University of Southampton

Faculty of Social Sciences

<u>School of Education</u>

Students' Perceptions of Value and Motivations for Studying an Undergraduate Degree in the Humanities

by

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Thesis for the degree of <u>Doctorate of Education</u>

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Abstract

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This research examines how humanities students understand the purpose of going to university and the value of their degree in an increasingly market-driven higher education policy context. Utilising a sequential (follow-up) explanatory mixed methods approach, the research focuses on one particular institutional context to allow for an in-depth investigation. Data was collected from students studying for an undergraduate degree in the humanities at a UK research-intensive university, who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-16, and from graduates who commenced their studies prior to 2012.

The main findings suggest that there is a complex web of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the humanities, strongly shaped by three core influencing contexts (societal, familial, educational). Strong media and political discourse on the financial investment and return of an undergraduate degree make humanities students feel that it is not enough to quantify the value of their degree in terms of its intrinsic value (i.e. their love of the subject area), thereby creating an inner conflict as they feel pressured to attribute a value to their degree based on their future employment outcomes. As such, perceptions of value are enacted in the policy context of marketisation and the impact of oversupply and competition. Graduates who studied under a lower or no tuition fee regime were less likely than contemporary counterparts to have instrumental motivations, however nonetheless reflect on the value of their degree in the context of their success in negotiating the graduate labour market. Humanities students under a higher university tuition fee regime are more likely to have consumerist attitudes compared with those who studied under a lower or no tuition fee regime.

With the *voice* of humanities students noticeably missing from existing literature, this research seeks to fill this gap by offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding as to how the marketisation of higher education has influenced students' motivations and choice relating to university and shaped notions of the value of a degree.

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List of Accompanying Materials

All data supporting this study are available from the University of Southampton repository at https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/D1721.

List of Accompanying Materials

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Nicky Stecker-Doxat

Title of thesis: Students' Perceptions of Value and Motivations for Studying an Undergraduate Degree in the Humanities

I 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.

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

Signature: Date:

Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank my family and friends who have given their love and continued encouragement to me during what has been both a difficult and rewarding journey.

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Felix, to remind him that with hard work, perseverance and a passion for what you are doing, you can achieve things you never thought possible.

Chapter 1   Introduction

1.1   Purpose

UK higher education (as in many other countries) has increasingly become under pressure to contribute more effectively to the economy and deliver graduates who are prepared for the world of work (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Gedye et al, 2004). This context has shaped perceptions of the value of an undergraduate degree, as higher education students view their credentials as an essential currency and a positional good that provides advantages in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). Significant changes to the UK higher education policy landscape, (Browne Report (2010), White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011), White Paper: *Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice* (2016), *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*), have been reflected in media and political discourse focusing on the financial investment and return of an undergraduate degree, whether students are getting value for money, students as consumers and the role of university as preparation for employment. With fiscal research (de Vries, 2014; Belfield et al, 2018) suggesting that returns to a degree varies substantially by subject with some of the lowest earning subjects including a number of degrees in the humanities, how has this shaped students' perceptions of the value of their degree? The aim of this research is to discover how students understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree in a humanities discipline, by exploring their motivations for studying their chosen degree, and how their perceptions of the value of their degree are being negotiated in the current higher education policy context of marketisation.

To make meaning of what is a broad and complex subject matter, the research focused on a particular institutional context, which allowed for an in-depth investigation. Data was collected from students studying for an undergraduate degree in the humanities at a UK research-intensive university, who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-16, and from graduates who commenced their studies prior to 2012. Recognising both the unique strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative methods, a mixed-method sequential explanatory approach was used. Self-selecting current students and graduates participated in an online survey, which was followed by a series of focus groups with current students and semi-structured individual interviews with graduates. The surveys allowed for a quantitative analysis of students' attitudes and behaviours for going to university and choice of degree subject, and opinions about the purpose of university. The focus groups and interviews were structured around key themes identified from the survey, providing an in-depth qualitative insight into their perceptions, feelings and understanding of the value of their degree. The students and graduates who

participated in the research studied across different higher education fee regimes, thus additionally giving a unique understanding in to perceptions of value in relation to higher education policy.

A major outcome of the research will be a deeper and more nuanced understanding of students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the humanities, and the economic and personal value they place on their degree, providing a fresh contribution to existing theoretical and empirical research on the value of a degree in an increasingly marketised higher education policy context. It will also provide a helpful evidence base to aid universities in shaping their strategic plans and policies as they seek to respond to the challenges of meeting students' expectations of higher education and provide a meaningful student experience that is relevant to all.

In this introductory chapter I will explain how my interest in this subject developed, clarify how the term *the humanities* is being used in this study, provide a context to the research and define the research questions.

1.2   My story - *"what are you going to do with that?"*

In 1997 I applied to a university as an undergraduate to study BA Archaeology and History. I applied at a time when there were currently no tuition fees. Despite my parents not having been to university themselves, their expectations and that of my teachers, were that I would go to university after my A-levels. This was the norm. With A-levels in History, English and Government and Politics, I had no strong career direction in mind. I had always loved history- particularly ancient history, and it was the subject I excelled most in at school. In exploring my degree options, I looked at universities that offered ancient history related subjects- selecting universities that my parents and teachers considered to be "good", which for my parents were ones that were not a former polytechnic and considered to have good reputation. When I had decided that an ancient history related subject was what I wanted to study, I remember telling my parents and the response was, *"What are you going to do with that?"* I remember feeling very strongly, why did it matter and why could I not just learn more about something that I was interested in? Fifteen years later as a member of staff in a recruitment and admissions department in a Humanities faculty at a Russell Group university, I was working at a university Open Day just as the tuition fees were being increased to £9000, and a father whose daughter was interested in reading archaeology explained to me how he was worried what his daughter would do with her degree. I smiled to myself.

It is this scenario that prompted my research. Despite the influences from my parents and teachers about where to study, my perception and understanding of the purpose of higher education has been one that has been significantly driven by learning for learning sake, rather than determined by an economic outcome. I was interested in exploring the impact that the recent changes to UK higher education policy might be having on the perception of humanities degrees and students' decision making in going to university and their choice of degree subject. I admit that I undertook the research in the hope that the data would show that this passion that I had for the subject area and love of learning was still strong, despite the governments' strong employability agenda. The results highlighted that I had underestimated the role of the higher education policy context in shaping students' perceptions of the value of their humanities degree.

1.3   Research context

The significant changes to the higher education policy landscape have been reflected in the research that has been undertaken in this area. As the economic value of an undergraduate degree has become progressively more scrutinised, recent studies have framed their research around the economic value of a degree and its currency in terms of labour market opportunities, focusing on themes such as value for money (Williams, 2013; Tomlinson, 2018), financial investment and return (Chevalier, 2011; Rose, 2013), graduateness and employability (Fallows & Stevens, 2000; Glover, Law & Youngman, 2002; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Rae, 2007; Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009) and students as consumers (Lomas, 2007; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011; Fairchild, 2014, Tomlinson, 2017). There is also a considerable body of literature on student choice around university (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Briggs, 2006; Foskett & Johnston, 2010; Wilkins, Shams, & Huisman, 2013; McManus, Haddock-Fraser & Rands, 2017).   However, although there are examples of where research in to perceptions of value has been specifically focused, this has been situated in non-humanities subjects, for example Geography (Gedye, Fender & Chalkley, 2004), Sociology (Ashwin, Abbas & McLean, 2013), Foundation Year students (Robinson 2012), Psychology (Kaye & Bates, 2017) and Law (Nicholson, 2020). There has been very limited studies that specifically centre on the value of *the humanities*. Where there is research in this area, this has very much been focussed either on the public and cultural value of humanities (Collini, 2012; Small, 2013; Belifore, 2015; Benneworth, 2014), or the instrumental value of a humanities degree in relation to the skills and employability agenda (Saunders & Addis, 2010). Although these areas are very relevant in the current higher education policy context of marketisation, they only offer a limited and narrow understanding of the value of a humanities degree, and noticeably missing is the voice of the students who are choosing to study a degree in this area. Given the significantly

different economic and political context in which students are now making their decisions around going to university and the increasing pressures that universities are under to respond to and adapt to higher education legislation, there is a need to understand how humanities students' perceptions of value are being negotiated in the current higher education policy context of marketisation.

1.4   What are "the humanities"?

It is not my intention to provide a full history of "the humanities" and liberal arts education (see Ullman, 1946; Proctor, 1998; Bod, 2013), rather, given the term *humanities* is being used throughout this research, it is necessary to provide a definition as to how it has been applied. As Ullman (1946: 301) states, *"everyone who writes on this theme should give his own definition before proceeding in to the main roads and bypaths"*.

For many centuries there was no distinction between humanities and science, it was all part of the same intellectual activity (Bod, 2013:1). Yet the division of knowledge into *science*, *social science* and *the humanities* is deeply entrenched in ways of thinking prevailing in the English-speaking world and is reflected in many institutional structures (Wierzbicka, 2011:31). As Bod (2013) questions in his research in to the historiography of the humanities, to what extent is the distinction between the humanities and the science essential or artificial?

The term *humanities* is ambiguous in the Anglophone world (Bod, 2013), with the scope of the subject matter being very broad. According to Wierzbicka (2011:38) it is this broad scope of the subject matter that explains why fields as different as history, biography, literature, philology, linguistics, classics and religious studies have all been seen as part of *the humanities.* Proctor (1998) argues that no one knows what the humanities are. He believes the original humanities (*studia humanitatis*) of the fifteenth century that centred on classical education of Greek and Roman antiquity are dead, and that nothing has been found to replace them with since. There is a significant body of research that has tried to define t*he humanities*. Some argue that the humanities constitutes a field of inquiry that is fundamentally different from science (Wierzbicka, 2011). Whereas others argue that the humanities are in fact not so different to the natural and social sciences, and should not be seen as two mutually exclusive groups (Collini, 2012). Proctor (1998) asserts that most people are only able to think about the humanities in terms of their opposites - the sciences. The British Academy (2018) for example, state that*, "Everyone knows what 'science' is […] the British Academy covers the rest of human wisdom that isn't science".* In seeking to offer an explanation as to what *the humanities* are, the British Academy use the

definition of 'humanity' meaning a quality of empathy, or kindness. They believe that "*all the studies that the British Academy champions and promotes are about humanity itself: humanity past and present alike, together with whatever thoughts, concerns and hopes about human futures that those studies provoke.*"

There being no one universal definition of *the humanities,* in some instances the term is seen to be used synonymously with the *liberal arts* and to include all studies except those narrowly vocational (Ullman: 1946), or overlapping with aspects of what is considered *the arts* and the humanistically-oriented *social sciences.* Such overlaps are possible because the concept of the *humanities* refers not only to a particular subject matter but also to a particular approach (Wierzbicka, 2011:38). Bod's (2013) research seeks to identify patterns in humanistic material on the basis of methodological principles. He argues that there are common, underlying methods and methodological principles that humanities scholars have typically employed to investigate their humanistic material. He notes that many of these were not found by humanities scholars themselves, for example, the mathematical proportions found in classical Greek art and architecture by Pliny and Vitruvius were taken as normative prescriptions by later art theorists. Bod challenges the dominant view in the philosophy of the humanities that contends that humanities are concerned primarily with *understanding,* whereas science is about *explaining.* He asserts that:

> *[…] seeking and finding patterns is timeless and ubiquitous, not only when observing nature but also when examining texts, art, poetry, theatre, languages, and music. […] [T]here is also a centuries-old humanistic tradition that seeks principles and patterns while at the same time giving us an understanding of what makes us human (p.10).*

The British Academy's research (2017) in to the skills that are developed through the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) states that AHSS "*help us to understand ourselves, our society and our place in the world*". Echoing Bod's research in to commonalities of underlying methods and methodological principles in investigating humanistic material, their research identified a common core of skills shared across AHSS that could be divided in to three broad categories, *i) communication and collaboration, ii) research and analysis, iii) attitudes and behaviours characterised by independence and adaptability.* Table 1.0 below outlines the skills

developed within each of these three broad categories. In addition to this set of core skills, they also identified other skills more specific to individual AHSS disciplines, including languages, high-level numeracy, qualitative analysis and data processing skills, geospatial skills and practical production skills, content production, recording and broadcasting and archival retrieval skills.

Table 1.0: Common core skills shared across arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS)

Communication and collaboration	Research and analysis	Attitudes and behaviours
Communication *Clear and coherent explanation and description* *Persuasive argument underpinned by evidence* *Appropriate to purpose and audience, in tone and format, using technology in ways which help convey the message* **Working with others** *Listening to and recognising different viewpoints, being sensitive to cultural contexts* *Working with others to achieve common goals, using diplomacy and negotiation* *Taking on different roles and respecting others' views* *Leading and motivating others, by understanding how to influence human behaviour*	**Designing research and collecting evidence** *Formulating a research question and determining the evidence needed to answer it* *Locating and retrieving textual, numerical and visual information from existing sources* *Generating information through primary data collection* *Organising information from multiple sources, recognising its relevance and identifying gaps* ***Analysing*** *Manipulating information and data, using technology where appropriate* *Applying qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis* *Assessing what the evidence might mean, recognising where it is incomplete, ambiguous or unreliable* *Evaluating findings to come to a conclusion, taking into account different perspectives and evaluating the complexity of the material*	**Independence** *Working autonomously and motivating themselves Enthusiasm for enquiry, using initiative and taking responsibility for achieving goals* *Self-discipline, organisation and time management* *The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS)* **Problem solving** *Applying knowledge to find solutions, in a creative and innovative way* *Using resources effectively* *A positive, proactive and receptive attitude* **Adaptability and creativity** *Willingness to try different approaches, open and receptive to new ideas* *Ability to anticipate and accommodate change* *Commitment to ongoing learning and development, building on strengths and addressing weaknesses*

	Critical thinking and reflection on taken-for-granted 'answers' to problems and value assumptions	
	Decision making *Establishing criteria and evaluating evidence against them*	
	Generating a range of recommendations and assessing the merits of each	
	Taking responsibility for the decision reached	

Their research further argues that AHSS graduates make an important contribution to the economy and society, with AHSS graduates being employed in a wide range of sectors and roles, and because of their skills, they are able to successfully move between careers adapting to different industries and become successful leaders. Their skills of critical analysis, problem solving, negotiation and communication, speaking other languages and understanding other cultures has intrinsic value with huge benefits for society (2017:11).

As has been discussed, there is no one universal understanding of *the humanities*, which can lead to "terminological-conceptual problems" (Bod, 2013:8). Bod (2013:2) offers a pragmatic stance as a more workable classification, where *the humanities* could be defined as *"the disciplines that are taught and studied at humanities faculties".* This pragmatic 'definition' would include linguistics, musicology, philology, philosophy, literary studies, theology, theatre studies, historical disciplines (including art history and archaeology), as well as more recent fields such as film studies and media studies. For the purposes of this research, the term *the humanities* is used in a pragmatic sense - as a group of subjects studied in a specific university setting. This is a more practicable solution than naming individual humanistic disciplines. It is recognised that humanities disciplines are not a homogenous group, and that there may be some variations in specific motivations between subject areas. As Skatova & Ferguson (2014:1) state, "[d]ifferent people choose undergraduate degrees to study at university for different reasons". However, their research in to why people choose different university degrees also concluded that those who apply to arts and humanities degrees are more likely to be driven by interest (intrinsic motivation). It is beyond the scope of this research to analyse varying motivations and values within the group of subjects that

is the humanities. More empirical research on motivations for attending university that focuses on different degrees is needed to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

It is also not to say that the methods and methodological principles of the humanities and their perceived skills that are developed as discussed above are irrelevant to this study- indeed they too are critical for gaining insight in to students' motivations for choosing their humanities degree and the value that they attribute to it. This is very apparent in the data analysis chapters. The UK research-intensive university selected as the focus of this study aligns the following subjects to the humanities: archaeology, English, film studies, history, modern languages, music and philosophy. Thus, where this research refers to degrees in *the humanities* it denotes these seven subject areas. The institutional context used in this research can be considered to be representative of other universities with a similar profile and ethos, where subjects are grouped in a similar way under the organisational umbrella of *the humanities*. Where the terms *humanities students* or *humanities graduates* are used in this study, it refers to students who were currently studying or graduated from an undergraduate degree in one or more of these seven subject areas at this university.

1.5 Research aims and questions

The core aim of this research is to examine how students understand the value of their humanities degree in an increasingly market-driven higher education policy context.

Four specific research questions were formulated to support this:

1. What are humanities students' motivations for participating in university and choice of degree subject?

2. What value do humanities students ascribe to their degree?

3. How do humanities students understand the role university plays in preparing them for future employment?

4. Are there any relationships between humanities students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and how they understand the value of their degree, and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation?

1.6   Outline of thesis

Chapter 2 will provide the context to this study and a review of the existing literature pertaining to this research area. The methodological approach is detailed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is the first of two data analysis chapters and will explore humanities students' and graduates' motivations for choosing to go to university, where to study and what to study. Chapter 5 is the second data analysis chapter and will focus on how humanities students' perceptions of value were being enacted in the policy context of marketisation and the impact of oversupply and competition. Chapter 6 will bring together the two data analysis chapters through contextualising the key discoveries in the existing literature, with chapter 7 providing a conclusion to the research offering a series of recommendations and suggestions for future directions for research.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2   Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the context to my research. This chapter is structured in to two key sections. Section 2.1 will provide a summary of the recent changes in the higher education policy landscape, and the resulting impact of increased tuition fees on applications to undergraduate degrees in the humanities. Within this context of the increased marketisation of higher education, section 2.2 will explore existing theoretical and empirical research on the value of higher education, and how this has shaped perceptions of the value of degrees in the humanities.

2.1   Policy context

There is a strong consensus that contemporary conditions of the UK higher education sector have been significantly transformed through the expansion, diversification and the move towards a more market-driven agenda (Tomlinson, 2014:11). Since 2011 there have been unprecedented changes in the policy environment in the funding of higher education in the UK. My aim here is not to provide a detailed history of higher education policy (see Silver, 2003; Brown & Carasso, 2013), however I wish to highlight some of the more recent and significant legislation, which has had a considerable influence on how the value of a degree is understood.

2.1.1   The funding of higher education

In 1996 the Labour government commissioned an inquiry in to the future of Higher Education in the United Kingdom (Dearing Report,1997), which recommended that in order to expand student enrolments over the next twenty years, students should "enter into an obligation to make contributions to the cost of their education once they are in work." (1997:2, para 8). In response to the Dearing Report findings and recommendations, the *Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998* allowed tuition fees to be introduced across the entire United Kingdom as from the 1998-99 academic year. A means-tested approach based on the amount of money families earned required students to pay up to £1,000 a year. In order to meet the government's target of increasing the proportion of students going on to higher education to 50 percent by 2010, it was clear that this could not be met through the existing £1,000 limit. In response, the Labour government proposed the idea of "top up"/differential fees, whereby universities would be able to set their own level of tuition fees based on the funding they required. This resulted in the *Higher Education Act 2004*, which permitted universities in England to charge variable fees of up to £3,000 a year for students enrolling from the 2006-07 academic year. In 2009-10 the cap rose

to take account of inflation. In 2011 the new coalition government announced that they would be cutting a total of £940m (12.6 per cent) from the budget for teaching, research and buildings, to be implemented from the 2012-13 academic year. To compensate for these cuts in direct funding, the cap in tuition fees for universities in England for Home and EU domiciled students raised from £3,290 to a maximum of £9,000 per year, almost tripling the cost of higher education and "making a very obvious shift in the burden of the costs of tuition from the state to the individual beneficiary" (Bolton, 2012: 6). This increase in tuition fees saw "the single largest one-year increase in net costs anywhere in the world since mass higher education began" (HESA, 2010: 34).

The government predicted that when the fees were to be raised to a maximum of £9,000 that the average annual cost would be £7,500, with universities only charging more than £6,000 in exceptional circumstances. Any university that wanted to charge students more than £6,000 and up to £9,000 would need to submit an annual "access agreement" to help support widening participation, signed off by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). However, despite the government's prediction, figures from OFFA in July 2011 confirmed that more than a third of English universities (47 out of 123 universities) were able to charge the maximum £9,000 as their standard fee. The number of institutions charging a maximum of £9000 for some or all of their degree courses steadily increased from 98 institutions (62 percent of institutions with access agreements) in 2013-14, to 117 institutions (72 percent) in 2014-15, and to 130 institutions (76 percent) in 2015-16 (OFFA, 2014, 2015).

2.1.2   The marketisation of higher education

Over recent years, the government's political agendas have left the higher education sector in a period of immense equivocation; its function, purpose and future unclear. The Browne Report (2010), White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011), the removal of the student number controls in 2015, The UK Competition and Markets Authority's report on competition in the HE sector (2015), White Paper: *Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice* (2016), have all led to fundamental changes in the higher education system provision through the massification of higher education, greater accountability, increased competition and a steady escalation of a consumerist culture. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016, to incentivise "excellent teaching" to give students clear information on where the best provision could be found (DBIS, 2016), further solidified the foundation of a greater competitive market between HE providers. The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, considered to be the first major regulatory reform to the UK higher education

sector in 25 years (UUK 2017), created two new bodies to regulate and fund higher education providers: the Office for Students (OfS), to replace the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). This Act further reinforced the existing debates around increased competition, student choice, value for money and an ever more consumerist culture.

