience...Where students can buy a degree...Just give a 40% anyway.*

## **Summary of Theme Five**

Overall, the data suggests that both academics and students alike do not engage with, acknowledge or understand the regulations, indicating that the institution is making it too hard for providers (the institution) and users (students and staff) to either find them or spend the time interpreting them, unless on a need to know basis.

Whilst the qualitative data does not discuss the macro and micro institutional pressures, such as league tables, raised in the survey data, the findings show that whilst marking standards have not necessarily changed, some course elements have changed in order to accommodate student ability, experience or satisfaction.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Academics do not necessarily agree that the rhetoric of higher fees is affecting their grading practice; in some cases, feedback is overly so, even to the detriment of the academic, but they do acknowledge a sense of grade creep.

Academics perceived that students saw themselves in a dual role of consumer and learner and that academics perceived that they are seen as servants to the student body.

Academics expected the higher tuition fees to have an impact on student demands for higher grades but blamed the marketing discourse for unrealistic expectations.

The next section reviews the datasets and presents comparisons and contrasts between academics and student responses.

### 5.3 Data Sets Compared and Contrasted

#### 5.3.1 Overview

This section compares the student and academic datasets and provides an overview of participant concurrence and conflict.

##### **Agree**

Both student and academic datasets concurred in respect to a particular matter

##### **Disagree**

Both student and academic datasets did not agree in respect to a particular matter

Where percentage differences are not provided, quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., questionnaires and focus groups or interviews) or qualitative datasets (e.g., interview and focus group) have been compared and thus the comparison is arrived at based on my judgement of those datasets.

#### 5.3.2 Points of Agreement

The majority of both sets of study respondents **agreed**:

- That grades were very important to the students.
- That educators are proponents in the discourse for achieving success through good grades.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- That there was a misalignment in the expected and actual student experience. It can be concluded that there is a real difference between the marketing offering and the academic value offering. 5% difference (both close to 60% in influences when questioning marks).
- That students know the rules in the event of needing to know when a problem arises. 1% difference (both close to 35% agreed students knew rules when a problem arose).
- That students did not perceive that grades were negotiable thus evidencing a concordant mindset of fairness in marking.
- The important factors for a meeting: *maintenance of grade level* and *health issues*.
- That they perceived that students wanted a better grade to reflect the *effort* put into their work.
- That bribery was unacceptable, reflecting a sense of fair play on both sides, although a small proportion of students did consider bribery acceptable, hinting at a potential gap in student ethics. 15% difference, a seventh more academics found bribery unacceptable (99%).
- That academics were a student commodity in terms of being a useful thing for grades but not as a commodity that can be bought or sold.

### 5.3.3 Points of Disagreement

The data also highlighted some **disagreements**:

Both sets of respondents highlighted contrasts in issue perspectives:

Academics acknowledged teaching and learning differences and challenges, such as absence being problematic, but students did not agree. 15% difference (a third higher percentage of academics than students).

- Academics stated that digital devices were problematic, however, students did not mention this at all, but stated academics should be available to help 'anytime'. It may be that academics could be provided with other communication tools to engage with the students.
- Academics perceived that students responded negatively to grade enquiry outcomes, whilst students stated the opposite. The disagreement could not

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

be analysed, as there was no satisfaction data from actual meetings, the respondents may not have been connected to each other, or recollection of the event, due to time passing, may be unreliable. 59% difference (over three times percentage of academics perceived a negative reaction compared to that actually reported by students).

- Whilst academics felt that the grade questioning was not justified, students believed it was. Some students were unsure whether they were justified to question, highlighting hesitancy about their rights. It should be noted that this question about whether grade questioning may have been misinterpreted as to whether it meant, did students have a right to question, or whether a specific questioning was justified. 34% difference (2.5 to 3 times percentage of students felt questioning grades was justified than academics).
- On perceptions of reading and understanding the rules in the first year, academics stated that students did not but the students themselves said they did. 24% difference (students over 5 times percentage of academics). The question did not interrogate specific rules held in a specific location that all respondents could refer to, and as the rules change annually, it is not clear which rules the respondents referred to i.e. those on the website, in a handbook, a power-point or word-of-mouth. As memory is an unreliable factor, it may be that either academics are dismissive of student knowledge, that students were not aware of the rules, but have become so since, that individuals are knowledgeable about some rules and not others or, as a last resort, students confirm lack of rule knowledge.
- When discussing student visits for a grade change, the majority stated that the outcome for the student was being given advice to improve; however, academics stated that the number that purposely came purely for advice to improve was actually much lower. The students stated that their goal was for advice on improvement but there may be some confusion between what was sought, achieved and timings. 26% difference (4 times percentage of students said request was primarily for advice).
- Furthermore, academics perceived that students ultimately were seeking a grade change through a subtle meeting; however, only a small amount of students stated they specifically wanted a grade change thus the evidence

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

for grade grubbing is limited. It could be seen that a grade change was the original unspoken intention by the student, or the meeting was misinterpreted by the academic. 47% difference (10 times percentage of academics as students). Without records, it is unclear what the original intention and understanding of the meeting was and this might be a case of academics incorrectly pre-empting student wants and needs.

The next chapter discusses the findings from the student, and then the academic data.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

### **6.1 Overview**

The key finding from both sets of data highlights the need for a new model to provide a better understanding of student grade enquiries. This has led to the development of The Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) model. A summary terminology relating to grade enquiries and questioning is highlighted to clarify the lexicon.

The chapter then discusses the issues, themes, descriptions and possible explanations arising from the data. The nature of grade enquiries are defined, clarified and presented via the GEC model.

The data discussion re-examines the main student findings relating to questions one and two: specifically the background pressures on students and their experiences and attitudes towards their grade enquiries; it then moves on to academic findings relating to question three. This is followed by a comparison of the data sets.

An overview of potential future grade enquiries at Coastal University is discussed with suggestions to frame student grade enquiries in a supportive light.

### **6.2 Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) Model**

The new Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) model has been devised to explain modes of grade enquiry (see Figure 2 and Appendix J). This has arisen as a result of interpreting convoluted understandings of the grade enquiry phenomena as viewed in both the literature and from the study respondents. The research into the phenomenon of grade enquiries has considered a range of grading issues: institutional wholesale grading practices (grade inflation) through to grade enquiries and grade questioning (pestering the professor: Franz 2010),

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

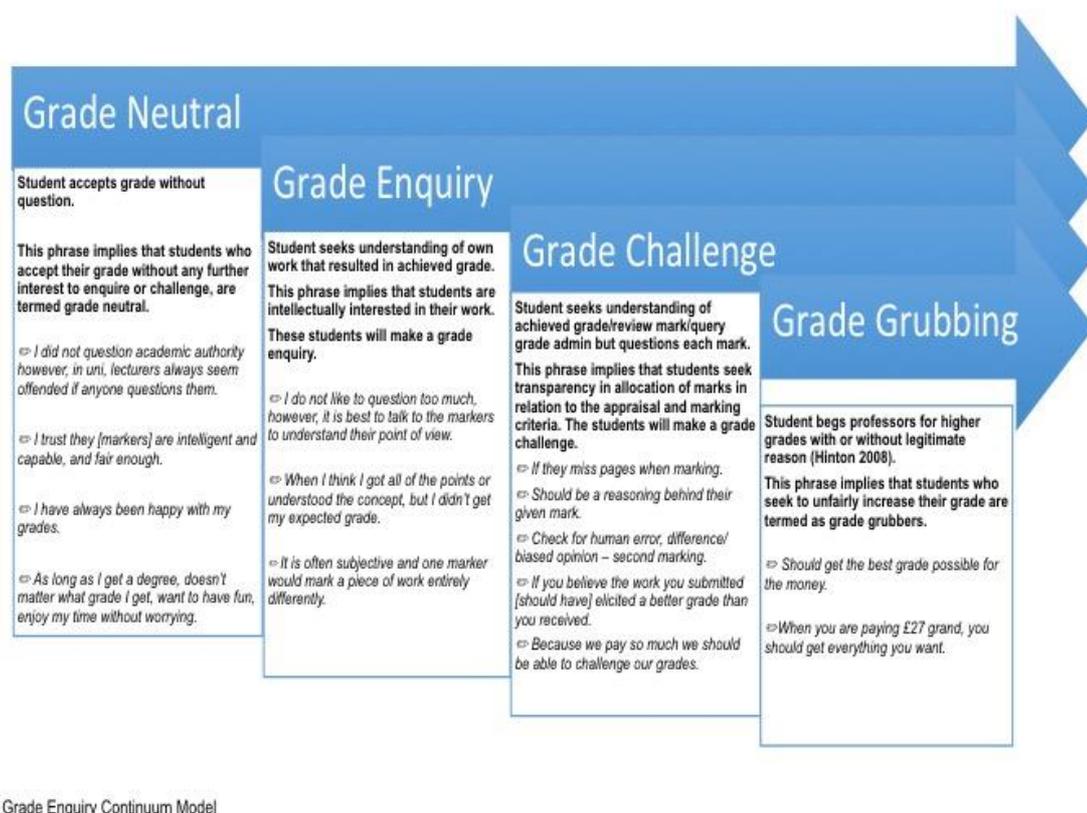


Figure 2: Grade Enquiry Continuum Model

When researching the literature relating to grading, grades and questioning, the terminology relating to students grade enquiries was confusing. During the literature review research, interpretation of the scholarly language relating to grading was unclear. This may have been due to differences in understanding of the terminology between the US and the UK, but also to the lack of previous research into the subject of grading enquiries and the nuanced differences between such enquiries. A close study of the qualitative data from both academics and students indicated subtle differences in the language used. Four classifications were divined and some examples are provided in the model.

The four classifications are:

**Grade Neutral:** whereby students who receive their grades accept them at face value and do not question them. These students may be indifferent or pleased with their results, or not sure of their rights or processes for grade enquiry.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

**Grade Enquiry:** whereby students seek a fuller understanding of why their own work achieved a particular grade. These students genuinely seek to understand how the work could have been improved.

**Grade Challenge:** whereby students seek understanding of the achieved grade with a view to challenging academic judgement. These students seek a discussion with their tutor, about how the grades were achieved, at a microscopic level, to determine whether the marker misinterpreted or failed to provide full marks.

**Grade Grubbing:** whereby a student will seek a higher grade whether justified or not. These students seek to enhance their overall grade, using manipulative leverage to request or demand a better grade.

Whilst reasons for grade enquiries are diverse, students are often demonised by both the media and, more eloquently, by scholars. It is not fair to blame the student body for their predicament, however. Directed by society, government and the media combined, individuals have learnt, accepted and believe that university is the only choice for a better future and that high grades are important (QAA 2012). Thus, some who attend university may not be best suited to it, and academics may be inclined to agree. Furthermore, some academics may assume that all individuals will attempt to increase their grade.

This expectation by academics may be considered to be a result of seeing the marketisation of HE negatively affecting their professional identity whilst promoting a different offering to the student body that is not in the direction of student academic excellence, but of expecting academics to provide offerings of placement, and customer service, and to attend graduation events that provide a leaving gift of a good grade graduation certificate.

On reviewing the findings, there is a lack of data to suggest widespread lobbying for good grades. This puts the phenomena of grade grubbing and bribery into the category of what Krinsky (2013) calls moral panic, that of

*“alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order” (p.2)*

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

and squarely in Pandora's Box, a conceptual space where unexpected future problems can sit for the meantime. Whilst it is an emerging phenomenon, however, it should not be mismanaged.

### **6.3 Discussion of Student Findings**

#### **6.3.1 Overview**

The research aim was to investigate the reported phenomena of grade grubbing in English HE so as to improve the understanding of its existence and why it occurs. It asked why students, post 2012, choose to go to university, the background pressures on students at university, and their experiences and attitudes towards grade enquiries and grade grubbing. The literature shows that students are encouraged to believe that university is an investment that will produce a return in terms of well-paid employment, often with students repeating beliefs formed by a previous generation rather than rationally observing the current financial and economic climate, confirming Enders (cited in Matthews 2013).

Within the first question, four themes were explored: motivations for attending university, student expectations for their degree and its impact on their career prospects, assessment pressure points experienced by students, and student perceptions of their own role in their university experience.

Within the second question the thesis discusses student grade expectations and their personal experiences of the assessment process.

#### **6.3.2 Q1 - Theme One: Motivations for Going to University**

Students identified that pressure to go to university was applied by peers, which was consistent with Sokatch (2006), and also by secondary school educators and parents, confirming data from UCAS (2012:13). Government reports in the literature strongly promoted the idea that higher education would lead to higher returns (see Robbins 1963; Dearing 1997; Browne 2010) and UCAS (2012) and, as reported by students, this was confirmed by educators and parents and formed the key instigator for university entry.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Students articulated that they thought choices for the future after secondary school were limited, with university as the next obvious step towards employment. This supports UCAS (2012:15), which reported that students had little knowledge of non-university life options. Some students felt that university was the right thing to do, or were just not sure, as reported by Brown (2003) and again, ten years later by Brown and Carasso (2013), but many may not have the right life skills for university, as identified by Lythcott-Haims (2016). In some cases, there was a sense of the fear of missing out, a concern reported by Mintel (2013) and a ritualisation highlighted by Tomlinson (2008). This was more pronounced with students from university attending families.

Further reasons for attending university included better anticipated job prospects, personal independence and a social life, connections and volunteering; a set of benefits that they felt were important and which were expected and tie in with Prozac (2006) and NUS-HSBC (2008). This also mirrors the discourse from government reviews (see Robbins 1963; Dearing 1997; Browne 2010) reported over time in the media (see QAA 2012, p.63).

Independence was a strong theme, with students wanting to detach themselves from families and join like-minded others to gain “transformational experiences”, as reported in QAA (2012, p.63) and Parry (2013). A few identified that they wanted to live in a place of their choice or be semi-autonomous, as suggested by Goldscheider and Da Vanzo (1985), with many still needing parental support as researched by Lewis *et al.* (2015). Surprisingly, none expressed a desire to study abroad, to gain the ‘transversal skills’ sought after by global employers, as supported by Minsky (2015), suggesting that many students are not confident to step out of their comfort zone.

Employment was a recurrent theme throughout the research, and university placements and good grades leading directly to jobs were considered important. Some respondents indicated that, in the first year, grades did not matter, which ties in with QAA (2012, p.67).

Whilst the quantitative data said the related job market was ‘competitive but opportunities exist’, it was of interest that there was a lack of discussion in the

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

qualitative data about the economy and the potential paucity of relevant jobs, current and predicted, related to their study. Whilst students stated that grades are important for jobs, it is possible that perceptions of the job market and actual job availability have not yet been fully realised by the student body. This indicates a lack of research and long-term planning for their chosen industry, and optimism that suitable jobs would be available after graduation.

### **6.3.3 Q1 - Theme Two: Student Expectations**

Students' perceptions and expectations of a university degree as an agent for better employment and MA entry were as anticipated. These responses were consistent with government-designed intentions (see Robbins 1963; Dearing 1997; DfES 2003; NUS-HSBC 2008; Brown 2010) in terms of the belief and expectation that having a degree supports better job prospects.

Undergraduates still see education as part of human capital investment. This ties in with multiple authors (see Becker 1964; Crook *et al.* 2011; Fitzsimons 1997; Little 2003) and is further evidenced by the overwhelming importance of high grades to achieve the degree credential, a seeming measure of a student skill set. Furthermore, a return on investment, in many cases up to £40,000 overall, was anticipated and confirms Browne (cited in Collini 2011, p.3) and HESA (2013). This, however, can only be a perception and is not measurable until several years post-graduation.

In terms of employer needs, it was recognised by many, that a 2:1 and work experience were the minimum job entry requirements, as was assumed. This understanding of the lowest employment prerequisite supports the findings of Snowdon (2012) who highlighted that CV filtering was essential for employers to sift through applications. Furthermore, the student data relates to Snowdon (2012), that some employers no longer have faith in the blunt tool of a degree classification, but that social skills, or university experiences such as placement, could influence the student to grow into an employee desired by employers.

Students, though, showed little evidence of having explored the likely return of investment resulting from a specific degree selection in relation to higher tuition

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

fees and the reduction in the graduate premium, as highlighted by Burnett (2015). This was startling.

Students did expect that they would get a good job based on the received media mantra that those with a degree are paid better and this did not surprise me. From practice observation, first year students often struggle with being a scholar and display short-term behaviours, so not having researched the long-term benefit of a degree was not a surprise.

Finally, this research was undertaken at a post-92 university where there tends to be a more explicit link between degree courses and specific career paths; this may not be the case to the same extent at universities with a larger mix of humanities and social science degrees. e.g. students studying subjects like history, classics, English, even modern languages, are likely to be rather less expectant that their degree will lead them to a particular career. The relationship between degree and employment may be fundamentally different.

### **6.3.4 Q1 - Theme Three: Assessments and Pressure Points**

For many students, although entering HE is an important life choice entailing the expectation of freedom, independence, knowledge and challenge, as noted by Beard (2012) and NUS-HSBC (2008), yet many they are pulled by demanding external factors that impact their studies and assessment marks.

Most of the students indicated that they struggled with adjusting to higher-order thinking, requiring support to help them on their academic journey. Findings show that where students were expected to evidence performativity, that of understanding the assessment brief and articulated marking criteria before attempting the task, and adhere to an academic “standard” variable by course criteria, staff marking, degree outcomes and other factors, it could be argued that the ‘standard’ was difficult to achieve (Cox 2009). For those students who were academically capable at each year level, others had pressures that hindered their confidence and progression. Many students stated that they felt a pressure to maintain good grades, and that a grade lower than their norm would not be acceptable, yet they still struggled with understanding of the academic level required. This resonates with the QAA (2012) report that highlights the conflicting

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

student requirements for variation, flexibility and standardisation, and that support was required for students on different learning trajectories (p.55).

Some students pointed out the absence of or strain on the staff/student relationship and that this affected their performance. This supports Woolcock and Malvern (2008, cited in William 2013, p.1) who found that students wanted to be able to meet with tutors regularly.

65% of students did not see class absenteeism as an issue or barrier to assessment achievement. HEPI-HEA (2014) highlighted that lack of attendance means that students miss deep learning, interaction, engagement, effort and the academic experience. Other student issues confirmed previous studies of academic performance (see Budden *et al.* 2010; Caison 2005; Lang 2001), including health issues (see Jones 2014; MIND 2013, Sherriff 2013) and personal relationships (see Finn 2015).

All of these factors are important to recognise since they affect a student's ability to succeed. The findings confirmed that previous study performance was a critical driver for study motivation and success, whereas lack of stable finances whilst studying, or friendships and social integration (see Tinto 1993) were seen as a hindrance for integrating into university life. Whilst students stated that they put effort into their work, and contrary to HEPI-HEA (2014), the challenges of multi-tasking and meeting deadlines indicated an inability to cope with university life. This was not a surprise.

### **6.3.5 Q1 - Theme Four: Students as Learners or Consumers**

This section sets out to understand how students saw themselves as participants in HE, the financial commitments to their course, attitudes towards their studies, their relationship with staff and attitudes towards assessed work and grades.

Students rarely commented on the detail of their relationships with academics, but those who commented were clear that some academics were keen to develop individual students, whilst others experienced hostility from staff when help was required. Other students perceived that there were limited grounds for relationship building with staff. These students identified issues that were not communicated to

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

the academic, such as the effort that they desired recognition for, individual hopes, acknowledgment of backgrounds and additional support required, much of which agrees with QAA (2012, p.46). This may be due to timetabling issues and other constraints on academics' contracted time such as meetings, teaching, research, enterprise and service activities as reported by many (see Brew 2006; Cummings 1998, cited in Macfarlane 2012; Franz 2010; Locke 2007). Considering that academic relationships are the lynchpin for learning, it is evident that, for most respondents, student and staff engagement, mentoring and student development should take priority, and this concurs with QAA (2012, p.46).

In answer to the question of whether students defined themselves as learners or consumers, many respondents indicated that they chose university to learn, investing both money and time in terms of study and assessments. This is contrary to much of the literature that presents a gloomier picture of students, highlighting and suggesting that they are purely driven by the consumerist relativism (see Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Molesworth *et al.* 2009). With regard to students seeing themselves as learners or customers, there was a sense of emerging consumerism. For example, students are mindful of their study commitments, and the costs associated with being at university but not necessarily with the wider economy. There also appears to be a tension between title ownership, responsibilities and rights, suggesting that, not only could students be customers, clients or consumers but may well also be grade enquirers, particularly those with consumerist attitudes.

In a parallel twist, whilst students did want to achieve success in their undergraduate career independently, some students were keen to put the price of HE at the forefront of their service value expectations, so agreeing with Naidoo and Jamieson (2005), Molesworth *et al.* (2009) and QAA (2012, p.23). This confirms an emergent neo-consumerist approach to their university experience, partially agreeing with Tomlinson's (2015) depiction of students as being quasi-consumers. This was not unexpected. Academics noted that students appear financially savvy, however, students did not necessarily research or understand the terms and conditions attached to purchasing a place on a programme. This could be equated to the purchase of a mobile phone. Individuals know the price of

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

the product and what it can do but rarely read the lengthy conditions, warranties or guarantees related to the purchase. The same can be seen in terms of students not necessarily understanding what the institution will and will not provide for the fees. This indicates a naïve consumerism. If institutions do go down the route of taking on nascent consumers, they will have to be able to account for the services they provide.

The arrival of the 'consumerist ethos' echoes the QAA (2012, p.22) that highlighted value discussions, and service expectations that were framed by tuition fees. This can be seen partly by the financial commitment that students have made, but also by the students' own perception of their needs from the service they have invested in: that of an education, with support, that they expect will lead to employment. This confirms Prozak (2006) and Browne (2010). It may well be that students who are fee-focused are disaffected by the academics, assessment boundaries and institutional quality and accountability controls, (see Macfarlane 2017) as well as being obsessed with grades, and thus use the consumerist argument as a valid lever for potential grade grubbing behaviours.

Of interest, from the students' comments, was the inability to separate the price of their course and the concept of their commitment to a tax-payer loan, by suggesting that they had already paid or were paying the tuition fee, even though fee repayment is subject to gaining employment. This was a surprise as I had assumed students would be aware of the long-term financial implications of debt repayments. This indicated that students believed they would get a job that will be used to pay back their loan, future proofing their external commitment to finances as a reason for educational demands in terms of value and service expectations. Whatever their financial position, students were keen to identify what they wanted for their (as yet personally unpaid for) money, which concurs with QAA (2012).

Students were divided on the relationship of the cost of HE and future grade challenges. Some indicated that an increase in grade challenges was unlikely in relation to fees because they perceive current fees to be normal. They had no understanding of a previous lower fee paradigm and were sanguine about the matter, as noted by Tomlinson (2014), but they had higher expectations for better quality feedback. For students who did think grade challenges would increase, the

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

consumerist tone was evident. Respondents' reasons ranged from relocating blame for future students' (lack of) effort, debt, service and desired grades. This reflects the discourse in the literature highlighted by Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) and Molesworth *et al.* (2009) suggesting that buyer-seller relationships are evident. The conflict in predictions may be due to the probability that students had little or no previous experience of purchasing and committing to a high price service with an undeterminable outcome and responded according to their own philosophical or practical expectations and experiences.

Students see themselves as learners with a partial consumer mentality, fed by the media, government and consumer rights, using that language; although it was not a full part of their identity but a mis-description of a consumer. This implies that students are quasi-consumers in a quasi-market.

### **6.3.6 Q2 Theme five: Grade Expectations and Experiences of Grading**

Where students suffer problems that may hinder academic success, or are confused about their role in university, wanting to achieve a 2:1 degree leading to employment, but receiving grades that are unacceptable, students may wish to question the grade or seek to persuade the marker to adapt the grade for a better outcome (Franz 2010). This section discusses respondents' expectations and experiences in relation to the grade.

The majority of students indicated that grades were important, linking grades as a device that would connect them to the workplace. This was predictable. Some students made the connection that good grades promoted interest in future learning behaviours; others highlighted that since so many people have degrees, the grade is a differentiator or a stepping-stone to the next year level or placement and this ties in with QAA (2012 p.67). The intense level of importance students bestowed on the grade and degree suggests that students see employment opportunities limited to only those with high marks.

For students who were not grade motivated [Grade Neutral in the grade enquiry continuum model proposed above], grade challenging appeared to be of little concern. For the majority who valued good grades, however, where poor feedback or other concerns affected assessment, students were motivated to enquire about

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

their grades, whatever effort and time was committed [Grade Enquiry]. This concurs with Franz (2010) and was unsurprising.

Despite study patterns, life experiences and grades achieved, there was a spirit of competitiveness amongst the respondents, with many comparing their grade with friends. This was anticipated. They may be checking for justice through marks awarded to others, looking to improve themselves and share news to evidence success with those outside of university such as family, sponsors and friends. Many did check feedback for performance appraisal and for future assessment. Only a few sought out the marker. Those seeking the unit leader/marker were respondents wanting to discuss their grade for feedback clarity [Grade Enquiry]. Others, however, did so due to competitive perception of the grade as an absolute indicator of ability and as a status marker, in particular for employment. This aligns with Prozac (2006), who stated that individuals want to be judged on things they can regulate, wanting reality to work in their favour.

Students felt that course choice or values sought by tuition fees could influence students to question their marks [Grade Challenge]; however, grade negotiation [Grade Grubbing] was perceived as unlikely due to moral constraints. This was unforeseen.

Many respondents tended not to question their grades [Grade Neutral], highlighting a perceived or stated power paradigm in favour of academics (see Moten and Harney 1998). This was surprising. The data indicated that undergraduates were less likely to question a result but those who did, tended to do so on an intellectual level. This was a partial surprise as I had anticipated more to negotiate grade uplift. Under half of those who had questioned a result wanted to understand how to improve their work, check whether the grade was reasonable or seek concept clarification [Grade Enquiry], highlighting a personal uncertainty and exploring issues of interpretation. A minority believed that, due to the tuition fees, students should get the best deal, and that disputing assessments over tangible and intangible elements of the assessment was part of the education package [Grade Challenge]. The latter was a revelation as I had expected more cases to be evident, however, the former grade enquiry nomenclature, Grade Neutral, concurs with OIA (2014), who noted that most students complete their

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

courses without cause for complaint (p.1). Overall, there was the sense of a lack of student personal confidence, both in terms of study ability that aligns with Hayes' (2009, p.17) depiction of the vulnerable learner with a fixation on the grade for future utility and the potential to grade enquire.

Reasons for grade changes are multiple, related to guideline structures, perceptions of absolute grades and a sense of grade justice. In subjective programmes where shades of grey marking could apply and marker inexperience can occur, grades are open to challenge, particularly in the social sciences, as reported by OIA (2013, 2014). Where grades were questioned, it was clear that assessment clarification and advice was the outcome with the very few grades changed seemingly down to administrative error, although there was evidence that a volte-face by academics had occurred, albeit little evidence was provided in this data. Overall, it suggests that grade changes rarely occur but are dependent on legitimate performance evidence rather than entitled persuasion. This was anticipated.

First year students appeared to be unsure about their ability to navigate university requirements and adjust to the new environment, as evidenced by Read *et al.* (2003); having difficulty understanding or fulfilling assessment criteria to achieve good grades, and this was to be imagined as students are usually young and without interest in reading vague, wordy and unpalatable documents. This also ties in with Bloxham *et al.* (2016). Second years' gain confidence, still seeking validation but are more grade focused. Final year students were very grade focused confirming Lieberman and Remedios (2007) who found that second through to final year students were more grade orientated and less study focused, raising concerns around depth of interest in their courses. The data suggests that meeting with the marker to discuss the assessment, with or without grade change questioning, fulfils the student need for guidance and reassurance. Students who do not find a perceived satisfactory resolution to their grade enquiry were unhappy, however, and this confirms both Orsmond and Merry (2011) and Price *et al.* (2010). This unhappiness or dissatisfaction may be due to a poor assessment explanation or the marker not acquiescing to a hoped-for grade change.

It could be interpreted that the students need some validation of their work beyond

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

written feedback and a grade in order to know how they are doing and how to improve. This is counter to Mill (1978:401 cited Molesworth *et al.* 2009) who suggested that students need academics to make 'them better pleased with themselves and with their errors'. Fidler's (cited Grove 2014) observation that students want academics to make them feel good about themselves, whatever they do, indicates a lack of individual student confidence. This was not a surprise as students are transitioning toward the adult world of employment and responsibility. Similarly to school, some younger students may feel dependent on academics to coach and support them through the learning and testing journey, as noted by Black *et al.* (2004), even though the issues remain around grading, generic or poor feedback, much covered by Price *et al.* (2010); QAA (2012, p.40); HEPI-HEA (2014, p.8), and fairness, as highlighted by QAA (2012, p.53). For some, tuition fees were justification enough for grade enquiry and feedback-as-required rights.

Where university rules, processes and procedures relating to academic boundaries were concerned, although some students said they had read and understood them, most were unaware of the procedures or only got to know them when a problem arose, and this was not a surprise. Students may, however, seek to increase grades in line with, or independent of, rules of the academic boundaries, confirming Delucchi and Korgen (2002). This suggests that students' failure to recognise or understand the processes may be due to the location of the documents, the language used or the time required to read what amount to *terms and conditions* as experienced from consumer contracts elsewhere. Furthermore, a lack of awareness may stem from an absence of '*contract conditions*' at school. There may be assumptions that powers relating to processes and rules lay elsewhere, are generalised and not attachable to the individual. Thus, when a problem arises, students make themselves aware of the documentation, similar to product guarantees and warranties, based on experiences in the commercial marketplace, and this supports Molesworth *et al.* (2009, p.279) who identified the buyer–seller transactional model underpinning student attitudes towards HE service.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Relating to morals and ethics, it was clear that students believed in fairness when it comes to grading, which was predictable. Although students indicated that grades should be earned, however, they also felt that academics are not to be trusted and were, in turn, concerned about the marking being thorough. This concurs with O'Brien (2010). Furthermore, students indicated that, despite the quality of student work and perceived effort, the marker should be mindful of grade allocation, and take into account the grade a student 'needs' for the workplace (see Delucchi and Korgen 2002). Students were divided here, however: those who believed in academic justice and those who felt academics should compromise their position by marking to the advantage of the student, competent or otherwise, thus implicating the academic in bending the rules, breaking their personal ethical and moral codes. This was considered probable. Preconceived ideas that students, similar to Gabriel and Lang's (2006) concept of unmanageable consumers, would expect this as part of the financial exchange, was anticipated. The optimistic expectation of a flexible marker, prepared to practice favouritism, or positive bias, suggests that the moral and ethical balance of students expecting academics to bend the rules is evident and these multi-dimensional student moral and ethical stances could have implications for future customer service expectations; i.e. I am honest but you can be dishonest on my behalf. Furthermore, it confirms the view that university is the perceived agent between school and the workplace and expectations of university are clear, to get students into the workplace.

The question of bribery, a darker dimension of Grade Grubbing, was included to see how far students might be tempted to go to get the grade of their choice. The majority of students were adamant that bribery was unacceptable, having expectations of fair play from both academics and students alike. Even though misdemeanours in HE were initially being sought in this research, the presence of this was revealed to be imagined. A minority of students, however, were open to the idea of bribery, specifically if there was no chance of being caught out and this agrees with Ruedy *et al.* (2013) who discussed cheating highs, or to get ahead, as noted by Brown (2003) and the reported student bribe incident (BBC 2013a). This highlights a hesitant concern around student self-performance, moral and ethical judgement and the student's place in an unpredictable job market.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Students who had never challenged grades [Grade Neutral] indicated that academics knew more about a subject than they did and that they would work for their grades. Interestingly, such students did not consider grade-challenging behaviour to be unethical, but stated they had not practised it and would consider it, as a result of this research, for the future. Should students want grade uplifts, as a required or perceived service or indulgence when engagement has been absent, and they may feel confident to demand them, as identified by Delucchi and Korgen (2002).

In terms of the types of programmes where grade enquiries occurred, within the arts and humanities, the highest appeared to be within business related courses (n=82) with others across media (n=18) and nursing (n=2). The former figure was probable as the literature suggested that certain courses were cash cows, taking in varying ability students, and this had also been highlighted in a conversation prior to the study. Due to lack of wider representation from nursing and science, it was not possible to draw conclusions about grade enquiries in that field. The arts and humanities, however, is an area that is prone to grade enquiries, due to multiple answer interpretations and grades being easier to achieve; the latter noted by Light and Silverman (2011), leading to grade questioning, as reported by OIA (2013), highlighting complaints from business, social studies, medicine-related studies and law (OIA 2013:20). The grades were particularly important as these courses offered many placement opportunities but only to those who had achieved the 2:1 trajectory in the first year.

Overall, feedback is an issue for students in terms of clarity, relevance and depth. This may be resolved by academics giving meaningful feedback and feed-forward with an account of student academic performance to ensure that students perceive that their work is appraised in a critical yet supportive way.

A discussion of the findings in relation to academics now follows.

## **6.4 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Academics**

### **6.4.1 Overview**

The aim of the research was to investigate the reported phenomena of grade grubbing in English HE to improve understanding of its existence and the motivations for doing so. The research interrogated academics' perceptions as to why students, post-2012, choose to go to university, the background pressures on students at university and their experiences and attitudes towards grade enquiries and grade grubbing.

This chapter discusses the main findings relating to question three, specifically academics' perceptions of students' views on grades in terms of utility, pressures on academics teaching contemporary students, experiences of grade enquiries, including leveraging and bribery, perceptions of academic identity and academic attitudes towards students and their grade enquiries.

### **6.4.2 Q3 - Theme One: Perceptions of Students' Views on Grades**

Academics perceived that students believed that the grade was an important marker and stepping stone. This parallels the student data and UCAS (2012a, p.13), each reporting that educators are collaborators in the discourse for achieving success through university entry and good grades to achieve that success. It may be that respondents need to have more advice about the achievement within the assessment, and improvement rather than focusing on just the actual grade.

### **6.4.3 Q3 - Theme Two: Challenges to Student Learning and Teaching**

Academics experienced considerable pressure from the student cohort and, in some cases, classroom etiquette was absent. From experience of some students, this was anticipated. Brown and Carasso (2013) reported the skills disadvantages that some students display when entering university, alongside their external commitments, as noted by Leathwood *et al.* (2003), which was confirmed by academics in this study. Furthermore, observations were made that distraction from non-class material on laptops and phones hindered students' ability to learn. This supports Hembrooke and Gay (2003, p.56) who noted the distracting

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

prevalence of electronics in the classroom. Electronic distractions may be a factor that would lead to grade enquiries. Academics, similarly to the electronics, are expected to entertain (QAA 2012), and student behaviours, such as ignoring the laptop or TV at will when at leisure, may also be a behaviour practised in the classroom. As such, this may reflect the perceived poor student attitudes in class. Students may benefit from advice on policy and procedure guidelines. Despite the concerns around electronic distractions, teaching styles may need to engage with the digital environment to address teaching and learning differences that may also contribute to grade enquiries.

### 6.4.4 Q3 - Theme Three: Grade Enquiries and Challenges

The mismatch of student expectation and support provided was presumed, and supports HEPI-HEA (2014, p.21). It highlighted that universities should not downplay their responsibility in encouraging and supporting the student. The principle that students see the degree as a service product to be bought or negotiated was not substantiated. Molesworth *et al.* (2009) claimed that the buyer–seller transactional model underpinning student attitudes towards HE service is substantiated.

Academics recognised the student pressures reported by HEPI-HEA (2014), QAA (2012), MIND (2013) and Crocker *et al.* (2003), and this was anticipated. The expectation that, because of fees, students anticipated more staff support than they were getting was substantiated but not acted upon by the students. This may be due to students accepting the provision as normal, not wanting to bother the academic, or not understanding how to interpret work feedback or transcendently know how to move forward (Rust *et al.* 2003; Evans 2013b).

Academics pointed out that students want feedback meetings to understand a grade. There is potential confusion regarding whether respondents' answers to 'question a grade' should be interpreted to mean 'question assessment feedback', 'question the actual grade', or 'question the grade for a change'. It was evident that students had genuine enquiries arising from the assessment feedback. This supports Evans (2013b) who found that feedback was subject to interpretation, and to subject-specific variables, as well as noting student receptivity to and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

application of feedback; and Macfarlane (2016), who argues that assessments undermine students' learning choices in favour of 'game playing' behaviours. Thus, students are keen to understand whether they have played by the game rules and been marked in a fair and appropriate way.

Molesworth *et al.* (2009) and Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) argued that students are now, or have been enacted, as consumers rather than learners. Data from the academics tended to agree. The QAA (2012) and HEPI-HEA (2014) report that students seek transparent and meaningful feedback and, despite other institutional pressures, this was supported by academics. Titus (2008) described that some students want to engage with the marking criteria to co-create grades, but this was not supported in this study, where academics reported that students wanted to discuss assessment marks and understand the assessment structure. Macfarlane (2016) concurs, highlighting students' concerns about whether such practices are fair and appropriate. The idea of co-creating marks was not explored. If institutions do not acknowledge this, however, and create guidelines to accommodate collaborative learning, assessment and feedback structures, they could be accused of coercing student rights and freedom of choice to learn (see Macfarlane 2016).

Relating to grade enquiries, academics stated that grade changes were the first priority, which I expected, whilst students said they wanted to improve, which I did not expect. Secondly, both datasets agreed that students wanted to query the mark, and thirdly, staff said students wanted to know how to improve whilst students identified clarification. There is some confusion about the syntax used and understood for these choices by academics, students and the researcher alike, and clarification is needed.

Student demand for quality and timely feedback highlighted by QAA (2012, p.40 and HEPI-HEA 2014, p.8) was confirmed by academics. This was expected.

Academics' observations about students' emotional responses to assessment outcomes were noted as unpredictable but falling into the emotionally negative category. This was not a surprise as students seek validation of their ability based on school-type feedback that is, as far as I have seen, less critical than at

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

university. This reflected student dissatisfaction with the grade and meeting outcomes related to the feedback. This coordinates with QAA (2012), who reported that transparency over justification of grades was sought by students, confused by, for example, positive comments, but low grades or vice versa, consistency, format, quality and depth. For many students, greater time and effort is required to allow for information processing and supporting the student on their learning journey.

With regards to official appeals, the OIA (2013, p.13) found that over 55% of cases were unjustified for grade appeal with a further 16% not eligible (total 71%). This was anticipated. With experience of unofficial appeals at assessment meetings, the academics agreed. High numbers of unjustified enquiries may reflect student misunderstanding of university processes/procedures or student failure to obtain the experience and grades they hoped for. Those academics who stated that students were justified (21%) are similar to those reported by OIA (2013, p.13) of 25% justified, partly justified and settled cases.

The largest proportion of grade enquiry incidents were from Media and Communications (43%), Science and Technology (25%), Health and Social Care (14%) Business (14%) and Tourism (3%) respectively. This contradicts the student response to this question but was anticipated from the literature (see Cheong 2000, Prather *et al.* 1979, Sabot and Wakeman-Linn 1991 in the US, and, in the UK, the OIA (2013; 2014), who indicated that the majority of complaints received, by subject, were for courses in social studies).

Academics recalled that final year students were most likely to grade enquire and the results are as presumed. This may be due to the student body being frustrated about conditions of employment opportunities, concerns about being a productive member of society and to be financially independent. This sides with Becker (1964) and Little (2003), indicating that graduate desires have not changed, but neither have assessment issues (Evans 2013b). With regard to teachers as commodities, this was substantiated. Academics pointed out that they perceived as much in terms of providing customer service to a somewhat untrusting customer base. There was also some agreement with Delucchi and Korgen's (2002, p.9) contention that academics need protection against consumer backlash

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

should they adhere to stringent grading as set out in the marking criteria. Whilst staff did feel undermined, the pressure to not resign may be due to personal financial issues, and ties in with behaviours impacting on staff health and morale (Shaw and Ward 2014, UCU 2013). From experience and from the literature, this was unsurprising.

A large proportion of academics considered fielding grade meetings to be part of their job and students concurred. This was presumed. Despite university rules that demand that academic judgement should not be challenged, there was a contradiction between the declaration that students should not question academics and a practice in which many do. This could be because students are unaware of the institutional policy, or due to a consumerist view that seeks to override that policy in search of answers and service. The irony with this contradiction is that a degree is about teaching the ability to question, yet the institution seeks to stifle a particular type of questioning.

Having explored the data in depth for comparable behaviour to the case of the student attempting to buy their grade through bribery (see BBC 2013a), it is concluded this case appears to be a unique example of student misdemeanour. As a result, it falls into newsworthy entertainment or media myth. This was partially expected. Whilst it raised initial concerns about social order in academia (see Cohen in Krinsky 2013, p.3), the case is a rare example of serious academic disorder in UK HE and was not evidenced at Coastal University.

Academics perceived that students were after a better grade [Grade Grubbing], by fore-fronting the amount of effort put in, the utility of the grade to progress and absenteeism. The latter was assumed and agrees with Adams (2005) and Macfarlane (2016), who have each described how assessment is measured by performance rather than transcendent effort and the time that students commit to the presentee-ism and assessment.

### **6.4.5 Q 3 - Theme Four: Grade Leveraging**

Academics were exposed to students leveraging manipulative behaviour in order to induce a higher grade [Grade Grubbing]. Academics were clear that they would not engage with financial leverages but noted that emotional pleas were a

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

pressure in grade enquiry situations. This was partly anticipated. Franz (2010) discussed how students might attempt to persuade lenient staff to reconsider the grade directly using the leverage of pestering rather than go through a formal Appeal Process. Franz (2010) suggests that students will ask for a grade increase using the following criterion:

*“if the study cost is high, the reward from pestering is high; the cost of pestering is low and the professor is lenient”* (Franz 2010, p.411)

As Franz’s paper was from the US, where tuition fees are higher and standards are different to the UK, the responses from Coastal University academics could not be predicted. It may be that many Coastal University academics are exposed to this behaviour and are professional enough to uphold academic values rather than acquiesce to grade challenges or grubbing or customer service expectations that challenge quality and standards, but did not respond to the survey.

Academics considered bribery unacceptable. This was assumed. This demonstrated an ethical outlook towards their own academic practice in agreement with the BBC (2013a) professor’s response to refuse the student a higher grade. As there is no other comparative data, it can only be assumed that academics in UK universities have a strong sense of ethics in the workplace, recognising that employment termination would be the norm, that unfair practices would damage the institution’s reputation, and that personal reputation would be damaged by accepting bribes.

The qualitative findings indicated that many staff had been strongly verbally bullied by students and some had been exposed to physical bullying with varying outcomes [Grade Grubbing]. This was surprising. This result cannot be compared to other sources as there is a lack of literature and institutional records, but it has resonance with The Guardian’s (2015) article recounting verbal demands. The bullying of academics may be due to a student’s frustration with the academic staff, the system, personal health issues, mismanaged expectations or general disregard of the grade-awarding academic, potentially considered, by the student, as a marketised commodity. This reflects Hazo (1999, p.31), who found that where students are not responsible for their learning they demand the academics *serve the students*. Although Franz (2010) discussed the pestering of professors for a

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

better grade, there is little other literature or data relating to grade enquiries prior to this study.

### 6.4.6 Q3 - Theme Five: Customer Service

Academics had to explain the university rules in grade enquiry and grade challenging situations, the unread equivalent of *Terms and Conditions* of assessment. This was envisaged, based on my own experience. Academics required students to take responsibility for reading the rules on entry, whilst management may consider that academics should explain the regulations as part of a customer service. This supports Yanovitch (2014) who highlighted the need for institutions to practise controllable factors such as customer service and it may be that academics may benefit from explicit exposure to the management expectations.

Where students face being told or read the policy that states they are not able to question academic judgement, this suggests that academics have the upper hand, either intellectually or administratively, even though that might not be the case. Furthermore, such a policy prevents students from being part of the assessment judgement, particularly in terms of what may be considered fair and appropriate (see Macfarlane 2016, p.2). From primary research relating to academic judgement policies, the response that students should not challenge academic judgement appeared to be a widespread regulation across most UK universities, however, some institutions had adapted their policies to signpost students to other guidance services. It was neither a surprise nor foreseen as I had not considered it before this study. Interestingly, the UK university mind-set appears to be commercially minded enough to take student loan money, but like others, Coastal University has not resourced essential service aspects such as individual grade enquires for all. This concurs with Martin (2012) who observes the higher cost-lower quality model of HE, that of charging a particular fee but not providing the right resources. As such, any student dissatisfactions may be captured in NSS scores and which may be the key factor for middling league table scores.

Confusion and lack of knowledge about the content and location of guidelines was assumed, and in agreement with Read *et al.*'s (2003, p.10) "culture of academia".

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

These are institutionally dominant factors with 'disciplinary blocks' to control dispositions and behaviours, and are an attempt to 'negotiate the (largely unwritten) 'rules of the game' of university life (p.10). Regarding guidelines on assessment enquiries, it is evident that academics and students alike would benefit from short and simple guidance, located in highly visible spaces, to prevent misunderstandings regarding meeting boundaries.

Academics are advised to follow university generic marking regulations and guidelines. These are set in place to appease regulatory bodies such as the QAA and other watchdog bodies who forefront the spirit of marketised customer satisfaction. The marking guidelines can affect academics' views on how to determine a grade. The grade that is given, however, may appease neither the student nor the regulatory body. The former may challenge the grade and the latter may investigate. Hiron (2015) highlighted that even though the customer is not always right, they are still the customer and that service experience is the only differentiating factor from one company to another. Academics might find themselves under pressure to acquiesce to meet institutional commitments to regulatory bodies rather than award grades that contradict the notion of good customer service, that of giving the customer what they want. The data indicated that academics appear to mark fairly and this was not a surprise, however, the depth of involvement that regulatory bodies will have in future grade complaints cannot be predicted.

Jewell *et al.* (2013) discussed grade inflation as a service tactic to keep courses or departments afloat and it may be that high-resource or under-performing courses may succumb to over-grading behaviours. Academics highlighted a sense of grade creep and this was partially surprising. It was anticipated that rigid marking strategies across all faculties is professionally critical.

Academics predicted that, in future, more students would want to enquire about their grades, although not necessarily formally wanting a grade increase. This was partially assumed, although I had thought that grade grubbing would be more likely given youth unemployment issues. Academics may have perceived more grade enquiries rather than grade increase requests due to the institution taking on larger cohorts of undergraduate students of variable ability, who are also acutely aware

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

of their commitment to the higher fee paradigm as the norm, and where staff restructuring and redundancies were ongoing at the time of this research. This reflects Shepherd and Bowcott (2010) who warned that government funding cuts would lead to job losses and the use of [inexperienced] postgraduates for teaching; and Batty (2012) who argued that staff reforms were necessary to double 'research excellence'; the latter may be of little interest to undergraduates.

The QAA (2012) highlighted that students expect better quality feedback and this study concurs. This was a surprise as it was expected that more students would be grade focused rather than improvement focused.

Academics self-identified as servants to the student body and indicated some bitterness at being treated simply as a good grade provider under the name of customer service. This backs up Margolis (2004) and Sadler (2011), who found that, as well as serving the interests of the institution (Sadler 2011), faculty may acquiesce to students seeking a good experience, and that staff may over-ride grades given to address the student expectation. This was unsurprising. To counter any potential accusations of special treatment, some academics identified that they over-engineered their marks to protect themselves from grade challenges or bullying, or being treated with disrespect (Guardian 2015). Interestingly, the student data seems to confirm the servant perception and concurs with The Guardian (2015) reporting student demands and suggest a perceived abuse of staff.

### **6.5 Summary of Academic and Student Findings**

The research aim was to investigate the reported phenomenon of grade grubbing as perceived by students and academics in one English university in the post Browne Review higher tuition fee landscape. Specifically, it explored the background pressure on students leading up to assessment grades, and their experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries. Furthermore, it examined the background pressures on, and experiences of, academics in grade enquiry situations, and their attitudes towards students and their grade enquiries.

Only by understanding the discussion and debates that underpin this study, can we start to comprehend the reported phenomena of grade grubbing.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The literature appears to lack student and academic viewpoints in terms of matters relating to entitlements, rights and justice in regards to grading as part of the student learning journey in HE. In its place, students are faced with a wide array of policies and procedures, hidden in plain view in online repositories that both conflict with each other and prevent students from understanding and practising their rights to question academic judgement. Furthermore, students are not encouraged to speak out about their grade achievement concerns, quashing the 'student voice', and thus contradicting what is considered to be fair. This verified findings from the QAA (2012, p.53) who recognised the absence of student voice in matters of individual, rather than institutional, concern.

Students unhappy about assessment criteria that did not acknowledge intangible elements such as effort, criticised feedback that posed further questions, indicating trust issues between student and marker; especially if the student receives an unpredicted grade for performance perceived by the student to be acceptable.

Students' complaints about feedback and feed-forward have been recognised in the literature but universities continually avoid resourcing meaningful feedback and support mechanisms for ever larger cohorts of academically disadvantaged students.

Students were confused about the rules of academia, i.e. there is an understanding gap between students and academics, and the academic role, evident in the literature. Equally, many academics did not understand what it is that students do not understand, and students were not openly signposted to the terms and conditions of grade enquiry.

Furthermore, academics discouraged grade enquiries, due to workload. Students who did engage their lecturer in grade enquiry situations, however, were seeking customer service value, as noted in the literature, be that in terms of understanding their grade achievement, concept explanation as allowed in policy, or by seeking an enhanced grade by challenging academic interpretation or contributing to feedback (Grebennikov and Shah 2013, p.606) the latter two not provided for in Coastal policy.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Grade enquiry meetings had several outcomes, with results not originally anticipated for either party. Furthermore, it is evident that meeting intentions were often confused, as is the subsequent reporting of them. Whilst many students, on receiving their grades, are not interested to discuss them further, some do wish to discuss the feedback and make grade enquiries. For those students who have met a lecturer to discuss improvement, concepts, the marking rubric or a grade increase, whatever their initial intention, their questioning can be seen to be couched through a service lens.