Within this context, the worth of an undergraduate degree has become progressively more scrutinised, by not only the students themselves, but also their families, schools and colleges, general public, politicians and media. Catchwords such as "*value for money*", "*student experience*" and "*employability*" have become key stimuli in students' decision-making processes for choosing which university to go to. With students leaving university with an average debt of £50,000 (Belfield et al, 2017), almost double compared with prior to the new fee regime of up to £9000, the question of what to study at university has increasingly become a central debate. With more higher education policy changes on the horizon, such as the intention to extend the TEF to subject level in 2019-20 and 2020-21, and the recommendations in the Augur Review on post-18 education in England (2019) - these have the potential to create further demarcation in this discourse. The Augur Review's proposals around the funding of higher education providers, which suggest that teaching grants should be attached to each subject to reflect more accurately its social and economic value to students and taxpayers (recommendation 3.5), has significant implications for "low value" higher education courses like the humanities, as they are considered "not to deliver outcomes in line with the imagined aspirations of students choosing to study them, or a return on investment for the taxpayer" (McVitty, 2019). Additionally, the proposal for OfS to have the regulatory authority to place a limit on the number of students who could be admitted on to courses that provide poor value for money in terms of employment and earnings (recommendation 3.7), reinforces the notion that the value of a degree is solely measured by labour market outcomes and fails to acknowledge learning as an important value in and of itself.

2.1.3   The impact of tuition fees on university applications

To understand the possible impact of the tripling of university tuition fees to £9,000 on applications and acceptances to higher education in the UK, The Independent Commission on Fees (2014) was asked to investigate and report on the findings. Based on data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), they found that the effect of the tripling of undergraduate tuition fees had an immediate impact on university applications. The UCAS data for the 2012 admissions cycle showed a significant change in the demand for full time undergraduate study, with the application rate of eighteen year olds from England falling by around one per cent, against a recent trend in annual increases by a similar amount. Around one

in twenty students (approximately 15,000), did not apply to attend university in 2012 following the change in tuition fees (UCAS, July 2012). For Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where tuition fees remained similar to 2011, the application rate of eighteen year olds to study within their own countries continued their recent trends. The increase in tuition fees in England also meant that the application rate from Scotland and Northern Ireland to study outside of their home country also fell (UCAS, July 2012).

Following the dip in the numbers of application in 2012, UCAS data showed there was a steady year on year increase in the total number of undergraduate applications up until the 2015 cycle. The 2016 cycle discontinued this trend with 100 fewer applicants compared with 2015. This decreased further in 2017 by 3.1 percent, resulting in 18,220 fewer applicants (UCAS, 2017). In their end of cycle report for 2018, UCAS reported that the total number of applicants to full-time undergraduate degree level courses in the UK decreased by 0.6 percent, bringing numbers to the lowest levels since 2013 (Figure 1.0)

Figure 1.0: UCAS End of Cycle Data 2018: Applicants by Domiciled Group (p.28)
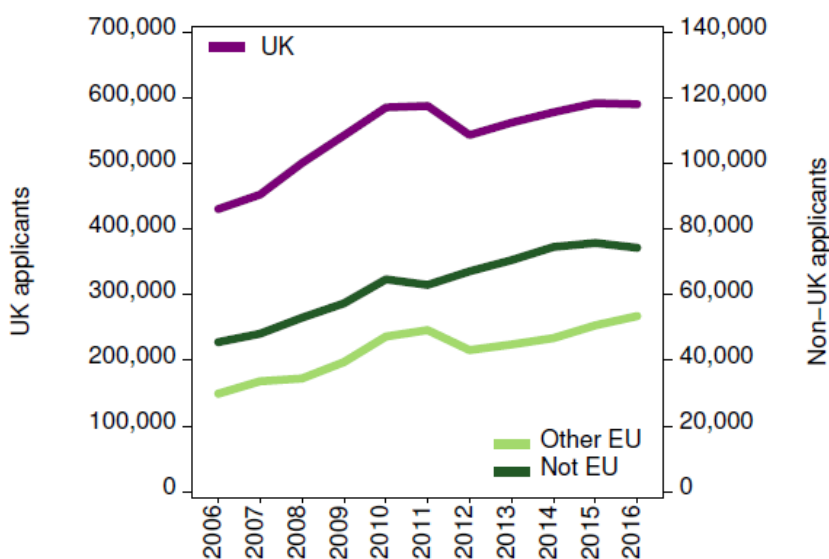
These decreases in the number of applicants however need to be considered in the context of a changing demographic where the eighteen year old population has been declining steadily since 2009, set to stabilise in 2019 and increase again from 2020 (Bekhradnia & Beech, 2018). With this in mind, the proportion of English eighteen year-olds applying to university did in fact increase to 37.8 percent in the 2018 cycle, 0.3 percent up from 2017 - the highest on record (UCAS, 2018).

This growth in the proportion of eighteen year-olds applying to university against a trend of a declining eighteen-year-old population is significant as it signifies that although students recognise university as a major financial commitment, the appetite for higher education remains strong and that the associated costs are perceived as an investment worth making (Bekhradnia & Beech, 2018).

Despite this trend in increasing applications from the eighteen year old population, the UCAS data by subject level (see tables A1 and A2 in Appendix A) offers an important insight in to how decision-making around subject choice has been influenced by a higher tuition fee regime and associated political and media discourse on the economic value of a degree. Prior to the introduction of £9000 fees in 2012, there was growth in the number of applicants across virtually all subject areas between 2009 - 2011. The number of applicants applying in 2012 immediately after the tripling of tuition fees resulted in a 7.4 percent decline across all subject areas, with some subjects being impacted more than others. The UUK (2014:28) in their analysis of trends in undergraduate recruitment reported a 23.1 per cent decline in the number of UK- and EU-domiciled undergraduate entrants to humanities-related subjects at higher education institutions in England in 2012–13, compared to 2010–11. Over the same period entrants to science-related subjects only decreased by 15.3 per cent.

For applicants applying in 2013 and 2014, the data shows that for many subject areas there were signs of recovery, including those in *Group V History and Philosophical studies* and *Group Q Linguistics, Classics and related*. *Group R European Languages, Literature and related* and *Group T Non-European Languages, Literature and related* struggled to return to their pre-2012 numbers. Between 2013 -2018, the percentage change for applications to arts and humanities related subjects were particularly hard hit, with a steady year on year decline since 2015. This decline coincided with the significant changes in higher education legislation described in section 2.1.2 above - suggesting that the political and media discourse around the economic value of a degree has had an influence on students' decision-making on what to study at university. The political agenda has created a stigma associated with some disciplines being perceived as less practical, which has resulted in students questioning their value in an increasingly competitive global economy.

2.1.4   Potential value – the graduate premium

The arts and humanities disciplines have been central to the value debate, with obstreperous comments about the humanities becoming almost commonplace in media headlines, such as, *"The university degrees that may add nothing to a life time's salary"* (The Times, 2007), *"Rise in arts degrees has left UK with major skills crisis'* (The Telegraph, 2013), and *"The war against humanities at Britain's universities"* (The Guardian, 2015). Political criticism has further fanned the flame, with warnings from the Education Secretary that a focus on arts and humanities- style subjects can restrict future career paths (The Guardian, 2014), and Government initiatives such as the "Your Life" campaign (2014-2017), which promoted studying 'STEM' (science, technology engineering, maths) subjects, as they were considered crucial in order to succeed in a competitive global economy. There has been no such government initiatives in support of the humanities.

The "graduate premium" –a term used to describe the increase in average wages that university graduates can expect having achieved a degree- is still a significant motivator in the decision for coming to university, as indicated by the increase in the proportion of eighteen year-olds applying to university discussed above. This not only reinforces the instrumental value of a degree in terms of its economic currency in the graduate labour market, but additionally the evidence that there are significant variations in outcomes for graduates based on degree subject, has contributed to the value of a humanities degree being questioned.

In the wake of the *Higher Education Act 2004* which enabled the introduction of variable tuition fees of up to £3000 a year from the 2006-07 academic year, the British Academy undertook a review, entitled *'That full complement of riches': the contributions of the arts, humanities and social sciences to the nation's wealth* (2004)*. The aim of which was to raise awareness to policy makers of the "vital role these subjects play in sustaining and developing the UK's knowledge-based society and economy". The report emphasised the negative impact that the strong political and media discourse around measurable graduate outcomes was having on students' decision making for what to study at university, stating that the "[s]ubjects that are taught, studied and researched by many individuals attracted by their inherent interest sometimes suffer from a prejudice that what is often evidently enjoyable is unlikely to be useful" (2004: ix). The report recognised the importance of yielding returns to the investment of public funds, however believed that it was "illogical and damaging to equate a real return solely with a measurable, immediate economic return. The value of knowledge goes far beyond such narrow definitions." (para 165, p.63).

A report commissioned by the Sutton Trust in 2014, *Earnings by Degrees: Differences in the career outcomes of UK graduates* (de Vries, 2014*),* looked at the starting salaries and earnings three and a half years after graduation to ascertain whether there were any differences in earnings based on degree subjects and different types of university. The report found that the differences were "significant", and concluded, "[n]ot all degrees are created equal. At a time when the average student is graduating with around £44,000 of debt, it is more important than ever to recognise that fact" (2014:4).   The report found graduates from medical courses and from science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) courses had substantially better average outcomes than those from the arts, humanities, and social sciences. On average the top earning courses in terms of starting salary were medicine and dentistry; engineering and technology; economics; computer science; and education. The lowest earning courses were psychology; English; design and creative arts; biological sciences; and history and philosophy. In monetary terms, graduates from medicine and dentistry were found to have starting salaries approximately £12,200 higher than those studying design and creative arts; and engineering and technology graduates having starting salaries on average £8,800 higher than design and creative arts graduates. Another key finding from the report was that there were significant differences between graduates depending on the university they attended, with graduates from Oxford and Cambridge having starting salaries 42 percent (approx. £7600) higher per year, than graduates from post-1992 universities. They were also found to earn starting salaries approximately £3,300 higher than graduates from other highly selective Sutton Trust 13 (ST13) universities[1]. Even after accounting for graduates' demographic characteristics, social backgrounds, A-level grades, degree classes and their choice of subject, large differences between universities remained. With all else being equal, the advantage of Oxbridge graduates over other Sutton Trust 13 (ST13) universities in starting salary was approximately £2,455 per year (12 percent). Their salaries were also approximately £3,349 (17 percent) higher than those of graduates from other Sutton Trust 30 universities[2], £4,207 (22

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[1] In 2000 the Sutton Trust created a list of 13 UK universities for the purposes of monitoring social mobility, based on the rankings in an average of published university league tables. These were the Universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, Warwick, and York, plus Imperial College London, LSE, and UCL. *(Reference -https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/studying-at-oxbridge-earns-you-7600-more-than-studying-at-a-new-university/)*

[2] In 2011, the Sutton Trust updated its methodology to include the 30 "most highly selective" British universities, according to the Times University Guide, the purpose of which was to illustrate the relative number of students from poor backgrounds enrolled compared to other institutions. These included the Universities of Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial College, King's College London, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Reading, Royal Holloway, London, Sheffield, Southampton, St Andrews, Strathclyde, Surrey, University College London, Warwick and York.*(Reference - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Trust)*

percent) higher than those of graduates from -pre-92 universities and £4,760 per year (25 percent) higher than those of post-92 graduates (de Vries, 2014).

Studies such as the one undertaken by the Sutton Trust in 2014 have now become commonplace and research in to graduate earnings are readily available to students. In 2018, students could for the first time view average earnings data by degree subject across institutions. The new Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) administrative dataset developed by the UK Department for Education (DfE), which tracks English students through school, college, university and into the labour market, allowed students to view the typical annual earnings range three years after graduation at a course/institution level.

In 2018 the IFS undertook research in to graduate earnings by degree course utilising the LEO administrative dataset (Belfield et al, 2018). They provided estimates of the labour market return five years after graduation of different subjects, institutions and degree courses relative to the average degree. The findings from this research mirrored the findings from the Sutton Trust research in 2014, with there still being significant earnings differences by degree subject and institution. Economics and medicine students were found to earn around 60 percent (around £40,000 per year) more than history and English students (£25,000) five years after graduation, and Russell Group universities and pre-1992 institutions were found to have higher earning graduates than newer institutions. Even after accounting for differences in students' background characteristics and prior attainment, graduates from Russell Group universities had the highest earnings, 10-13 percent higher on average than graduates of other institutions with the same observable characteristics. Thus evidencing that outcomes interact with both subject and institution (Belfield et al, 2018).

Research in to graduate earnings, now readily available to students at subject level, infers that not all degrees are equal, with where and what you study being an important valuable commodity in an over-crowded graduate labour market. Given this context, how has this shaped the way in which the value of a degree is understood?

2.2   Notions of value in a marketised UK higher education

This section is split in to two parts. The first part considers the theoretical underpinnings that have been used for this research including the key influences that have informed my thinking on

conceptions of value; and the second part considers how notions of value in a marketised UK higher education is discussed within the existing research literature.

2.2.1   Theoretical underpinnings: conceptions of value

The theoretical underpinnings of this research is based on conceptions of value- specifically the duality of instrumental and intrinsic value. These notions of value are crucial to this study, as value claims and expectations are central to gaining further insight in to how the value of a degree is understood in an increasingly marketised UK higher education context. Additionally, notions of value also drives behaviours in terms of what motivates individuals and their decision-making, and as such key aspects of motivation psychology relating to extrinsic and intrinsic drivers are also considered.

What is value?

Tomlinson (2018: 713) states, "there is no simple or unified approach to conceptualising value in relationship to higher education […] concepts of value have a different meaning depending on the disciplinary lens being adopted. Yet, 'value' is often used freely without thinking too much about its meaning or related attributes (Jokilehto, 2008). The dictionary (OED) definition defines *value* as:

- *"The regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something" [mass noun]*
- *"The material or monetary worth of something" [count noun]*
- *"The worth of something compared to the price paid or asked for it" [count noun]*

Not only does this infer there is some commodity and medium of exchange, it also implies "the value of one thing is equivalent or different in comparison to another" (Jokilehto, 2008: 36). The word "value", also does not necessarily always appear when making value judgements, instead value claims such as "good", "bad", "best", better" "worse", "worst" are used (Schroeder, 2016). Dewy (1916), also makes reference to these value judgements, arguing that:

> "To value means […] the act of passing judgement upon the nature and amount of its value as compared with something else. To value in the latter sense is to valuate or evaluate" (279).

These value judgements are particularly pertinent, as universities are now being held accountable to a profusion of quality assurance measures, all being used to assess whether students are getting value for money (see 2.2.2 below).

According to DeWitt (1929: 317), "*value is never a matter of immediate feelings merely, but also of the fulfilment of expectations centring around such feelings. Value is relative to the conceived goal of a desire, and varies with the definition of the goal*". This notion of fulfilment of expectations is central to discourse on marketisation and the changing value of higher education. As Tomlinson (2018: 713) states*, " it has become common to view the value of higher education in market-driven environments in relation to a process of commodification […] whereby what higher education produces is reducible to largely material and measurable market commodities*". Moreover, it is these dominant forms of value framing that have informed much of the policy discourse and legislation around marketisation.

Dewey's value theory (1939) relies on the concept of inquiry, i.e. the process of self-conscious decision-making, whereby the knowing cannot be separated from the doing - *"for every set of circumstances that we encounter brings forth some potentially unknowable set of prior beliefs, so that we are always acting within some definition of the situation"* (Morgan, 2014: 1048). Thus, value claims can never occur in a vacuum, as individuals are influenced by the historical, cultural and political contexts in which their decision-making takes place. As such, context and human behaviour are fundamental to understand fully students' motivations and how they ascribe value to their degree. Dewey's theory of value (1939) also states that knowing is only one mode of experiencing, and emphasises the importance of finding out how things are experienced when they are experienced as known things. This notion of how value is framed is particularly relevant to this research when giving consideration as to how graduates ascribe a value to their degree, as they are reflecting from the standpoint of the *knowledge experience*, and whether their expectations have been fulfilled. This concept of reflection can be seen in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which proposes that it is through self-reflection that people make sense of their experiences, explore their cognitions and beliefs, engage in self-evaluation and alter their thinking and behaviour accordingly (Schunk & Pajares, 2009: 36). As such, social cognitive theorists propose that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behaviour. These concepts are evident in the literature on notions of value in a marketised higher education and student motivations for going to university/college, which suggests that sociological influences (e.g. family, friends and teachers) play an influential role in this decision-making (see section 2.2.2 below).

Motivation reflects the reasoning behind choices and actions (Brophy, 2010:2). It is a complex phenomenon with multiple frameworks with different underlying assumptions concerning the nature of motivation (Kaplan et al, 2012). According to Maehr & Meyer (1997), *motivation* is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour. Brophy (2010:3) defines student motivation as "the degree to which students invest attention and effort […] rooted in students' subjective experiences, especially those connected to their willingness to engage in learning activities and their reasons for doing so". According to Ryan & Deci's research guided by self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Ryan, 1995), human nature as active or passive is a result of a wide range of reactions to social environments. As such SDT is "the investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes" (2000: 68). Not only is SDT concerned with the specific nature of the positive developments, it also examines the social environments that are antagonistic towards these tendencies. Given the increasing scrutiny of the worth of an undergraduate degree and the stigma associated with degrees in the humanities discussed in the preceding section, understanding students' motivations and the context and environment in which their perceptions of value are being enacted is essential.

Unlike the value judgements described above, according to Dewey (1916: 219), intrinsic values are not objects of judgement and cannot be compared or regarded as *greater* or *less*, *better* or *worse*. *"They are invaluable and if a thing is invaluable, it is neither more nor less so than any other invaluable".* From a motivational psychologist perspective, intrinsic motivation are activities pursued for their own sake. According to (Ryan and Deci, 2000: 56):

> *Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures or reward.*

By contrast:

> *Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome. Extrinsic motivation thus contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value.*

Yet, despite these distinctions, it is recognised by Ryan & Deci that an activity can be at the same time intrinsically and extrinsically motivating. Small (2013) in her defence of the value of the humanities, questions the purity of the term 'intrinsic', and refers to Shelley Kagan's (1998) belief that non-intrinsic properties can contribute to the intrinsic value of a thing i.e. it may be enhanced by other components of it, than the pleasure enjoyed in it (164). With this in mind Small offers John Mills' term 'for its own sake' as an alternative, which she suggests may have an advantage in clarity over 'intrinsic value' as it "admits that some objects and activities can have value 'as an end', independent of the means by which we individually arrive at agreement or disagreement with the valuation" (176).

Critics of the 'for its own sake' argument contend that value cannot be seen in isolation from the contexts, as it is these contexts which give value and meaning. In Ruskin's (1872) consideration of wealth, he considers "value" to be always twofold in nature- *intrinsic* and *effectual*. He argues that for the production of effectual value, this always involves two needs, firstly the production of a thing essentially useful, and secondly the production of the capacity to use it; thus "[w]here the intrinsic value and acceptant capacity come together there is effectual value, or wealth" (p.11). Whereas *potential value* is about the maximum possible capacity of the "output" that may or may not be realised, *effectual value* relates to the incorporation and actual use of the "output", which may also decrease if it is not found to be or realised to be "useful". As has been discussed in section 2.1.4 above, the potential value of a degree ("graduate premium") is a significant motivator in the decision-making process for going to university, reinforcing the instrumental value of a degree in terms of its currency in the graduate labour market. Exploring how the humanities graduates in this study ascribe value to their degree, will provide further insight in to its perceived "usefulness".

The traditional approaches to the value of higher education have been linked to a liberal conception of universities as agents of personal and intellectual growth (Tomlinson, 2018); however the shifting UK higher education policy landscape has resulted in the government imposing more heavily learning as an investment directly on to the individual, promising greater advantages and opportunities in the labour market. This has fundamentally changed the relationship between students and universities. Given the greater emphasis on the future of higher education being "more skills-based and more focused on value for money for students" (House of Commons, 2018), has this led to an increase in instrumental motivators and value being framed in instrumental terms?

2.2.2   Notions of value in the existing literature

This section considers notions of value in the existing research literature highlighting key conceptual value themes in the marketisation of higher education such as commodification, status, positionality, and identity and knowledge formation.

Value as a commodity

The marketisation of higher education has led to competition between universities with students increasingly being positioned as consumers, and universities looking to improve how they meet these 'consumer demands' (Molesworth et al, 2011). As discussed in section 2.1, there have been some clear actions among policymakers to recast the contemporary student as a customer, rational chooser and stakeholder (Tomlinson, 2014) and as Glater (2013: 2188) notes, "a financial aid regime that requires students to shoulder evermore the cost of higher education represents a decision to treat education more like a consumer investment". As such, the term "value for money" has become embedded in public discourse and ingrained in higher education, as demonstrated by the fact that ensuring "students receive value for money" is one of the Office for Student's (OfS) core objectives (House of Commons, 2018: 4).