Academics believed the context for students entering higher education was no longer for the pleasure of learning for its own sake, but because students are under pressure to get a job. Whilst commitment to study was stated as important, it was not necessarily carried through.

There was a tension between how the student as consumer and learner manifests itself and it is clear that academics are resigned to labelling the student as “consumer” even though the discourse still identifies them as students, imagined or otherwise, with or without external baggage.

There was a prevalence and manifestation of grade enquiries, lack of contact time, lack of resources and lack of personal time. Academics believed grade enquiries may intensify, not out of a sense of curiosity, collegiality or co-collaboration, but out of a sense of entitlement. This not only confirmed the student consumer dimension but also the tension between the academics’ hopes for a student and the students’ wants and needs.

Academics facing students who are under pressure to achieve good grades for graduation do, in turn, feel pressure from students in many ways.

With multiple factors working against the HE student, such as feedback issues, rules and regulations available after contract signing, confusion about assessments, rights to query and commitments to debt, the student cannot be blamed for behaving like consumers seeking customer service.

Where entitlement without consideration was perceived as a right by the students, academics were seeing their identity eroded, particularly in the classroom,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

competing with in class electronics, assumed to be available 24/7, required to dispense grades that suit the individual need rather than the inherent worth of their work.

Academics were subjected to a range of responses from students after assessment meetings that affected their own wellbeing and sense of identity. Whilst academics felt confident about controlling meetings, a feeling of professional competence being under scrutiny was recognised, with many staff stating that the academic-student relationship was often undermined and in many cases, weakened.

Furthermore, the demand by the students for directed teaching and passive learning, rather than self-study, all centred around the ILO's, the demand for a clearer criterion for grades and demands for second marking indicated a loss of academic freedom.

Where there was a disconnect between student and staff expectation around effort and performance, an argument ensues about who is right and this results in dissatisfied students and demoralised staff.

Academics indicated a sense of being a commodity as part of a means to an end, to be used, sometimes without respect, and seen as grade dispensers. Thus the academics seemed to be proletarianised, no longer being an independent thinking individual, bullied by both students and management, and reduced to being merely a functionary responding to industry demands with little ownership of the products of education.

There was a sense of a creeping increase in grade enquiries, that may have affected grade and feedback practices. Some academics reported practising feedback-lite to get through the amount of marking or over-engineered feed-forward in order to protect themselves from accusations of a lack of attention to the work submitted.

Whilst the academic staff were working to provide a quality academic experience, Coastal University's support provision appears insufficient to meet all student wants and needs. With universities promoting aspirational educational offerings

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

but under-resourcing the promise to deliver a proclaimed offering, legal challenges may be on the horizon. In order to prevent this, the marketing offering and resources will need to improve.

Due to confusion over assessment meeting intentions, and where student and consumerist rights converge, there was a sense of a need to strengthen trust and relationships between the student and academic, and that of managing the consumer expectations before enrolment.

The general lack of signposting of terms and conditions at many points in the student decision-making process may leave Coastal University exposed to legal redress, particularly around grade enquiries.

After enrolment, academics reported that students applied low cost leverage tactics to persuade a grade increase and it was evident that some forms of bullying behaviours existed, indicating student frustration in respect to getting a straight answer or the grade they want or need for employment.

Simple guidelines for academic questioning were absent.

The research shows that there is a vital need for greater understanding of what is meant by grade enquiry, respecting the differences between the various types. The Grade Enquiry Continuum Model addresses this.

A brief discussion of potential policy implications now follows.

### **6.6 Policy Debate (Question 4)**

The Browne Review (2010), like others before it, advocated a review of changes to the student funding system that was implemented in 2012. The premise was to 'secure a sustainable future for HE', and it sought to achieve this through financial investment, funded by the student users through fees, rather than the government. Where universities had a funding shortfall from the pre-2012 system, the new funding system would provide stronger cash-flow by allowing institutions to choose their own fee rates (Browne Review 2010). Through student choice, the HE landscape would change, allowing popular institutions to expand (Browne Review 2010). To relocate the point of funding from the tax payer to the individual directly,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

students could take out loans. It was for them to decide the purpose of university and if they wanted to go, they should pick up the bill. It was suggested that neither middle nor low-income students would be priced out of a university education (Shepherd and Bowcott 2010) implying higher education for all. The concept was that graduates should pay for self-investment with the speculative expectation that the graduates with higher earning jobs would pay back the cost of the degree several times over, rather than by others who would not benefit. Furthermore, students would have greater choice about 'the range of options'. In terms of self-investment and who gains the most from that investment, the benefit was considered, by government, to be received by the individual, thus justifying the individual responsibility for the fees. Students do tend to forefront rationality and utility when considering the potentials for ROI from HE. Going to university voluntarily was, essentially, a consumerist choice. Implementation of the review would place the funding of education where it belongs, in the control of the beneficiary. Furthermore, it would pave the way for improving standards. The policy did change the educational landscape, however, not in favour of the student. The student body decreased in 2012, increased in 2013, decreased in 2014, further marginally decreasing again in 2015 (HESA 2016). Although student numbers changed marginally, the institutions gained considerable sums of money and invested in rebuilding projects instead of in staff. The higher tuition fee has affected student notions of value for money. Furthermore, students are not necessarily aware of how HEI's spend the student fee income. In order to gain the trust and support of the student body, transparency about where student fees are invested would be appropriate.

The demographics evidenced an increase in widening participation students applying to and attending university (BIS 2015a) with a variety of pre-HE qualifications, many unsuitable for HE. The macro-economic climate has not been favourable for graduates, however. Graduates leaving university outnumber the jobs available, thus the graduate premium value has shrunk and competition for jobs has increased. The barriers to HE were not financial, but 'underachievement at school, misinformation, lack of confidence and low aspirations' (Piatt 2010). The apparent range of options for students has not evidence much variety beyond the choice of universities available. With universities accepting almost any student,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

institutions have ensured incoming finance at the expense of students. Despite the incoming finance, institutions have sought to cut staff costs through redundancies, leaving fewer staff to teach through less contact hours to larger cohorts of students, many lacking underpinning skills for HE, and presenting a prism of needs, both social and academic. Whilst the new funding format of higher tuition fees allowed institutions to reinvest in their campus buildings, institutions have not yet addressed the student needs by 'improving standards' as yet undefined. With greater numbers of students entering HE, and staff cuts widespread, the lack of resources leaves academics in a position to provide Ritzer's fast food model, potentially delivering dumbed-down courses and a pleasant experience for the student. Acknowledging this infrastructure, the degree can be seen as just another commodity. Whilst new buildings look impressive, it would behove HEIs to invest in the academic and professional staff needed to service the student body in the way that the student customer would hope for. This includes more time with their academics, better feedback and discussions on how to improve for the future. Furthermore, closer ties with potential employers for students at all levels of educational achievement would offset the promise that HE is appropriate for indeterminable slogans such as 'brighter futures' and 'reach your potential'.

The funding through a student loan system has confirmed the commercialisation and marketisation of HE, which has favoured under-funded institutions but not the student seeking a fully supported, person-centred education for employment. Whilst HE has become available to all, the policy and the student loan system has not protected those 'customers' who do not understand their place in the repayment system (**FG2.2** *When you are paying £9000 per year*) at that point in time, that of not having paid any tuition fees but still committed to a debt subject to terms and conditions; has it protected those who committed to debt but who are least suited to HE. Furthermore, it has not protected or informed those lacking career choice guidance (**P2:2** *Wasn't my decision but was, from high school, pushed onto us, particularly when UCAS came round*) and has not protected those deficient in career outcomes from their university/course of choice, for example, by providing courses for saturated employment opportunities.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The basis of failure for the student body was funding through student loans, universities accepting many students on lower tariff points, and having failed to research the likely outcome, accepting students without underpinning skills, and unlikely to pay back the debt, damaging the individual's self-worth. The student is a customer, albeit, not necessarily a sophisticated one. The institution should, in line with every other commercial provider, set out the Terms and Conditions of engagement with HE. To compare, individuals would not buy a car without an agreement that it was fit for purpose, such as driving from A to B. The same applies to HE and its ability to support students into the workplace. When a financial transaction takes place, both parties must be aware of the contractual implications before proceeding. HE fails to do this, which contravenes consumer rights laws and should be addressed immediately.

When considering links between grade enquiries and tuition fees in Higher Education, multiple aspects need to be considered. Such aspects can be viewed in a linear way, stretching from HE government policy that seemingly addresses inequality for study opportunities, student expectations, student roles, social pressures and 'needs' to achieve employment, as outlined in the Browne Review (2010), Delucchi and Korgen (2002) and QAA (2012). Society expected that HE would lead to employment and, as such, students bought into that notion. The media discourse indicated that individuals with degrees would receive a higher salary post HE. Employers, however, sought only students with high grades as a threshold for interviews thus furthering social segregation. The economic landscape was not widely considered by the student body as an argument or proof for seeking a post-16 alternative activity. Students, mindful of competition, appear to absorb the education equates to jobs discourse without question. Those who do not get a graduate level job, will have had, at best, a university experience. HEIs must be explicit about their offering, that of a place to study at university, the opportunity for workplace experience and the purpose of grading internally and its relevance to industry. This must be clear in the marketing offering, grading policies and appeals policies.

The findings support Tomlinson (2008), who observed the positional struggles and the association between jobs and credentials and how society uses them.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Academics, however, were not keen to answer the question about students' perceived social class. Those who did said the students were from middle class backgrounds. The data here was too small to draw any conclusions from, however. Where an institution takes on student-consumers, it will need to understand its student body in greater detail, in order to create an individual experience. Currently, institutions do not gather class data as such, although they can gather data based on other individual consumer behaviour touchpoints. Institutions, and student, might benefit transforming student cards into hybrid student loyalty cards to gather information on student potential wants and needs during the educational experience.

There was an expectation that high fees will be used, in the future, as a lever for better grades (Delucchi and Smith 1997a). This appears to be an emerging issue despite employers wanting experience and other skills. This may need to be addressed by providing more vocational courses and skills to address students' desires for employment and to provide the right employees for industry, as an agent between school and the workplace. Additionally, universities could be more honest in the marketing that university education does not guarantee jobs and is not necessarily directly linked to skills employers want. Not all courses are well-suited for direct links to employers and the training they might want, although all courses should provide skills of critical thinking that generally important in the knowledge economy. Furthermore, differences in degree courses, links to employment and the graduate premium could should be mirrored in different fee levels, thus reflecting an honesty in the degree pricing.

Dandridge (cited McTague 2015) stated that students will become more demanding as a result of the fees fuelled by university marketers creating unrealistic dreams of a student experience that vulnerable students are buying into (Inglis 2011) but not always receiving. Government reforms for education are complex and students face unequal opportunities for getting a degree. Whilst the policy has favoured institutions, institutions have failed the academic body and in turn academics are struggling with the student body. It may be that institutions will need to become more commercial in their outlook and practice by defining what the education service is offering in the student journey and experience, complete

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

with terms and conditions that confirm both parties' obligations. As marketing practice in the wider social context is an accepted norm, the notion of 'move with your feet', has the potential to induce student-clients to move their 'business' elsewhere, a behaviour that should be encouraged through differential pricing. The so-called marketisation of UG HE is less of a market but more of a monopolistic cartel, in that most institutions charge a very similar rate. Institutions will need to rethink how they provide and deliver a service good that is meaningful to the student-client, within their professional boundaries.

In terms of societal, cultural, technological, political and economic changes, and misconceptions about the purpose of HE through society's expectations, media discourse and issues of fear of missing out (Mintel 2013), students are left confused about their place in society: the wealthier student with perceptions of being clever and the others frustrated and disenfranchised, many with a large debt and potentially a job with lower wages. This could easily be argued as a government own goal or a framed meritocratic society. The student cannot be blamed, however. Institutions must be clear about the purpose of attending university, including that some courses do not necessarily lead to jobs (such as those over-saturated with potential employees).

Politicians and society have the power to instigate change, sometimes together but most often apart. The success of the Browne Review (2010) and its' predecessors, in terms of favouring the student and society, educationally, culturally and economically, has yet to be seen: it may take several decades to evidence the success or failure of the political ideal of education for all and social mobility. Whilst HEIs are currently on an unprecedented spending high, they should make clear how they will survive in the downturn years when due to demographics, the student numbers will drop over the next 18 years and where technology may overtake the need for HEIs at all.

The next chapter presents my conclusions based on the analysis of the findings, and the discussion of those findings, with reference to the Grade Enquiry Continuum Model.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

### 7.1 Overview

This chapter reviews the research aim and questions, provides an outline of the contributions of this thesis to the existing literature on grade enquiries; explores further areas of scholarship to take this study forward; and offers personal concluding reflections on the research.

### 7.2 Research Aim and Questions Revisited

The aim was to investigate the reported phenomena of grade enquiries as perceived by students and academics in one English university in the post Browne Review higher tuition fee landscape.

#### Questions

1. What are the background pressures on students that may result in grade enquiries?
2. What are students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries?
3. What are academics' experiences and attitudes towards students who make grade enquiries?
4. What are the policy implications in relation to student grade enquiring and feedback in terms of institutions' responses to this?

This study has made a contribution to knowledge in the area of perceptions and attitudes towards grading and its value in higher education. In summary, before applying to university, the students surveyed here appeared not to have researched the long-term financial implications before committing to what might be up to 30 years of debt. None of the students seemed to have genuinely explored the ROI or the graduate premium for a job related to their degree, but had relied on media reports that graduates earn more than non-graduates. Assessing the job market was not evident nor was there a widespread discussion of the economy and likely relevant job opportunities. This may not have been of concern to the

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

students since under the current fee regime, if a job of a particular salary is not gained, then fees do not need to be repaid, thus students may not feel obliged, at this stage, to assess the job market if there is an interest in learning alone. In terms of students engaging with activities that differentiate themselves in preparation for the workplace through gaining transformative or transversal skills or experiences, placement was acknowledged but study abroad was not considered, and a reliance on the degree was considered enough in its own right. In terms of studying for a degree, presentee-ism, or a lack of it, was not considered a barrier to gaining information or graduation success. When it came to co-creation, ~~studying that of working with the staff to create new knowledge~~ for the grade rather than for the learning itself, students did not see themselves as part of a learning team but more of an apprentice needing close guidance and support. Unexpectedly, despite all the complaints about the student body and their overburdened workload, academics were, in general, sympathetic to the student cohorts. Academic complaints were not targeted at the students but the university and the way its policies disadvantage the student by expecting staff to work with limited resources and at their own expense in terms of time that is not reimbursed.

Institutions, bound by internal micro-policies and academics tied by work-load planning constraints need to provide boundaries for student-clients such as terms and conditions. These need to be fore-fronted before students engage with a professional institution so that the student-client has their expectations managed and understands what they are committing to long term.

In terms of morals and ethics, students were not driven to practise wholesale grade negotiation, but stated they would work for the grade. Furthermore, grade enquiries tended to be undertaken on an intellectual level rather than attempting a grade deal. The research shows that, at Coastal University, there is little stable evidence of negative extremities in grade enquiry behaviour, that which is pejoratively referred to as grade grubbing, and even less of bribery. Focusing on the insignificant number of responses relating to students who might attempt to buy a grade, a price could not be reached. It was noted, however, that if they were able to buy a grade it would, hypothetically, be on the condition of not being caught. Reports of students bullying academics, both verbally and physically,

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

when a grade meeting did not have a satisfactory outcome, raised concern for staff welfare, however.

With regards to student questioning and where they fit into the Grade Enquiry Continuum, this study has shown that they range from mostly grade neutral to unsure of their rights for questioning, alongside some final year students being more engaged with grade enquiries. Instead of assuming that all students are grade grubbers, therefore, there is a need to recognise that students want an explanation of how their grade was achieved, because they do not understand it from the feedback. It is therefore important that we call all students 'grade enquirers' until known otherwise.

All the findings that confirmed what was known or assumed indicated that the need for change has not been clarified, actioned or effectively managed: in this case, the process and resources for meaningful contact time and feedback. Where variable factors such as institutions and students, are involved, issues of concern to students and staff alike, tend not to change. However, they can be improved.

The results of this study are of particular interest from both a cultural and societal perspective, particularly as it involved undergraduates and academics during a time of significant change in the HE sector. When considering the types of individuals that society and industry would hope to engage with, honesty in all areas of life might be considered a virtue. It is hoped that when students enter HE, they arrive with a moral compass that aligns with the principles of UK HE, that of integrity and honesty that forefronts an individual's work. Of interest is that both sets of respondents were in agreement about the matter of bribery being unacceptable, however, students were happy for staff to adjust their grades upwardly whether the work was worthy or not. I wonder what message this sends when staff who are stretched might practice academic freedom in the form of 'resistance or subversion' and simply give grades that address client satisfaction. This potentially raises questions about the ethics of the academic and what their moral influence is over undergraduates. Any debate about academics not being trustworthy over grades might lead to a breakdown in trust between industry or society and the academic community and as such needs to be mitigated against.

### **7.3 Contributions to the Extant Literature**

The research has found a gap in knowledge about the nomenclature of grade enquiry and questioning and how it was (mis) applied. By exploring the literature, locating previous works by recognised authors in both respected and pejorative print, and exploring the primary data, the first model for understanding the many facets of grade enquiry has been devised to address how academics and institutions view the student body seeking assessment and grade meetings. The empirical findings of this thesis complement those of earlier and limited studies, mainly from the US. Despite its exploratory nature and small sample of participants, it extends our knowledge, perceptions and understandings of students' attitudes and intentions towards grading and grade enquiries. Whilst this thesis did not concur with Franz's (2010) game modelling testing, which suggested that the expense of the course would necessarily lead to professor pestering, it did concur that the value students place on the grade is positively associated with them approaching professors (Franz 2010, p10).

This thesis underlines that students are straddling the dual path of learner and consumer and offers insights suggesting that, in the near future, grade enquiries and challenges, as a result of perceived grade value, may increase. Whilst institutional grade inflation has been discussed widely in the literature, little research has explained how grade enquiries have impacted institutional grade inflation. This research does not attempt to address that gap in the literature but it does recognise that grade enquiries and questioning may have some influence. All work relating to institutional grade inflation has been addressed through empirical administration. By understanding the continuum of potential questioning outcomes, institutions can start to measure and manage grade inflation with a view to managing both student and staff expectations of grade relevance and power accordingly. This study did not set out to explore institutional grade inflation but is primarily based on the under-researched nature of grade enquiry and grade questioning. It is important to understand that several terms appear to have been conflated to mean the same thing when, instead, there are subtle nuances between the differing grade enquiry behaviours and attitudes.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Reconstruction of the literature has provided a new path for investigation. Due to the limited sphere of this thesis, there are still many unanswered questions about grade enquiry approaches in higher education, across all academic levels, both nationally and globally.

### **7.4 Grade Enquiries in the Future: Pointers and Actions (Q4)**

Reviewing the data, there is an expectation that there will be more grade enquiry meetings (perhaps grubbing) in the future. Since the terminology for grade grubbing has been misunderstood, there is a need for clarification and explanation within the educational community of the differences and the need to understand those differences when student facing. Such understandings may assist the response when faced with demands for customer care, in line with high fee expectations.

Summary factors pointing to this are multifarious:

Firstly, the lack of career alternatives: choices for post-secondary progression are limited such as technical or industry apprenticeships. Some students may feel that they have been incorrectly guided towards a university career to which they are not suited.

Secondly, in a period of economic stagnation, society and students see HE as the agent between school and the workplace. Pushed by school and other respected figures, students continue to use the degree as a differentiating tool.

Thirdly, the easy availability of student loans and commitment to debt will, as with any other consumable product, drive the demand for service and value for money such as greater contact time.

Fourthly, commitment to external activities will not decrease. Students will continue to juggle a work-study-life balance, some successfully and others not.

Fifthly, where students face unclear policies/terms and conditions, misunderstandings and complaints are inevitable. With the discourse surrounding fees and the ancillary costs needed to attend university, students will cite being

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

misled and question the credibility and value of going to university; but may still seek consolation from the graduation credential.

In addition, unclear assessment briefs and marking criteria, compounded by misunderstandings over feedback, will stimulate students to question the brief, performance expectations, academic judgement and grades.

Overall, students who are used to purchasing products and services in both on and offline, who are motivated by price comparison or experienced in haggling events, will transfer consumerist expectations of Value for Money from the shopping domain to the educational offering. Educational institutions need to be proactive to address this.

### **7.5 Implications for Policy (Q4)**

This section considers wider policy implications in relation to student grade enquiring and feedback issues. It can be used for fine grain understanding of the undergraduates' expectations and experiences, as well as those of the academics who face student grade enquiries on behalf of the institution. Such enquiries are complicated and nuanced, often derived from ignorance, and the institution would benefit from acknowledging the issues raised and taking steps to address them.

There is a need for the university to be held accountable and do more to address student charters and student level agreements. The institution should:

- Provide information to students about the organisation's position in relation to the government papers on the university website and literature, and provide Q & A at open days [aligns with students not necessarily understanding the purpose of going to university].
- Signpost alternatives to university at open days, such as apprenticeships, gap years, study abroad, entrepreneurial courses, evening courses and part-time qualifications to prevent accusations of exploiting financially-naïve individuals [confirms that students not being fully aware of HE alternatives]
- Provide better information about the university's unique selling point and key offering supported by historical and recent data, clarifying the potential offerings and experiences available to them, the support services that are

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

available (with or without additional costs) in order for the student to make rational choices with realistic expectations. This should lead to a better student experience and student-customer satisfaction [aligns with student comments about the perceived differences between marketing and actual offerings].

- Provide information on attendance expectations and the correlation between attendance and progression, progression and impact on other offerings, such as placement [ties in with belonging, gaining knowledge, knowing academics and peers, and assessment success].
- Provide students with funding and fee breakdowns, and provide information about the true costs around their degree, in order to educate and prevent the misunderstandings about how fees are utilised in terms of resources, both tangible and intangible, as well as highlight financial support and eligibility for aid [aligns with student concerns of financial difficulty and support]. Clarity that students in reality will often not pay the headline £9250 + living costs + interest might help to reduce some of the consumerist pressure.
- Resource feedback processes in terms of supporting academic staff to plan their workload sufficiently to provide in-depth feedback and one-to-one feedback opportunities [ties in with student comments on feedback/ feedforward issues for their success].
- Co-create classroom and workplace etiquette workshops to ensure that both parties understand what is socially acceptable and desirable, in order to prevent misunderstandings between all parties [aligns with comments about use of electronics in class, poor communication, manners, and lack of attendance].
- Redesign courses with potentially subjective answers to include assessment strategies that allow for non-academic students to display their developed learning, perhaps through exhibitions or creating artefacts, as well as collaborative academic-student learning and marking to take place, in particular, for final year students [ties in with assessment to prevent misunderstanding over learning progress and grade allocation].
- Explicitly include the Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) model in unit guides and provide practical flowcharts and applications for individuals to follow.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Not only will this clarify the terminology for staff but also go towards a common understanding for grade enquiry meetings. This information should be provided at Open Days, in handbooks and unit guides, be available via the Student Union and be located in multiple spaces for easy access and viewing [ties in with misunderstanding of grade enquiry nomenclature].

Universities seeking to operate in the newer commercial landscape have much to do to improve their student customer offering. The succinct list above highlights a distinct absence or avoidance of critical signposting of offerings and boundaries essential for the running of a high-fee service product that will satisfy the users, a practice that is at odds with policy.

### **7.6 Further Areas of Scholarship**

The findings have presented a new understanding of grade enquiries in HE in two ways. Firstly, the data gave insights into how contemporary students attending university from a range of backgrounds in a higher tuition fee landscape, with a backdrop of recession, really felt about their perceptions and experiences at Coastal University. Secondly, the data provided evidence about how academics understand their students and how they interpret student assessment enquiries.

The findings have shown that how academics and students interpret assessment meetings and grade enquiry can be understood in several dimensions. Interpreting the literature was confusing in terms of understanding text related to grading due to the varying terminology used (i.e. inflation, challenge and grubbing). In many cases, the terminology was used interchangeably and unpicking the subtle differences of the lexicon was complicated and demanded clarity. To avoid future misunderstandings, this thesis led to the creation of the Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) model.

The new model will be critical for future studies relating to assessments and grade enquiries, not only in HE but transferable to primary and secondary schools where grade enquiry, according to data collected, is common; and can be used by the student, academic and administrative body alike to determine the questioning nomenclature for determining the nature of the enquiry, but also for future research interests.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

The study made clear other areas for investigation within the HE grading landscape.

➤ *Grade Enquiries: A review of Final Year Students in UK HE.*

Final year students were not actively targeted due to other institutional surveys at the time; however, their insights will expand this research.

➤ *Grade Enquiries: A perspective from mature students in UK HE.*

Mature students were not specifically targeted in this study. Insights from the older student, such as those on UG or PhD programmes, may provide valuable understandings of this demographic, particularly for the latter, where viva and defence of a thesis could be interpreted as fighting for, defending work or grade grubbing for a pass mark. Complexities of the academic-student relationship may raise areas for institutions to address, particularly where boundaries of personal relationships affect the PhD experience.

➤ *Grade Enquiries: A perspective from the Nursing and Health faculty.*

Nursing students were not approached on the request of the faculty Head of Education citing survey fatigue. This group would provide valuable insight on the tensions between achieving grades for academic purposes vs training for professional purposes (see Ganske 2010, White 2013 and more recently, Bodkin 2016).

➤ *Grade Enquiries: A perspective from STEM students.*

STEM students were not included in this study as it did not reach those groups. The literature indicated that good grades were easier to achieve in humanities and social studies courses due to perceived subject ease compared to STEM subjects. As public funding is being awarded to these subjects, more students might apply, however, students who struggle may highlight perceived and actual grade achievement difficulties.

➤ *Questioning the grade: Understanding the complexity of academic-academic grade enquiries in HE.*

Academic lobbying for a student's (or small group's) grade to be uplifted is reported but under-explored. Insights may provide evidence of inequalities in interpretation of assessment marking or student favouritism over

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

performance.

- *Questioning the grade: Understanding the complexity of management-academic grade enquiries in HE.*

Reports of management bullying for grade changes are rare but known (Henry 2010); however, this area is underexplored. Insights may highlight the tensions between academic judgement and institutional commercial needs.

- *The Hidden Issues of Student-Staff Bullying in HE.*

Reports of bullying of staff by students from UG – PhD level may highlight the tensions that students experience in HE. This will explain and help academics understand the performance expectations vs external pressures on the individuals. It will further highlight the most common pressures levied and provide insights on support services required for academics.

- *Grade behaviours by social class, postcode or Free School Meal (FSM) code.*

Studies seemed to imply that grade-questioning behaviours may be from poor performers (Franz 2010) but not by social class, although the research did not confirm either way. With greater numbers of First Generation and Widening Participation students attracted to and attending HE, further research would provide insight into grade attitudes and behaviours by socio-demographic touch-points to assess the perceptions of HE value to these groups.

- *Comparative Grade Enquiries across the Globe.*

Grade Enquiries are understood differently across the globe. Grade grubbing, cheating and bribery have been reported at universities across the world. A country comparison would highlight the value of the grade aligned to personal and country economic status in line with cultural understandings and behaviours.

- *The No-Grade University.*

Would students go to university if assessments were abolished? This research would test the water for a student experience free from the idiosyncratic judgement of submitted work, avoiding grade bias, requests for additional feedback and demands for grade uplifts. Research may determine

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

the place of universities in contemporary society.

➤ *What I wish my university knew about me.*

Some students voiced concerns that the university did not know them as individuals and the problems that they faced in order to be at university. A perceived absence of this knowledge suggests that institutions need to take better care of their high-fee paying stakeholders. An investigation into those problems would provide insights into enhancements of the institutional offering that may address concerns around Value for Money (VfM).

### **7.7 Concluding Reflections**

This thesis arose out of a comment from a programme team meeting at Coastal University, several interesting experiences at institutions in other countries and a news piece from the BBC (see BBC2013a). Those influences portrayed the student body in a negative light.

I found the ensuing curiosity about grade grubbing, how it was understood and how prevalent it might be, very interesting because the concept and terminology, before this thesis, was not known to me. This interest was more than pejorative as often, the phrase 'no smoke without fire', can hold true.

The research journey took many twists and turns. Meeting with students highlighted how topical they found this study. Many had harboured thoughts and questions about grades and grading but were embarrassed to discuss it with their academics. This reflected their desire for a good grade and grade discussion but discomfort about having an adult conversation with their academics. Students perceived that their questioning would be trivialised. Academics were happy to discuss the topic of grades and grading with me, wearing a research hat, rather than their line manager or even their own PhD supervisor, where the relationship may be less than perfect and the conversation considered petty. Three staff, later, pointed out the therapeutic nature of talking through the subject that they perceived would be 'something useful, at last' in terms of giving them voice to provide data that may have leverage in their academic community.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Of concern was whether I had really understood the meanings that respondents had given or whether I was overlaying my beliefs on their words, particularly where students were not qualitatively forthcoming in the questionnaire where there were indications of their perceptions and experiences but no examples to illustrate their points. Whatever contribution respondents gave to the study, the research was considered timely and welcomed by those who participated which surprised me, since I had thought that the students would refuse any engagement.

I was also very much aware that I was close to the research, which in itself was double-edged. I tried not to lead interviewees to give answers based on my replies to their narrative, finding that repeatedly prompting with 'can you explain that further' or just a simple 'thank you', would be sufficient to keep the interviewee in their train of thought.

I have attempted to include contrasting views to show how individuals felt about a topic. Some respondents were more expressive or eloquent than others but all responses were important. I hope that I have interpreted the work in a manner that does justice to the contributed data.

Having spent four years on this research and writing up, and having set out to find how prevalent grade grubbing was and how it was presented, I was both disappointed and delighted at the double-edged outcome. Firstly, disappointment arose out of the lack of substantial grade grubbing reports, all (disappointingly) backed up by a lack of bribery. Secondly, I was delighted that there was a lack of substantial reports of grade grubbing and bribery but instead, a sense of integrity within the students wanting to achieve by their own method but in their own time and with the right support to help them on their academic journey. Furthermore, the sense of fairness and sympathy, in general, from the academics was enlightening, as I had expected them to be exhausted, cynical and disinterested in the students. Whilst many are, it was not fully apparent in the data.

Having written 'something useful at last', this research will not go to waste. Firstly, I can see that my perspective has changed towards the student body, being more sympathetic to their situation with regards to how universities expect students to

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

align themselves to arcane regulations and processes, rather than adapt to the student shopping; because that is what it is, for the next chapter in their life.

Secondly, arising from the findings, there are opportunities for staff development workshops, particularly for those in early career positions who may be fully aware of the educational-political landscape, and thus cognisant of the pressures students face, expectations of the student-consumer body and potential obligations those staff may face. In addition, workshops may also be useful for longer employed staff who still view students from pre-fee days.

This thesis has opened up more avenues of research that will feed into the debate of the value of universities in society but, more so, how institutions themselves need to change to address societal needs.

Academics face a potential consumer backlash and stress issues as a result of assessment enquiries, and any contumelious attitudes of modern university management will need to be challenged to put the student at the heart of the system by ensuring educators are suitably trained to deal with their customers.

This research is the first of its kind in the British HE domain. This thesis has found that extreme novel grade enquiry behaviours (i.e. grade grubbing), were rare. The key point to grade grubbing is about seeking better grades without justification. The study has found that, whilst students do undertake grade enquiries, of the overall student population at Coastal University, most grade enquire with only a minority grade challenging. An insignificant number of students grade grub. The research has identified, however, that there is a need for Coastal University to improve the grade enquiry service to satisfy student expectations, be this through workload planning and resourcing staff as well as signposting the procedure. This thesis breaks new ground with the creation of a unique, practical and essential Grade Enquiry Continuum model that highlights the complexities of grade enquiries. The overarching four category model can be used for measuring and managing student assessment queries across multiple disciplines. This resource will be an essential guide for future education service provision in order to understand the modern edu-student-consumer, address potential service challenges and be a tool for professional practice and researchers alike.

## Appendices

- Appendix A - HE Stakeholders for whom this work will be valuable
- Appendix B - Study of 135 universities policies on academic judgement
- Appendix C - OAI complainants by subject
- Appendix D - OAI complainants by issue
- Appendix E - Transcript from one student focus group
- Appendix F - Student concept map sample
- Appendix G - NVIVO software data trail (Phase 3) and Surveymonkey trail
- Appendix H - Participant Information Sheet and consent form
- Appendix I – NVIVO/Maykut and Morehouse 1994
- Appendix J - Grade Enquiry Continuum (GEC) Model
- Appendix K – Author Background and The Dark Art of Flouncy Writing

## Appendix A

Firstly, Academics: who are employed to facilitate and assess knowledge this research is directly relevant, potentially revealing the extent to which academics employ their own moral and ethical beliefs when faced with grade-grubbing requests; particularly in light of possible perceived or actual lack of university policy on this matter. Further it will allow academics to compare their experiences across the university and seek support from colleagues, department and the institution in problematic situations.

Secondly, Students: an understanding of perceived behaviours surrounding academic integrity could lead to better academic-student responses in grading understanding and future discourse.

Thirdly, policy makers: This research will provide data for policy makers to ensure institutional regulations are known, relevant and robust. A need to review academic appeal policy that suggests academic judgement is not open for questioning may be pertinent particularly for students who wish to discuss grades rather than the overall assessment.

Fourthly, CPD (Continuing Professional Development) Trainers in HE: There appears to be no obvious workshops or training on how to deal with difficult situations around grade enquiries and “grubbing” without some guidance and support. Therefore, I am interested in exploring, briefly, institutional policies on unjustified appeals against academic judgement. This research may focus the administration’s attention to provide supportive guidance or training for academics in this area.

Fifthly, researchers: access to data could support other investigations relating to classroom behaviours, motivational studies and institutional policy particularly across the fields of education, psychology, sociology and law. It will serve as a research model for improvement and/re-application.

Finally, this research will be of interest to education trend-observers in HE, the education media, and third party interests.

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

## Appendix B

### Analysis of 135 British universities policy on challenging academic judgement

APPEALS PROCEDURE REVIEW University List..

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/aboutus/members/Pages/default.aspx>

The purpose is to access University open-access documents to assess policy documents relating to grade appeals or academic appeals. (135 universities) March 2014

	University	Policy Location	Policy	YES=1	NO=127	MAYBE=3
1	University of Aberdeen	Appendix_5x18a.pdf page 11 of 15  <a href="http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/academic-quality-handbook-838.php">http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/academic-quality-handbook-838.php</a>	<b>Academic judgement:</b> relates to the considered application of academic expertise in the assessment and grading of a student's academic work. It is a matter solely for the person or committee that has made that academic judgement. The University's academic judgement procedures are approved by the UK Quality Assurance Agency. The University will not normally consider appeals concerning the academic judgement of any of its examiners or committees unless it can be shown that they have not followed correct procedures or that their decision was perverse (i.e. that the decision was one that no reasonable person, properly advised, could have reached). <b>Where a student disagrees, or is unhappy with a decision of academic judgement, for example the award of a particular CAS mark, that student cannot submit an appeal solely because they disagree or are unhappy.</b> To submit an appeal there must be valid grounds, for example, if the procedure used in reaching the decision was flawed.  <b>Class Certificate:</b> confirmation that a candidate has attended and duly performed the work prescribed for a course.		No	
2	Abertay University	<a href="http://www.abertay.ac.uk/media/academic_appeals_procedures_v3.1%20tlc.pdf">http://www.abertay.ac.uk/media/academic_appeals_procedures_v3.1%20tlc.pdf</a>	1.3 <b>Invalid Grounds</b> for an Academic Appeal For the avoidance of doubt, Academic Appeals will not normally be considered when: ↓ The student <b>disputes the academic or professional judgment</b> of the examiners in relation to the award of grades and marks		No	
3	Aberystwyth University	<a href="http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/regulations/appeals/verification/appeals/">http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/regulations/appeals/verification/appeals/</a>	<b>2.4 Acceptable grounds for appeal</b> 2.4.1 The University is only prepared to consider appeals which are based on one or both of the following grounds: 2.4.1.1 defects or irregularities in the conduct of the examinations or in <b>written</b> instructions or in advice relating thereto, where there is a <i>prima facie</i> case that such defects, irregularities or advice could have had an adverse effect on the candidate's performance; 2.4.1.2 <b>exceptional</b> personal circumstances where there is a <i>prima facie</i> case that such circumstances could have had an adverse effect on the candidate's performance. (In appeals based on these grounds, the appellant must show good reason why such personal circumstances were not made known to the Examining Board before its meeting. Where a candidate could have reported exceptional circumstances to the Examining Board prior to its meeting, those circumstances cannot subsequently be cited as grounds for appeal.) <b>2.5 Unacceptable grounds for appeal</b> 2.5.1 <b>Appeals that question the academic judgement of examiners shall not be admissible.</b> 2.5.2 Appeals based on disappointment or dissatisfaction with an examination result will not be considered and will be rejected by the Pro Vice-Chancellor. 2.5.3 Appeals based on a student's inability to familiarise themselves with the requirements of their courses regarding attendance, the submission of work, and methods of assessment, will not be considered and will be rejected by the Pro Vice-Chancellor.		No	
4	Anglia Ruskin University	<a href="http://web.anglia.ac.uk/andet/academic/public/academic_regs.pdf">http://web.anglia.ac.uk/andet/academic/public/academic_regs.pdf</a>	9.7 The student may <b>not appeal on any ground which:</b> • <b>disputes only the academic judgement</b> of the Anglia Ruskin Awards Board concerning the student's performance in any academic work and/or work-based component of the <b>COURSE;</b>		No	
5	University of the Arts London	<a href="http://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/academic-regulations/course-regulations/10-assessment-appeals/">http://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/academic-regulations/course-regulations/10-assessment-appeals/</a>	<b>Material Irregularity</b> Material Irregularity means that the University made an error which had a significant impact on your assessment and on the grade you received. This includes where disabled students have not received the agreed level of support that they need. Simple examples would be that your grade was calculated wrongly or that the college lost some of your work. <b>You cannot, however, request a review because you simply disagree with the grade that you have received for your work.</b>		No	

Source: Author's own 2014 (p.1 of 29)

## Appendix C

The OIA (2013 and 2014) data (Figures 3 and 4) shows Complaints by Subject. Complaints remain consistently in the social studies courses.

### Trends in complaints - who complains?

Among the top ten course types the only increase in complainant numbers has been students on social studies courses. Although direct comparison with HESA data is not possible it is evident from figures for student enrolment that students in Law, Medicine and Dentistry, Subjects Allied to Medicine and Business and Administration are proportionately the most likely to complain. This is consistent with previous years.

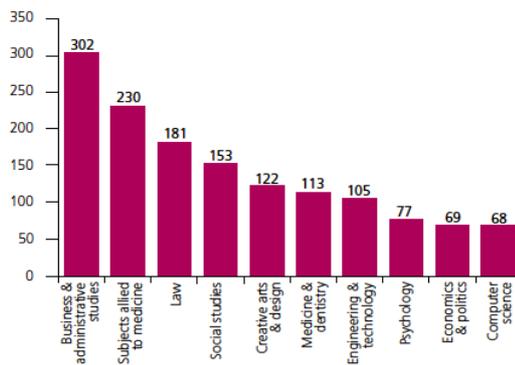
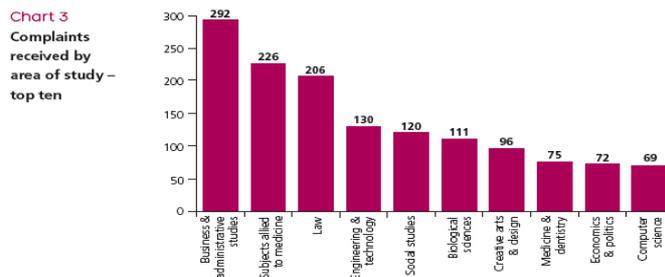


Figure 3: Trends in Complaints by Subject (OIA 2013, p.20)

### Trends in complaints

#### Who complains?



There are no significant changes in complaint numbers by subject studied. Students taking courses that lead to qualification or professional recognition submit the highest level of complaints.

Figure 4: Trends in Complaints by Subject (OIA 2014, p.16)

## Appendix D

The OIA (2013 and 2014) data shows Complaints by Issue (Figures 4 and 5) and remain consistently with student academic status, In both figures, the dominant theme of complaint is Academic Status whereby a student will approach the OIA after unsuccessfully appealing against a final assessment or degree outcome or failure to progress between years (OAI 2014, p.20).

### Persistent themes

Overall the most common areas of complaint are shown in chart 6 below.

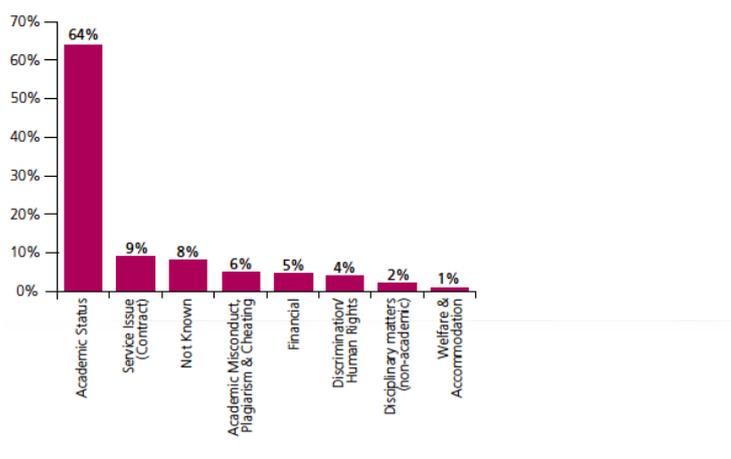


Figure 5: Persistent complaint themes (OIA 2013, p.22)

### Persistent themes

The main focus of complaints is shown below.

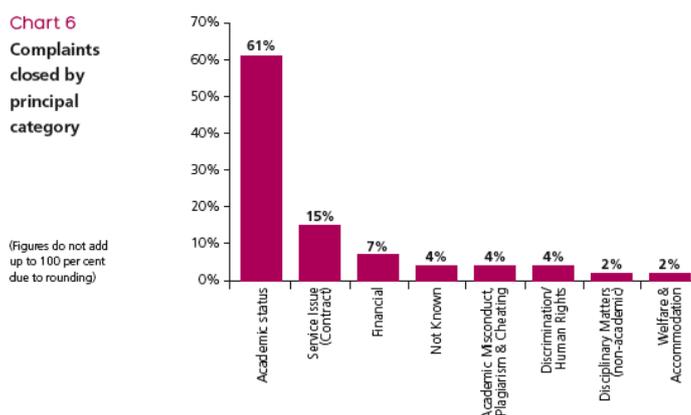


Figure 6: Persistent complaint themes (OIA 2014, p.17)

## Appendix E

### Students and Their Grades – Focus Group Four (students)

#### Reminder to researcher:

##### Primary questions

1. To explore the background pressure on students that may result in grade enquiries.
2. To investigate students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, grade enquiries.

#### Pre-start checklist:

- ✓ Ensure all participants have signed the focus group consent form
- ✓ Welcome participants, thank them for attending, introduce myself, and the recording machine.
- ✓ Outline the aims of the focus group discussion: to learn how they view their university course in general and for the future and how they view grades and grading.
- ✓ Explain the ground rules: there are no right or wrong answers, no boundaries on speaking but side conversations are not to take place. Everyone's opinions are important and should be expressed.
- ✓ Ask participants to introduce themselves via a rapport building icebreaker (i.e., "If you had a £1m, which country would you visit and why")

#### Participant composition:

P1	EC	F	20	British	Faculty of Management – BA Events Management 2 <sup>nd</sup> year
P2	HS	F	22	British	Faculty of Management – BA Events Management 2 <sup>nd</sup> year
P3	LG	F	20	British	Faculty of Management – BA Events Management 2 <sup>nd</sup> year
P4	OM	M	21	British	Faculty of Management – BA Events Management 2 <sup>nd</sup> year
P5	LS	M	20	British	Faculty of Management – BA Events Management 2 <sup>nd</sup> year

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

NOTE: High speed focus group due to time pressures on students...brief and succinct

- 1 Let's start the discussion by talking about why you chose to go to University. Thinking about applying to University, what was your main reason for committing to three years? (Probes: job, parents, do not know – tease out).  
(Probes for discussion: family tradition, family or other expectation, friends have gone, self choice, leads to new knowledge, leads to a career, not sure why at Uni).
- P5) Well, I didn't know what else to do really  
P3) I needed a degree to go into Events Management, but also wanted a new life experience too.  
P1) I believed that achieving a degree in my field would excel my chance in my likely career.  
P4) Well, the placement year really, better chance of getting a grad level job, also there was a lack of opportunities for young people where I am from, also the economic crisis when I left college mean that getting into uni for 4 years meant it could be better finding a job when the economy was more stable.  
P2) Learning something new. I was unsure as to what future I wanted but felt comfortable in education so I applied to move away see where I ended up.
- 2 What do you like about Uni? (Learn new things, meet new friends, the gap between school and workplace, a networking environment)
- 3;18
- P2) Second year is hard in some ways, as in assignments and preparing for the future. However, some areas I feel I have learned a lot and gained confidence. However, it is more competitive that I first thought.  
P4) Friends and experience.  
P1) the opportunities, wouldn't have achieved placement without this course.  
P3) Independence and meeting new people.  
P5) The lifestyle, I like the student lifestyle. I am committed only to this course and no-one else.
- 3 What do you think a good lecturer should be like? (Probes: professional, friendly, prepare us for work, supportive, lenient, give easy grades, tough but fair, straightforward).  
**ACADEMIC AS A COMMODITY?? WELL BEING???**  
**EXPECTATIONS AT UNI?**
- P3) On time and organized and interested in the topic.  
P5) Able to explain things clearly, available to help anytime.  
P1) Passionate! Understanding, motivational and has loads of experience.  
P2) Wants to get to know the students and understand how they work. I like when a lecturer pushes us to work harden and believes that you can do well. And provides personal help to the students.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

7:02		<p>P4) Passionate, empathetic, relevant industry experience, professional, not just an academic Reliable</p> <p style="color: #c00000;">(Training not academic, available all the time)</p>
4	<p>What makes it difficult for students to learn or achieve in a certain topic (Probe: topic does not interest me particularly, bad memory, topic is abstract, bad memory issues, work commitments, dyslexia or other disability, lack of academic skills, lack of interest).</p>	<p>P2) The lack of contact time. I like to be able to repeat information, to really know what I am doing, so it means something. P4) Poor communication. Uninspired lecturers. Financial struggles. P1) A bad lecturer. Lack of access to resources. No motivation. P5) When it's unclear how the topic is beneficial to the degree/our career. P3) Limited resources. Unhelpful lecturers.</p>
5	<p>How does your marker/personal tutor, programme leader give you feedback on assessment tasks? (Probes: offers specific recommendations, suggests you study more, is upset that marks are not progressing, confirms you have good grades but there is room for improvement).</p>	<p>P3: Not at all P5: Comments on line, nothing more. P1: feedback is online, 1-1s are optional P4: Often very little useful feedback P2: Written or online grades. However, some have allowed us to have 1-1s, however it's always after an assignment and doesn't relate much to real life.</p> <p style="color: #c00000;">(none of the students understood this question)</p>
10:11		
6	<p>How does your marker/personal tutor, programme leader give you feedback on assessment tasks in terms on how well you are doing? Your overall academic development? (Probes: optimistic about grades, doesn't say much about future grades, identifies that the workplace is harder than uni, says grades needs improving, says that</p>	<p>P1: Relates essay topics to future. P4: With very little hope. They should keep you motivated and inspired and don't. P5: They don't, yes they should P6: Not at all, but they should. P2: They talk vaguely, some are optimistic, others do not make connections with real life, more about the now than future. They should show more real life connections.</p> <p style="color: #c00000;">(few of the students understood this question – expectations that lecturers could predict the future of catering, not</p>

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 7  | <p>education is important for a better future)</p> <p>How important are university grades to you all here? (Probes: important, not that important, parents/sponsors might pull funding, not sure)</p> | <p style="color: #c00000;">their job to be psychics, surely student should have done their own research in to prospects?)</p> <p>P2: Very important, more so personally, as I always fall short but want to do better.</p> <p>P5: Quite important.</p> <p>P4: They're not vital, uni is a stepping stone, nothing more.</p> <p>P3: Extremely, our future.</p> <p>P1: Very disencouraging when lecturers tell you they are worth only a small amount.</p> <p style="color: #c00000;">(mixed bag of reality checks here)</p>   |
| 8  | <p>How important are university grades to the/your job market? (Probes: not sure, not important, very important, have not explored)</p>   | <p>P1: Very to me, want to achieve the best I can.</p> <p>P3: Moderately, it's more about the work experience.</p> <p>P4: Not really, experience has higher value.</p> <p>P5: Very important in competitive market for jobs.</p> <p>P2: Very important as it shows hard work</p> <p style="color: #c00000;">(Uni's need to be more explicit about the purpose of university – that of a stepping stone</p>   |
| 9  | <p>How different is grade questioning compared with school (Probes: if known, heard of, experienced)</p>  | <p>P2: Very. It's much more complex and harder to comprehend.</p> <p>P5: In school/FE, questioning was encourage and was helpful, not at uni.</p> <p>P4: In school, the teacher's word was final, there wasn't respect for students word against a teacher, we were children, they were adults. At uni, the lecturers. University retains the one way street for respect. But students are paying for a service and often feel there is not a mutual respect. (Does respect = service or vice versa?)</p> <p>P3: Grade questioning at uni is a lot harsher.</p> <p>P1: No room for improvement, "<i>get what you are given</i>" remarks at school.</p> |
| 10 | <p>How different is challenging academic</p>  | <p>P1: Due to mass of students feedback</p>  |

Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

knowledge authority from school?