Despite this political agenda, there is significant discourse that argues that the value for money rhetoric in higher education undermines the value of knowledge in society. Williams (2014) claims that universities should be concerned with knowledge not skills, and intellectual capital rather than economic capital. She contends that encouraging seeing a degree as a financial investment degrades higher education and "[i]immersing yourself in your chosen discipline, critiquing existing knowledge and advancing new knowledge are all missing from economic calculations". She argues that the government's premise, *"Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money. In this way teaching will be placed back at the heart of every students' university experience"* (DfE, 2011), assumes a direct link between the quality of teaching and the quality of learning without any acknowledgment of the efforts that students make themselves. Thus suggesting that the notion of consumerism in an educational environment sits uncomfortably, as students believe that they are entitled to a degree, rather than engaging with and earning a degree (Marshall, Fayombo & Marshall, 2015; Fairchild & Crage, 2014; Glater, 2013; Plunkett, 2014). Students may also develop notions of academic entitlement, which Holdford (2014) describes as the tendency to expect academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success, thus positive educational outcomes may be seen by students as an expected 'return on investment' instead of as a result of ability or effort (Marshall, Fayombo & Marshall, 2015). The perception of a degree being an entitlement because of an

economic transaction made between a student and a university has also affected teaching staff who are pressured to fulfil the students' role as a consumer in order to attract and retain academically competitive students (Molesworth et al, 2011). Holdford (2014) contends that viewing students as a customer not only unintentionally pressures faculty members to relax expectations for academic performance thus compromising the "quality" of graduates, but also reinforces students' sense of entitlement. Naidoo & Jamieson's (2005) similarly suggest that an overly consumerist approach to higher education promotes instrumental attitudes to learning, threatening academic standards and cements academic entitlement. Marshall, Fayombo & Marshall's (2015) research to determine the level of student consumerism among second year undergraduate psychology students at the University of the West Indies found that the level of student consumerism among the sample was above average. Over 60 percent of the students reported that they perceived their relationship with the university to be that of a buyer and a seller relationship, and almost 60 percent of the students felt that they should be reimbursed for classes where they thought they did not learn anything. They assert that these perceptions of compromise and entitlement were shaped by the fact they have paid for it, concluding that a probable explanation for this could be attributed to recent rises in the cost of tuition fees at the university where the research was conducted. Similarly Delucchi and Korgen's (2002) research found that over 42 percent of the undergraduate sociology majors they sampled in their research believed that their payment of tuition entitled them to a degree. They concluded that this revealed a lack of commitment to learning for its own sake and a preoccupation with grades as students wanted to do the least amount of work necessary to graduate.

Research by Kandiko & Mawer (2012) on concepts of value indicated that a consumerist ethos (value as financial return on investment) was prevalent amongst students. The research found that students used tangible measures of value, such as contact time and new buildings (symbolic value) as proxies to inform judgements about 'value for money'. Additional elements of the student experience, such as having access to a university library, were considered to be something they were entitled to as it was perceived as being included in the cost of tuition fees; however there was less clarity amongst the students as to whether this entitlement also included contact time, as it was believed to be a much less visible and tangible element of value.

Molesworth et al (2009) argue that higher education market discourse promotes an existence whereby students seek to '*have a degree'* rather than '*be learners'.* Using Fromm's (1976) humanist philosophy as a framework, they contend that "students seek to *have* ideas, or skills as if they were possessions that can be bought, rather than to know ideas as a way of seeing the world and skills as ways of acting" - thus education cannot be *had*, but *experienced* (280.) Molesworth et al recognise an important paradox to a marketised education – that it is in fact the

students with the attributes and capabilities developed from the *being* mode (i.e. someone who is a reflective, critical thinker), who are more effectively prepared for the workplace than those in the *having* mode.

Value as status

Higher education policy has placed "employability" at the centre of its agenda, making clear the relationship between universities and the labour market. As the economic and philosophic context of higher education has changed, so too have the expectations of students, graduates and employers (McCowan: 2015:267). Glover et al's (2002) research in to students' perceptions of the personal outcomes of a university education indicates that economic motivation is more important than the pursuit of knowledge and that instrumentalism directed towards employment is increasingly expected of higher education (293). Little (2004:1) defines employability as "a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations". Glover et al (2002) makes a distinction between *graduateness* as a state after the completion of a course and *employability* as an assessment of the economic worth of a student at that time, arguing that there is a tension between these terms whereby a student who having completed a degree may have ascertained a certain set of criteria and array of capabilities, however may not be immediately employable. Birds (2010: 7) states that there are sections of government, business and the media globally that seem preoccupied with a perceived gap between those skills which employers say are needed in the workplace and the levels of skills which workers in the economy are able to offer. This 'perceived gap' in skills, alongside growing global competition in graduate employment has led to an increased pressure on universities to address this issue. Molesworth et al (2011) argues that industry placements contribute to the instrumentality of students' approaches, by emphasising the acquisition of proficiencies in order to 'hit the ground running' when finding a job. As such this undermines the other potential aims of HE confirming the role of the university is to get a job (282). Birds (2010: 9) in her report on the 'skills debate', queries the responsibility of universities training the next generation of workers and questions whether higher education is in fact the best vehicle for providing these skills, or whether this is the role of the employers. Hager & Hodgkinson (2009: 623) argue that much of students' transitional learning actually takes place within the workplace itself, with some important types of learning being significantly and irreducibly contextual. Barnett (2004: 247) similarly reasons that what is learnt is significantly shaped by the context in which it is learnt, and argues that "learning for an unknown future has to be learning understood neither in terms or knowledge or skills but of human qualities and dispositions". According to Harvey (2000: 3), the primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while at the

same time empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners. To make subjects not traditionally seen as vocational more vocationally relevant, it is has become increasingly common to frame the discourse in terms of the skills and attributes developed through the degree. In response to the government's employability agenda, Saunders & Addis (2010:15) stated "there is some independent basis for the claim that humanities graduates are particularly well equipped with generic skills and competencies that will enable them to adapt effectively to the changing demands of the 21st century world of work", [and] could even be argued that these capabilities are more valuable to the labour market than 'vocational' qualifications". Gedye, Fender & Chalkley (2004) in their research in to the undergraduate and post-graduation experiences of the value of a Geography degree concluded that there was a need to make more accessible and explicit the employability learning outcomes in programme, module and assessment information to help students be more cognisant of the skills and attributes they were developing that would be valuable to prospective employers (393-394). This emphasis on skills is further reinforced by The British Academy's (2017) project to articulate the skills that are inherent to the study of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and the contribution they make to the economy and society.

In the higher education policy context of a greater market-driven environment, it is becoming more important for universities to understand how prospective students decide which universities to attend. Coates (2005) argues that institutional resources and reputations are frequently read as important informal proxy measures of the quality of university education; however has little to do with pedagogy. Literature on student decision making (see Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) suggests sociological influences, such as family, friends and teachers play an influential role in this choice (Renfrew et al, 2010; Kaye & Bates, 2016), described by Foskett & Johnston (2010) as "networks of intimacy". Academic reputation as an indicator of status is also a significant factor in making university choices (Briggs, 2006; Whitehead, Rafan & Deaney, 2006; Lawton & Moore, 2011; Drayson, Bone, Agombar & Kemp, 2013). Whitehead's et al (2006) research in to the factors that encouraged and discouraged students applying to the University of Cambridge concluded that the prestige of the university was a significant choice dimension. Similarly Briggs' (2006) survey of first year science and engineering students in Australian universities also found that academic reputation was the prevalent choice factor. This was further supported by Drayson et al (2013) who concluded that the reputation of the course and the university were two important characteristics of institutions. Similarly, Tomlinson (2008) found that the students in his study attached an importance to the profile of their institution as well as their degree classification, which were seen as a potential means of achieving a positional advantage in the labour market. Research by McManus et al (2017) in to understanding how students applying to universities in the UK are influenced in their decision-making, concluded that

league table positioning increased with the desirability of the institution, with there being more competition at the higher end of the university market than at the lower end. The research additionally found that on average students were willing to pay £270 in extra fees for a 10 percent improvement in the league table rankings of the institution- raising to over £400 for students with at least one parent who attend university. Research suggests that students see league table positioning as a "better" investment, with a more prestigious university, as defined by their league table position, having greater economic currency in the graduate labour market.

Value as positionality

Mass participation in HE has resulted in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, thus leading to credentialism and educational inflation (Bol, 2015). Brown (2015) believes that there are a number of paradoxes inherent in a market-driven HE system and argues some competition leads to better use of resources, but too much can be damaging, undoing the advantages of increased competition in the first place. McCowan (2015:271) argues that employability is a quality of the individual facilitating the gaining of employment, but is not a guarantee of employment itself as it is also dependent on a number of external factors such as availability of jobs, potential discrimination and competition. Tomlinson's (2008) research in to students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability found that students viewed themselves to be in a positional competition amongst a growing supply of graduates entering the labour market with similar profiles and aspirations (2008: 59); and as such recognised that they needed to add value to their academic credentials by growing and emphasising their "soft" currencies, (e.g. extra curricula activities and skills) in light of their weakening currency. Bol's (2015) research on the positional model of education argues that as a result of educational expansion a positional model of education becomes more important, whereby labour market rewards do not primarily depend on absolute skills levels, but instead on workers' relative positions in the labour market (105). Glover et al 's (2002) research in to student perceptions of the personal outcomes of university education found that Graduateness (i.e. the effect on knowledge, skill and attitudes having undertaken an undergraduate degree) alone is not seen by students as sufficient for success in a highly competitive environment. Roderick (2010) similarly suggests that students are under enormous pressure to self-commodify- i.e. to transform themselves in to marketable products capable of high levels of economic productivity; a pressure reinforced through social relations, media, education and government policy. According to Roderick there are three responses to the pressure to self-commodify- *complying*, *resisting* and *humanising*. Students comply with commodification as a means to achieve economic success and gain social status, which is actioned out of fear of deviating from expected social norms and to please others- as such, it is seen as the path of least resistance. Roderick asserts that complying is

frequently accompanied by opportunising- in that students implement and engage in strategies in order to develop a competitive edge and increase the likelihood of safeguarding a successful outcome in the labour market. Resisting commodification is described as a response to seek "happiness sand self-fulfilment"; however, this is actioned without necessarily considering the economic consequences. Students are motivated to "buy time" (through delaying, avoiding, rebelling) to "develop self-awareness and explore their personal interests". According to Barber (2002), resisting commodification, because it goes against the behavioural norm and expectations of others, can induce feelings of guilt. Humanising commodification is a measured attempt to uphold a sense of self through pursuing own interests, and is associated with increased intrinsic academic motivation where "learning is valued and sought for its own sake" (Roderick, 2010). However, with students heavily influenced by political and media discourse emphasising that having a degree is a valuable and necessary commodity in the graduate labour market, how likely is it that students will choose to resist and humanise commodification over compliance?

Value as knowledge formation

Small (2013) in her defence of the value of the humanities, dedicates an entire chapter to the notion of 'intrinsic value' and gives a comprehensive exploration of the philosophical debates around 'intrinsic value'; a term which she believes is frequently resorted to by advocates for the humanities with the hope that by invoking it, it might "stop the hard and unsatisfactory working of trying to justify the value of the humanities and the value of studying them" (151). Small argues that when the term is employed in the defence of the humanities,

> *"… it tends to denote one or both of two things: (negatively) resistance to requirements for practical or instrumental value; (positively) a way of speaking about value that refers us back to the object itself and offers to free us from the charge of mere subjectivism" (151).*

Although Small (2013) writes mainly to defend the public value of the humanities, it raises wider questions about the purpose of the university today, and whether knowledge is 'an end in itself' (see 2.2.1 above). According to McCowan (2015) having intrinsic value as the only purpose of a university is very hard to sustain as even "learning motivated by intrinsic value will often have instrumental benefit as a kind of 'accidental' positive externality" (277). This is echoed by Collini (2013), who indicates that the kinds of enquiry that universities will be engaged in may naturally lead to instrumental outcomes.

Brown (2015:7) argues that the marketisation of higher education has turned degrees in to an economic good, inimical to the broader liberal notion of higher education being about the intellectual and moral development of the individual. Roderick (2010:56) echoes this view, claiming that universities:

"…exist in a state of tension, struggling to maintain their more liberal or traditional roles that focus on intellectual development, critical thinking, and creating well-formed responsible concerned citizens, while facing mounting pressure to adopt corporate business models that focus more on technical and instrumental learning, and producing sufficient human capital for the knowledge based economy."

There has long been a tension between idealised notions of the purpose of university and the reality of students' experiences (Molewsorth, 2009); the current HE policy has only strengthened this tension. With the government agenda clear that "higher education must play a more significant part in meeting this country's skills needs and preparing students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (House of Commons 2012), and universities being held more accountable with their success measured in terms of graduate employment, are Newman (1852), Mills (1867) and Adler's (1988) perceptions of knowledge being 'an end of itself' still relevant in the context of marketisation of higher education?

According to Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan (1997) universities need to cater for students motivated by an intrinsic interest in their subject – providing a space and time for reflection and reinvention, and engage students who seek to be challenged and change as people. Molesworth et al (2011) has argued that because the marketisation of higher education has led to students increasingly being positioned as consumers, as a result they "are not particularly receptive to the idea that through immersing themselves in their subject they may change as a person; rather their desire to attend university is primarily to become a more employable person" (279). Although he recognises that a consumerist culture in higher education is not a new creation, he contends that universities have vigorously adopted an "orientation that has reduced a degree to an outlay that appears to secure future material affluences rather than as investment in the self" (280). Glover et al 's (2002) research in to student perceptions of the personal outcomes of university education found that amongst the students in their study there was understanding that the general set of capabilities and qualities that they gained from their degree were for the purpose of enhancing

career or employment prospects (298). According to Cortright et al (2014), learning occurs when students have intrinsic motivation and personal interest in the educational material, whereas less mature and sophisticated learning occurs when students have lower levels of intrinsic motivation and are motivated externally to be successful. Deci & Ryan's (2000) research in to Self Determination Theory (SDT), suggests that people whose motivations are authentic (self-endorsed) compared to those who are merely externally controlled, have more interest, excitement and confidence, which manifests itself as enhanced performance and wellbeing. Intrinsically motivated learners are more likely to attain higher levels of achievement than extrinsically motivated students, who are motivated from rewards associated with success (Gardner, 1988: 106).

Value as identity formation

Universities are now being held accountable to a profusion of quality assurance measures, all being used to assess whether students are getting value for money. Harvey & Knight (1996) argue that a variety of meanings have now been attached to 'quality', revealing a tension between *quality-as-accountability* and *quality-as-transformation*, and contend that the focus has been very much on the former resulting in a 'compliance culture', rather than seeing higher education as a transformative process of learning. The transformational power of higher education in terms of intellectual, personal and social identity development is well documented (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Hall & Sears 1997, Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Wass, 2012; Christie et al 2014; Cortright et al, 2015; Gabdrakhmanova et al, 2016). Student Development Theory (see Long, 2012) can also be considered to be a gauge of value as it measures the way a student grows, progresses or increases developmental capabilities as a result of higher education (Long, 2012). As an example, Chickering's (1969) and Chickering & Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of developmental theory assesses the formation of identity, offering an alternative means to consider value through looking at the transformative power of universities and their role in encouraging the development of human potential. However, as can be seen from this discussion, the existing literature and empirical research on the impact of the marketisation of higher education has largely been framed negatively with the instrumental and intrinsic functions of higher education being perceived as a dichotomy. What impact is this discourse having on how students understand the value of their degree?

2.2.3   Why is this research important?

The higher education sector is not a static entity, but has an evolving identity that reflects the changing external environment and social, economic and cultural context of its time. With media and political discourse focused on the economic value of a degree and whether students are getting value for money, how has the shifting political landscape shaped students' perceptions of higher education, and more specifically the value of a degree in the humanities?

As has been shown, there is a considerable body of research on how the marketisation of higher education has influenced students' motivations and choice around university, and shaped notions of the value of a degree. However, as discussed in section 1.3 above, there is a paucity in the empirical literature of studies that specifically centre on how the value of a degree in the humanities is being understood in the context of the marketisation of higher education. Noticeably missing from the research is the voice of the students themselves- the ones who are specifically choosing to study a degree in the humanities despite it being perceived as a riskier investment. This research seeks to fill this gap.

This purpose of this chapter has been twofold. Firstly to clarify the theoretical underpinnings of this research through a discussion on the key influences that have informed my thinking – namely conceptions of value and motivation theory, and specifically the duality of instrumental and intrinsic value. Secondly, to afford a consideration of how notions of value in a marketised UK higher education have been discussed within the existing research literature.

Chapter 3   Methodology

Having provided the context to this research, this chapter will summarise the methodological approach for the research, outlining the benefits and limitations of the methods chosen.

3.1   Research design

The core aim of this research is to examine how students understand the purpose of going to university and the value of their degree in an increasingly market-driven higher education policy context. The research strategy was developed to support this intention. This research draws on evidence from undergraduate students studying for a degree in the humanities at a UK research-intensive university who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-16, and from graduates who commenced their studies prior to 2012. According to Saunders et al (2009), the choice of research strategy is guided by the research question(s), research objectives, amount of existing knowledge, available time and resources, and the philosophical underpinning of the researcher. These principles were utilised in the research design for this study and are explained in more detail throughout the chapter.

3.1.1   Institutional Context

The research focused on one particular institutional context to allow for an in-depth investigation in to what is a broad and complex subject matter. Although this approach has many similarities with case study research methodology, in that it is a descriptive and exploratory empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon, it is not a case study in its truest sense as it does not provide a detailed examination of the specific contextual conditions of *the case* – "the real-world context" (Yin, 2014: 16). However, the same underlying ethos for utilising a case-study approach as a research strategy (i.e. the ability to produce rich descriptions and insightful explanations) applies to this research that focuses on an individual institutional context. Despite the advantages of using a single research context, in that it allows for phenomenon to be examined in detail, critics of such an approach dispute the robustness as a research tool and argue that the study of a single or small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings (Soy, 1997). The aim of this research is not to draw conclusions that apply to large populations with specified levels of certainty, but rather highlight notions that are indicated from the data analyses, which are then discoursed in relation to other empirical studies in the discussion chapter.

The UK research-intensive university selected as the focus of this study was selected for two core reasons. Firstly, because it was representative of other universities with a similar profile and ethos, and had a similar organisational structure in the way it grouped humanities subjects. With a large Humanities department of approximately 2,600 undergraduate students enrolled during the 2015-16 academic year, covering seven discipline areas - archaeology, English, film studies, history, modern languages, music and philosophy - it offered an ideal data sample. The second reason was more pragmatic, relating to the time and resources available (Saunders et al: 2009). It is important to highlight my position within the research context, as a member of Professional Services staff at the university since 2006. Being in full-time employment whilst undertaking the research necessitated making realistic choices in selecting the institution, and as such using the university I was employed at provided convenience for holding focus groups and interviews. Although this could be perceived as a conflict of interest potentially compromising my professional judgment in conducting or reporting the research, measures were taken to address any possible conflict. This included complying with all University regulations in undertaking the research, and disclosing my position in the research context to research participants. Whilst being an *insider researcher* could be considered to lead to a loss of objectivity and bias, it can also help the researcher to have more understanding about their research and the phenomena being studied (Saidin & Yaaob, 2016) (see section 3.2.1 below).

3.1.2   Mixed methods research

This section does not aim to provide a full history of mixed methods research (see Cresswell & Planco Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). The purpose is to explain the methodology utilised in this research study, highlighting the key strengths and limitations associated with this approach.

Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998) and Creswell (2003) argue that instead of the research method being important, the research problem is the imperative and thus researchers should use all approaches to understand the problem statement. Given the complexity of the research subject matter under investigation and core aims of the study, this research project fuses both qualitative and quantitative stand points to explore reality from a pragmatic paradigm perspective (Subedi, 2016). Pragmatism is not affiliated to any system or philosophy unlike positivist or interpretive paradigms (Rahi, 2017), embracing both points of view- thus researchers may be both objective and subjective in their epistemological orientation (Subedi, 2016). Bryman (2006: 118) argues that "[o]ne of the chief manifestations of the pragmatic approach to the matter of mixing quantitative and qualitative research is the significance that is frequently given to the research question", and as such "relegates epistemological and ontological debates to the sidelines".