How do you feel about questioning academic judgement?

and challenges are rarely altered. Very hard to question judgement.  
 P4: There's less of a lecturer/student relationship at uni. At school your teachers know you and what you need to improve on and are empathetic to individual's situations.  
 P3: very different, as all the tutor's are friends so questioning academic judgement is awkward.  
 P5: At uni, there's the impression you can't even attempt challenging authority as it wouldn't get you anywhere like it did at school.  
 P2: I do not agree fully and do not see them as an authority but just the marker. I don't like to question too much however, I recently learn that it is best to talk to them (lecturers) to understand their point of view.

(want school behaviours/echos Academic 3's not time to know the students)

**POST IT NOTES  
ACTIVITY**

On the back, please put Q11 or 12 or 13

M/F age/ faculty/year of the course/your nationality

11

Have you ever wanted your grade to be reviewed but have not had the confidence?

P5: no  
 P2: I have not had the confidence with some lecturers, but other I have felt strongly about and done so.  
 P4: Yes, but no confidence cus often don't feel I know what the lecturer wanted to begin with. Always going in blind. Lecturers all want something different but don't explicitly say this.  
 P2: Yes, but I know nothing will change.  
 P1: Yes, never gets changed anyway, seems pointless.

(Going in blind – student did not seek clarification in the first place...)

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

12	What would be a good reason to get the grade reviewed?	<p>P1: In case lecturer has missed crucial points you are trying to meet.  P3: two different tutors marking, one is harsher than the other.  P2: Not what I was expecting or if I was unsure of the topic even if I submitted it. If it's lower than expected.</p> <p style="color: #C00000;">(students have a sense of expectation: above their level of ability or just an expectation?)</p>
13	What is your experience of assessment compared to school or college?	NOT ASKED>>>>
14 32;14	<p>Have you heard of students trying to cheat/have cheated in exams or coursework?  (Probes: in Uni that is, not at all, you know of a recent case, it never happens – tease out)</p>	<p>P1: No.  P3: No.  P2: No.  P4: No.  P5: No.</p>
15	<p>Have you heard of students trying to get a marker to change their grades? (Probes: in Uni that is, not at all, you know of a recent case, it never happens, under what circumstance, what was the rationale for that? – tease out)</p>	<p>P2: Yes. They were unhappy and felt it was wrong.  P5: No.  P4: No.  P3: Yes but I don't know the details.  P1: yes, the marker had missed several pages and didn't include these in the final mark.</p> <p style="color: #C00000;">(Refer to interview with BB, also students were unhappy 'feeling it was wrong....')</p>
16	<p>Have you heard of students trying to bribe a marker for better grades?  (Probes: in Uni that is, not at all, you know of a recent case, it never happens – tease out)</p>	<p>P1: No.  P3: No.  P3: No.  P2: No.  P5: No</p>
17	<p>Is that acceptable? (Probes: If so, when or if not, what do you think of students who consider cheating/asking/bribery).</p>	<p>P1: No.  P3: No.  P3: No.  P2: No.  P5: No</p>

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- |                    |  |  |
|--------------------|--|--|
| 18                 | Should academics/markers be questioned about their marking? (Probes: under what circumstances, do lecturers know their subject, everything is negotiable, it is unacceptable to challenge a marker – tease out). | <p>P5: Yes, because they can be wrong.<br/> P2: Yes, they may be biased on some things.<br/> P4: Yes, accountability.<br/> P3: Yes, they could have favouritism.<br/> P1: yes, Check for human error/biased thinking</p> <p style="color: #C00000;">(Students are suspicious of academics and their marking)</p>   |
| 19                 | How many friends/peers/colleagues do you think engage in grade challenging behaviours – that is, to get a better grade (Probes: one, some many, none).   | <p>P1: Not many, minority.<br/> P3: Five<br/> P2: 1-2 maybe<br/> P5: Three</p>   |
| 20                 | Are you aware of guidelines on academic questioning? (Probes: what this might be, where is it, have it been read, it is somewhere on the website).   | <p>P2: Yes, MyVLE and tutors<br/> P5: Yes, online<br/> P3: No.<br/> P1: No idea.</p> <p style="color: #C00000;">(There is no such document as of 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015 – ties in with Academic 3 interview)</p>   |
| 21                 | Do you think the increased costs of HE might encourage students to challenge their grades? (Probes: explore other factors, pressures).   | <p>P1: No, don't see the difference after cost increase, I do question the quality of learning.<br/> P3: Yes! If we pay a lot of money, we deserve high quality of teaching.<br/> P5: no.<br/> P2: No. Personally, I believe it is all my own personal ability.</p> <p style="color: #C00000;">(P1 – has own goal, perhaps means teaching, but what is she comparing to?<br/> P3: may already get high quality teaching, but lacks high quality processing?)</p> |
| 22.<br><br>1:20:10 | <p>PLEASE TAKE A STICKY NOTE AND WRITE</p> <p><b>Things I wish my university/lecturer knew about me....</b></p>  | <p>P2: How I need more time on repeats of lectures. The ability to talk freely on my opinions.<br/> P3: I don't understand referencing.<br/> P1: Understand commitments and attendance, the hard work we give as opposed to completing assignments before deadlines.</p>   |

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

On the back, please put  
Q22

M/F age/ faculty/year of the  
course/your nationality

(Repeat lectures – resolved by recording  
Talk about opinions – more seminars  
Referencing – go to library  
Deadlines – two deadlines system ?)

Summarise briefly, all the questions covered.  
Offer last chance to add anything into the discussion.  
Thank all participants for joining the group today.  
Give out closure paperwork: details on how to contact researcher if any further questions or thoughts.  
Goodbyes.

## Appendix F

### Student concept map: sample

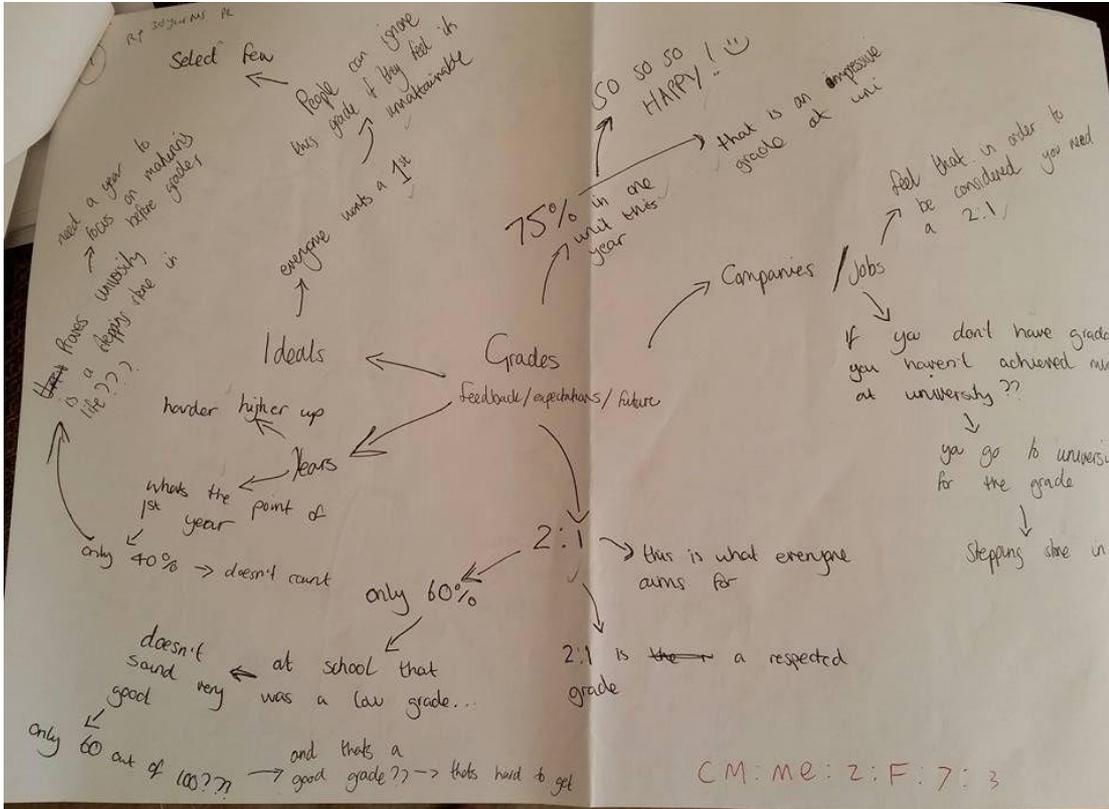


Figure 7: Student concept map - sample

*“Only 60 out of 100, doesn’t sound very good, at school, that was a low grade. 75% in one unit this year, so so so HAPPY! 😊”*

*“Companies/jobs. If you don’t have grades you haven’t achieved much at university?? You go to university for the grade... stepping stone in life??”*

## Appendix G

Table 13: NVIVO Phase 3 Developing a thematic framework

Phase 3 - 26 Categories collapsed to 3 themes with 10 sub-themes	Code definition (rules for inclusion)	Sources	Units of Meaning coded
<b>1. The Education Business</b>	Now includes category 17 (Standards and KPI and NSS etc), 2 (Condition of academic life)	694	55
1.1 Institutional Structure	Refers to issues that academics see contributing towards staff and student dissatisfaction	3	2
1.2 Standards		6	4
1.3 Condition of academic life	Moved Category 1 (decline of deference) and category 3 (student characteristics) here	619	46
1.4 Rules, regulations and Policies		66	24
<b>2. Motivations for going to uni</b>		335	23
2.1 Why Students go to University	Refers to understanding(s) of why students go to university in the higher fee paradigm as commented by academics and students (MAYBE SPLIT UP OPPORTUNITIES and PLACEMENTS into another category??? Also search all docs for those keywords).	335	23
<b>3. The Student Experience</b>	Now includes former category 20 (Help!) and 16 (transitions from school to HE), category 6 (Culture of Grades), 9 (stress factors)	1810	54
3.1 Culture of grades		195	31
3.2 Stress factors	Moved category 11 (them and us) to here	255	37
3.3 Challenges to learning	Moved category 21 (absenteeism vs presenteeism), category 14 (student disengagement) here. RENAMED THIS CATEGORY FROM BARRIERS TO CHALLENGES and will refile under The Student Experience.	379	39
3.4 Grade enquiries and challenges	Moved to here Category 4 (cheating and bribery), and 7 (morals and ethics) and 26 (courses with higher fails). Moved This topic into The Student Experience.	418	40
3.5 Customer service expectations	Moved Category 18 (Fees) and 19 (Hogwarts and Dumbledores), 22 (staff characteristics), 15 (feedback) here	563	45

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

## Appendix G (continued)

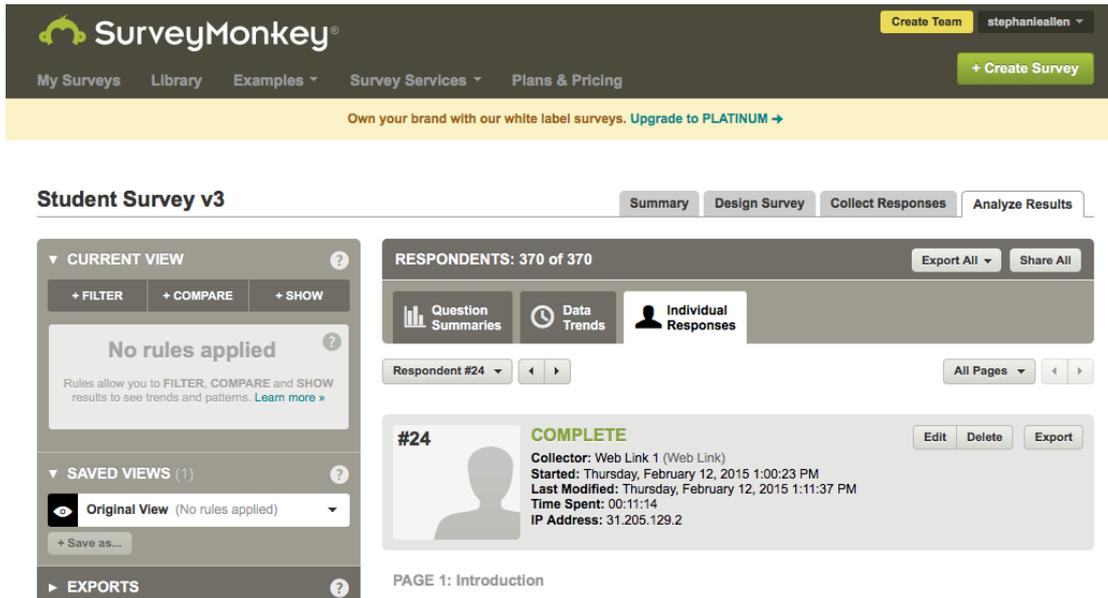


Figure 8: Student data collection trail via SurveyMonkey

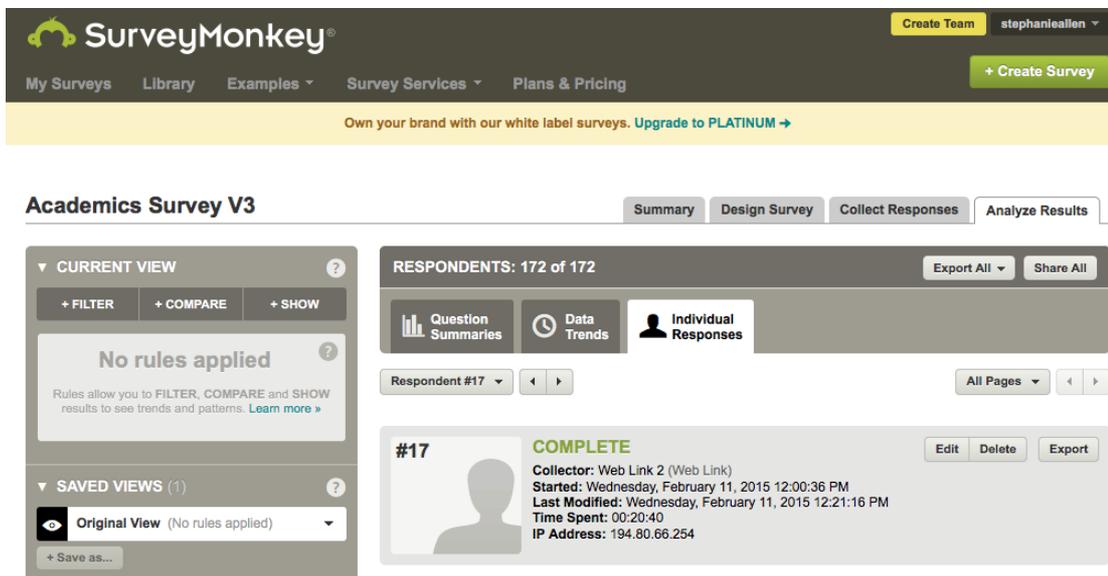


Figure 9: Academic data collection trail via SurveyMonkey

# Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

## Appendix H

### Participant Information Sheet

**Study Title:** Students & Their Grades (Academics)

**Researcher:** Steph Allen

**Ethics number:** 12830

**Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.**

#### **What is the research about?**

My name is Steph Allen and I work in The Faculty of Media and Communications at BU. This research is for a doctoral thesis at The University of Southampton. It seeks to elicit academics perceptions of student expectations in the post-2012 landscape exploring perceptions of university and its role before the workplace, attitudes towards assessment and grades as well as rules, regulations and policy.

The doctorate is funded by BU. The research is doctorally, not institutionally driven.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

Your opinion is vital to my research because you have some traits in common with other participants. For that reason, what you think will help in refining current doctoral research.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

Beyond this interview, you may be contacted for additional or follow up information should any aspect be unclear at the transcribing stage.

#### **Are there any benefits in my taking part?**

You will be contributing to a unique research project that addresses both a gap in the literature and adds to current, yet limited knowledge.

#### **Are there any risks involved?**

No risks have been identified.

#### **Will my participation be confidential?**

All data gathered will comply with the Data Protection Act and University policy. Information collected will be stored in a locked safe (paper copies) and remain confidential. Data will be coded and kept on a password protected computer.

As a researcher, I will do my best to preserve confidentiality and anonymity where possible, however, it may be that by signing this and the consent form, and information provided by you could be linked to your data, therefore, full anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

#### **What happens if I change my mind?**

You the right to withdraw at any time without your legal rights being affected.

#### **What happens if something goes wrong?**

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you may contact the Head of Research Governance (02380 595058, [rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk](mailto:rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk)).

#### **Where can I get more information?**

Researcher: Steph Allen [stephaniea@xxxxxxxxxx.ac.uk](mailto:stephaniea@xxxxxxxxxx.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Michael Tomlinson [MTomlinson@soton.ac.uk](mailto:MTomlinson@soton.ac.uk)

Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries  
in Higher Education

Appendix H (continued)



CONSENT FORM

**Study title:** Students And Their Grades (Academics)

**Researcher name:** Steph Allen

**Ethics reference:** 12830/4402

Please *initial* the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet  
and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be  
recorded and used for the purpose of this study

I understand that my responses will be anonymised in reports of the  
research   
I consent to having my responses identified personally with me in reports of  
the research

*Please delete statement as appropriate*

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time  
without my legal rights being affected

**Data Protection**

*I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on  
a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this  
study.*

Name of participant (print name).....

Signature of participant.....

Date.....

## Appendix I

Analytical Process (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994 Data Analysis)	Maykut and Morehouse 1994 Practical Application in NVivo	Strategic Objective	Iterative process throughout analysis
1. Comparing units of meaning across categories for inductive	Phase One - Open Coding (237 codes)	<b>Descriptive accounts</b> (Reordering, 'coding on' and annotating through NVIVO)	Assigning data to refined concepts to portray meaning
2. Refining categories	Phase Two - Categorisation of Codes (26 codes)	↓	↓
3. Exploring relationships and patterns across categories	Phase Three- Coding on		Refining and distilling more abstract concepts
	Phase Four- In Case Analysis	<b>Data Management</b>  (Open and hierarchal coding through NVIVO)	↓
4. Integrating data to write finding	Phase Five - Data Reduction (6 themes)	↓	Assigning data to themes/concepts to portray meaning
	Phase Six - Writing Analytical Memos		↓
	Phase Seven - Validating Analytical Memos	<b>Explanatory Accounts</b>	Assigning meaning
	Phase Eight – Ten - Synthesising Analytical Memos. examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis	(Extrapolating deeper meaning, drafting summary statements and analytical memos through NVIVO.)	↓

Analytical hierarchy to data analysis. Data processed through NVIVO following Maykut and Morehouse (Adapted from QDA 2013a and b).

The initial round of Open Coding produced 237 codes. To manage the codes, data was reduced into categories. For example, 15 open codes including 'students questioning academic judgement', 'differences for challenging in school vs university' and 'students comments on the questioning process' were subsumed into a Category 05 entitled 'Grade enquiries and challenges'. The next stage reduced the 26 codes to six themes. For example, 'The culture of grades', 'challenges to learning', 'grade enquiries and challenges' and 'customer service expectations' were subsumed into an overall theme titled 'The Student Experience'. It is recognized that the interpretation is mine and may not be the same for another.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

In detail:

First Phase - Open coding was carried out on all the transcripts and compared to the concept maps providing 237 discrete themes that required refining over several phases before identifying the key major themes.

Second Phase - Categorisation of codes involved the distillation of 26 codes, re-organising and relabeling them into broader code categories that reconstructed and reduced the data framework.

Phase Three – Four involved identifying the codes that required coding into sub-categories, of which some sub-codes were applicable in several main codes or themes. Some codes required excluding from original codes with inclusion rights being reviewed alongside the transcripts, to establish whether the data related to umbrella themes as evidenced in the memos.

Phase Five– Data reduction involved merging codes to define a framework of six themes and inter-relationships for reporting (Buzan 1993).

Phase Six – Ten involved analytical memo writing in Word format against the higher level codes summarized the content of the category and were written identifying the content of the cluster codes, that describe and draw inferences in relation to the research questions for final write up; validating analytical memos, as a self-audit process that required data interrogation looking at relationships across categories and data providing evidence based findings and synthesis of analytical memos into transparent and supported findings (see Chapter 5).

## Appendix J

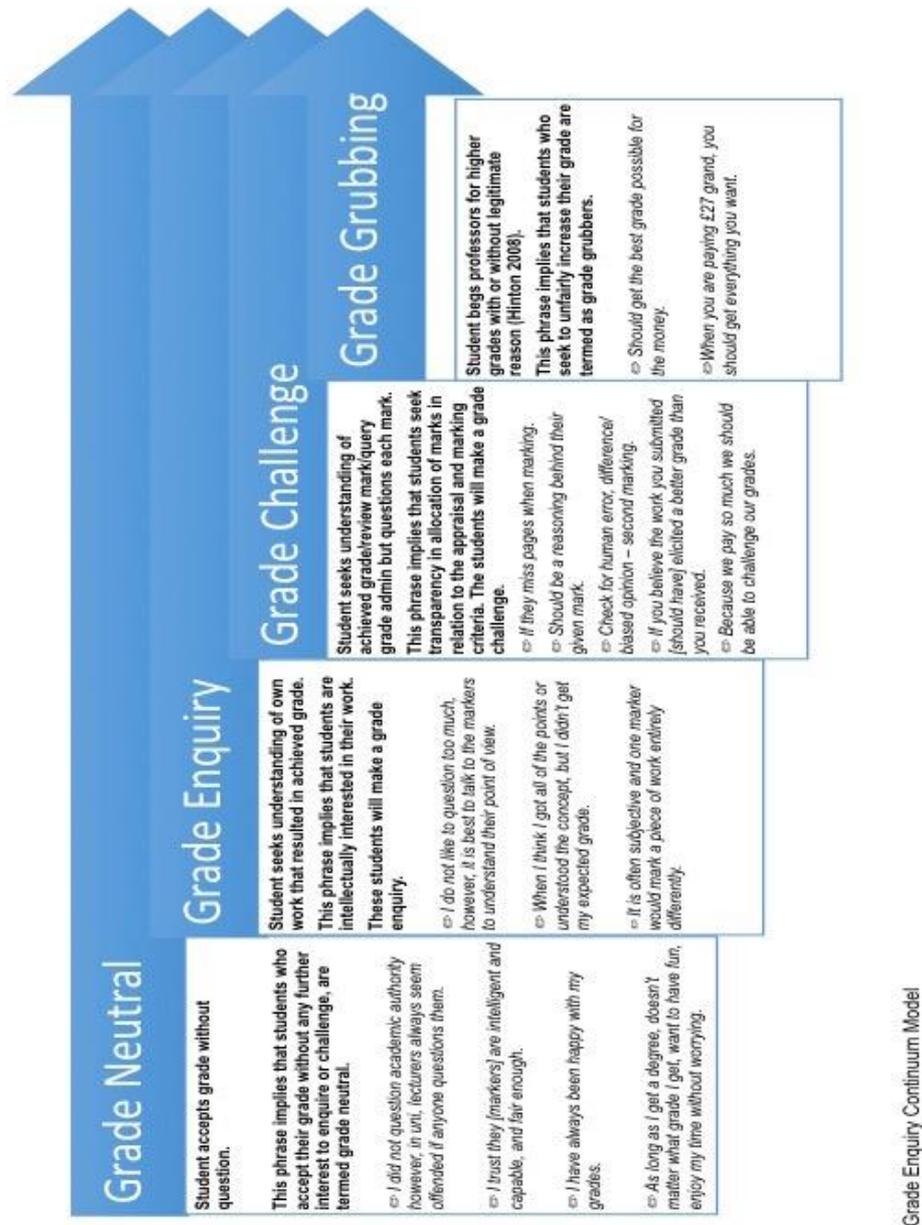


Figure 10: Grade Enquiry Continuum Model

## **Appendix K**

### **Author Background and The Dark Art of Flouncy Writing**

This section explains the lead up to the interest in the thesis topic. It starts with a brief overview of my pre-education background, a consideration of my role within HE and how I see myself within the institution. It highlights the struggles that I have encountered in the run up to and during the writing of this work including approaches writing and storytelling in general, and the likely position within HE as an outcome of this doctoral journey.

I joined Coastal University after what I would call a successful career in the Advertising and Marketing World. There were no pre-requisites for joining the commercial world in the Thatcher 1980s, just an ability to move with business needs at very short notice. The hours were long but the rewards were handsome. Even then, FE and HE sought to engage with industry through site visits and guest talks, but for the agencies, liaising with HE was a sideline to the core business.

My welcome into FE came after giving some guest lectures in the early 'naughties'. The FE institution was seeking individuals with connections to industry in order to ensure students were exposed not only to academic work but also to insights and networking opportunities with potential future employers. The talks were well received and continued to be so when I was successfully appointed as lecturer for marketing and marcoms courses. Later, I became Head of HE within FE, which meant more of the same but also logistical, budgetary and student problems. The role was pragmatic and any writing involved figures, figures and figures, and dealing with any other problem that required solving. Furthermore, I did not perceive myself to be what I thought might constitute 'an academic' but disempowered management.

A few years on, I left FE to join HE in a 'cross-boundary' professional (Whitchurch 2010) position. I joined HE to work in a job with a specific job description that required knowledge for strategic development of international partnerships and

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

recruitment of international students. I had my own very small room, and I was left to do whatever I felt would get the job done. However, I felt academically disconnected when partner institutions were keen to understand my academic standing. A Masters seemed to signal that I was not a member of the academic clique but an 'other'. Later, I joined a teaching team, to put my international experience to work with marketing communications students. However, when taking on the new role, that of a 'blended professional' straddling dedicated appointments across academic and professional domains (Whitchurch 2010), I was confused by the transitioning and evolving structures, followed by HE academic language that had not been encountered in FE. Furthermore, I had no guidance or support to take me through the first year cycle of what being an academic in HE meant, nor the expectations of senior management in order to fill the role successfully. At this point, I felt I knew less about teaching, systems and processes in HE than I had when I was Head of HE in FE.

Due to space shortages, I was to share a hot desking office with colleagues engaged in teaching but not publishing. Interactions with them made me ponder the connection between those given a hot-desk and a publishing academic having a room of one's own. Room allocation appeared to be about intellectual status and what one had to do, or be, to achieve one and thus achieve a certain status was unclear.

Conversations with individual-room colleagues who were publishing highlighted their facing the dual path of either being a writer or a teacher. No real acknowledgment was made of the 'others' as 'they' fell into the professional or service landscape, to be connected with as and when required. As those colleagues had the status of Dr. I wanted to understand what being a Dr. meant [I still do not know] and how to achieve it. An exploration of the library highlighted several types of doctorates. The subject variety was wide. I concluded that having achieved many other academic and professional qualifications, it should not take too long, and on reading several theses I, somewhat naïvely, concluded that writing a doctorate should not be too troublesome.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

My own writing background has been borne out of writing short marketing reports and completing educational forms that follow simplistic and pragmatic structures. This style reflected my own disposition, whether nature or nurture, to adhere to a short and simple structure. However, competing with the desire for written structure, is a more recent transition to preferring visual communication instead of text, which I often struggle to write consistently and logically. This seems at odds with writing to structure, and I concluded that my style has evolved to creative patch-working on a structure. I noted that publishing staff who were fluent in academic writing 'jargon', considered higher order writing skills, have a natural skill in what was coined by a colleague as 'The Dark Art of Flouncy Writing'.

I had already started the first year of the EdD, when the topic of Grade Grubbing at Coastal University arose. Whilst I had dealt with students who were concerned about their grade, and compared them to grade demand experiences elsewhere, I not only wanted to understand how common reported grade grubbing and bribery was at Coastal but also why. It brought to mind that as individuals, many endeavour to attain something of significant importance and that several might go further than others to achieve it.

The journey to research the topic and write it up in an academic language that steps beyond that of a journalistic, dull-factual or conversational style, highlighted how difficult it is to transition to a new style of narrative. A skill to be developed, perhaps, over a lifetime.

I am not noted for my storytelling, and this is a carry over from my early years. 'Don't tell Stories' was commonly heard around the childhood household where family updates, everyday life and backgrounds were not shared; language and communication was limited. I was told not to speak unless I was spoken to, and that children should be seen and not heard. It seems I had grown up with the Silent Generation, those who were, according to Time (1951) described as withdrawn, unimaginative, cautious and unadventurous. This discovery was a revelation. As a First Generation student starting HE very late in life in the early 1990's, I found as a mature student, and now as an emerging writer, that the silence is still prevalent. In terms of writing, I tend to either pen too few words or

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

waffle; I miss the point and, more spectacularly, I tend to forget the point. Apparently, this too, as I found with working with my own students, is relatively common. Many find the transition from school writing or the writing requirements on vocational programmes to academic, or flouncy writing, a struggle. The parallel of how students find researching and HE writing difficult was not lost on me either. I can both relate to that but also support them on their educational journey.

With regard this research there are two points to note. Firstly, in my own case, the topic has been noted as under-researched yet it has been welcomed within Coastal University by both sets of respondents. The study has given voice to a controversial subject that remained un-discussed in both government and institutional policy, yet has some meaning and significance for the stakeholders. This work has given voice to the students and academics on a matter that has been, mostly, ignored, thus un-silencing a debate of importance. Secondly, the notion of students seeking help and support for their academic journey is no different to mine, we are just at different academic writing levels, with some more lost and confused than others about knowing what is right and how to do the thing right.

In terms of literature choices relating to the thesis topic, I have observed that my own background and professional bias has promoted some writings over others. Whilst in cynical nature, I have tried hard to recognize such cynicism and tone, and acknowledge that I have to gracefully accept that neutrality in academic work is key.

On reflection, undertaking a doctorate has expanded my knowledge, experience and understanding of the undergraduate cohorts as they travel through the student journey of assessments and grade enquiries, the challenges they face and the need for the institution to adapt according to student needs.

It is hoped that I may even develop the dark art of flouncy writing and become part of an academic clique. Hopefully, with a room of my own, and at home, with an edible dinner, every night.

Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries  
in Higher Education

## List of References

- Abell, P. (1991) *Rational Choice Theory*. Aldershot: Brockfield.
- Abrams, F. (2014) University complaints by students top 20,000. *BBC*, 3 June. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27640303> [Accessed 19 July 2014].
- Action on Access (2006) *Widening Participation. A Rough Guide for Higher Education Providers*. Bradford: University of Bradford.
- Adams, J. B. (2005) What Makes the Grade? Faculty and Student Perceptions. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32 (1), 21–24.
- Adams, R. (2013) Universities face more complaints since rise in tuition fees. *The Guardian* 13 June. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/jun/13/universities-complaints-tuition-fees> [Accessed 1 December 2014].
- Adams, R. (2016) University of Oxford rebuts Cameron's claims over student diversity. *The Guardian* 31 January. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/31/university-of-oxford-rebuts-camerons-claims-over-student-diversity> [accessed 2 April 2017].
- Admiraal, W., Wubbel, T. and Pilot, A. (1999) College Teaching in Legal Education: Teaching Method, Students' Time-on-Task, and Achievement. *Research in Higher Education*, 40(6), 687-704.
- Alderson, P. and V. Morrow (2004) *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting With Children and Young People*, Barkingside: Barnardo's.
- Aldridge, S. and Rowley, J. (1998) Measuring customer satisfaction in higher education, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 6 (4), 197 – 204.
- Aleamoni, L.M. (1981) Student ratings of instruction in: J. Millman (Ed.) *Handbook of Teacher Evaluation*: 110-145. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Anglin, P.M. and Meng, R. (2000) Evidence on Grades and Grade Inflation at Ontario's Universities, *Canadian Public Policy*, 26(3), 361-368.
- Anyangwe, E. (2011) Are students the consumers of higher education? Live chat best bits. *The Guardian*, 14 December. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/dec/14/marketisation-best-bits> [Accessed 17 January 2014].
- Archer, L., Hutchings, M., and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. London: Falmer Routledge.
- Arubayi, E. (1987) Improvement of Instruction and Teacher Effectiveness: Are Student ratings reliable and Valid? *Higher Education*, 16, 267-278.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Ashe, C. and Hettihewa, S. (nd) Factors Affecting Students' Perception of Ethical and Moral Behavior: An Empirical Investigation of Business Schools in the United States and Australia. *National Social Science Journal*, 36 (1), 8- 22.
- Ashton, D. and Green, F. (1996) *Education and Training and the Global Economy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Ashworth, K.H. (1979) *American Higher Education in Decline*. Texas: Texas A&M University Press.
- Attwood, R. (2012) Satisfaction and its discontents. *Times Higher Education* 8 March. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/satisfaction-and-its-discontents/419238.article> [Accessed 14 May 2014].
- Axelson, R.D. and Flick, A. (2010) Defining Student Engagement, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 43 (1), 38-43.
- Babbie, E. R. (2010) *The Practice of Social Research*. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. Belmont CA: Wadsworth Cengage.
- Babcock, P.S. and Marks, M. (2011) The Falling Time Cost of College: Evidence from Half a Century of Time Use Data. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 93 (2), 468-478.
- BACP (2016) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Lutterworth: BACP
- Baines, P. and Fill, C. (2008). *Marketing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, M. (2008) Students: Customers or Learners? *BBC*, 21 June. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7466279.stm> [Accessed 3 January 2015].
- Baker, S.E. and Edwards, R. (2012) How many qualitative interviews is enough. *NCRM*. Available from: <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/> [Accessed 14 April 2017].
- Baldwin, G. and James, R. (2000) The Market in Australian Higher Education and the Concept of Student as Informed Consumer. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 22 (2),139-148.
- Ballantyne, R., Borthwick, J. and Packer, J. (2000) Beyond student evaluation of teaching: identifying and addressing academic staff development needs. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25: 221-236.
- Barnett, R. (1994) *The Limits of Competence*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Baron, P. and Corbin, L. (2012) Student Engagement: Rhetoric and Reality. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31 (6), 759-772.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Barrett, D. (2011) The cheating epidemic at Britain's universities. *The Telegraph*, 5 March. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8363345/The-cheating-epidemic-at-Britains-universities.html> [Accessed 12 May 2015].

Batty, D. (2012) Vice-chancellor of City University says staff reforms are necessary. *The Guardian*, 2 April. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/apr/02/paul-curran-city-university-staff-reforms> [Accessed 16 June 2014].

BBC (2013a) University of Bath student jailed over tutor bribe bid. *BBC*, 23 April. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-22269573> [Accessed 25th April 2013].

BBC (2013b) Zero-hour contracts 'exploit Scottish University staff' *BBC*, 4 November. Available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-24794186> [Accessed 12 December 2013].

Bean, J. (2005). *Nine themes of college student retention: Factors predicting the success of first- year, first-semester students at Tennessee State University*. Thesis (PhD). Tennessee State University.

Beard, M. (2012) A Point of View: When students answer back. *BBC News Magazine*, 2 December. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20531666> [Accessed 6 February 2014].

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization*, London: Sage.

Becker, G. S. (1964) *Human capital*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bedford, L.A. (2009) The Professional Adjunct: An Emerging Trend in Online Instruction. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, XII, (III) Available from: <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall123/bedford123.html> [Accessed 12 December 2013].

Bell, D.N.F. and Blanchflower, D.G. (2011) Young people and the Great Recession. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 27 (2), 241-267.

Bello, A. L. and Valientes, D. M. (2008) Grade inflation: fact or myth?, *Philippine Review of Economics*, 45 (1), 93-108.

Benn, R. (1995) Higher Education, Non-Standard Students and Withdrawals. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 19 (3), 3-12.

Bennett, N., Dunne, E. and Carre, C. (2000) *Skills Development in Higher Education and Employment*. Buckingham:Open University Press.

Bernard, H. R. (1988) *Research methods in Anthropology*. New York. NY:Rowman Altamira.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Biggs, J. (2001) The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. *Higher Education* 41, (3), 221-238.

Bills, D.B. (2003) Credentials, Signals, and Screens: Explaining the Relationship Between Schooling and Job Assignment. *Review of Educational Research*, 73 (4), 441-449.

Birnbaum, R. (1977) Factors Related to University Grade Inflation. *Journal of Higher Education*, 48(5), 519-539.

BIS (2010) *Skills for Sustainable Growth Strategy Document*. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/.../bis-10-1273-skills-for-sustainable-growth-strategy-summary.pdf> [Accessed 3 April 2013].

BIS (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills> [Accessed August 2012].

BIS (2015a) *Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. Open Consultation. November. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

BIS (2015b) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*. July. London: Department for Business and Innovation Skills.

BIS (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. May. London: Department for Business and Innovation Skills.

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B. and William, D. (2004) Working Inside the Black Box. *University of Victoria*. Available from: [web.uvic.ca/.../Working%20Inside%20the%20Black%20Box-Assessment...?](http://web.uvic.ca/.../Working%20Inside%20the%20Black%20Box-Assessment...?) [Accessed 3 January 2014].

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010) *How to Research*, second edition. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Blenkinsopp, J. and Scurry, T. (2007) 'Hey GRINGO!': the HR challenge of managing graduates in non-graduate occupations, *Personnel Review*, 36 (4):623-637.

Bloxham, S., den-Outer, B., Hudson, J., and Price, M. (2016) Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41, (3), 466-481.

Bodkin, H. (2016) Thousands of student nurses cheating their way through training, universities reveal. *The Telegraph*, 19 July. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/19/thousands-of-student-nurses-cheating-their-way-through-training/> [Accessed 24 August 2016].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Boeije, H. (2002) A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews, *Quality and Quantity*, 36: 391-409.
- Boeije, H. (2010) *Analysis in Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications: London.
- Bohms, E. (2011) If students are consumers, why doesn't HE practice good customer service? *The Guardian*, 16 September. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/sep/16/student-consumer-customer-service>. [Accessed 30 December 2015].
- Booth, A. (1997) Listening to students: Experiences and expectations in the transition to a history degree. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22 (2), 205-220.
- Boudon, R. (1974) . Jon Wiley & Sons: Canada.
- Bourner, T., Reynolds, A., Hamed, M., and Barnett, R. (1991) *Part-time students and their experience of higher education*, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Bowden, R. (2000) Fantasy Higher Education: University and College league tables. *Quality in Higher Education*, 6 (1), 41-60.
- Bowles, A. Fisher R., McPhail, R., Rosenstreich D. and Dobson, A. (2013) Staying the distance: students perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, (November), 1-14.
- Bribery Act (2010) (s.9) *Gov.UK*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/anti-bribery-policy> [Accessed 4 April 2017].
- Brady, B. and Dutta, K. (2012) 45,000 caught cheating at Britain's universities. *Independent*, 11 March. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/45000-caught-cheating-at-britains-universities-7555109.html> [Accessed 14 June 2014].
- Brannen, J. (2005) Mixed Methods research: A discussion paper. Available from: [eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/89/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-005.pdf](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/89/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-005.pdf) [Accessed 5 May 2015].
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V.,(2013). *Successful Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brennan, J. (2004) *The Social Role of the Contemporary University: Contradictions, Boundaries and Change, Ten Years On: Changing Education in a Changing World*. Center for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). Buckingham: The Open University Press.
- Brew A. (2006) *Research and teaching: beyond the divide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Bridges, D. (1992) Transferable skills: a philosophical perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 18(1), 43- 51.
- Brown, P. (2003) *The Opportunity Trap: Education and Employment in a Global Economy*. Cardiff University: Working Paper Series 32.
- Brown, P.A. (2008) A Review of the Literature on Case Study Research. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 1 (1), 2-11.
- Brown, P. and Lauder, H. (1992) *Education for Economic Survival: From Fordism to Post-Fordism?* London: Routledge.
- Brown, P. Lauder, H. and Ashton, D. (2011) *The Global Auction: the broken promises of education, jobs and incomes*. Oxford:Oxford University Press.
- Brown, R. (2014) Competition and Choice in Undergraduate Education. *CDBU*. 10 January. Available from: <http://cdbu.org.uk/competition-and-choice-in-undergraduate-education/> [Accessed 9 May 2014].
- Brown, R. and Carasso, H. (2013) *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*. UK:Routledge.
- Brown, R. (2011) The New English Quality Assurance Regime. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17 (2), 213-229.
- Browne, J. (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education Report of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
- Bryman, A. (2006) Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done? *Qualitative Research*, 6 (1), 97-113.
- Bryman, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Budden, M., Hsing, Y., Budden, C. and Hall, M. (2010) Heads or tails (success or failure)? Using logit modelling to predict student retention and progression. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(5), 35–42.
- Buglear, J. (2011) Grading and academic freedom: an English academic's angle on Hill's contentious triangle. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17 (1), 101-104.
- Bunce, L., Baird, A., and Jones, S.E. (2016) The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*. In Press 1-21.
- Burn-Callander, R. (2014) More young entrepreneurs launch start-ups in wake of recession. *The Telegraph*, 8 August. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/yourbusiness/11133048/More-young->

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

[entrepreneurs-launch-start-ups-in-wake-of-recession.html](#) [Accessed 7 October 2014].

Burnett, K. (2015) Top university chief: Is Uni really worth the money? *The Telegraph*, 12 August. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/11799502/Top-university-chief-You-might-well-be-better-off-not-going-to-Uni.html> [Accessed 13 August 2015].

Buzan, T. (1993) *The Mind Map Book*. New York, USA: Penguin.

Burnett, K. (2015) *Top university chief: is Uni really worth the money?* *The Telegraph* 12 August. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/11799502/Top-university-chief-You-might-well-be-better-off-not-going-to-Uni.html> [Accessed 13 August 2015].

Cairns, R. (2011) Higher education: What it takes to make it to Oxbridge. *The Telegraph*, 1 October. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8793862/Higher-education-What-it-takes-to-make-it-to-Oxbridge.html> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Caison, A. (2005) Determinants of systemic retention: Implications for improving retention practice in higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6(4), 425–441.

Caru, A. and Cova, B. (2003) Revisiting consumption experience: A more humble but complete view of the concept. *Marketing Theory*, 3 (2), 267-286.

Castells, M. (1994) The university system: engine of development in the new world economy. In *Revitalizing Higher Education*. Ed. Salmi, J. and Verspoor, A. (eds.),. Oxford: Pergamon, pp. 14-40.

Centra, J. A. (1993) *Reflective Faculty Evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chan, R., Brown, G. T. and Ludlow, L. (2014) *What is the purpose of higher education?: A comparison of institutional and student perspectives on the goals and purposes of completing a bachelors degree in the 21st century*. Roundtable paper presented at the American Education Research Association (AERA) Annual Conference. Philadelphia, PA: April 7, 2014.

Chen, Y. and Hoshower, L.B. (2003) Student Evaluation of teaching effectiveness: an assessment of student perception and motivation, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28 (1), 71-88.

Cheng, M. (2011) 'Transforming the Learner' versus 'Passing the Exam'? *Understanding the Gap between Academic and Student Definitions of Teaching Quality*. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17 (1), 3-17.

Cheney, G., McMillan, J.J. and Schwartzman, R. (1997) Should We Buy the "Student-as-Consumer" Metaphor? *The Montana Professor*, 7 (3), 8-11.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Cheong, K.S. (2000) Grade Inflation at the *University of Hawaii-Manoa Department of Economics*, Working Paper No. 200002. Available from: <http://www.economics.hawaii.edu/research/workingpapers/002.pdf> [Accessed 9 February 2014].

Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2013) Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 176 (2), 431-457.

Clarke, M., Hyde, A., and Drennan, J. (2013) Professional Identity in Higher Education. IN: Kehm, B.M., and Teichler, U. (eds). *The Academic Profession in Europe: New Tasks and New Challenges*. Netherlands:Springer, 7-21.

Clerehan, R. (2002) Transition to tertiary education in the arts and humanities: Some academic initiatives from Australia. *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 2 (1), 72–89.

CMA (2015) Undergraduate students: your rights under consumer law. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/415732/Undergraduate\\_students\\_-\\_your\\_rights\\_under\\_consumer\\_law.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415732/Undergraduate_students_-_your_rights_under_consumer_law.pdf) [Accessed 12 August 2016].

Coates, H. (2007) A Model for Online and General Campus-Based Student Engagement. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32, 121-141.

Coburn, K. (2006) Organizing a ground crew for today's helicopter parents. *About Campus*, July/August, 9-16.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2000) *Research Methods in Education*, 5th ed. London: Routledge Falmer.

Cohen, P. A. (1980) Using student ratings feedback for improving college instruction: A meta-analysis of findings. *Research in Higher Education*, 13, 321-341.

Cohn, E. and Geske, T. G. (1990) *The Economics of Education*, third edition. New York: Pergamon Press.

Coaldrake, P. and Stedman, L. (1998) *On the Brink: Australia's Universities Confronting their Future*. University of Queensland Press.

Coaldrake, P. and Stedman, L. (1999) Academic Work in the Twenty-First Century. Changing Roles and policies. *Occasional Papers Series* (pp. 1-35). Canberra: Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Collini, S. (2003) HiEdBiz, The Future of Higher Education. *London Review of Books*, 6 November. Available from <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n21/stefan-collini/hiedbiz>. [Accessed 2 April 2017].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Collini, S. (2010) Browne's Gamble. *London Review of Books*, 4 November. Available from: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>. [Accessed 12 July 2013].

Collini, S. (2011) From Robbins to McKinsey. *London Review of Books*, 25 August, Available from: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n16/stefan-collini/from-robbins-to-mckinsey> [Accessed 11 June 2013].

Collins, N. (2010) Up to one in four graduates faces unemployment. *The Telegraph*, 16 July 2010. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/7892235/Up-to-one-in-four-graduates-faces-unemployment.html> [Accessed 9 May 2013].

Coopers and Lybrand (1998) *Skills Development in Higher Education*. London: Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals / Department for Education and Employment.

Connelly, C. E. and Gallagher, D. G. (2004) Emerging trends in contingent work research. *Journal of Management*, 30(6), 959-983.

Cox, R. (2009) "I would have rather paid for a class I wanted to take": Utilitarian Approaches at a Community College. *The Review of Higher Education*, 32 (3), 353-382.

Creswell, J. W. (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design – Choosing Among 5 Traditions*. London: Sage.

Creswell, J.W. (2003) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. USA:Sage

Creswell, J. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design, Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage.

Creswell. J. (2013a) *Steps in Conducting a Scholarly Mixed Methods Study*. Available from: [digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1047&context...](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1047&context...) [Accessed 20 May 2015].

Creswell, J.W. (2013b). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among The Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2007) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Crocker, J., Karpinski, A., Quinn, D. M. and Chase, S K. (2003) When Grades Determine Self-Worth: Consequences of Contingent Self-Worth for Male and Female Engineering and Psychology Majors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(3), 507-516.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Crombie, I.K. (1996). *The pocket guide to critical appraisal*. London: BMJ Publishing Group.

Crook, T. R., Todd, S.Y., Combs, J.G., Woehr, D.J. and Ketchen D.J Jr, (2011) Does human capital matter? A meta-analysis of the relationship between human capital and firm performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96 (3), 443-56.

Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research*. London: Sage

Daymon, C., and Holloway, I., (2002) *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications* [online]. London: Routledge.

Dearing, R. (1997) *The Dearing Report: Report for the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: Higher Education in the Learning Society*, London: HMSO.

Deem, R., and Brehony K.J. (2005). Management as ideology: The case of 'new managerialism' in higher education. *Oxford Review of Education* 31 (2), 217-235.

DeLong, M. and Winter, D. (2002) *Learning to Teaching and Teaching to Learn Mathematics: Resources for Professional Development*. Mathematical Association of America. US: Washington DC.

Delucchi, M. and Korgen, K. (2002) "We're the Customer - We Pay the Tuition": Student Consumerism among Undergraduate Sociology Majors. *Teaching Sociology*, 30 (1), 100-107.

Delucchi, M. and Smith, W. L. (1997a) A Postmodern Explanation of Student Consumerism in Higher Education. *Teaching Sociology*, 25, 322-27.

Delucchi, M. and Smith, W. L. (1997b) Satisfied Customers versus Pedagogic Responsibility: Further Thoughts on Student Consumerism. *Teaching Sociology*, 25, 336-37.

Denscombe, M. (2007) *The Good Research Guide*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Open University Press, Maidenhead.

DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*. London: HMSO.

Dickson, V.A. (1984) An Economic Model of Faculty Grading Practices. *Journal of Economic Education* 15(3), 197-203.

Dill, D.D. (2005) *Will Market Competition Assure Academic Quality?: An Analysis of the UK and US Experience*. October 2005. Available from: [www.unc.edu/.../Market%20Regulation%20in%20US%20and%20UK.pdf](http://www.unc.edu/.../Market%20Regulation%20in%20US%20and%20UK.pdf) [Accessed 3 December 2015].