Mixed methods research offers an alternative methodology for researchers to use to address complex issues in a way that is more comprehensive than could be achieved by either purely qualitative or qualitative research (Halcombe & Andrew, 2009). This is echoed by Scoles et al (2013) who sees mixed-methods research as an appropriate research method to address problems in complex environments, in particular, in education. Mixed methods research questions are concerned with unknown aspects of a phenomenon and are answered with information that is presented in both numerical and narrative forms (Subedi, 2016). Mixed methods research can either integrate or link quantitative and qualitative data concurrently by combining or merging them, or sequentially by having one build on the other, giving priority to one or to both forms of data (Creswell, 2003). This research uses a *sequential (follow-up) explanatory mixed methods approach*, which consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell, 2006; Plano Clark, 2011). Critics of the sequential approach raise concerns with the implementation of this method, for example how the sequencing of the data collection and analysis is determined, and how priority or weight is given to the quantitative and qualitative data (Subedi, 2016). Schoonenboom & Johnson (2017) and Greene (2015) argue that equal-status mixed methods research designs (also known as "interactive mixed methods research") are possible, resulting when both the qualitative and the quantitative components, approaches, and thinking are of equal value. Being in constant interaction, the outcomes they produce are integrated during and at the end of the research process. Creswell (2009: 82) states that numerous considerations influence the comparative weighting of the qualitative and quantitative data in a study and that theoretical drive, or worldview, should be used to determine this. From a pragmatic worldview standpoint, the weighting is dependent on the research question. In this study, the data analysis gives equal-status to each of the mixed-methods approaches. Quantitative analysis was undertaken in the first instance through self-selecting current students and graduates participating in an online survey, in order to elicit attitudes and behaviours for going to university and choice of degree subject, and their opinions about the purpose of university and how they valued their degree. This was followed by collecting qualitative data through a series of focus groups with current students and semi-structured individual interviews with graduates. Structured around key themes emerging from the questionnaire, the aim of the qualitative phase was to provide further in-depth insight into their perceptions, feelings and understanding and offer some context and explanation to the numerical and statistical inferences resulting from the quantitative analysis. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 summarises the mixed methods research tools that were utilised in the study. The component methods are discussed individually in more detail in the following section below.

Table 1.1: A summary of the mixed methods research tools utilised in the study for current undergraduate students

Sequence	Mixed method approach	Research tool
1	Quantitative Qualitative	Online questionnaire (closed questions) Online questionnaire (open questions)
2	Qualitative	Focus groups

Table 1.2: A summary of the mixed methods research tools utilised in the study for graduates

Sequence	Mixed method approach	Research tool
1	Quantitative Qualitative	Online questionnaire (closed questions) Online questionnaire (open questions)
2	Qualitative	Individual interviews

3.1.3   Phase 1 - Quantitative data collection and analysis: online questionnaire

'Surveying' is the process by which the researcher collects data through a questionnaire (O'Leary, 2014). A 'questionnaire' is the instrument for collecting the primary data (Cohen, 2013). According to O'Leary (2014), questionnaires are a useful survey tool as they allow for a large number of respondents to be reached; represent an even larger population; allow for comparisons, generate standardised, quantifiable, empirical data; generate qualitative data through the use of open-ended questions; are confidential and even anonymous. Despite these benefits, there are also a number of disadvantages and limitations of this research tool, such as being time consuming, expensive, difficulties with sampling, gaining permission to conduct the research, finding enough participants, and people not wishing to divulge information about themselves even with protections guaranteed (Cohen et al, 2007). In considering the strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires as a survey tool, utilising such an approach was still believed to be the best method as it enabled a large number of people to be contacted quickly and efficiently.

At the beginning of the academic year in 2015, all currently enrolled students studying for an undergraduate degree in a subject within the Faculty of Humanities at the institution selected for the study were invited by email to participate in the research via the Faculty's student office (Appendix B1). This included students who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-

16, and as such were all paying a tuition fee rate of £9,000. As suggested as good practice by Leary (2014), the email included an information sheet about the research and what their participation in the study would involve, including assurance of confidentiality (Appendix B2), which was followed up by reminder emails to increase the response rate as well as speed of response. As a means of encouraging participation, the benefits of engaging in the research were also emphasised, which included a small monetary incentive. See Church (1993), Bentley & Thacker (2004), Singer & Couper (2008), Zutlevics (2016) for a discussion on the benefits and limitations of offering monetary incentives to research participants.

Graduates who commenced their studies prior to 2012 were initially individually approached to participate in the study by the researcher through existing contacts, and using controlled social media channels within the Faculty of Humanities. Participants were then invited to extend the invitation to their own personal contacts. Participation was managed in this way to avoid "snowballing" and unsolicited responses. As for the current students above, a small monetary incentive was offered and an information sheet about the research and what was involved in the study was included in all communications (Appendix B2 and B3).

Section 3.1.3.1 below shows the participation rates of the undergraduate students and graduates who were surveyed.

The undergraduates and graduates were purposely surveyed as two discrete groups. Separate online questionnaires were designed for the current students and graduates (Appendix B4 and B5) to allow for the phrasing of the questions to be more relevant to each of the groups, as well as for supporting research question four, which was to explore whether there were any relationships between humanities students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation. To support the research questions, the questionnaires were structured around four broad themes, which were informed by existing notions and concepts in the research literature relating to the intrinsic and instrumental value of a degree in the policy context of the marketisation of higher education (as discussed in chapter 2). The four themes were: i) perceptions, choice and motivation, ii) employability and career aspirations, iii) tuition fees, and iv) value. The purpose of exploring these four themes was a means of initially gauging broader views and perceptions in these areas.

O'Leary (2014) and Bell & Waters (2014) emphasise the importance of the length and order of questions for logic and ease for respondents, as well as the accessibility and clarity of the questionnaire itself. With twelve core questions in total for current students and fifteen for the graduates, the questionnaire was divided in to five separate sections around the four key themes

described above. These were chronologically arranged according to the student journey as a means of aiding and stimulating their thought process. Section one asked for biographical information such as the degree programme they were studying, their current year of study or year of graduation, mode of study, age, sex and whether they were a domestic, EU or international student. Although more detailed biographical information could have been requested, such as that pertaining to educational and socioeconomic background, asking for too much personal information could be negatively received. As such only relevant, basic information was requested as a means of encouraging participation and increasing completion rates. Section two focused on motivations for attending university and choice of degree subject. Section three was centred around their views on the purpose of higher education with section four related to their engagement with social and extra-curricular activities whilst at university. The fifth and final section focused on perceptions of value, through asking current students questions related to what they would like to gain from university and their thoughts on the future. This section in the graduate survey was more reflective, and asked them to give thought to how they gained from their university experience. The full questions for both the current student and graduate surveys can be found in Appendix B4 and B5.

The questionnaires were designed to include a mixture of closed response and open ended questions. Asking a number of close-ended questions meant that it would not only be quicker for participants to respond to, but would also be comparatively quick and easy to interpret through statistical analysis. The open questions on the other hand provided an opportunity to identify additional concerns or opinions from respondents that were not captured by the closed-ended questions, and would also allow for participants to express their views in their own words. The types of closed questions utilised included dichotomous questions as well as multiple choice questions, such as checklists, rank order, and Likert Scale questions. O'Leary (2014) highlights a number of issues to be aware of when designing survey questions, such as ambiguity, leading, confronting, offensiveness and unwarranted assumptions. To address this, the survey questions were pilot-tested with a small number of individuals known by the researcher, and refined accordingly.

Following the closing date, the data from the questionnaires was exported to Microsoft Excel and analysed. The questionnaire data from the close-ended questions were statistically analysed, whereas a thematic inductive analysis approach was adopted to identify emerging themes from the data from the open-ended questions. This approach is discussed in more detail in section 3.1.4 below. Although the questionnaires enabled rich statistical data to be collected to gauge broad views and perceptions on themes, such a method can be difficult to examine and explain more complex issues and opinions. While a number of open-ended questions were used, the

depth of answers that respondents could provide was limited. As such a *follow-up explanations model* (Creswell, 2011) was utilised using qualitative analysis through focus groups and individual interviews in order to give further depth and breadth to the findings in the questionnaires. This model is used when a researcher needs qualitative data to explain or expand on quantitative results (Creswell, Plano Clark, et al., 2003).

3.1.3.1   Online questionnaire participation

326 current undergraduate students who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-16 participated in the survey - approximately 12.3% of the total number of students (2653) who received the email. The email was sent to all enrolled undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities. Responses were received from across all the seven discipline areas (archaeology (5.2%), English (18.7%), film (4.6%), history (22.4%), modern languages (19.6%), music (6.7%), philosophy (6.4%), undisclosed (16.93). The chart in figure 1.1 below shows the percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by discipline compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey. This shows that there was a broadly representative sample in the data analysis.

Figure 1.1: The percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by discipline compared to the total percentage of humanities students contacted to participate in the survey
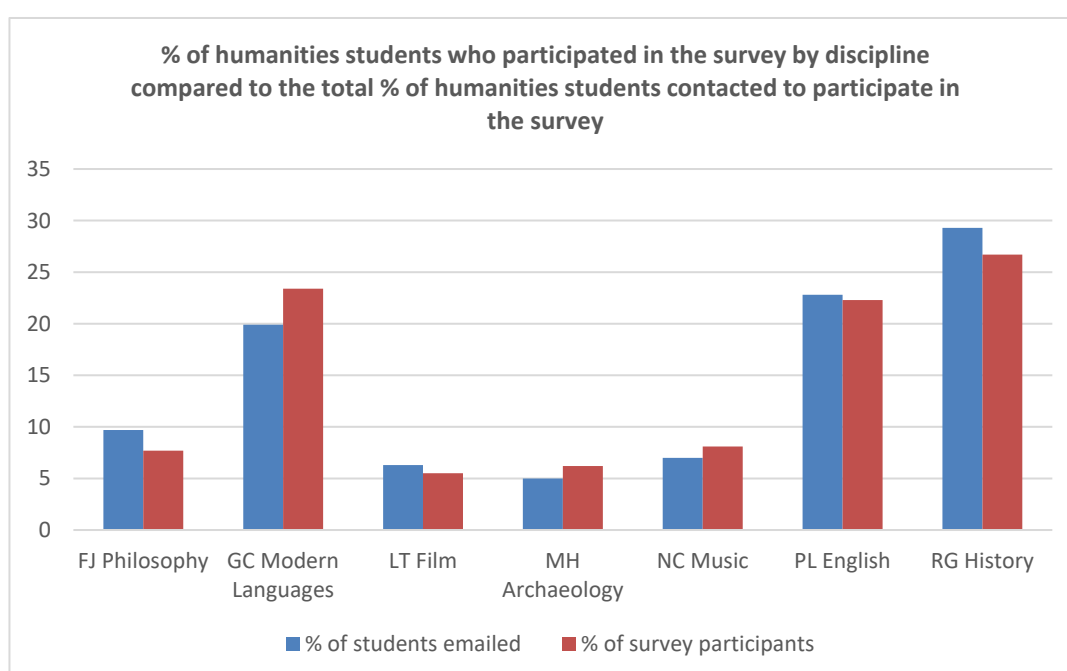
Of the respondents, 44.8% were in Year 1, 19.0% in Year 2 and 19.6% in their final year (undisclosed (16.6%). The chart in figure 1.2 below shows the percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by year of study compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey. This shows more first years participated in the survey as a proportion of total students, compared to second and third/final year students. However, as 16.6% (n.54) did not disclose this information, the sample could be more representative than the data suggests.

Figure 1.2: The percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by year of study compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey
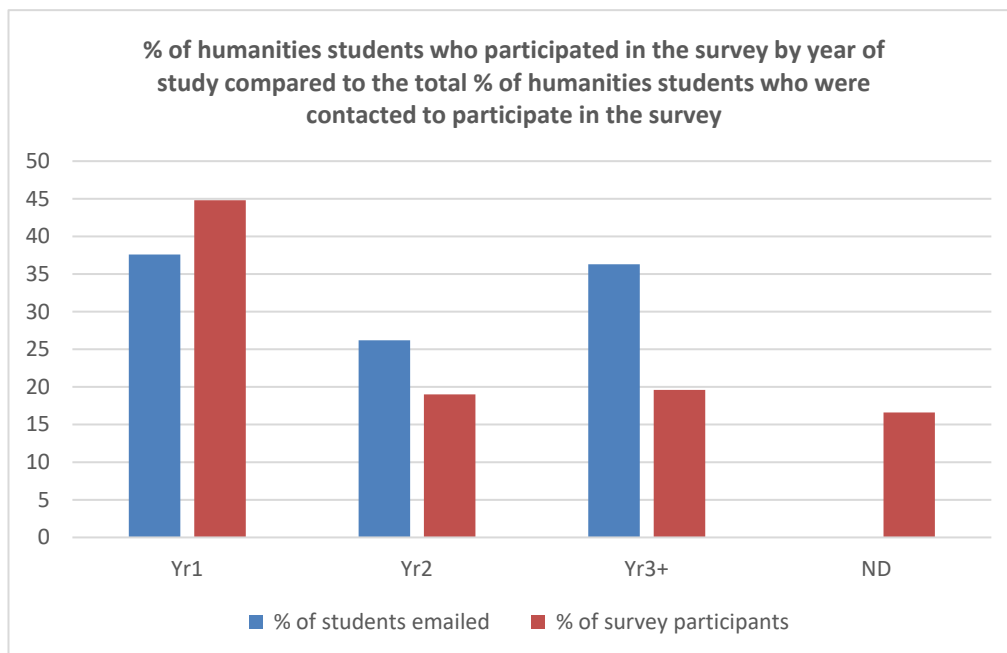
In terms of their ages, 83.6% were between 18-20 years old, 15.3% between 21-25 years old, and one respondent from each of the age brackets 26-29 years old, 46 -50 years old and over 51 years old. The age groups of the total humanities population that were invited to participate in the study were not captured; however, there was participation from across each of the age brackets. The age group with the largest percentage was 18-20 year olds; however, this is unsurprising given that 18 year olds make up the largest proportion of students applying to university.

63.5% of respondents were female and 19.6% were male. 16.9% of respondents did not disclose their sex. The chart in figure 1.3 below show the percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by sex compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey. This shows that less males were represented in the sample; however, it should be noted that 16.9% (n.55) did not disclose this information. This also needs to be considered in the wider context that women have been shown to outnumber men in almost two-thirds of degree subjects, with the gender gap in British universities having almost doubled since 2007 (UCAS, 2018). The biggest gender divide includes degrees in areas such as history, philosophy and English. To ensure that there was representation of *voice* in the data analysis, the sex of participants was taken in to consideration in the qualitative research where it was ensured that each focus group had both male and female representation.

Figure 1.3: The percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by sex compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey.
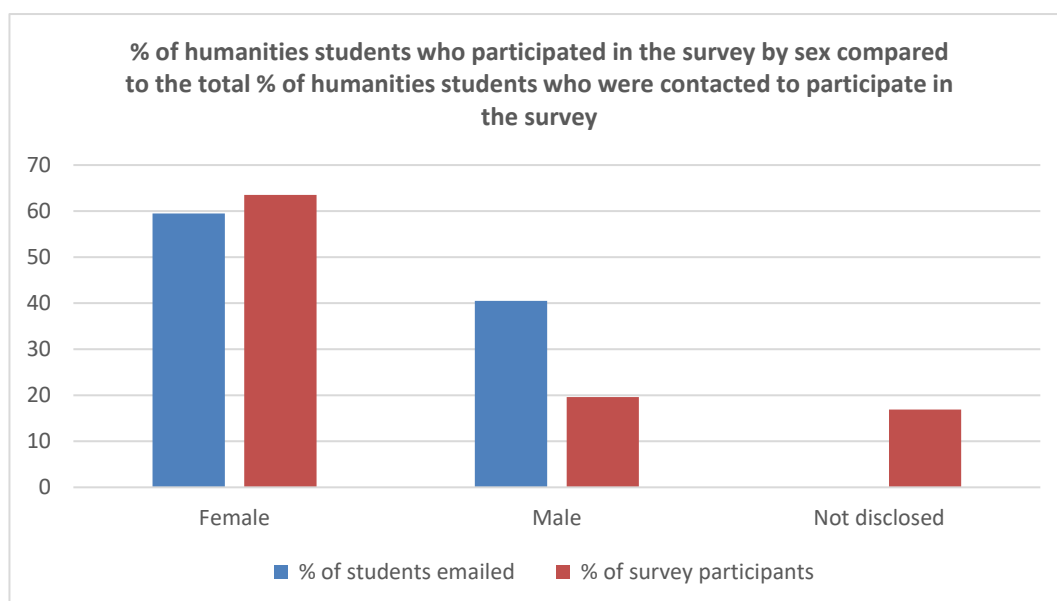
The vast majority of respondents were domestic students, with 79.8% from the UK. 2.8% were from the EU and 1.2% from the Channel Islands. 16.3% did not disclose their domicile. The chart in figure 1.4 below shows the percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by domicile compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to

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participate in the survey. This shows that the there was a broadly representative sample in the data analysis.

Figure 1.4: The percentage of humanities students who participated in the survey by domicile compared to the total percentage of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey

% of humanities students who participated in the survey by domicile compared to the total % of humanities students who were contacted to participate in the survey
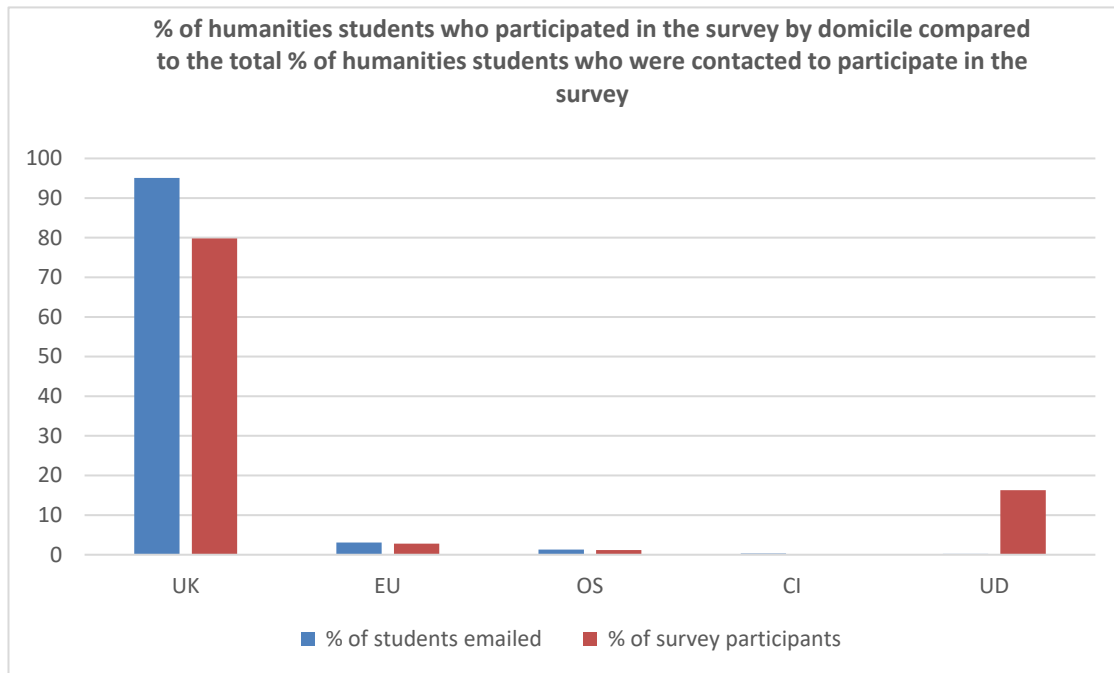
The overall response rate marginally falls short of the recommended sample size of 335 responses based on a population of 2600 determined by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). However, as can be seen from the above charts, the response rates for discipline, age, sex, and domicile of the participants were broadly reflective of the total undergraduate cohort in the Faculty.

26 graduates participated in the survey (archaeology (7.7%), English (26.9%), history (23.1%), modern languages (15.4%), music (11.5%), philosophy (15.4%). Respondents commenced their studies between 1995 and 2011. Seven participants paid no tuition fees, six studied under a fee regime where there were fees of up to £1225, and thirteen studied under a fee regime where fees were between £3000 and £3375. Of the responses, 73% were aged 18 years old when they started their degree, 19% were 19 years old and 4% 20 years old. 58% of the respondents were female and 42% were male.

As highlighted above, I was keen to ensure that there was good representation of the *student voice* in the research, through having a range of humanities disciplines, students in different years

of study, different age groups and gender mix. However, a detailed analysis through the lens of aspects of identity (gender, age) was not part of the scope of this research. As such, the data samples were not broken down and analysed in this way.

The students and graduates who participated in the study were self-selecting, and therefore it may be possible that those who took part either had a more positive experience of higher education, or conversely a poor student experience wanting to use the study as an opportunity to raise particular issues. It is also recognised that since the study focuses on a single university, based on a relatively small data sample, it cannot claim to be fully representative of all humanities students and graduates from all institutions. However this does not invalidate the study or mean the methodological approach was any less rigorous.

3.1.4   Phase 2 - Qualitative data collection and analysis

3.1.4.1   Focus Groups

The second phase of the *sequential (follow-up) explanatory mixed methods approach* for the current undergraduate students was a focus group. Powell & Single (1996: 499) define a focus group as "*a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.* Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context (Gibbs, 1997) in a way that allows researchers to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it (Morgan 1988). As such, this was deemed an appropriate method in order to gain a deeper understanding of the findings in the quantitative phase. Critics of focus groups as a data collection tool argue that they are limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample (Gibbs, 1997). This was taken in to account when selecting the participants, and additional attention was given to the make-up of the groups to promote representation. As well, as ensuring the focus groups were representative, students were also selected to participate based on the answers they provided in the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. It was felt there where students gave additional insight in to themes or introduced new understanding not previously considered, this could stimulate interesting discussion within the group. As Gibbs (1997) states, if multiple understandings and meanings are revealed by participants, multiple explanations of their behaviour and attitudes will be more readily articulated.

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3.1.4.1.1   Focus group participation

O'Leary's (2014) recommendations for good practice for questionnaires was extended to the focus groups, and participant information sheets were sent to all students to allow them to make an informed decision as to whether to take part. Twenty students participated across four focus groups, as detailed in tables 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 below.

Table 2.0: Focus Group 1 participant summary

Year of study	Degree programme	Gender	Age bracket	Fee classification
Year 1	BA French & Spanish Linguistic Studies	M	18-20	UK
Year 1	BA Archaeology & History	F	46-50	UK
Year 1	BA History	F	18-20	UK
Year 1	BA History	F	18-20	UK

Table 2.1: Focus Group 2 participant summary

Year of study	Degree programme	Gender	Age bracket	Fee classification
Year 2	BA Modern History & Politics	F	18-20	EU
Year 2	BA Spanish	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA History with YA	M	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA Modern History & Politics	M	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA Music	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA Modern Languages	F	18-20	UK

Table 2.2: Focus Group 3 participant summary

Year of study	Degree programme	Gender	Age bracket	Fee classification
Year 2	BA French & Portuguese	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA English	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA Film Studies	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA Archaeology	F	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA History	M	18-20	UK
Year 2	BA English	F	21-25	UK

Table 2.3: Focus Group 4 participant summary

Year of study	Degree programme	Gender	Age bracket	Fee classification
FY	BA English and French	F	21-25	UK
FY	BA History	M	51+	UK
FY	BA Spanish (Linguistic Studies)	F	21-25	UK
FY	BA Philosophy	F	18-20	UK

The quantitative data analysis indicated that there were in some instances differences in motivations and perceptions depending on year of study, and as such the focus groups were separated by year group to understand this further. A key characteristic of focus groups are the synergistic quality resulting from the social dynamic of the group (Cyr, 2017), where the insight and data produced is through the interaction between participants (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995). Therefore, having participants from the same cohort would also help create a sense of commonality. The quantitative data analysis was not analysed at subject level, and as such the focus groups consisted of students studying degrees from across the seven humanities disciplines in the Faculty. Although there were more female respondents to the questionnaire than males (reflecting the student body in the Faculty), to ensure the groups were representative, where possible, male students were invited to participate. The comments from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire also indicated that there were some differences in perceptions and motivations by age. Even though the vast majority of students were from the 18-20 year old category, where possible students in other age brackets were invited to participate.

Typically, a set of questions guides the focus group conversations, with the participants determining how the conversations unfold. The open nature allowing for spontaneity and free discussion on specific topics (Onwuegbuzie et al, 2002). The focus groups were semi-structured, with five open-ended questions centred on the results from the questionnaire (see Appendix B6). The questions were selected to given further understanding to the quantitative data analysis and build on some of the emerging themes in the open-ended questions, which indicated a complex intertwinement of the instrumental and intrinsic motivations and perceptions of value. As such, the focus groups provided the means to understand the context in which these notions were being formed. The approach to the analysis of the data is detailed in section 3.1.4.3 below.

3.1.4.2   Individual in-depth interviews

The second phase of the *sequential (follow-up) explanatory mixed methods approach* for the graduates were individual in-depth interviews. An 'interview' is typically a face-to-face conversation between a researcher and a participant involving a transfer of information to the interviewer (Cresswell, 2012). Interviews are considered to be the best data-collection option in situations where the objective of the research is concerned with the exploration of the feelings and attitudes of participants to gain a deeper appreciation and greater understanding of a particular phenomenon (Opoku, Ahmed & Akotia, 2016). Although a significant advantage of interviews is that the method allows for greater depth compared to other methods of data

collection, a disadvantage cited by critics is that it can be prone to subjectivity and bias on part of the interviewer (Cohen & Manion, 1980: 242).

The interviews were largely unstructured to allow participants to tell their stories in their own words. Probing questions were prepared, which were centred around the same four broad themes utilised in the questionnaire (i) perceptions, choice and motivation, ii) employability and career aspirations, iii) tuition fees, and iv) value (see Appendix B7). The data from the graduate questionnaire suggested that their motivations for attending university were more likely to be intrinsically driven, however, paradoxically, some of the free text comments indicated that they were reflecting on their degree from a more instrumentally-driven positioning. As such, a key aim of the individual interviews was to use the graduates' narratives in order to gain further insight in to how they understood the value of their degree having negotiated the graduate labour market.

3.1.4.2.1 Individual interview participation

Ten individual interviews were held in total. Similar to the undergraduate students, the graduates were also selected based on their responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Additionally, to help answer research question four, which was to explore whether there were any relationships between humanities students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation, the tuition fee policy under which they studied was also taken in to consideration in order to get a broad sample (see table 3.0 below). Participant information sheets were sent to all students to allow them to make an informed decision as to whether to take part.

Table 3.0: Participant summary for individual interviews with graduates

Interview no.	Degree programme	Years of study	Gender	Age when studying	Tuition fee
1	BA Philosophy & Politics	2006 – 2009	M	19	£3000
2	BA Archaeology	2007 – 2010	M	19	£3070
3	BA History	2005 – 2008	F	19	£1000
4	BA French and Spanish	2009 – 2013	F	18	£3225
5	BA History	2011 – 2014	M	19	£3000
6	BA Philosophy	2009 – 2012	M	18	£3225
7	BA English and French	2010 – 2014	M	18	£3290
8	BA Philosophy and Maths	2009 - 2012	M	19	£3225
9	BA History	1998* – 2000	F	20	No fees
10	BA History	1997 – 2000	F	18	No fees

* Started at another university in 1997 and transferred to the university in to Year 2 in 1998

3.1.4.3   Qualitative data analysis

The focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Thematic analysis (TA) was utilised to interpret all the qualitative data, including the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, as well as the focus groups and individual interview transcriptions. Braun & Clarke (2006) state that TA is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. Additionally, it is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). An inductive approach to the thematic analysis was implemented. The qualitative data was exhaustively scrutinised with transcripts read repeatedly to expose emerging themes and segments of text grouped together to ascertain how these major themes were important to the participants. The data was analysed for similarities and differences across sub groups, such as year of study and between the undergraduate students and graduates. It should be highlighted that ascertaining causality was not the aim of this research. As discussed in chapter 2, Dewey's theory of value (1939) emphasised the importance of finding out how things are experienced when they are experienced as known things. This notion of how value is framed is particularly relevant to this research when giving consideration as to how graduates ascribed a value to their degree, as they were reflecting from the standpoint of the *knowledge experience*, and whether their expectations had been fulfilled (see Chapter 7, section 7.1). As such, the methodological and analytical approaches selected for this research was to support the exploration of emerging themes, patterns and relationships in the data- thus the focus being on possible influences determined through students' and graduates' perceptions and experiences, rather than causality per se.

According to Nowell et al (2017), with an inductive approach, the thematic analysis is data-driven, i.e. the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves. Although it is recognised that an inductive approach typically means that the process of identifying and coding themes occurs without trying to fit the data into a pre-existing theory or framework, existing notions identified within the research literature were used simply to structure and label the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Table 4.0 below summarises these key themes.

Table 4.0: Summary of the key emerging themes from the qualitative data analysis

Emerging themes from the data analysis	Core theory from research literature
Influence and pressure of others in decision making (societal, familial, educational) Employment opportunities Justification Passion Personal growth	**Motivation theory** *Motivations for going to university* *Choice of degree subject*
Campus style Course structure Geography League tables Emotional connection	*Choice of university*
Consumerist attitudes Tuition fees Value for money Reputational prestige Degree subject status Credentialisation Self-commodification	**Instrumental value** Value as a commodity Value as status Value as positionality
Personal growth Intellectual development Disciplinary knowledge	**Intrinsic value** Identity Formation Knowledge Formation

The qualitative data collection resulted in a considerable amount of data. The quotes utilised in this study were purposefully selected to illustrate the emergent themes. The undergraduate

students and graduates were reflected on in parallel rather than in separate sections throughout in order to highlight where there were any similarities and differences between the two groups.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

The research followed the University of Southampton's ethical protocols and guidance. Undergraduate students and graduates were approached to take part in the research on a volunteer basis. An information sheet about the research was included as part of the emails giving clear and concise details about the research and what their involvement would be in the study. Participants were provided with a consent form to sign at each stage of their participation, which reiterated the information previously provided.

Anonymity and confidentiality were the main ethical issues in this research, however great care was taken to collect and store the data with respect and confidentiality. All necessary steps were taken to disguise the identity of the participants when using quotes from the free-text comments in the questionnaires, focus groups and individual interview, with reference only being made to their degree programme and level of study/year of graduation (see section 3.3 below). During the focus groups and individual interviews, participants were advised they could indicate if a remark should be treated as off the record, and that particular material would not be used. Other than the use of attributed quotes from the qualitative data collection in writing up the project, the data is only available to the researcher. All data is kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act and University's Research Data Management policy, being stored in password protected areas on computer and only accessible by the researcher.

3.2.1 Positionality in the research context

As indicated in section 3.1.1 above, I was in full-time employment at the university where the research was being carried out. This type of research is known as *insider-research*, which can be described as research that is undertaken within an organization, group or community where the researcher is also a member (Fleming & Zeegward, 2018: 311). Whilst being an *insider-researcher* could be considered to lead to a loss of objectivity and bias, it can also help the researcher to have more understanding about their research and the phenomena being studied (Saidin, 2016), enabling a deep level of understanding and interpretation (Fleming, 2018). According to Smyth & Holian (2008), although having insider status may confer privileged access and information, the researcher's position in an organisation may also act as a constraint in terms of limiting who is willing to participate and what is revealed. These outcomes were not realised with in this research

given the representation of participants in the data sample and breadth of emerging themes from the data analysis.

Trowler (2011) argues that what counts as inside research depends on your own identity positioning. Costley (2010) states, professional life, personal life, family, career goals, values and principles will all have an influence and be relevant to research topics and the way research is undertaken. As highlighted in section 1.2, my motivation for the research study was based on my own experiences as a humanities graduate. Although I undertook the research with expectations that the data would evidence similar values of liberal and intrinsic benefits of a humanities undergraduate degree that I had as a student, I was keen to make sure this did not compromise the approach that I took to this study. Key challenges often associated with insider-research can include implicit coercion of participants, lack of disclosure of positioning and potential conflicts of interest and over emphasising tacit patterns (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). To address these challenges associated with insider-research, not only did I acknowledge my expectations for the research study to evidence similar values and motivations to that of my own, I also ensured that there was transparency in the methodological approach. I did this by i) disclosing my position in the research context to research participants from the outset; ii) formulating research questions that did not support any favoured hypothesis (chapter1, section 1.5); iii) ensuring that the framing of the questions in both the surveys and in the interviews and focus groups was framed in neutral language to avoid eliciting a particular response (appendix B, B4-B7); iv) interpreting the data so as to not under emphasise or play down any themes. . According to the American Psychological Association (n.d), C*onfirmation Bias* is the *"tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one's preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data".* The approach I took to this study demonstrates my methodological and analytical openness of the data and my ability to work past any biases I may have had. The results of this research highlighted that I had underestimated the role of the higher education policy context in shaping students' perceptions of the value of higher education, thus rejecting any potential preconceptions rather than supporting them.

3.3　　　Referencing qualitative data

A referencing system was established to appropriately attribute the different sources of qualitative data captured using the following coding system:

Table 5.0: Qualitative data referencing codes

Code	Code description
CS	Current student
G	Graduate
Q<no.>	Questionnaire <question number>
FG	Focus Group
I	Individual interview
Y1/Y2/FY	Year 1, Year 2, Final Year
ND	Not disclosed

This key can be found alongside all quotes used in the study in the following format.

Current undergraduate students:

Participant group/qualitative data collection tool/degree programme/year of study

> *Examples: CS/FG4/BA History and Archaeology/Y1*
>
> *CS/Q5/BA French and Spanish/FY*

Graduates:

Participant group/qualitative data collection tool/degree programme/years of study

> *Examples: G/I/BA Philosophy and Politics/2012-2015*
>
> *G/Q/Q11/BA Music/2005-2008*

Chapter 4   Motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the humanities

The core aim of this research is to examine how students understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree in a humanities discipline, by exploring their perceptions of value and motivations for studying their chosen degree (Research question 1). This chapter is split in to three sections, and will analyse humanities students' and graduates' *motivations for going to university* (4.1), their *choice of degree subject* (4.2) and how they chose *where to study* (4.3).

To determine whether there were any relationships between perceptions and expectations of going to university and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation (Research question 4), the current students and graduates are reflected on in parallel throughout this chapter to highlight where there are any similarities and differences between the two groups.

4.1   Motivations for going to university

Question 1 in the surveys asked participants what their motivations were for choosing to go to university and to select their top three motivations from a list of seven. In addition, there was also an option to select 'other' and a free text section to provide an explanation for their alternative response. Table 6.0 below shows the top three responses for the current students' and graduates' motivations for attending university.

Table 6.0: Current students' and graduates' top three responses for their motivations for attending university

Question 1: What were your motivations for attending university? Please select your top three statements.					
Answer Options	Response Percent (Average across all years)	Response Percent (Year 1)	Response Percent (Year 2)	Response Percent (Final Year)	Response Percent (Graduate)
To have a better chance of employment and get a good job	78.4%	79.3%	79.0%	77.8%	57.7%
To learn more about things that interest me	76.6%	75.9%	82.3%	73.0%	53.8%
To experience university life and to make new friends	61.3%	57.9%	71.0%	58.7%	84.6%
To prepare for a specific job or career	27.9%	35.2%	21.0%	17.5%	7.7%
To increase my earning potential	27.1%	25.5%	33.9%	23.8%	11.5%
To get a good general education	25.7%	22.8%	22.6%	38.1%	53.8.%
Because that's what you're supposed to do after school/college	12.3%	12.4%	9.7%	14.3%	26.9%
Other	4.5%	1.4%	4.8%	12.7%	3.8%

As the results show, the two most popular responses to this question for current students across all years of study was t*o have a better chance of employment and get a good job* (78.4%), and *to learn more about things that interest me* (76.6%). This signified that both of these motivations were considered to be *equally* important to the students, and suggested a dual primary motivation for attending university- with on the one hand the *extrinsic motivation* – i.e. enhanced employment prospects, and on the other, *the intrinsic motivation- i.e.* learning interesting things.

In addition to the primary dual purpose identified, the data indicated a secondary motivation for going to university, with the third most popular response being *to experience university life and to make new friends (61.3%).* This indicated a further intrinsic impetus and also signified the importance of the non-academic life experiences that university also had to offer, such as living away from home and the more social aspects such as forming friendships.

Although the data showed that having a better chance of employment and getting a good job was a key motivation for attending university for the current students, the lower response rate for the comment *"to prepare for a specific job or career"* (27.9%) suggested that they did not necessarily

have a definite career in mind. This was emphasised in the 'other' comments and free text comments associated with this question in the survey, which showed that students were purposely using their time at university to decide on a career path.

I don't know what job I want to get so studying gives me a few more years to decide.
(CS/Q1/BA English//Y2)

Over the summer between 2nd and 3rd year I decided that I would like to pursue a career in teaching at university level - when I first applied I didn't have a career in mind.
(CS/Q1/BA English/FY)

The third most common response for the current students was the primary response for the graduates, with going to university *to experience university life and to make new friends* (84.6%) being the primary motivator. Whereas the data showed that current students had a primary dual motivation, which saw extrinsic and intrinsic drivers as equally important, the survey results indicated that the graduates seemed to have a more prominent intrinsic primary motivation for attending university. In terms of their secondary motivations, the data for the graduates showed a higher level of clustering of responses as indicated by the second and joint third most popular answers; t*o have a better chance of employment and get a good job* (57.7%), *to get a good general education* (53.8%), *and to learn more about things that interest me* (53.8%). This suggests there was no overriding secondary motivation, but rather multiple subsidiary drivers all considered to be equally significant.

Question 2 in the survey offered further insight in to the motivations for choosing to attend university (Figure 2.0). Participants were given three statements of intrinsic and three statements of extrinsic motivations relating to their decision for choosing to go to university. Using the Likert scale 1 to 5, participants were asked how far they agreed with these statements. They were also offered an opportunity to select 'other' and to provide a free text response with other details they felt were relevant to their experience.

Figure 2.0: Current students' and graduates' decision making for choosing to attend university.

Question 2: How far do you agree with the following statements? I decided to go to university because...
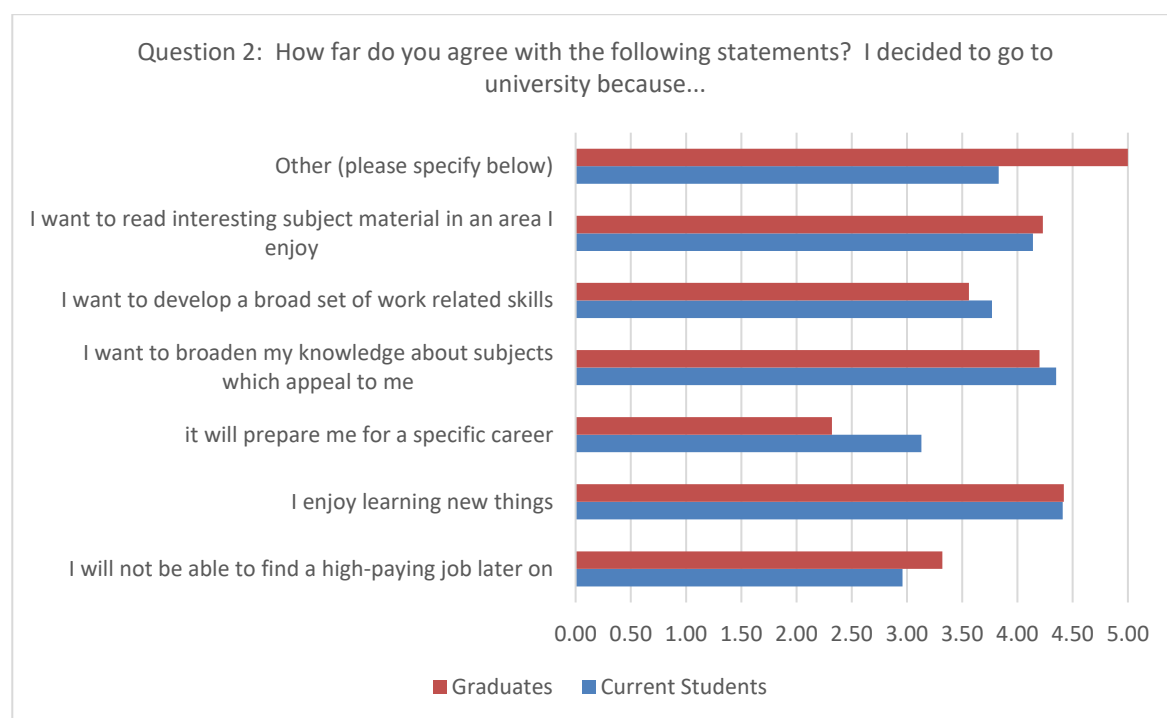
 Although figure 2.0 indicated that the current students and graduates had broadly similar average responses, the intrinsic statements (*I want to read interesting subject material in an area I enjoy; I want to broaden my knowledge about subjects which appeal to me; I enjoy learning new things*), had higher levels of agreement compared with the extrinsic statements, which emphasised the importance of the intrinsic drivers in choosing to go to university.

As can be seen in table 6.0 and figure 2.0 above, a number of respondents from the surveys selected *'other'* for Question 1 (current students n.13, graduates n.1) and Question 2 (current students n.18, graduates n.4). There were three prevailing reasons across both groups given as 'other'. As has already been described above, the first reason that was considered an important factor in choosing to go to university was the feeling of being unsure of a career direction and not being ready to go in to employment. The second reason related to the opportunities that going to university would offer, which they felt would not be available or easily available to them outside of the university environment. For example, a number of students expressed that having the prospect to study abroad was an important motivator for choosing to go to university.

> *Because I'm studying a language it also meant I got the opportunity to study abroad for a year.* (CS/Q1/BA Music and French/FY)

The third reason that was highlighted emphasised personal growth as an important driver for going to university, such as improving awareness of self, adjusting to living away from home and becoming more independent.

> *I want to learn new things about myself when I've been made to live alone, as well as to learn how to cope as an independent person* (CS/Q2/ BA Film Studies/Y2).