Dodeen, H. (2013) Validity, Reliability, and Potential Bias of Short Forms of Students' Evaluation of Teaching: The case of UAE University. *Educational Assessment*, 18 (4), 235-250.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Dore, R. (1976) *The Diploma Disease: education, qualification and development*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Douglas, J., Douglas, A., and Barnes, B. (2006) Measuring Student Satisfaction at a UK University. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 14 (3), 251-267.
- Dowd, S. B. (1994) Promoting Academic Integrity in Health Occupations Education. *Journal of Health Occupations Education*, 9 (1) Article 7.
- Ecclestone, K. (2001) I know a 2:1 when I see it: understanding criteria for degree classification in franchised university programmes. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 25, 301-313.
- Edmondson, K. (2000) Assessing science understanding through concept maps. In Mintzes, J., Wandersee, J. and Novak J. (Eds.) *Assessing science understanding* (p.19-40). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Ernest, P. (1999). *Social Constructivism as a Philosophy of Mathematics: Radical Constructivism*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- ESCR (nd). The Research Ethics Guidebook, *Economic and Research Council*. Available from: <http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/> [Accessed 17 March 2017].
- Evans, A.M. (2013a) Governing student assessment: administrative rules, silenced academics and performing students. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(2), 213-223.
- Evans, C. (2013b) Making Sense of Assessment Feedback in Higher Education. *Review of Educational Research*, 83 (1), 70-120.
- Evans, L., and Nixon, J. (2015) *Academic Identities in Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Fallows, S. and Steven, C. (2000) *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Farley, B. L. (1995) *A is for average: the grading crisis in today's colleges, Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University*. The Center for Faculty Development, Mid-Career Fellowship Program, History Department.
- Felton, J., Mitchell, J. and Stinson, M. (2004) Web-based student evaluations of professors: The relations between perceived quality, easiness, and sexiness. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29 (1), 91-108.
- Finn, K. (2015) *Personal Life, Young Women and Higher Education: A Relational Approach to Student and Graduate Experiences*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Finney, T.G. and Finney R.Z. (2010) Are students their universities' customers? An exploratory study, *Education + Training*, 52 (4), 276-29.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Firat, A.F. and Dholakia, N. (2006) Theoretical and philosophical implications of postmodern debates: some challenges to modern marketing, *Marketing Theory*, 6 (2), 123-162.

Fitzgerald, T., White, J., and Gunter, H. M. (eds) (2012) *Hard Labour? Academic Work and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.

Fitzsimons, P (1997) Human capital theory and participation in tertiary education In K-M. Mathews & M. Olssen (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Education Policy For the 1990s and Beyond* (p.107-129). Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.

Flatters, P. 2016. *The changing face of consumer demand*. HSBC. Available from: <https://globalconnections.hsbc.com/global/en/articles/consumer-demand> [Accessed 6 April 2017].

Flick, U., Kardoff, E. and Steinke, I. (2004) *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Forstenzer, J. (2016a) 'The *Teaching Excellence Framework*: What's The Purpose? [www.crickcentre.org/wp.../01/TEF-Whats-the-Purpose-booklet-Josh-Forstenzer.pdf](http://www.crickcentre.org/wp.../01/TEF-Whats-the-Purpose-booklet-Josh-Forstenzer.pdf) [Accessed 14 May 2017].

Forstenzer, J. (2016b) Why the teaching excellent framework is flawed. *Times Higher Education*, 23 February. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/feb/23/why-the-teaching-excellence-framework-is-flawed> [Accessed 14 May 2017].

Franz, I. (2010) Grade inflation under the threat of students nuisance: Theory and evidence. *Economics of Education Review*, 29 (3), 411-422.

Gabriel, L., and Lang.T (2006) *The Unmanageable Consumer*. London: Sage.

Galindo-Rueda, F., Marcenaro, O., and Vignoles, A. (2004). The Widening Socio-Economic Gap in UK Higher Education. *CEE Discussion Papers 44*, Centre for the Economics of Education, London.

Ganske, K.M. (2010) Moral Distress in Academia. *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, (15) 3:6.

Gee, P., Hull, G. and Lankshear, C. (1996) *The New Work Order: behind the language of the new capitalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Geer, J. G. (1991) Do open-ended questions measure salient issues? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55, 360-370.

Gibney, W. (2013) A Bribe and a Pistol. *Inside Higher Ed*, 2 May. Available from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/02/instructor-describes-unsettling-meeting-graduate-student>. [Accessed 4 April 2017].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Gillham, B. (2005) *Research Interviewing, the range of techniques*. Berkshire: McGraw Hill.

Gill, J. (2008) Academics criticize HEA for flouting principles of intellectual freedom. *Times Higher Education*, 17 April. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/academics-criticise-hea-for-flouting-principles-of-intellectual-freedom/401505.article?storycode=401505> [Accessed 14 June 2016].

Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

Goldscheider, F. and DaVanzo, J. (1985) Living arrangements and the transition to adulthood. *Demography*, 22 (4), 545-563.

Gordon, G., and Whitchurch, C. (2010) *Academic and Professional identities in Higher Education: the challenges of a diversifying workforce*. London: Routledge.

Gornall, L. (2014) 'Becoming "Indigenous" as "New Teaching and Learning Staff" – and a Reflexive Review'. In Gornall, L., Cook, C., Daunton, L., Salisbury, J., and Thomas, B. (eds) *Academic Working Lives: Experience, Practice and Change*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 249–56.

Gose, B. (1997) Efforts To Curb Grade Inflation Get an F from Many Critics. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 July. Available from: <http://chronicle.com/article/Efforts-to-Curb-Grade/77010> [Accessed 14 June 2014].

GOV.UK (2011) Oral statement to Parliament. *Foreign student visas: Home Secretary's statement*. London: CMA.

GOV.UK (2015) *Higher education: consumer law advice for providers and students*. London: CMA.

Gray, M. and Bergmann, B.R. (2003) Student teaching evaluations: inaccurate, demeaning, misused. *Academe Online*, 89 (5), 44-46.

Grebennikov, L. and Shah, M. (2013) Student Voice: Using Qualitative Feedback from Students to Enhance their University Experience. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18 (6), 606–618.

Gredler, M. E. (1997). *Learning and instruction: Theory into practice* (3rd ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Greene, J. and Caracelli, V. (2003) Making Paradigmatic Sense of Mixed Methods Inquiry, in *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, Tashakkori, A and Teddlie, C. (Eds) 2003, Sage: California.

Greenwald, A.G. and Gillmore, G.M. (1997) Grading Leniency is a Removable Contaminant of Student Ratings. *American Psychologist*. 52 (11), 1209-1217.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Grix, J. (2010) *The Foundations of Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan.

Grossnickle, J. and Rashin, O. (2001) *The Handbook of Online Marketing Research*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Grove, J. (2014) UCU considers vote of no confidence for Surrey v-c over student assessments of staff. *Times Higher Education*, 29 May. Available from: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/ucu-considers-vote-of-no-confidence-for-surrey-v-c/2013613.article> [Accessed 2 June 2014].

Grove, W. A. and Wasserman, T. (2004) The life-cycle pattern of collegiate GPA: longitudinal cohort analysis and grade inflation. *Journal of Economic Education*, 35,162–74.

Guardian, The (2015) My students have paid £9,000 and now they think they own me. *The Guardian*, 18 December. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/dec/18/my-students-have-paid-9000-and-now-they-think-they-own-me> [Accessed 22 December 2015].

Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1998) Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gude, K. (2014) College Students and Their Helicopter Parents: a Recipe for Stress. *Huffington Post*, 4 August. Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karl-gude/parents-the-worst-kind-of\\_b\\_5097971.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karl-gude/parents-the-worst-kind-of_b_5097971.html) [Accessed August 2014].

Gye, H. (2013) Graduate 'rich list' reveals universities that will make you a millionaire: Oxford comes top but Manchester is also in 'super wealthy' elite. *Mail online*, 25 April. Available from : <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2314550/UK-graduate-rich-list-reveals-universities-make-millionaire-Oxford-comes-top.html#ixzz4d6HX6C3P> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Habermas, J. (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interest*. Boston:Beacon, Boston.

Halsey, A., Floud, J. and Anderson, J. (Eds) (1961) *Education, Economy and Society*. New York: Free Press.

Halsey, A., Lauder, H., Brown, P. and Wells, A. (1997) *Education, Culture, Economy, and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harman, G. (2003) Australian academics and prospective academics :adjustment to a more commercial environment. *Higher Education and Policy*, 15 (3), 105-122.

Harrell, M.C. and Bradley, M.A. (2009) Data Collection Methods. *Semi Structured Interviews and Focus Groups*. US: RAND Corporation.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Harrison, A. (2011) England's universities face funding cuts of 12%. *BBC*, 17 March 2011. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12762556> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

HEPI-HEA (2014) *The HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014*. Available from: [www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/05/21/hepi-hea-2014-student-academic-experience-survey](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/05/21/hepi-hea-2014-student-academic-experience-survey) [Accessed 21 February 2015].

Havergal, C. (2016) Rise in UK university dropout rate disappointing'. *Times Higher Education*, 23 March. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/rise-uk-university-dropout-rate-disappointing> [Accessed 12 July 2016].

Hay, D. (2007) Using concept maps to measure deep, surface and non-learning outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32 (1), 39-57.

Hay, D., Kinchin, I. and Lygo-Baker, S. (2008) Making learning visible: the role of concept mapping in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(3), 295-311.

Hayes, D. (2009) Academic freedom and the diminished subject. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57 (2), 127-45.

HEA (2016) Student Success – an Employability Perspective. Available from: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/blog/student-success-%E2%80%93-employability-perspective>. [Accessed 13 May 2017].

HEFCE (2014) *Global demand for English higher education: An analysis of international student entry to English higher education courses*. Available from: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201408a/#d.en.86921> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Hembrooke, H. and Gay, G. (2003) The laptop and the lecture: The effects of multitasking in learning environments. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 15 (1), 46-64.

Henry, J (2010) The university professor who stood up against dumbing down of degrees. *The Telegraph*, 28 February. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/7332452/The-university-professor-who-stood-up-against-dumbing-down-of-degrees.html> [Accessed 19 August 2016].

Heskett, J. L., Sasser, W. E. and Schlesinger, L. A. (1997) *The service profit chain*. New York: Free Press.

HESA (2013c) *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Institutions*. Available from:

[http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_pubs&task=show\\_pub\\_detail&pubid=1708&Itemid=286](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_pubs&task=show_pub_detail&pubid=1708&Itemid=286) [Accessed 13 December 2013].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

HESA (2016) *Higher Education and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom. Student enrolments by level of study and mode of study 2010/11 to 2014/15*. Available from: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/sfr224> [Accessed 7 July 2016].

Higher Education Act (2004) UK: The Stationery Office Limited.

Hill, F.M. (1995) Managing service quality in higher education: the role of the student as primary consumer. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 3 (3) 10-21.

Hinton, K. (2008) *Practice of grade-grubbing looked down upon by professors, students on the Hill*. Available from: <http://www.tuftsdaily.com/features/practice-of-grade-grubbing-looked-down-upon-by-professors-students-on-the-hill-1.912139#.UL4o2IUx9eU> [Accessed 2 December 2012].

Hirons, C. (2015) *STOP.DROP.SERVE. When the Customer Experience forgets about the Customer*. Available from: <http://www.carolinehirons.com/2015/10/stop-drop-serve-when-customer.html> [Accessed 30 December 2015].

Hirsch, F. (1977) *The Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge.

Hirschman, E.C. (1986) Humanistic inquiry in marketing research: philosophy, method and criteria, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23, 237-249.

HM Treasury. (2013) *Autumn Statement 2013*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/autumn-statement-2013-documents> [Accessed May 2014].

Hodges, L. (2013) Should British universities grade students using an American-style system? Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/should-british-universities-grade-students-using-an-american-style-system-8983739.html> [Accessed February 2014].

Hoff, J. (2014) Are adjunct professors the fast-food workers of the academic world? *The Guardian*. 24 January. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/24/exploitation-of-adjunct-professors-devalues-higher-education> [Accessed 5 February 2014].

Holmes, L. (2001) Reconsidering Graduate Employability: the graduate identity approach. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7 (2), 111-119.

Horsburgh, D. (2003) Evaluation of qualitative research, *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 12, 307–312.

Huber, L. (1987) Changes in the Student Role [1]. *Studies in Higher Education*, 12 (2), 157-168.

Huczynski, A. and Buchanan, D. (1991) *Organisational Behaviour: an Introductory Text* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Husbands, C. T. and Davies, A. (2000) The Teaching Roles, Institutional Locations, and Terms and Conditions of Employment of Part-time Teachers in UK Higher Education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24 (3), 337-362.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J., and Strobel, J. (2008). Constructivism and education: Misunderstandings and pedagogical implications. *The Teacher Educator*, 43, 72-86.

ILO (2010) *A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth. A G20 Training Strategy*. Geneva: International Labour Force. Available from: <https://www.oecd.org/g20/summits/toronto/G20-Skills-Strategy.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2013].

Independent, The (2014) Class action: The age-old divides in British society show no sign of disappearing..... but that is not a cause for defeatism. *Independent*, 27 August. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/class-action-the-age-old-divides-in-british-society-show-no-sign-of-disappearing-9695456.html> [Accessed 4 May 2015].

Inglis, F. (2011) Economical with the actualité. *Times Higher Education*. 6 October. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/economical-with-the-actualit/417654.article> [Accessed 12 February 2015].

Jackson, K. M. and Trochim, W.M. (2002) Concept Mapping as an Alternative Approach for the Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses. *Organisational Research Methods*, 5 (4), 307-336.

Jarratt Report (1985) *Report of Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities*. London:CVCP.

Jewell, R.T. and McPherson, M.A. (2012) Instructor-Specific Grade Inflation: Incentives, Gender, and Ethnicity. *Social Science Quarterly*, 93 (1), 95-109.

Jewell, R.T., McPherson, M.A. and Tieslau, M.A. (2013) Whose Fault Is It? Assigning Blame for Grade Inflation in Higher Education. *Applied Economics*, 45, 1185-1200.

Johnes, G. and McNabb, R. (2004) Never Give up on the Good Times: Student Attrition in the UK. *Oxford Bulletin of Economic and Statistics* 66 (1), 0305-9049.

Johnson, B. and McElroy, T.T. (2010) *The Edutainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching*. Maryland: R & L Education.

Jones, B. (2011) Avoiding Grade Appeals, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 April. Available from: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/avoiding-grade-appeals/33048> [Accessed 1 December 2012].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Jones, M. (2014) How Cambridge University almost killed me. *The Guardian*, 5 October. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/oct/06/cambridge-university-student-depression-eating-disorders> [Accessed 5 October 2014].
- Kahu, E. R. (2013) Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (5), 758-773.
- Kantanis, T. (2000) The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university. *Journal of Institutional Research* 9 (1), 100–110.
- Kehm, B.M., and Teichler, U. (2013) *The Academic Profession in Europe: New Tasks and New Challenges*. Netherlands:Springer.
- Kennedy, D. (1999) Philosophy for Children and the Reconstruction of Philosophy. *Metaphilosophy*, 30 (4), 338-359.
- Kinross, D. (2010) Universities spending millions on websites which students rate as inadequate. *The Telegraph*, 16 November. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8042168/Universities-spending-millions-on-websites-which-students-rate-as-inadequate.html>. [Accessed 15 December 2014].
- Kirkham, C. 2014. With Goldman's Foray Into Higher Education, A Predatory Pursuit Of Students And Revenues. *The Huffington Post*, 14 December. Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/14/goldman-sachs-for-profit-college\\_n\\_997409.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/14/goldman-sachs-for-profit-college_n_997409.html) [Accessed 5 April 2017].
- Kohn, A. (1992) *No Contest. The Case Against Competition. Why we lose in our race to win*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Kohn, A. (2002) The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 November. Available from: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Dangerous-Myth-of-Grade/34252>. [Accessed 17 April 2014].
- Kolevzon, M.S. (1981) Grade Inflation in Higher Education: A Comparative Study. *Research in Higher Education* 15 (3), 195-212.
- Knodel, J., 1993. The design and analysis of focus group studies: a practical approach. In: Morgan, D.L. *Successful Focus Groups*. California: Sage Publications, 35-51.
- Kraimer, M. L., Wayne, S. J., Liden, R. C., and Sparrowe, R. T. (2005) The role of job security in understanding the relationship between employees' perceptions of temporary workers and employees' performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(2), 389-398.
- Krinsky, C. (2013) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics*, Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2015) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. USA: Sage.

Kvale, S. (2008) *Doing Interviews*. USA: Sage

Kwan, K.P. (1999) How fair are student ratings in assessing the teaching performance of university teachers? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24 (2), 181–195.

Lang, M. (2001) Student retention in higher education: Some conceptual and programmatic perspectives. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3(3), 217–229.

Langbein, L. (2008) Management by results: student evaluation of faculty teaching and the mis-measurement of performance. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(4), 417–428.

Laurison, D. and Friedman, S. (2015) Introducing the Class Ceiling: Social Mobility into Britain's Elite Occupations. *LSE Sociology Department Working paper Series*. London: LSE Academic Publishing.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) 'It's a struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (6), 597-615.

Leslie, L. L. and Brinkman, P.T. (1988) *The Economic Value of Higher Education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Lewis, J., West, A., Roberts, J. and Noden, P. (2015) Parents' involvement and university students' independence. *Families, Relationships and Societies: An international Journal of research and debate*, 4 (3), 417-432.

Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Kraimer, M. L., and Sparrowe, R. T. (2003) The dual commitments of contingent workers: An examination of contingents' commitment to the agency and the organization. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24, 609-625.

Lieberman, D.A. and Remedios, R. (2007) Do undergraduates' motives for studying change as they progress through their degree? *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77 (2), 379-395.

Light, J. and Silverman, R.E. (2011) Generation Jobless: Students Pick Easier Majors Despite Less Pay. *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 November. Available from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203733504577026212798573518> [Accessed 21 July 2013].

Lillis, D. (2012) Systematically evaluating the effectiveness of quality assurance programmes in leading to improvements in institutional performance. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18 (1), 59-73.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. USA: Sage.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Litosseliti, L., 2003. *Using Focus Groups in Research*. London: Continuum.

Little, A.W. (2003) Motivating learning and the development of human capital. *Compare*, 33 (4), 437-452.

Locke, W. (2007) *The Changing Academic Profession in the UK: Setting the Scene*. Universities UK, London: UK.

Locke, W. (2011) 'The International Study of the Changing Academic Profession: A Unique Source for Examining the Academy's Perception of Governance and Management in Comparative Perspective'. In Locke, W., Cummings, W. K. and Fisher, D. (eds). *Changing Governance and Management in Higher Education: The Perspectives of the Academy*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 381–3.

Locke, W. and Bennion, A. (2011) 'The United Kingdom: Academic retreat or professional renewal?'. In Locke, W., Cummings, W. K., and Fisher, D. (eds), *Changing Governance and Management in Higher Education: The Perspectives of the Academy*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 175–97.

Locke, W. (2014) *Shifting academic careers: implications for enhancing professionalism in teaching and supporting learning*. York: HEA

Love, D.A. and Kotchen, M.J. (2010) Grades, Course Evaluations and Academic Incentives. *Eastern Economic Journal*, 36:151-163.

Lowe, H. and Cook, A. (2003) Mind the Gap: Are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1), 53-76.

Lythcott-Haims, J. (2016) Former Stanford dean shares the 8 skills everyone should have by age 18. *Business Insider*, 17 April. Available from: [http://www.businessinsider.com/former-stanford-dean-shares-the-8-skills-everyone-should-have-by-age-18-2016-4?utm\\_content=buffer17e66&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer&IR=T](http://www.businessinsider.com/former-stanford-dean-shares-the-8-skills-everyone-should-have-by-age-18-2016-4?utm_content=buffer17e66&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer&IR=T) [Accessed 12 May 2016].

MacDonald, I. (1992) Meeting the needs of non-traditional students: Challenge or opportunity for higher education, *Scottish Journal of Adult Education*, 1(2), 34-44.

MacDonald, P. (1992) Narcissism in the modern world. *Psychodynamic Practice*, 20 (2), 144-153.

Macfarlane, B. (2009) *Researching with Integrity*. London: Routledge.

Macfarlane, B. (2012) *Intellectual Leadership in Higher Education: Renewing the Role of the University Professor*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Macfarlane, B., Zhang, J., and Pun, A., (2014) Academic integrity: a review of the literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39 (2), 339-358.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Macfarlane, B. (2015) Student Performativity in higher education: converting learning as a private space into a public performance. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34(2), 338-350.
- Macfarlane, B. (2016) The performative turn in the assessment of student learning: a rights perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Available from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/Xy6h4B2SpBBPqypnaeq4/full> [Accessed 16 May 2016].
- Macfarlane, B. (2017) Why students are treated worse than customers. *WUN*, 22 April. Available from: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160517150918945> [Accessed 4 April 2017].
- Machin, S. and Vignoles, A. (2004) Educational inequality: the widening socio-economic gap. *Fiscal Studies*, 25, 107–28.
- Mansfield, H.C. (2001) Grade Inflation: It's time to Face the Facts. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 6 April. Available from: <http://chronicle.com/article/grade-inflation-its-time-to/9332> [Accessed 21 July 2014].
- Marginson, S. (2015) Rethinking education, work and employability. Foundational problems of human capital theory. *SRHE conference*, Newport 9 December 2015.
- Margolis, E. (2004) The McDonaldisation of Higher Education (review). *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75 (3), 368-370.
- Marsh, H.W. and Roche. L.A. (1984) Making Students' Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness Effective. *American Psychologist*, 52 1187-1197.
- Martin, R.E. (2012) *The College Cost Disease: Higher Cost and Lower Quality*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.
- Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching*, 1st ed. London: Sage.
- Massaro, V. (2010) Cui bono? The relevance and impact of quality assurance. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 32 (1),17-26.
- Matthews, D. (2013) Political experiment' must not reduce education to a commodity. *Times Higher Education*, 15 August. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/political-experiment-must-not-reduce-education-to-a-commodity/2006504.article> [Accessed 28 November 2015].
- Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (1994) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. London: The Falmer Press.
- McArthur, J. (2011) Reconsidering the social and economic purposes of higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 30 (6), 737-749.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

McInnes, C., James, R., and Hartley, R. (2000) *Trends in the first year experience in Australian Universities*. A commissioned project for the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, EIP Commonwealth of Australia. Available from: [http://www.dest.gov.au/archivehighered/euippubs/eip00\\_6/fye.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/archivehighered/euippubs/eip00_6/fye.pdf) [Accessed 4 February 2014].

McInnis, C. (2004) Studies of student life: An overview. *European Journal of Education*, 39 (2), 383–394.

McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble and the future of Higher Education*. London: PlutoPress

McTague, T. (2015) Half of the first graduates forced to pay £9,000 a year for university say their degrees were NOT worth the money. *MailOnline* 22 June. Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3134359/Half-graduates-forced-pay-9-000-year-university-say-degrees-NOT-worth-money.html> [Accessed 24 June 2015].

Menges, R. J. (1991) The real world of teaching improvement: A faculty perspective. In M. Theall & J. Franklin (Eds.) *Effective practices for improving teaching: New directions for teaching and learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S.B. (1988) *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merton, D.M. (1999) Inclusive Evaluation: Implications of Transformative Theory for Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 20 (1), 1-14.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis; An Expanded Sourcebook of New Methods*, 2nd Ed. Thousand Oaks:CA, Sage.

Miley, W.M. and Gonsalves, S. (2004) Grade Expectations Redux. *College Student Journal* (38), 3, 327-332.

MIND (2013) *How to cope with student life*. MIND, 2013. Available from <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/student-life/coping-with-academic-work-and-exams/#.VEoxCUu0b1o> [Accessed 12 March 2015].

Minsky, C. (2015) Further your career prospects by studying abroad. *Times Higher Education*, 21 September. Available from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/further-your-career-prospects-studying-abroad> [Accessed 28 November 2015].

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E. and Scullion, R. (2009) Having, being and higher education: the marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14 (3), 277–287.

Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (2010) *The Marketisation of Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Moore, C., Wiley Wakeman, S. and Gino, F. (2014) *Dangerous Expectations: Breaking Rules to Resolve Cognitive Dissonance*. *Harvard Business School Working Paper*, No. 15-012, August 2014. Available from: <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=47874> [Accessed 16 March 2016].
- Moore, M. and Trahan, R. (1998) Tenure Status and Grading Practices. *Sociological Perspectives*. 41 (4), 775-781.
- Morgan, D.L., and Krueger, R.A., 1993. When to use focus groups and why. In: Morgan, D.L. *Successful Focus Groups*. California: Sage Publications, 3-20.
- Morse, J. (1995). The Significance of Saturation. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5 (2), 147-149.
- Morse J.M. (1999) Qualitative generalizability. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9 (1), 5–6.
- Moses, J.W. and Knutsen, T.L. (2007) *Ways of Knowing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moten, H. and Harney, S. (1998) *Doing Academic Work*. Available from: [joss Winn.org/wp-content/.../Moten-and-Harney-1998-Doing-Academic-Work.pdf](http://joss Winn.org/wp-content/.../Moten-and-Harney-1998-Doing-Academic-Work.pdf) [Accessed 27 June 2014].
- Munro, L. (2011). Go Boldly, Dream Large!: The Challenges Confronting Non-Traditional Students at University. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55 (2), 115-131.
- Naidoo, R., and Jamieson, I. (2005) Empowering participants or corroding learning? Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20, 267-281.
- National Audit Office (nd). *Assessing value for money*. Available from: <https://www.nao.org.uk/successful-commissioning/general-principles/value-for-money/assessing-value-for-money/> [Accessed 2 April 2017].
- National Audit Office (2002) *Widening participation in higher education in England*. Available from <http://www.nao.org.uk/report/widening-participation-in-higher-education-in-england/> [Accessed June 2015].
- National Audit Office (2014) *Investigation into financial support for students at alternative higher education providers*. Available from: <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/investigation-financial-support-students-alternative-higher-education-providers-2/> [Accessed 2 April 2017].
- NSS (nd) The National Student Survey. *NSS*. Available from: <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/> [Accessed 05 February 2013].
- Nicol, D. (2010) From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35 (5), 501-517.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Nicol, D.J. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) Formative Assessment and Self Regulated Learning: A model and Seven Principles of Good Feedback Practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (2), 199-218.