Universities being environments that provide opportunities and experiences for personal growth were key themes that came out of the focus group discussions and individual interviews. As well as being drivers in choosing to go to university in the first instance, they were also discussed in terms of value. How students and graduates perceived the value of their degree, in both extrinsic and intrinsic terms, is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

One of the most noticeable differences in the results from Question 2 (figure 2.0) between the current students and graduates was the level of agreement in the response to, *"it will prepare me for a specific job or career".* This statement had a stronger level of agreement for the current students than for the graduates (3.13 vs 2.32). Although the results from Question 1 (table 6.0) highlighted a low response rate for both current students and graduates for the statement *"to prepare for a specific job or career"* as a motivation for deciding to go to university, when comparing the two groups, the data indicated that the current students were *more likely* than the graduates to have a specific career in mind. Thus suggesting that the higher education policy context in which the students were going to university may be having some influence in shaping their motivations. To explore further how students were understanding their future careers, both the current student survey and graduate survey asked participants whether they knew what career they would like to pursue post-graduation (question 10). Current students were asked about their current views and graduates were asked to reflect back to their time at university. Participants were asked to select one of three statements that was most relevant to them. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below show the results from each survey.

For current students two thirds of the respondents were either deciding from a number of possible career options (48%), or had a clear career path in mind (17.2%). A third of the current students (34.8%) did not have any ideas about their career post-graduation. When compared to the graduates' responses, a much larger proportion (75%) did not know what career they wanted

whilst at university, with much smaller proportions having a clear career path in mind (12.5%) or deciding from several possible careers (12.5%).   This suggests a shift whereby students entering higher education paying higher tuition fees of £9000 were more likely to have clearer ideas about their career than students who studied under a lower or no tuition fee regime, further reinforcing the notion that the higher education context in which the students were applying and studying under was having a possible influence in shaping motivations and decision-making.

Figure2.2: Graduate survey Question 13

Question 13 - Which of the following statements most applies to you?

Legend:
- I knew exactly what career I wanted
- I was undecided from among several possible careers
- I was undecided about the career I wanted when I graduated from my undergraduate degree

12.5%
12.5%
75.0%

Figure 2.1: Current student survey Question 10

Question 10 - Which of the following statements most applies to you?

Legend:
- I know exactly what career I want
- I'm deciding from among several possible careers
- I don't know what career I want

17.2%
48.0%
34.8%

Chapter 4

To gain a deeper understanding of students' career motivations at university, the data from Question 10 in the current student survey was broken down by year of study (Figure 2.3)

Figure 2.3: A comparison of Question 10 from the current student survey by year of study
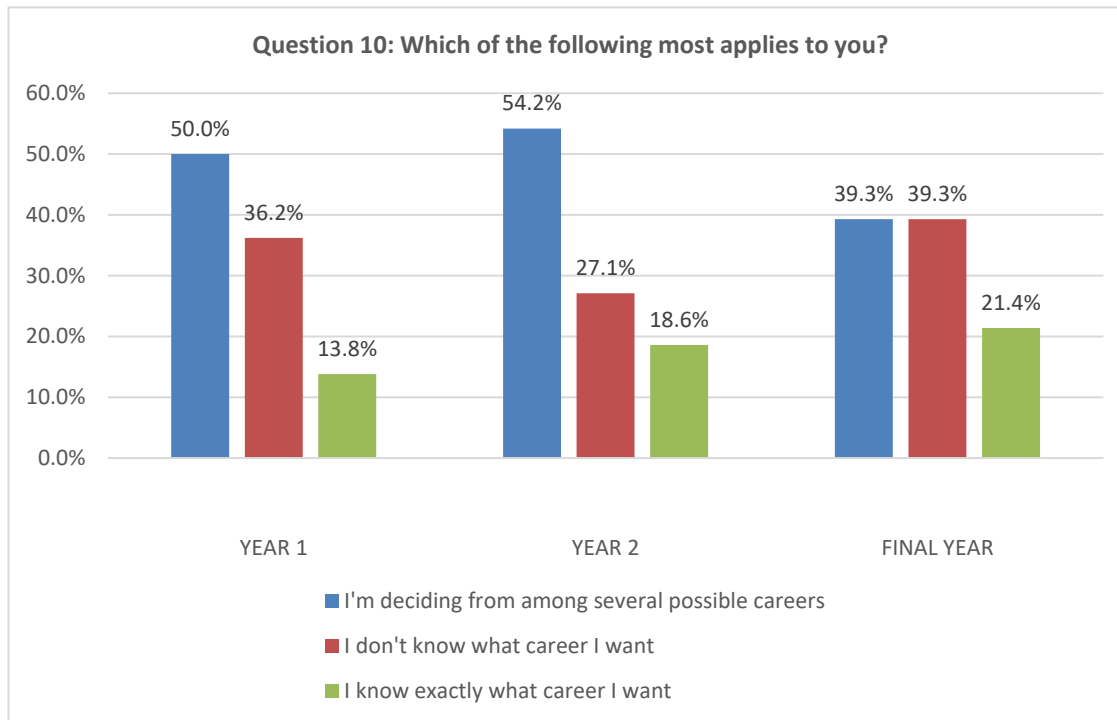
The data suggested that students were more likely to know exactly what career they wanted to pursue post-graduation as they progressed through their degree, with final year students (21.4%) having a response rate eight-percentage points higher than year 1 students (13.8%). Although year 1 students were least likely to have a specific career in mind, half the respondents were deciding from a number of possible careers, suggesting that students were consciously choosing to come to university with the expectation that their university experience would help influence and shape their career direction. The numbers of students across all year groups who were still uncertain of a career path is noticeable and the free text comments associated with this specific question in the survey offered some important insights in to how students felt about their post-graduation employment. A first year English and Spanish student highlighted this sense of confusion about a future career and how they hoped that their time at university would offer some clarity.

Really not sure what I want to do after university, hopefully the experience will help me decide or open some possibilities as well. (CS/Q10/ BA English and Spanish/Y1)

Even for those students who did have a specific career in mind, they too had their own concerns and worries about whether their career ideas and aspirations where in fact achievable. These sentiments are captured in the following comment by a final year English student, highlighting not only a level of pragmatism to their decision-making, but also an awareness and concern with the competitive graduate labour market.

The possibilities are university professor (my main goal but far-fetched), journalist (nigh on impossible due to competition), or sales assistant at a supermarket (probably but highly undesirable). Finding an enjoyable career is my greatest worry. (CS/Q10/ BA English/FY)

Many of the notions touched on in the survey were explored further in the focus groups with current students, who were encouraged to share their reasons for choosing to go to university. The focus groups highlighted shared feelings of immense pressure to justify decisions for choosing to go to university and the need to have a clear rationale for these decisions by being able to substantiate an end goal. A first year history student described how they felt a need to justify decisions and choices to key people in their lives, such as family, friends and teachers.

[…] you need to justify what you're doing when you're leaving [school], *to maybe your peers, to your parents, teachers… (*CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1)

As well as feeling pressured to justify reasons to others, the data also indicated there was an element of self-justification. This presented itself through creating a rationale for themselves to reinforce that they were not wasting their time by going to university, which provided them with a sense of comfort whilst their post degree employment outcomes still remained uncertain.

> *[…] there's a lot of pressure I think on students going in to university to be doing it for like, "a reason", […] having this kind of perceived specific job, it's […] a bit of safety, […] I'm not kind of wasting my time; it's almost like a bit of a comfort.* (CS/FG2/BA History with Year Abroad/Yr1)

As alluded to in the comments above, the notion of justification was connected to the influence of others and there was strong evidence in the qualitative data of being influenced or pressured in the decision of deciding to go to university. The analysis of the qualitative data from the free text responses in the survey, focus groups with current students and individual interviews with graduates identified three main influencing contexts that were perceived to have had a more significant influence on decision-making for not only choosing to go to university, but also on what to study and where to study. These contexts are described in table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1: Influencing contexts as identified from the qualitative data from the current students and graduates.

Influencing context	Context description
Societal context	social, political and media pressures
F*amilial context*	parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins
Educational context	teachers, tutors, career advisors

Using these three identified influencing contexts *(societal, educational, familial)*, within each of the individual sections in this chapter there will be an exploration of how others shaped motivations and influenced decisions in going to university (4.1.1), what to study (4.2.1) and where to study (4.3.1).

4.1.1   The influence of others in deciding to go to university

Societal context

The data indicated for both the current students and graduates that they were strongly influenced by societal expectations in their decision to go to university, borne from political and media pressures. There were repeated accounts in the focus groups and individual interviews describing how they perceived going to university as mandatory, and as such had become an ingrained expectation. For example, a second year film studies student highlighted how the government's employability agenda and associated media discourse enforced the notion of university as the main progression route post A-levels.

> *[…] the government also pushes university […] I don't see getting a job after school and apprenticeships as sort of like reinforced as much as university […] it's like everywhere like league tables, university finances….* (CS/FG3/BA Film Studies/Y2)

These perceived societal expectations for going to university created feelings of pressure and stress. This was highlighted by a first year history student who described the burden they felt in deciding whether to go to university, and feelings of being powerless to pursue any other alternatives.

> *[…] people expect you to go in to university, and people expect you to do well there, and people expect you to come out of university, find a job, be successful […] it is a lot of pressure […] and that like made me feel that I don't have an option, I have to go.*
> (CS/FG2/BA Modern History & Politics/Yr1)

The government's strong employability agenda created a sense of obligation to attend university, and as such, the notion of any alternatives to university was seen as failure, as can be seen in the following comment by a second year English student who described the feelings of failure her sister felt when she made the decision not to go to university and to go straight in to employment.

[…] she hadn't gone to university and she feels she ought to, which I think completely like negates the point of higher education, and she says like "I failed" […] I think there's a real problem that it's not considered acceptable not to go to university…. (CS/FG3/BA English/Y2)

This entrenched belief of there being an automatic progression to university after school or college was also mirrored by the graduates. A history graduate (2011 - 2014) described how he saw going to university as part of an automatic educational progression, referring to it as a *"conveyor belt of education [….] that everyone was just swept up in"* (G/I/BA History/2011-2014). This programmed thinking towards education was further reinforced in an individual interview with an archaeology graduate (2007 -2010) who reflected on his motivations for going to university. His decision in going to university he believed was symptomatic of the social and political pressures from the Labour government at the time, where it was an ingrained, unquestioning cultural norm to progress to university straight after A-levels, which would then lead to a "good job".

[…] growing up under new labour you went to school, you did A-Levels, you got a degree, you'd get a good job [….] that's what I was told was going to happen and that's what everyone did. (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

This data shows that the societal pressure to attend university was borne from the perception that this was the primary pathway to a successful career, even though, as has been identified, they may not have a specific career in mind.

Educational context

The qualitative data indicated that the educational context was also a significant influencing agent for deciding whether to go university for both the current students and the graduates. Although neither the survey, focus group nor interviews specifically asked for biographic contextual information relating to respondents' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, references to these were made in both the free text responses in the surveys and alluded to within the detailed

discussions in the focus groups and interviews. For example, participants referred to the types of school or college they attended (i.e. grammar school, comprehensive school).

As part of the focus group discussions, participants reflected on their experiences at school/college and how this influenced their decision-making in applying to university. For the majority, the educational context was a significant influencing agent, as described by a final year English and languages student who highlighted the assertive role that their school played in reinforcing the expectations of going to university.

I was at a school that was really pushy […] there definitely was kind of the feeling of everyone should be going to university… (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

This notion of the pressures from the educational context was further emphasised by a mature student, who described their experience of going to their son's parents evening, where there was a very strong emphasis attached to going to university and any alternative to this was considered negatively.

[…..] he goes to a Grammar school and they're very keen on everyone going to university […] the previous year, six people out of the Sixth Form […] didn't go to university, and they proceeded to name them […] so I completely understand what you mean by the sort of pressure from the school... (CS/FG4/BA History/FY)

The data showed that this emphasis on university being the favoured option post A-levels was also reflected in the advice and support given to students at this stage in their education. The focus groups highlighted a perception of there being a two-tiered attitude in terms of the guidance given to students in the next steps after school or college. Students who were not considering going to university were not given as much support in the alternative options compared with those who had decided they wanted to go to university, who were given clear supervision, information and guidance about their options. This was highlighted in a conversation between two final year students.

[...] I definitely felt that friends who didn't go to uni weren't really given any advice by my school about kind of what to do after A-levels, about how to go about getting a job and building a career from that. (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

Yeah there was a lot more help at my school for people going in to uni […] there were services for people who wanted to go straight in to work but it was more focused on you need to do this to get in to uni. (CS/FG4/BA Spanish (Linguistic Studies/FY)

This suggests that the educational context was reinforcing the societal expectations of going to university, through focusing on providing information, support and guidance to students who were applying to university, rather than for those who were looking at other alternatives.

A similar picture was seen from the graduates. A philosophy graduate (2009 – 2012) described how he went to a school that traditionally had a very high progression to university rate, and as such, there were strong expectations that he would go to university. He recalled how he was encouraged to start actively thinking about going to university from an early stage, and to start planning visits to universities.

[…] the school I went to, it had a very high university moving on rate, so it was always encouraged. Certainly from the end of GCSEs, early A-levels it was discussed to start thinking about it early on, start scheduling the visits, that sort of thing… (G/I/BA Philosophy/2009-2012)

Although the data showed a strong influence from the school/college in deciding to go to university, in some instances the students still felt they had an element of choice, and that their decision to go to university was made independently of the educational context. A final year languages student acknowledged the pressure from her school, however explained how they had already decided that they wanted to go to university.

There was the pressure from the school, but beforehand I had already decided I want to go to uni, so it didn't really influence my decision... (CS/FG4/BA Spanish Linguistic Studies/FY)

Whilst the majority agreed the educational context was a significant influence, several participants deviated from this opinion, suggesting there may be other influencing agencies that had a more important impact.

F*amilial context*

Both the current students and graduates referred to the ways in which their families influenced their decision to go to university. The extent however to which the students and graduates were influenced by family differed from being the primary influencing agent in some instances to having a very limited, if any influence, in others. The limited influence from the familial context can be seen in the following comment by a final year English and French student, who described their parents as having a minimal influence on choosing to go to university, seeing their school as the significant influencing agent.

My Dad didn't go to university […] whereas my Mum did, and I think they both kind of thought, you know, whatever is the best for you […] I think the pressure definitely came from the school. (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

In some instances, the influence from family was created through a familial cultural norm. Where there were family members who had been to university themselves, this created a sense that this route was simply a natural path to follow. A history graduate (1998 - 2001) described how they did not feel they were being put under any direct pressure from their family to attend university, however recognised that as members of their family and peers had all attended university, this became an accepted progression route.

Not that anyone was ever saying or putting pressure on me academically […] it was just that was what my parents had done, my older brother and cousins - you name it,

everyone I knew […] I guess it was the social world that I lived in. (G/I/BA History/1998 -
2001)

Although participants in the research were not asked for biographic contextual information
relating to their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, references to this were made
within the focus groups and interviews. For example, participants referred to whether they were
first or second generation to higher education. For those who made reference to being first in
their family to attend university they were very cognisant of not having anyone to guide them
through the decision making process. This is evidenced in the following two comments. The first
by a second year archaeology student who explained how being the first in the family to attend
university their parents left the decision making to them. The second comment by an archaeology
graduate, who described the lack of guidance they felt they had around university, and the
benefits of being exposed to a context where other family members have been to university.

*None of my family went to university, so they kind of left it down to me really, so it was
kind a new experience for all of us.* (CS/FG3/BA Archaeology/Y2)

*I was the first person to go to university in my family, I didn't really have anyone to sort
of guide me […] if you've got lots of brothers and sisters that have gone through it,
they're advising you should think about this in the future…* (G/I/Archaeology/2007-2010)

For those who were second or more generation to higher education it was recognised that a
family member having been to university previously gave them a level of expertise, and as such, it
was perceived as welcomed guidance and direction with something that was unfamiliar to them. A
second year French and Portuguese student described how they valued their family's opinion
having been to university.

*[..] what my family thought of it and stuff was also part of it, because I kind of thought
well they've been through university, like they know what they're looking for I suppose
out of a university, but I haven't had that experience….* (CS/FG3/BA French &
Portuguese/Y2)

4.1.2   Summary: motivations for going to university

The data identified that the decision-making in choosing to go university involved a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers that were also shaped by educational and socioeconomic contexts, in terms of the school/college that was attended and whether they were first generation to higher education. There was strong evidence in the qualitative data of being influenced or pressured by others in the decision of deciding to go to university, which was strongly connected to the feelings of (self) justification that students described, by needing to have a clear rationale substantiated by an end goal. For both the current students and graduates societal expectations played a key role in their decision to go to university. There were repeated accounts in the focus groups and individual interviews describing how going to university was perceived as mandatory, and as such had become an ingrained expectation.

There was a strong perception that university was the primary pathway to a successful career, even though the data showed that students did not necessarily have a specific career in mind when applying to university, using this time to shape their career direction. The emphasis on university being the favoured option post A-levels was also reflected in the advice and support given to students whilst at school/college, thus suggesting the educational context was reinforcing the societal expectations of going to university.

Both the current students and graduates referred to the ways in which their families influenced their decision to go to university; however the extent to which the students and graduates were influenced by family differed from being the primary influencing agent in some instances (for example, where there was a familial cultural norm in going to university) to having a very limited, if any influence, in others. There was also a recognition that having access to guidance from family who had previously attended university was beneficial when it came to decision-making for going to university.

4.2   Motivations for subject choice

Questions 3 in the surveys asked participants what their motivations were for their choice of degree subject, and were asked to select their top three motivations from a list of six statements. There was also an additional option to select 'other' and to provide an alternative free text response if they felt that none or only some of the six statements were applicable to them. Table 6.2 below shows the top three responses for choosing the degree subject for both the current students and graduates.

Table 6.2: Current students' and graduates' top three responses for their motivations for choice of degree subject

Question 3: What made you decide to choose your particular degree subject? Please select your top three statements.					
Answer Options	Response Percent (Average across all years)	Response Percent (Year 1)	Response Percent (Year 2)	Response Percent (Final Year)	Response Percent (graduates)
The love of and/or interest in the subject area	95.8%	95.7.3%	96.8%	95.2%	88.5%
I will have a better chance of employment and getting a good job	63.3%	67.1%	64.5%	52.4%	46.2%
It will prepare me for a specific job or career	34.8%	45.0%	27.4%	20.6%	15.4%
I didn't know what I wanted to study and this seemed like a good choice	28.0%	21.4%	33.9%	36.5%	38.5%
It was at the university I wanted to attend	28.0%	25.7%	32.3%	30.2%	26.9%
Other	13.3%	13.6%	6.5%%	19.0%	30.8%
My parents/friends wanted me to study this subject	5.7%	4.3%	8.1%%	6.3%	7.7%

As discussed in the preceding section, the survey data suggested that for current students there was a dual primary motivation for attending university, covering both extrinsic and intrinsic drivers. However conversely, for choosing specifically what to study at university for current students there was a clear primary intrinsic motivator- the love of the subject area itself (95.8%). This was mirrored in the graduate survey data where having an affinity with the subject was also a primary motivation for subject choice (88.5%). The free text comments relating to this specific question in the survey emphasised the importance of being passionate about the subject. This can be seen from the following two examples from a current student and a graduate.

Interest in the subject was the only thing that made me choose my particular degree.
(CS/Q3/BA Philosophy & Sociology/FY)

[…] my love for and interest in my chosen subject was almost the sole consideration for choosing my degree subject. (G/Q3/ BA English & French/2010 - 2014)

In many cases, the love of the subject area was closely linked with the subject areas they were excelling in at school, and therefore seemed the obvious choice to continue as degree subjects. This view was reflected in the 'other' responses in the surveys (n.42), where the majority (60%) of respondents who selected this option made reference to their ability in the subject area. The following two examples from the free text responses to Question 3 in each of the surveys evidence this:

They were the subjects I studied at A-level and I enjoyed them so I decided to carry on with them. (CS/Q3/BA English and History/Yr1)

I seemed to be good at this subject at A Level. (G/Q3/BA English and History/1999- 2002)

This importance attributed to having a passion for the subject was further emphasised in the focus group discussions with current students and individual interviews with graduates. Despite employment outcomes being identified as one of the primary dual motivations for current students in going to university (table 6.0), the data from the focus groups highlighted the importance of studying a subject that they enjoyed, rather than for a job being the sole purpose. Although evidenced across all focus groups, this was particularly emphasised in a focus group discussion with first year students. As part of the discussion a student from the EU described how in her country it was common for the degree subject to be chosen with its potential economic value in mind. Yet despite the feelings of pressure to justify going to university in economic terms that was identified in the previous section, other participants in the focus group demonstrated feelings of surprise and incredulity towards the notion of economic imperatives being prioritised over passion for the subject.

She's going to base her life on something she doesn't enjoy? That sounds just horrible […] choosing something that you really, really enjoy to study is so important […] I can't imagine doing something that you didn't like and then having to struggle through…
(CS/FG2/BA Music/Y1)

[….] I feel like it's too big a part of your life […] three or you know more years of your life
for it just to be a means to an end…. (CS/FG2//BA History with Year Abroad/Y1).

The importance of having a passion for the subject was similarly reflected across the graduate interviews. The following quote from an English and French graduate revealed that although some consideration had been given to future employment outcomes, it was ultimately the emphasis on the love of the subject that was the driving force in their decision-making.

[….] for me choosing those subjects at uni was all about the fact that I knew I loved those
subjects [….] I had thought about the possibility of being a Lawyer, and everyone said,
"right, don't do Law for heaven's sake- do something you enjoy and do a conversion
course afterwards." […] rather than force yourself through a degree… (G/I/BA English
and French/ 2010 - 2014)

Although the survey data clearly showed the love of and having a passion for the subject area as a primary motivator for degree choice, it also suggested that it was consciously being considered with employment in mind- not necessarily though with a specific career in mind. This can be seen from the responses to Question 3 in the survey (table 6.2), for which the statement, *"I will have a better chance of employment and getting a good job"*, was chosen as a top three statement by 63.3% of current students and 46.2% of graduates, whereas the statement, *"It will prepare me for a specific job or career",* was only chosen as a top three statement by 34.8% of current students and 15.4% of graduates. The free text comments associated with this specific survey question suggest that a humanities degree was specifically being chosen because it was perceived that the broadness of the subject with there being no specific career path would provide more career-options post-graduation.

I didn't want to do a degree that would 'close any doors' for me…. (CS/Q3/English and
French/Y1)

Broad degree meant I had more options amongst a wider range of opportunities for
employment. (CS/Q3/ English and Film /Y1)

Just as there were influencing contexts that played a key role in the decision to go to university, discussed in the preceding section, these influences was also reflected in the decision-making in choosing what to study at university. Using the three core influencing contexts (*societal, educational, familial*) as identified in table 6.1 above, the next section will look at how they formed and shaped motivations for degree subject choice.

4.2.1   The influence of others in choosing what degree subject to study at university

Societal context

The data indicated that societal pressures - borne from political and media discourse- were shaping perceptions and informing decision-making in degree subject choice. The following comment by a first year music student provided an insight in to how students made decisions about what to study at university. They explained how some of their friends chose to study a Law degree as it had a very clear career pathway resulting in a greater salary, which meant they would be able to pay off university debts much more quickly. A sense of frustration was evident as the student questioned the ethos of prioritising the potential financial reward of a degree, a pressure that they believed was overshadowing passion for the subject.

> *[…] they've said that they want to become a Lawyer because it's like, they'll get the most money for it, and pay off their uni debts quicker […] than maybe pursuing something that they really care about, which is really quite depressing […] Why are we pushing that the money side of it is the most important and the pressure is kind of outweighing peoples' like passions….* (CS/FG2/BA Music/Y1)

The data showed a complex picture when it came to the motivations for choosing degree subjects. As has been described above, some students chose their humanities degree specifically for its "broadness", which they believed would offer them greater career opportunities in the post-graduate labour market. However, the data also suggested there was an element of caution when choosing to study a humanities degree, as can be seen in the following comment by a first year mature student studying history and archaeology. They described how one of their challenges in choosing to study their degree was the uncertainty of a career, particularly as they were aware of students with similar degrees not pursuing careers directly related.

> *[…] for me it was kind of the uncertainty about where a humanities course would take me […] I was working amongst a lot of people who had degrees in history and weren't doing anything to do with history…* (CS/FG1/BA Archaeology and History/Y1)

In some cases this uncertainty of what career a humanities degree might lead to was mitigated by supplementing it with another discipline that was more vocationally aligned. This can be seen in the following example from an individual interview with a graduate who explained how they chose to do maths alongside their Philosophy degree as they felt it provided clearer career options.

> *[…] I wanted to include mathematics because […] it had a lot of quite obvious possible career paths […] So having it was almost a bit of a safety to Philosophy […] I kind of chose the two as a balance between that kind of credible side […] mixed with genuine interest….* (G/I/BA Philosophy & Maths/2009 – 2012)

This understanding highlighted a perception that doing a degree solely in a humanities subject was a risk in the post-graduation labour market and therefore to minimise this risk there was a need to balance this with a more reliable subject.

The societal context as an influencing agent also presented itself through employers who had a role to play in shaping and informing decision making around subject choice. An English and History student explained how they chose their degree subject on the advice from employers who felt that it would better provide them with some of the necessary skills for that particular career path compared to other subject areas.

> *I want to go into print journalism and I was advised by a couple of people in the industry that a strong academic subject would provide me with better-written skills than a journalism degree would* (CS/Q3/ English and History/ND).

This understanding of some subjects being "better" than others in terms of preparation for employment is discussed in more detail in the following chapter when notions of value are considered.

Familial context

The data highlighted that the familial context also influenced the choice of subject as well as the decision of whether to go to university. For some the influences in the familial context were more extreme, resulting in feelings of being pressured to make certain choices and decisions. In the majority of cases, this was a result of the wider societal pressure influencing the familial context, which was subsequently shaping their perceptions of the value of a degree in terms of its economic currency in the post-graduation labour market. A second year English student described how they felt pressurised by their father to study Law who had very fixed ideas about the careers he wanted for his children. The student explained how part of the reason they decided to study English was a form of rebellion and the desire to make an independent decision that was right for them.

> *[…] my father had this image of me being this hot shot city Lawyer and he still pushes it*
> *[…] he has this image of one of his daughters being a Doctor, one being a Lawyer, you*
> *know one being something else. So I think part of the reason that I did English is actually*
> *a bit of resistance.…* (CS/FG3/BA English/Y2)

A similar picture was also evident in the graduate data. The following comment from an individual interview with a history graduate who commenced their studies at a time when there were no university tuition fees, describes how they believed their mother influenced their decision of what to study at university, which was based on perceptions of how the degree would be valued in the post-graduate labour market.

> *[…] it was a toss-up between History and English Literature joint honours, but in the end I*
> *think my Mum possibly convinced me to do a single honours degree [….] she must have*
> *just thought that a single honours had a bit more sort of strength to it or something in*
> *the market place.* (G/I/History/1998 - 2001)

The conception of there being some subjects that are "better" and more academically rigorous than others driven by the societal context was also reflected in the familial context. A second year film studies student described how their parents' views on the academic rigour of subjects made it very difficult for them when choosing what to study at university.

> *[…] when I was sort of applying for Film, I had a bit of conflict with my parents who said that it's not a tough subject […] being told that you know it's a soft subject why don't you do something else…* (CS/FG3/BA Film Studies/Y2)

It was not only how the familial context perceived the economic value of certain subjects in the labour market that influenced the choice of degree subject, but also the educational background in the familial context. Where there were family members who had been to university themselves, it was often that the subjects that they had studied were more likely to be chosen by the students. This notion of the familial context having a subliminal influence on what to study at university can be seen in the following two comments. The first by a first year history student who reflected that their Dad being a history teacher was very likely to have influenced in their decision-making for what to study at university. The second by a languages graduate who explained that although there was no direct pressure from their family to study modern languages, it was likely that this influenced their decision-making in choosing what to study.

> *[…] my Dad did history at uni, he was a history teacher, so I was brought up going to museums […] a little nudge all through my life saying you're probably going to end up doing History…* (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1)

> *My father did English but his siblings did languages, which may, looking back, is probably why I did them, […] I didn't feel pressured […] I think it just opened it up a bit more as an option for me… (*G/I/BA Spanish & French/2009 - 2013)

The data also indicated that having parents that had studied a humanities degree at university made it easier to choose to study a humanities degree themselves, despite being apprehensive about whether it would lead to employment. This view was explicitly highlighted in an individual

interview with a philosophy graduate, who explained that their parents' positive reflections on studying a humanities degree at university, meant that they felt more confident in also choosing to study a humanities degree.

[…] my dad he'd say "oh university, the best years of your life" […] that was quite inspiring […] But I think that it's quite significant that if I didn't have parents that had that experience, I probably wouldn't have felt as confident doing a humanities degree as I would be thinking [..] if I would have a job at the end of it… (G/I/BA Philosophy/2006 - 2009)

These reflections suggested there was some concern that a humanities degree might have less economic currency in the graduate labour market, and as such, students were mindful of this when considering what subject to study.

Educational context

In terms the role educators played in the decision of the subject to study at university, this was very much based on the relationship with the educator. The notion of the educator as a role model was a shared view evident in the data, with students having a good rapport more likely to consider choosing that subject to study at university. A second year French and Portuguese student described how they chose to carry on studying French because of being inspired and motivated by their French teacher at school, having originally wanted to study English but decided against this because of their teachers in this subject. Reflecting a reoccurring theme across the focus groups with students, they explained how integral the role of a teacher could be in choosing subjects at university.

[…] originally I wanted to do English at university but then I started my GCSEs and my teachers were a bit naff, whereas this French teacher was amazing and he was so good at motivating people and he was just so passionate about the subject and I really think that rubbed off on me... (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

Chapter 4

The importance of having encouraging and motivating teachers in choosing subjects at university was also mirrored across the interviews with the graduates. As an example, one graduate described how they were inspired by their philosophy teacher at school, which had a big impact on choosing to study philosophy at university. They described feeling inspired by him at a time when they were growing up and wanting to continue to study the subject at university to make him proud.

[…] my philosophy teacher was a big impact on me deciding to study philosophy just because he was a brilliantly inspiring person when I was growing up […] so I suppose almost wanting to make him be proud as well that I was continuing philosophy… (G/I/BA Philosophy & Maths/2009 - 2012)

As has been discussed above, the data showed that students often chose their degree subjects based on their capability and aptitude in the subjects at A-levels. Educators however, also played a part in this and were seen in an advisory capacity, offering guidance on the subjects to choose to study based on the students' ability in the subject area itself. This can be seen in the following comments, one from a current student and one from a graduate, who explained how their teachers had a significant influence on what they chose to study.

I was good at Maths, but it wasn't what I enjoyed or what I felt most comfortable with and my teachers wanted me to do languages because I was good at them… (CS/FG1/ BA French & Spanish Linguistic Studies/Y1)

I actually almost didn't take history for A level, I nearly dropped it in favour of drama, and then my teacher said actually you're really good at this and you should probably keep going… (G/I/BA History/2005 - 2008)

The data also suggested that educators had a significant role to play in the careers advice they gave to student, which had an influence in the subjects they chose to study at university. This is evidenced in the following comment by a first year history student who

wanted to pursue a career in Law, and was directed by her school careers advisor to study history and then do a conversion course.

My careers advisor advised me to do history. She said it's a lot easier to go in to Law doing history and then a conversion, as opposed to doing straight law… (CS/FG1/BA History/Y1)

4.2.2   Summary: choosing what to study at university

The love of the subject was a clear primary motivator for what to study at university for both the current students and graduates, however employment opportunities were still given consideration. For some it was perceived that the "broadness" of a humanities degree with there being no specific career focus would offer greater choice of career opportunities, however for others this came with a sense of uncertainty and even considered as a risk.

The data revealed a complex picture for choosing degree subjects, which was intertwined with concepts of value, as was shown through influence of the familial context where there were notions of some subjects being perceived as "better" than others in terms of their traction in the graduate labour market. For some students there was a tension between studying a degree based on the love of subject area and choosing a subject that had greater currency in the graduate labour market. In terms of the role educators played in the decision of the subject to study at university, this was based on the relationship with the educator. In some cases this was to positively reinforce study of a particular subject either through the inspiration and motivation, or through capability and aptitude in the subject area.

4.3   Motivations for where to study

It has already been highlighted that there was a complex interplay of motivations for choosing to go to university and what to study. Similarly, the data from the focus groups with students and individual interviews with graduates indicated that deciding where to go to university was a multifaceted thought process, with a number of considerations that needed to be balanced in order to reduce the number of options and come to a decision. These considerations, which were used as a means of filtering choice, can be grouped in to four broad areas*; league tables,*

geography, course content and *emotional connection*. The accounts by the students and graduates within the focus groups and individual interviews who described how they went about selecting universities, suggested that there was a hierarchy to the thought process, which funnelled down their choices . The diagram below (figure 2.3) shows the filtering process that was typically used for choosing where to study. Once the degree subject had been decided, league tables were used as the principal filter to narrow down choice. This was followed by geographical location of the university, then the content of the degree course taking in to account the module topics that could be studied, and finally the emotional connection they felt to the university when they visited.

Figure 2.4: A diagram to show the hierarchical relationships by current students and graduates in their decision making process for filtering choice of university
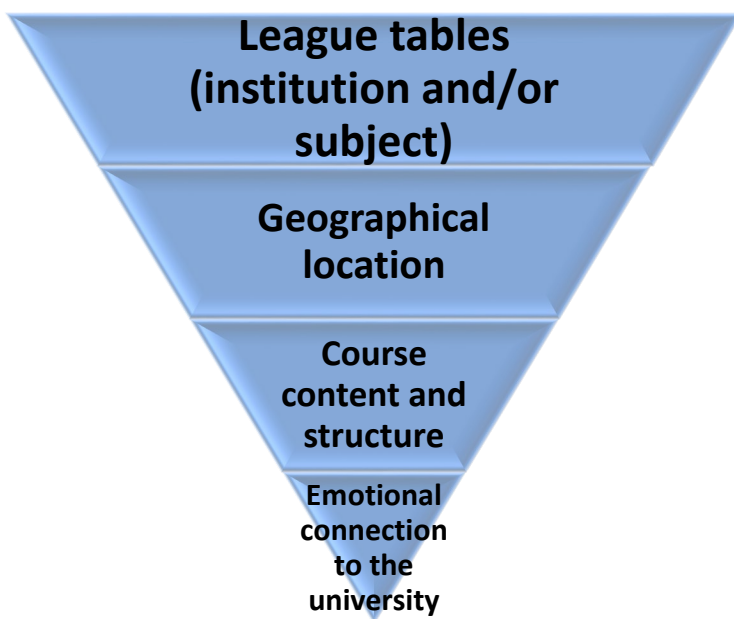
The following comment by a second year English student from a focus group discussion describes in detail the process they went through in deciding where to study. They explain how they used reputation of the universities and their entry requirements as a starting position, which was then narrowed down by location, discounting universities that were too far from home as they would have financial implications. These choices were then further narrowed by looking at the course offering and specifically what topics they could study. The deciding factor was the emotional connection felt when visiting the universities and how they felt in the environment.

I went on to the Russell Group website and then I looked at the grades that you need and then I went for cities that either interested me, or actually I crossed off ones I definitely didn't want to go to. I didn't want to go too far because of travel expenses. And then I looked at the courses of what you could study […] And also going to the Open Days had a massive impact- everyone says "oh you get a feel of it", and I was like, "no you don't", but you definitely do…. (CS/FG3/BA English/Y2)

As described above, the primary consideration for the majority was narrowing down the choices of university by league table position- this included looking at institutional rankings, subject rankings or a combination of both. This approach was explained by a second year languages student who described how they used subject league tables initially to filter down their choice, and then used the geographical locations of the universities to narrow down the options further.

[…] I looked through the league tables, sort of the top I don't know 20 from the subjects I wanted to do […] I wanted to go far, so I crossed all the ones which were too close, […] I went and visited I think four of five… (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

Both current students and graduates used the location of the university as a filter. As described above, in some instances this was to be closer to home and travel expenses were kept in consideration, whereas in other cases the preference was to be further away from home. There data also showed instances of there being much more specific criteria when it came down to location, such as the size of the city, cost of living and the aesthetics of the campus. A history graduate described some of these considerations.

[…] I didn't want to go to London, because I didn't want to be in such a big place and also the cost of being in London […] it was that criteria of a big enough town or city, not too far from home, and a campus... (G/I/BA History/1998 - 2001)

The data showed that the location of the university was also linked to other motivations such as the chance for a fresh start and it was a conscious decision in some cases to choose a university that friends were unlikely to attend, seeing it as an opportunity to meet new people and make

new friends. This was particularly emphasised by an English and French graduate (2010 -2014) in an individual interview who described how they were *"quite excited"* about the prospect of going *"somewhere completely new"* where there would be an opportunity to meet new people. This was not the same for all, as the data showed that in some instances the prospect of going to a university to have a fresh start with all new people was seen as daunting, and the location of the university was chosen based on some kind of familiarity. In these cases, there was a preference to apply to the same universities as their friends. In an individual interview with a philosophy graduate (2009-2012), they described how knowing that a few of their friends from school were going to the same university as them was a *"safety net",* giving a sense of *"reassurance"*.

Where course content was used as a filter for selecting universities there was a balancing act of the extrinsic and intrinsic considerations. Universities were discounted, even those which were high ranking in the league tables, where it was felt that the course was not right for them. An English and French graduate explained that even though they were only interested in looking at universities that were highly ranked in the league table, they disregarded Oxford and Cambridge because of the course content.

> *I had decided early on I did not want to go to Oxford or Cambridge […] Languages at Oxford or Cambridge are literature and nothing else, and I wasn't interested in that. […] So that counted them off…* (G/I/BA English and French/2010-2014)

Although course content was an important consideration for the majority, the data showed that for some the contents of the courses were so similar across universities, that there needed to be another means to filter down choice. A second year history student described how they approached narrowing their choices of university down.

> *[…] it did come more down to kind of distance from home, what the campus itself was like […] I believed that I would get kind of a similar enjoyment or a similar experience studying history in terms of the academic side wherever I went…* (CS/FG2/BA History with year abroad/Y1)

Whereas league tables, geographical location and course content were the initial key considerations in narrowing down the choice of universities, the emotional connection with the university as experienced through visiting the university (e.g. Open Days) was the final filtering stage and the determining factor for the preferred choice. Both in the focus group discussions with the current students and in the individual interviews with the graduates, there were frequent references to the feelings they had when they visited universities. In some cases it was difficult to articulate what it was specifically that made them feel comfortable in the university environment, which can be seen in the following comment by a first year history student. They explained how they ended up choosing the university as their preferred choice after visiting and comparing it to others, and described how when they visited they felt comfortable in the university setting, which had not been experienced elsewhere- yet was unable to specifically express what it was that made them feel that way.

I ended up choosing [the name of university] *just because when I got here I had the proverbial feeling, […] I know it sounds so lame, but I genuinely did, and that's something I hadn't experienced from seeing other universities, […] that is how I knew what I wanted…..(CS/FG2/BA History with year abroad/Y1)*

For others an importance was attached to being able to visualise themselves within the environment giving consideration to the intellectual fit of the university.

[…] the final decision came down to how I felt about myself, where I saw myself in three years, what kind of person I wanted to be and which I felt suited my personality more in terms of what I wanted and how I learn.. (CS/FG3/BA History/Y2)

The data showed a complex interplay between the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for selecting which universities to attend as students had to balance competing motivations- many of these were as a result of the influencing agencies.

4.3.1   The influence of others in choosing where to study

Societal context

As described above the primary filter for choosing which university to attend was league table position. The data showed that this was linked to notions of prestige, with there being a perception that a higher ranked and therefore more prestigious university would have greater economic currency in the labour market. This suggests that the societal context through media and political discourse was having a significant influence on choosing where to study. This is emphasised in the following comment by a second year archaeology student who suggested that the prestige of the university was the likely reason that everyone in the focus group had for choosing it. However, they also recognised that more emphasis was now often being placed on league tables, rather than the focus being on the degree itself.

> *[…] like why we chose to study at* [name of university]*, the league tables are a massive thing- people are choosing more on league tables more than say the actual degree programme.* (CS/FG3/BA Archaeology/Y2)

In the following comment by a final year philosophy student, they acknowledged the importance of league table ranking as an economic currency, and expressed the view that the purpose of going to university was predominantly for the enhanced employment opportunities post-graduation.

> *I wanted to go to a Russell Group university, […] I thought if I was spending all this money I'd want to you know go to one that is going to be recognised by a lot of companies […] you are ultimately going to university, I think, to get a good job out of it…* (CS/FG4/BA Philosophy/FY)

League table rankings as the primary filter for choosing where to study was also used by a number of the graduates, however those who had completed their degrees more recently placed much more emphasis on this. An English and French graduate, who studied from 2010 to 2014 paying a tuition fee rate of £3290, explained how they used institutional prestige and subject rankings as the principal means to filter down their choices of university.

[…] I was thinking Russell Group basically and so I ranked them in English, noted down a couple of the Russell Group ones that I thought I might like to look at, then ranked them all by French and which ones had high numbers on both [….] but it was mostly based on initially the league tables… (G/I/BA English and French/2010-2014)

For the graduates who completed their degrees where there were lower tuition fees or no tuition fees, the status of the university as identified through league tables was not the primary influence for choosing which university to attend- they were much more guided by the geographical location of the university and also the influence of other people. The following example from a history graduate who studied from 2005 to 2008 paying a tuition fee of £1000 highlighted the less influential role of league tables in narrowing their choice of universities to attend. They explained that their primary reason for choosing which university to attend was through being influenced by their boyfriend at the time. However, in her reflections they did also acknowledge being conscious of wanting to go to a "good university", which was identified as universities that had higher entry requirements rather than through league tables themselves.