Novak, J. (1984). *Learning how to learn*. Cambridge University Press.

Novak, J.D. and Cañas, A.J. (2007) Theoretical Origins of Concept Maps, How to Construct Them, and Uses in Education, *Reflecting Education*, 3 (1), 29-42.

Novak, J. and Gowin, D.B. (1984) *Learning how to learn*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

NUS-HSBC (2008) *NUS Student Experience Report*. London. NUS

NUS (2012) *Student Experience Research 2012*. Part:1 Teaching and Learning. London: NUS.

O'Brien, D. (2010) What happened to studying? *Boston.com*, 4 July 2010.

Available

from:[http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/04/what\\_happened\\_to\\_studying/?page=3](http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/04/what_happened_to_studying/?page=3) [Accessed 12 February 2013].

O'Cathain, A., Murphy, E., and Nicholl, J. (2007a) Why, and how, mixed methods research is undertaken in health services research in England: a mixed methods study. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1 (2), 147-163.

O'Cathain, A., Murphy, E., and Nicholl, J. (2007b) Integration and publications as indicators of 'yield' from mixed methods studies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1 (2), 147-163.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2004) Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9 (3), 325-335.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M., and Rust, C. (2008) Developing student understanding of assessment standards: a nested hierarchy of approaches. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13 (2), 205-217.

Oblinger, D.G. and Verville, A.L. (1998) *What business wants from Higher Education*. Phoenix: Oryx Press.

Obermiller, C., Fleenor, P., and Raven, P. (2005) Students as Customers or Products: Perceptions and Preferences of Faculty and Students. *Marketing Education Review*, 15 (2).

Obholzer, A. and Roberts, V.Z. (1994) (eds) *The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organised Stress in the Human Services*. London: Routledge.

Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) *Welcome*. Available from: <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/> [Accessed 14 May 2014].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

OIA (2013) Annual Report 2013. *Office of the Independent Adjudicator*. Available from: <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/93455/oia-annual-report-2013.pdf> [Accessed 14 May 2014].

OIA (2014) Annual Report 2014. *Office of the Independent Adjudicator*. Available from: <http://oiahe.org.uk/news-and-publications/annual-reports.aspx> [Accessed 30 December 2015].

Office of Fair Trading (2013) OFT launches call for information on undergraduate higher education in England. OFT 22 October. Available from: <http://www.offt.gov.uk/news-and-updates/press/2013/73-13#.Uqifl41upA0> [Accessed 13 December 2013].

Oldenquist, A. (1983) The Decline of American Education in the '60s and '70s. *American Education*, 19 (4), 12-18.

ONS (2013) *Graduates in the UK Labour Market:2013*. Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/graduatesintheuklabourmarket/2013-11-19> [Accessed 4 January 2014].

Oppenheim, A.N. (1992) *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*. London: Continuum.

Orsmond, P. and Merry, S. (2011) Feedback alignment: effective and ineffective links between tutors and students understanding of coursework feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(2), 125-136.

Padilla-Walker, L. and Nelson, L. (2012) Black hawk down? Establishing helicopter parenting as a distinct construct from other forms of parental control during emerging adulthood, *Journal of Adolescence*, 35 (5), 1177-1190.

Palfreyman, D. and Tapper, T. (2016) The marketization of English higher education and the financing of tuition fees. *London Review of Education*, 14 (1), 47-55.

Paton, G. (2013) More students turning to private colleges as fees rise. *The Telegraph*, 24 July. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10197945/More-students-turning-to-private-colleges-as-fees-rise.html> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Parahoo, K. (2006) *Nursing Research: Principles, Process and Issues*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.

Park, C. (2010) In Other (People's) Words: Plagiarism by university students - literature and lessons. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28 (5), 471-488.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Parkhe, A. (1993) Messy research, methodological predispositions, and theory development in international joint ventures. *Academy of Management Review*, 18 (2), 227-268.

Parr, C. (2013) Please Professor, I want some more. *Times Higher Education*, 28 February. Available from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/please-professor-i-want-some-more/2002088.article> [Accessed 30 February 2013].

Parr, C. (2014) Your views on the NSS: about as scientifically useful as TripAdvisor. *Times Higher Education*, 13 August. Available from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/your-views-on-the-nss-about-as-scientifically-useful-as-tripadvisor/2015186.article> [Accessed 2 January 2015].

Parry-Langdon, N., Bloor, M., Audrey, S., and Holliday, J. (2003) Process evaluation of health promotion interventions. *Policy & Politics*, 31 (2), 207-216.

Peacock, L. (2012) Graduate jobs: Do graduates need a first-class degree to get a good job? *The Telegraph*, 4 July. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/9375897/Graduate-jobs-Do-graduates-need-a-first-class-degree-to-get-a-good-job.html> [Accessed 2 December 2012].

Pearson, R., Perryman, S., Connor, H., Jagger, N. and Aston, J. (1999) The IES Annual Graduate Review 1998-99: the key facts, Institute for Employment Studies, Brighton.

Perry, E. and Francis, B. (2010) *The social class gap For Educational achievement: a review of the literature*. Available from: [www.thersa.org/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/.../RSA-Social-Justice-paper.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/.../RSA-Social-Justice-paper.pdf) [Accessed 15 May 2014].

Piatt, W. (2010) *Response to the Browne review of university funding*. Available from: <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/news/response-to-the-browne-review-of-university-funding/> [Accessed 7 July 2016].

Pintrich, P. R. (2000) Multiple goals, multiple pathways: The role of goal orientation in learning and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 544-555.

Pintrich, P. R. and Zusho, A. (2002) Student motivation and self-regulated learning in the college classroom, in: J. C. Smart and W.G. Tierney (Eds) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Volume XVII (New York, Agathon Press).

Prather, J.E., Smith, G. and Kodras, E. (1979) A Longitudinal Study of Grades in 144 Undergraduate Courses. *Research in Higher Education* 10 (1), 11-24.

Price, M., Handley, K., Millar, J. and O'Donovan, B. (2010) Feedback: all that effort, but what is the effect? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35 (3), 277-289.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Prozak, S. R. (2006) *Cult of the Individual*. American Nihilist Underground Society. Available from: <http://www.anus.com/zine/articles/prozak/individualism/> [Accessed 15 March 2015].

Psacharopoulos, G. and Patrinos, H.A. (2004) Returns to investment in education: a further update. *Education Economics*, 12 (2), 111-134.

Pyper, D. and McGuinness, F. (2013) Zero-hours contracts. *The House of Commons Library*. Available from: [www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06553.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06553.pdf) [Accessed 12 March 2014].

QAA (nd). *The Quality Code: The UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx> [Accessed 12 December 2013].

QAA (2012) *Student expectations and perceptions of higher education: A study of UK higher education*. Available from: <http://heer.qaa.ac.uk/SearchForSummaries/Summaries/Pages/HEER000379.aspx> [Accessed 1 September 2014].

QAA (2015) *Cultures of Quality: An International Perspective*. [online]. Gloucester.

QDA Training (2013a) Day 1 - Introduction to Nvivo: Setting up your Qualitative Database. Dublin: QDA Training.

QDA Training (2013b) Day 2 - Nvivo Underway: Analysing your Data. Dublin: QDA Training.

Raffe, D., Croxford, L., Iannelli, C., Shapira, M. and Howieson, C. (2006) *Social-Class Inequalities in Education in England and Scotland*, Special CES Briefing no. 40, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology.

Ramsden, P. (1991) A performance indicator of teaching quality in higher education: The course experience questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, 129-150.

Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Ramsden, P. (2006) *Patterns of higher education institutions in the UK; Sixth Report*, London: Universities UK.

Ramsden, P. (2008) *The future of higher education teaching and the student Experience Report for the Secretary of State for Innovation*, Universities and Skills September 2008.

Ranchhod, A. and Zhou, F. (2001) Comparing respondents of email and mail surveys. Understanding the implications of technology. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 19 (3), 254-262.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of 'Belonging' and 'Isolation' at a Post-1992 University, *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3), 261-277.

Reay, D., David, M.E. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Rees, G., Gorard, S., Fevre, R. and Furlong, J. (1997), History, Place and the Learning Society: towards a sociology of lifetime learning. *Journal of Education Policy*, 12 (6), 485-497.

Richardson, H. (2010) Willetts signals way in for private universities. *BBC*, 9 September. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11240067>. [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Rickett, O. (2015) *What the Hell are Britain's Universities For?* Vice Media LLX 6 March. Available from [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/universities-pissed-off-academia-business-corporate-oscar-rickett-438?utm\\_source=vicefbuk](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/universities-pissed-off-academia-business-corporate-oscar-rickett-438?utm_source=vicefbuk) [Accessed 11 March 2015].

Ritzer, G. (1993) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press.

Robbins Report, The (1963) *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins*. Available from: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>. [Accessed February 2013].

Rojstaczer, S. (2008) *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*. Gradeinflation.com, June 24. Available from [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com) [Accessed 28 August 2014].

Rolfe, H. (2001) The effect of tuition fees on students' demands and expectations: evidence from case studies of four universities *NIESR, Discussion Paper No. 190*. Available from: <http://ideas.repec.org/p/nsr/niesrd/190.html> [Accessed 12 March 2013].

Rosenau, P. (1992) *Post – Modernism and the Social Sciences*: Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rubenstein, H. (2013) Can anonymous CVs help beat recruitment discrimination? *The Guardian*, 11 April. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/money/work-blog/2013/apr/11/can-anonymous-cvs-help-beat-job-discrimination> [Accessed 14 April 2013].

Ruedy, N.E., Moore, C., Gino, F. and Schweitzer, M.E. (2013) The Cheater's High: The Unexpected Benefits of Unethical Behaviour. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104 (4), 531-548.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003) Improving Students' Learning by Developing their Understanding of Assessment Criteria and Processes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28 (2), 147-164.
- Rust, C., O'Donovan, B. and Price, M. (2005) A social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30 (3), 233-241.
- Ryan, A.B. (2006) Post-positivist Approaches to Research. In: *Researching and Writing your Theses: a guide for postgraduate students*. MACE. Maynooth Adult and Community Education, 12-26.
- Ryan, R. M. and Deci, E. L. (2000) Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
- Sabot, R. and Wakeman-Linn, J. (1991) Grade Inflation and Course Choice. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5(1), 159-170.
- Sadler, D. R. (2005) Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 30(2),175-194.
- Sadler, D.R. (2011) Academic freedom, achievement standards and professional identity. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17 (1), 85-100.
- Sarantakos, S., 2013. *Social Research*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2009) *Research methods for business students*, 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Schunk, D. (2012) *Learning theories: An educational Perspective* .6<sup>th</sup> Ed. Boston MA: Pearson Education.
- Sekaran, U. (1992) *Research Methods for Business*, 2nd ed. New York:Wiley.
- Sellgren, K. (2014) Degree courses 'not value for money, say many students. BBC, 21 May. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27486606> [Accessed 29 May 2014].
- Schiffrin, H.H., Liss, M., Miles-McLean, H., Geary, K. A., Erchull, M. J. and Tashner, T. (2014) Helping or Hovering? The Effects of Helicopter Parenting on College Students' Well-Being. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23 (3), 548-557.
- Sharabi, M. (2013) Managing and improving service quality in higher education. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, 5 (3), 309-320.
- Sharrock, G. (2000) Why students are not (just) customers (and other reflections on Life After George), *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 22(2), 149-164.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Shaw, C. and Ward, L. (2014) Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia. *The Guardian*, 6 March. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2014/mar/06/mental-health-academics-growing-problem-pressure-university> [Accessed 10 January 2015].

Sheehan, K. (2001) E-mail Survey Response Rates: A Review. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 6 (2), 0.

Shepherd, J. and Bowcott, O. (2010) Thousands to lose jobs as universities prepare to cope with cuts. *The Guardian*, 7 February. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/feb/07/job-losses-universities-cuts> [Accessed 9 May 2013].

Shepherd, J. and Williams, R. (2010) Student complaints about universities rise steeply. *The Guardian*, 15 June. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/jun/15/students-complaints-universities> [Accessed 15 February 2014].

Sherriff, L. (2013) Depression at University: Thousands more students seek counselling for mental health issues. *Huffington Post*, 10th July. Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/06/27/increase-student-depression-university-mental-health\\_n\\_3510291.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/06/27/increase-student-depression-university-mental-health_n_3510291.html) [Accessed 5 October 2014].

Shulman, C.H. (1976) Student consumerism: Caveat Emptor Reexamined. *Research Currents*, February 2-5, Available from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED118053.pdf> [Accessed 10 May 2017].

Silverman, D. (2010) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Sage.

Smith, J. and Naylor, R. (2001) Dropping out of university: a statistical analysis of withdrawal for UK university student, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A*, 164, 389-405.

Smith, J. A. and Osborn, M. (2003) Interpretative phenomenological analysis, in: Smith, J.A. (ed.) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Smith, J. L. (2012) *Relevant Selling*. New York: Executive Suite Press, Inc.

Snowdon, G. (2012) Graduates: is a 2:1 the best qualification for landing a job? *The Guardian*, 10 February. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/feb/10/graduates-best-qualification-landing-job> [Accessed 14 February 2012].

Sokatch, A. (2006) Peer influences on the college-going decisions of low socioeconomic status of urban youth. *Education and Urban Society*, 39(1), 128-146.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Sonner, B. (2000) A is for Adjunct: Examining Grade Inflation in Higher Education. *Journal of Education for Business*, 76(1), 5-8.

Spector, P.E. (1994) Using Self-Report Questionnaires in OB Research: A comment on the Use of a Controversial Method. *Journal of Organisational Behaviour*, 15 (5): 385-392.

Sproull, N. (1988) *Handbook of research methods: A guide for practitioners and students in the social sciences*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Stark, J.S. (1975) The New Consumerism in Higher Education. *Planning for Higher Education*, 4 (3), 2-5.

Strangleman, T. (2007) The nostalgia for the permanence of work? The end of work and its commentators, *The Sociological Review*, 55(1), 81-103.

Strauss, A, and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stucke, M.E. (2013). Is competition always good? *Journal of Antitrust Enforcement*, 1 (1), 162-197.

Sullivan, L.E. and Ogloff, J.R.P (1988) Appropriate supervisor-graduate student relationships. *Ethics and Behavior*, 8 (3), 229-248.

Suslow, S. (1977) Grade inflation: End of a trend? *Change*, 9 (3), 44-45.

Sutton Trust (2015) Background to Success: Differences in A-level entries by ethnicity, neighbourhood and gender. Available from: <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/background-to-success/> xxx [Accessed December 2015].

Sutton, A., and Taylor, D. (2011) Confusion about collusion: working together and academic integrity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36 (7), 831-841.

Sykes, W. (1990) Validity and reliability in qualitative market research: A Review of Literature. *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 52 (3), 229-232.

Taylor, P and Braddock, R. (2007) International University Ranking Systems and the Idea of University Excellence. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 29 (3), 245-260.

Taylor, T. (2011) Grade Inflation and Choice of Major. *Conversable Economist*, 14 November 2011. Available from: [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203733504577026212798573518](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203733504577026212798573518) [Accessed 18 February 2016].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

- Teddlie, C. and Tashakkori, A. (2009) *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thompson, C.J., Locander, W.B. and Pollio, H.R. (1989) Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (2), 133-146.
- Thompson, C.J. Locander, W.B. and Pollio, H.R. (1990) The lived meaning of free choice: an existential-phenomenological description of everyday consumer experiences of contemporary married women, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (3), 346-361.
- Thompson, C.J., Pollio, H.R. and Locander, W.B. (1994) The spoken and unspoken: A hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (3), 432-452.
- Thompson, C.J. (1996) Caring consumers: gendered consumption meanings and the juggling lifestyle, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (4), 388-407.
- Time (1951) The Silent Generation. *Time Inc*, 5 November. Available from: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601511105,00.html> [Accessed 13 May 2017].
- Tight, M. and Huismann, J. (2014) *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*. UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Tinto, V. (1975) Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research* 45 (1), 89-125.
- Titus, J.J. (2008) Student Ratings in a Consumerist Academy: Leveraging Pedagogical Control and Authority. *Sociological Perspectives*, 51 (2), 397-422.
- Todres, L. (2007) *Embodied Enquiry – Phenomenological Touchstones for Research. Psychotherapy and Spirituality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tomlinson, M. (2007) Graduate employability and student attitudes and orientations to the labour market. *Journal of Education and Work*, 20(4), 285-304.
- Tomlinson, M. (2008) The degree is not enough: students: perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29 (1), 49-61.
- Tomlinson, M. (2010) Students perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology*, 38 (4), 450-467.
- Tomlinson, M. (2013) *Education, Work and Identity: Themes and Perspectives*, Bloomsbury, London.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Tomlinson, M. (2014) *Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Trout, P.A. (1997) Disengaged Students and the decline of academic standards. *Academic Questions*, 10 (2), 46-56.

Trow, M. (1973) *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, USA: Berkeley.

Trow, M. (2010) Reflection on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Higher Education, In Burrage, M (ed) Martin Trow: *Twentieth Century Higher Education, Elite to Mass to Universal*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.

Trowler, P., and Knight, P. T. (2000) Coming to Know in Higher Education: theorising faculty entry into New Work contexts. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19 (1), 27-42.

Tucker, J. and Courts, B. (2010) Grade Inflation in the College Classroom. *Foresight*, 12 (1), 45-53.

UCAS (2012a) *How have applications for full-time undergraduate higher education in the UK changed in 2012?* UCAS. Available from: [https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/ucas\\_how\\_have\\_applications\\_changed\\_in\\_2012.pdf](https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/ucas_how_have_applications_changed_in_2012.pdf) [Accessed 17 January 2014].

UCAS (2015) *Record numbers of students accepted to UK universities and colleges this year, UCAS report shows*. UCAS. Available from : <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-numbers-students-accepted-uk-universities-and-colleges> [Accessed 2 April 2017].

UCU (2008) UCU responds to NUS/HSBC student survey. UCU 23 November. Available from: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/3618/UCU-responds-to-NUSHSBC-student-survey?list=2988> [Accessed 4 April 2017].

UCU (2013) *Higher stress. A survey of stress and well-being among staff in Higher Education*. London:UCU.

UKCES (2013) *UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2013: supplementary documents*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukces-employer-skills-survey-2013-supplementary-documents> [Accessed 9 June 2014].

Universities UK (2014) International students in higher education: The UK and its competition. *Universities UK*, September 2014. Available from: [www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf) [Accessed 2 April 2017].

Universities UK (2015a) The economic role of UK universities. Universities UK, June 2015. Available from: [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and.../the-economic-role-of-uk-universities.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and.../the-economic-role-of-uk-universities.pdf) [Accessed 14 May 2017].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Universities UK (2015b) Report Challenges claims on graduate oversupply.

*Universities UK*, 9 December. Available from:

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/report-challenges-claims-on-graduate-oversupply.aspx> [Accessed 12 December 2015].

Usher, R. and Scott, D. (1996) *Understanding Educational Research*, London: Routledge.

Vaira, M. (2004). Globalisation and Higher Education Organisational Change: A Framework for Analysis. *Higher Education*, 48, 483-510.

Van der Velden, G.M. (2011) When Student Engagement meets Consumerism. *The Guardian*, 2 August. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/aug/02/university-consumerism-student-engagement> [Accessed 9 November 2011].

Van der Mescht, H. (2004) Phenomenology in education: A case study in educational leadership, *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 4 (1), 1-16.

Van Manen, M. (1990) *Researching Lived Experience – Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. New York: State University of New York.

Vargo, S. L. and Lusch, R. F. (2008) Service-dominant logic: continuing the evolution. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36 (1), 1-10.

Verte, S., Geurts, H.M., Roeyers H., Oosterlaan, J. and Sergeant, J. (2006) Executive Functioning in Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder: Can we Differentiate Within the Spectrum? *Journal of Autism and Development Disorders*, 36 (3), 351-372.

Voss, R., Gruber, T. and Szmigin, I. (2007) Service quality in higher education: The role of student expectations. *Journal of Business Research*, 60(9), 949-959.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. London: Harvard University Press.

Wachtel, K. (1998) Student Evaluation of College Teaching Effectiveness: a brief review, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23(2), 191-212.

Wagner, C.S. (2008) *The New Invisible College: Science for Development*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press.

Walker, J. (2010) Measuring plagiarism: researching what students do, not what they say they do. *Studies in Higher Education*. 35 (1), 41-59.

Wankowski, J.A. (1973) *Temperament, Motivation, and Academic Achievement: studies of success and failure of a random sample of students in one university*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Educational Survey.

Weaver, M.R. (2006) Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3), 379-394.

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Wernerfelt, B. (1984) The resource-based view of the firm. *Strategic Management Journal*, 5 (2), 171-180.

Which? University. (2015) *What to study, where to go and how to get there*. Which? University. Available from: <http://university.which.co.uk/?gclid=ClivyNvgnMoCFQkXwwod6LIBJQ> [Accessed 12 December 2015].

Whitchurch, C. (2006). Who do they think they are? The Changing Identities of Professional Administrators and Managers in UK Higher Education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 28 (2), 159-171.

Whitchurch, C. (2009) The rise of the blended professional in higher education: a comparison between the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. *Higher Education*, 58, 407-418.

Whitchurch, C. and Gordon, G. (2010) Diversifying Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: some management challenges. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16 (2), 129-144.

White, S. (2013) Student nurses harassing academics. *Nurse Education Today*, 33 (1), 41-45.

Wignall, A. (2006) You have passed Go. Pay £3,000. *The Guardian*, 26 September. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2006/sep/26/education.students> [Accessed 11 January 2016].

Williams, J. (2013) *Consuming Higher Education. Why Learning can't Be Bought*. London: Bloomsbury.

Williams, J. (2015) The National Student Survey should be abolished before it does any more harm. *The Guardian*, 13 August. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/aug/13/the-national-student-survey-should-be-abolished-before-it-does-any-more-harm> [Accessed January 2016].

Williams, J. (2016) The threat to academic freedom. *The Telegraph*, 3 January. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/11098765/The-threat-to-academic-freedom.html>. [Accessed 3 January 2016].

Wimmer, R. D. and Dominick, J.R. (1997) *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. Belmont, MA: Wadsworth.

Winn, J. (2014) *Academic labour, students as consumers and the value form*. Available from: <http://josswinn.org/2014/04/academic-labour-students-as-consumers-and-the-value-form/> [Accessed 31 August 2014].

## Questioning the Grade: Understanding the Complexity of Student Grade Enquiries in Higher Education

Wittgenstein, L. (1974) *Philosophical Grammar*, edited by Rush Rhees translated by Anthony Kenny, University of California Press, Los Angeles: USA.

Whitchurch, C. (2010) *Convergence and Divergence in Professional Identities*. In: *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 167-183.

Woodhall, M. (1997) Human capital concepts. IN Halsey, A., Lauder, H., Brown, P. and Wells, A. (Eds.) *Education, Culture, Economy, and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 219–223.

Woodley, A. and Brennan, J. (2000) Higher Education and Graduate Employment in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Education*, 35(2), 239-249.

Woodruffe-Burton, H., Eccles, S. and Elliott, R. (2002) The effect of gender on addictive consumption: reflections on men, shopping and consumption meaning, *Marketing and Consumer Behaviour*, 6, 239-256.

Worthern, B.R., Van Dusen, L.M. and Sailor, P.J. (1994) A comparative study of the impact of integrated learning systems on students' time-on-task. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 21(1), 25-37.

Yang, S. (2014) Why Grades Are Causing a Culture of Unhappiness Among College Students. *Huffington Post*, 24 March. Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephanie-yang/grades-culture-unhappiness-college-students\\_b\\_5011598.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephanie-yang/grades-culture-unhappiness-college-students_b_5011598.html) [Accessed August 2014].

Yanovitch, T. (2014) *Why customer Service is Important to Higher Education*. Available from: [www.retainloyalcustomers.com/uncategorized/why-customer-service-is-important-to-higher-education](http://www.retainloyalcustomers.com/uncategorized/why-customer-service-is-important-to-higher-education) [Accessed 30 December 2015].

Yin, R. K. (1989) *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yorke, M. (2000) Smoothing the transition into higher education: What can be learned from student non-completion. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9 (1), 78–88.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The First-Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK Final Report*. The Higher Education Academy. Available from: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/fyefinalreport\\_0.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/fyefinalreport_0.pdf) [Accessed 2 March 2014].

Young-Powell, A. and Ward, L. (2014) Are universities breaking consumer protection laws? *The Guardian*. 22 April. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/apr/22/are-universities-breaking-consumer-protection-laws> [Accessed 17 July 2014].