[…] I had a boyfriend at the time who supported Southampton Football Club […], so I thought, well, that's a nice kind of middle ground […] I had the notion of wanting to go to a good university so I must have realised that it was important where I went. But I think I based that more on "this place must be good because the entry requirements are higher". (G/I/BA History/2005 – 2008)

This notion of there being better universities than others is also reflected in the following comment by a history graduate who commenced their studies in 1998 when there were no tuition fees. They similarly explained how their primary filter was based on location; however felt aware of wanting to apply to a "good university", but that at the time was not clear about what that actually meant.

[…] I probably wasn't the most well informed student. I went for largely what it looked like, what the prospectus looked like, did a small amount of research in to course content […] I looked at places that weren't too far from home […] I applied to what I thought were good universities, with very little information (G/I/BA History/1998 - 2001)

Chapter 4

Familial context

As had been discussed in the previous sections, the familial context was an influence when it came to deciding to go to university and subject choice. The data also showed there were instances where the familial context had an influence on choosing where to study. This can be seen from the following two comments, one from a current student and one from a graduate, who described how comments from parents about universities was perceived as welcome advice, as they had a certain level of knowledge having been to university themselves.

[….] my Mum also pushed a lot for me to come here […] so I think she probably did have influence […] I think perhaps what my family thought of it and stuff was also part of it, because I kind of thought well they've been through university, like they know what they're looking for…..(CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

[…] I talked to my family a lot about it. I mean both my parents went to uni so they knew about the process and that kind of thing… (G/I/BA English and French/2010- 2014)

The data showed that there was also a level of pragmatism in choosing where to study. In some cases there was a reliance on parents to visit universities, which had a bearing on their choices of university. This is described by a final year English and French student who explained how they were reliant on their dad in being able to visit universities. Although it was recognised that this was something that could have done on their own, it was not something they actually wanted to do. This suggests students welcomed the supportive role of their family in their decision-making.

*[…] my choice was based on how far my parents were willing to take me to universities
[…] My Mum can't have days off work, so it's always kind of like up to my Dad whether he would take me […] and I could have gone by myself but I didn't really want to…*
(CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

In some cases the familial influence was as a result of someone from that context having studied at the same universities they were applying to. This is highlighted in the following comment from

a first year languages student who explained that they chose their place through Clearing not only based on the reputation of the institution and the structure and contents of the course, but found validation from the fact that their mum had also attended the university.

> *[..] I like went through Clearing […] When I got my offers I think what motivated me was the fact that* [name of university] *was a Russell Group and not many of the others were and plus like when I looked further into the course, it seemed like quite interesting […] plus my Mum went here - she liked it here, so I thought it was good…* (CS/FG2/BA Spanish/Y1)

Educational context

As highlighted in section 4.1 above, the data showed that even where it was felt there was little or even no pressure from parents to go to university, there was a much greater influence from those in in the educational context. Educators were also described as being particularly influential in choosing which universities to apply to. The qualitative data repeatedly described experiences of being influenced to apply to Russell Group universities as they were considered to be "better" universities, and as was identified in the societal context, a more prestigious university was considered to have greater economic currency in the graduate labour market. This emphasis to apply to what was considered to be a more prestigious university seemed to particularly be the case for those that had attended more selective schools where there was a pressure to apply to a university that matched the schools' expectations of the students' academic ability. A second year history student reflected on this.

> *I didn't look at anything that wasn't a Russell Group because I was coming from a selective Sixth Form […] I'm sure if they could have done they would have got everyone in to Oxbridge, […] I feel like a Russell Group was a thing like that's what you should be aiming for…* (CS/FG2/BA History with a Year Abroad/Y2)

This suggests that the educational context had a significant part to play in reinforcing the political and media discourse on the economic value of a degree in the graduate labour market, through shaping students' perceptions of value and their decision making in where to study.

The following comment by a final year student not only reinforces the pressure from the school in applying to a prestigious university, but also highlights the practice of teachers "hand-picking" students who were encouraged to apply to Oxford and Cambridge universities. The student described how this had a significant impact on their decision making of which university to apply to.

> *[…] the pressure definitely came from the school, but at my school they kind of handpicked the people they wanted to go to Oxbridge and I wasn't one of those […] and although I'm really happy here, it's one of those things that I really think about quite a lot…* (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

The influence of the educational context in choosing where to study was also seen in the graduate data, with some describing how they applied to universities that their teachers had applied to. Others described how they were given a slightly firmer steer from their teachers on where to apply to, valuing their opinion and guidance.

> *[…] my History teacher gave me a bit of guidance with applying to Oxford and I applied to his old college…* (G/I/BA History/1998 - 2001)

> *[…] my English teacher […] she basically said don't apply to York […] and I had a lot respect for that teacher so I listened to her and didn't apply…* G/I/BA English and French/2010 - 2014)

In the graduates' reflections there was a sense of there being a change in how students today were supported in their decision-making compared to when they were applying to university. A history graduate offered their reflections on this change, commenting that students today have

access to social media forums that offer support and guidance with the decision- making around applying to university, which they described as being very different to when they were applying to university at a time when there was no internet. This meant that if the support and guidance from the school was limited, it was far harder to make informed decisions about where to study.

[…] I was like pre-internet so you had the prospectus and you went to a visit day and you might talk to a few other people who either went to that place […] and that was it really. So having things like the Student Room now, social media generally, I think it's a lot easier […] there's a lot more information to students now… (G/I/BA History/1998 - 2001)

4.3.2   Summary: where to study

The data indicated that deciding where to go to university was a multidimensional thought process, with a number of considerations that needed to be balanced in order to reduce the number of options and come to a decision. -*league tables, geography, course content* and *emotional connection*. Whereas league tables, geographical location and course content were the initial key considerations in narrowing down the choice of universities, the emotional connection with the university was the final filtering stage and the determining factor for the preferred choice.

The data highlighted a generally agreed perception that a higher ranked university was synonymous with being a more prestigious university and therefore would have greater economic currency in the labour market. For the current students and more recent graduates, the status of a university or degree course, as identified through league table positioning, was a strong influence being used to indicate the instrumental value of their degree and currency in terms of labour market opportunities. This suggests an acknowledgement that not all degrees are equal and as such, strategic choices were being made about which university to attend.

4.4   Chapter summary

This chapter has highlighted the complexity of motivations for deciding to go to university, what to study and where to study. Three influencing contexts were introduced, which had a significant role to play in shaping humanities students' decision-making. The data also evidenced that

students' motivations around higher education were intertwined with concepts of value, particularly in terms of its currency in a competitive graduate labour market. Whereas this chapter focused on the motivation for decision-making, the next chapter explores the context in which notions of value were being formed.

Chapter 5   Value in a changing higher education policy context

The previous chapter focused on the motivations and influences for attending university, choice of subject and where to study (Research question 1). This chapter builds on the duality and complexity that was identified through concentrating on the context in which students and graduates were making their decisions. Through understanding their expectations of and experiences in the labour market, it will focus on how humanities students' perceptions of value were being enacted in the policy context of marketisation and the impact of oversupply and competition, and whether this has led to an increase in instrumental motivators and value being framed in instrumental terms. This chapter will set out to answer research questions 2, 3 and 4.

Research question 2   What value do students ascribe to their degrees?

Research question 3   How do students understand the role university plays in preparing them for future employment?

Research question 4   Are there any relationships between students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation?

This chapter is divided in to two core parts. Section 5.1 considers perceptions of the purpose of higher education and the role of universities in preparation for employment. Framed within this context section 5.2 explores perceptions of value and how the value of their degree is understood.

5.1   Perceptions of the role of universities

Chapter 4 identified that current students had a dual primary purpose for attending university with the extrinsic and intrinsic drivers being equally important, whereas the graduates had a more intrinsic primary impetus for going to university. Using the economic and political context as a

frame, this section focuses on how students and graduates understood the purpose of university and the role they believed it played in preparing them for future employment.

In both the current student and graduate survey, participants were asked what they thought the purpose of higher education was (question 6). Using the Likert scale 1 to 5, participants were provided with four statements, two focusing on extrinsic elements and two on intrinsic elements, and asked how far they agreed with them. Where it was felt there were other reasons that were not already stated, there was an additional fifth option of 'Other' that could be selected with an opportunity to specify as free-text. The chart in figure 2.5 below shows the current students' and graduates' agreements with these statements.

Figure 2.5: Current students' and graduates' responses to survey question 6 on their perceptions of the purpose of higher education.
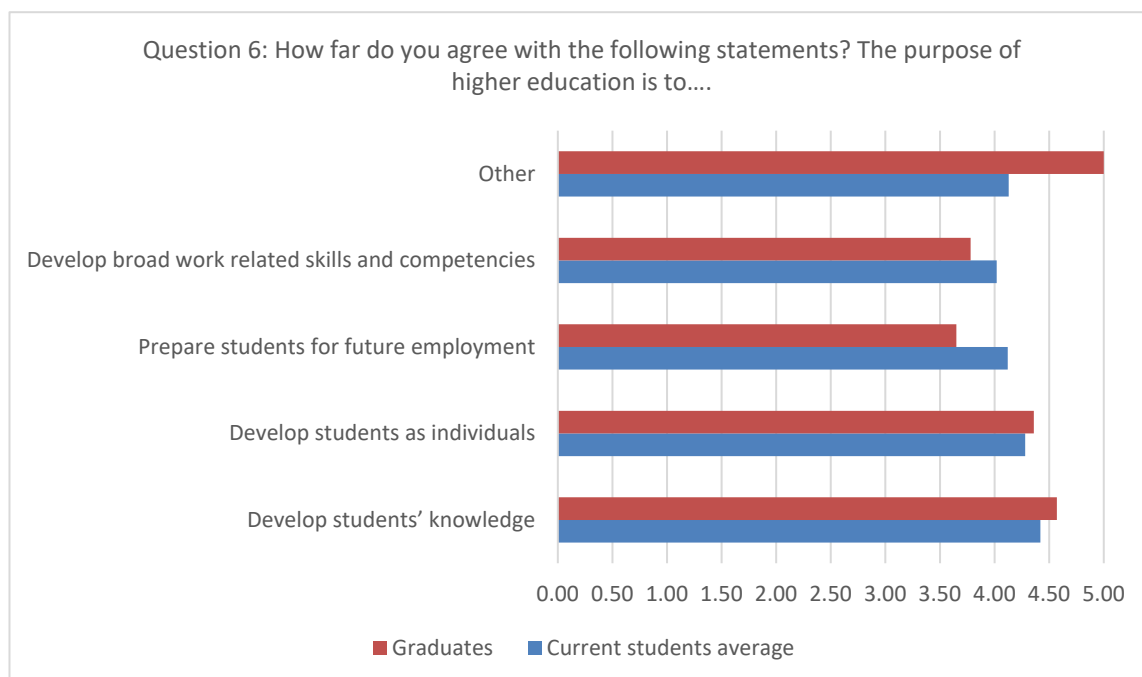
The data showed that for the current students there was a strong agreement with all the statements, which suggested that they perceived higher education to have a core dual purpose - that being instrumental in terms of preparation for employment and development of work related skills, and intrinsic in terms of personal growth and development of subject knowledge. This reflected their dual motivations for attending university as was identified in the previous chapter, thus highlighting that their motivations for going to university were driven by their

perceptions about the purpose of university and what they should expect from their university experience.

Whereas the current students had a broadly strong agreement with all statements, the graduates had a stronger agreement with the more intrinsic purposes of higher education (*Develop students as individuals G - 4.36/CS - 4.28; Develop students' knowledge G - 4.57/CS - 4.42*) compared with the more instrumental purposes *(Develop broad work related skills and competencies G -3.78/CS-4.02; Prepare students for future employment G - 3.65/CS - 4.12)*. This similarly reflected their motivations for attending university as was also identified in the previous chapter.

Those who opted to select 'Other' and commented in the free text provided some further insight into the perceptions of the purpose of higher education, and suggested a much more complex picture than the quantitative data indicated. The qualitative data associated with this survey question indicated a strong sense of cynicism about the purpose of higher education, with some of the 'Other' comments from current students referring to universities as solely being interested in making money mainly for their own benefit. This is highlighted in the two examples below, which not only suggested a sense of agitation amongst students about the cost of tuition fees but also an insight in to how they perceived their fees were being spent. A full discussion on the notion of value for money and how this shaped students' understanding of the value of their degree is explored in more detail below.

It [university] *is a money-making business with students being the cash cows.* (CS/Q6/BA Modern Languages/FY)

The aim of higher education is to get students to pay for fees to then pay for research which increases the prestige of the uni. (CS/Q6/BA Modern Languages/FY)

Further comments given as 'Other' in survey question 6 built on this disparagement about the purpose of university, suggesting there was an understanding of a degree being a necessary requirement in order to minimise any risk to gaining employment post-graduation. This is highlighted in the following comment by a first year history student who felt that a degree was a means to an end, serving merely as a function to meet a minimum threshold when applying for jobs in the graduate labour market.

Tick the box on your CV that says 'yes, I have a degree. (CS/Q6/BA History/Y1)

This suggests there was a perception of a degree being understood as a valuable commodity when applying for jobs and therefore contextualises the findings in the previous chapter that identified a key motivation for going to university was driven by a strong perception that university was the primary pathway to a successful career – a perception reinforced by the three influencing contexts. These influences and pressures manifested themselves in how students understood the purpose of university. This is reflected in the following comment by a first year student who suggested that there was a difference between what the role of a university *is* and what it actually *should be,* highlighting a perception of a possible dichotomy between the instrumental and intrinsic functions.

*Does th*is [question*] mean "The purpose of higher education is to..." or "The purpose of higher education should be to?"* (CS/Q6/BA Film and English /Y1)

This sense of there being a disparity in the purpose of higher education is explained further in the following comment by a second year film student, who suggested there was a difference in the understanding of the purpose of university between students and universities themselves. The student described how they believed there was an over-emphasis from universities on getting students ready for future careers, and that university should not solely be about preparing for a job.

[…] the way you feel what the purpose of university should result in is different from what the people involved think about it. I see a ton of information everywhere promoting volunteering and careers opportunities across campus, but I choose to think of university as […] something that's not always about future opportunities, regardless of how dominant it is within the culture of university. (CS/Q6/BA Film Studies/Y2)

The free text comments associated with question 6 in the graduate survey highlighted a perception that the purpose of university may change depending on the subject being studied. This is evidenced in the following comment by a philosophy and politics graduate (2006-2009)

who believed that the more vocational the degree, the more it should prepare you for future employment.

> *People take different degrees for different reasons: the purpose of a business-related higher education experience, for example, should definitely aim to prepare students for future employment.* (G/Q6/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

To gain a deeper insight in to this complex picture of perceptions around the purpose of higher education, the notion of the role of universities as preparation for future employment was discussed in both the focus groups with the currents students and the individual interviews with graduates. These discussions highlighted a variety of opinions about what the purpose of university was, with some students sitting at one end of the spectrum holding strong feelings that university was primarily about preparation for future employment, while others had opposing views seeing the purpose of university as predominantly developing subject knowledge and personal growth. These two contrasting opinions about the purpose of university are reflected in the comments below.

> *I would say the purpose of higher education is to get a successful and well paid job…* (CS/FG1/BA French and Spanish Linguistic Studies/Y1)

> *I don't feel like I am at university to like keep that job in sight, I feel like I'm here to enjoy the specialised study […] the culture […] the personal growth…* (CS/FG2/BA History with a Year Abroad/Y1)

Although the above examples highlight two contrasting perspectives, the focus group discussions also indicated that it was not as simplistic as seeing the purpose of university either as solely preparation for employment or only about personal growth and knowledge development. Many of the participants seemed to occupy a middle ground, acknowledging the dual role of university, with both instrumental and intrinsic functions. The following comment by a first year history student showed that they not only recognised the intrinsic purposes of university, such as identity

formation and subject development, however also believed that university was also about preparation for employment.

> *[…] it is just like development of yourself, of your skills, of your knowledge, you as a*
> *person as well, getting new experiences […] it is preparation for the job market.*
> (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1)

The notion of higher education as preparation for employment also formed part of the discussion in the individual interviews with graduates, who took a reflective positioning of their university experience and the benefits they felt they got from going to university in forming their views about its purpose. As was identified in figure 2.5 above, the individual interview data also indicated a perception that the purpose of university was more about developing subject knowledge and growing as an individual, than it was about preparation for future employment. This was emphasised by an English and French graduate who described how they believed that the primary purpose of university was about "academic study" rather than as preparation for the workplace, with a secondary benefit of developing life skills as a result of being exposed to the wider university experience.

> *[…] the university experience of living away from home teaches you how to live, how to*
> *pay bills, how to sort out problems in the house you're living in, kind of as an indirect*
> *consequence rather than as an active goal of university. University should be about*
> *academic study […] rather than becoming factories and businesses that churn out people*
> *ready for the world of work".* (G/I/BA English and French/2010 - 2014)

There was also a perception that universities had a social role to play in developing students in to citizens to enable them to make a positive contribution to the wider society and the community in which they live in. This view was particularly expressed in an individual interview with a philosophy graduate who felt that universities had an opportunity to play a part in this wider general development of people, particularly young people who were moving away from home for the first time.

> […] [Universities] *play a part in the general holistic development of people […] it's mostly quite young people going to university, sort of 18, 19, first time away from home. I think there's a lot a university can do [….] to shape them into citizens and shape them into people who can help society and the community they're in.* (G/I/BA Philosophy/2009-2012)

Yet despite these comments stressing the more intrinsic functions of a university, there was also recognition amongst the graduates that a changing higher education policy context, different from the one under which they studied, was having an impact on the role universities played in preparing students for the labour market. Given the changing higher education landscape, there was an understanding that there could be wider implications on society if a university did not at least act as a guide in some way by offering students some direction about what they could possibly do with their degree.

> *[…] it's not great for a society to have a large or a certain proportion of graduates every year who have no idea what they're doing and under employed for a year, so in that sense I guess universities should make available options which help people decide what they want to do… .* (G/I/BA Philosophy/2006-2009)

This sentiment was also mirrored by another graduate, who although felt that university should ultimately be about learning, recognised that universities needed to be more proactive with their careers information by offering clearer guidance for future career options.

> *[…] university should be about academia and learning, […], that's something that's changed quite a lot in the time since I was at university […] there's increasing emphasis on careers departments within universities now- they're not just a 'go and sit and have a chat about what you might do in the future', but it's to provide routes for students…* (G/I/BA History/1996-1999)

Despite having an understanding that universities were having an increasing role to play in preparation for future employment, there was also a sense of there being a possible tension

between increasing instrumental functions and intrinsic purposes of universities- a notion also identified in the current student data. A philosophy graduate raised concerns that the notion of a university playing a central role in preparing students for the graduate labour market could become a means to an ends; thus diminishing the other important functions that universities have in terms of development of subject knowledge and personal growth.

> *[…] it is seen more and more that the job of the university is not just to teach people, but to get them ready for a job that is of graduate level […] it detracts from that original pure pursuit of knowledge, of personal development. […] that is quite worrying, because it does very much narrow down this idea of knowledge is only useful to be able to get a job to apply it.* (G/I/BA Philosophy/2009-2012)

This section has shown there was a complex picture as to how the purpose of university was being perceived and understood, with varying emphasis on the instrumental functions in its role as preparation for employment, and the more intrinsic functions such as subject knowledge development and personal growth. In some instances, there were strong feelings of cynicism about the purpose of higher education, with it being a self-serving entity to make money from students for its own benefit. The data also showed that how the purpose of higher education was being understood was closely interwoven with perceptions of the economic value of the degree and its currency in the post-graduation labour market. Although the graduates perceived the purpose of higher education to have a more intrinsic function, there was an acknowledgement that a changing higher education policy context was having an impact on the role universities plays in preparing students for the labour market.

With more insight in to how the purpose of university was being understood, the following sections explore in more detail how the value of a degree was being understood in the context of increased marketisation of higher education.

5.2 Perceptions of value

To make meaning of the complex intertwinement of the instrumental and intrinsic motivations identified in the previous chapter, and the varied perceptions of the purpose of higher education discussed in the section above, there is a need to understand the context in which notions of

value were being formed. Reflecting the duality of motivations identified in the previous chapter, this section is split in to two parts - 5.2.1 explores instrumental value and 5.2.2 intrinsic value. To gain a greater understanding of this complexity, each section has been divided further in to sub-themes. Table 7.0 below summarises the value themes that will be discussed within each of the two core sections. These value sub-themes emerged as part of the analysis of the data, however uses existing notions identified within the research literature as an analytical framework and lens to structure the discussion.

Table 7.0: Value themes identified from the data analysis

Value type	Value Sub-themes	Value sub-themes descriptors
5.2.1 Instrumental Value	5.2.1a Value as a commodity	Consumerist attitudes, value for money and the financial nexus
	5.2.1b Value as status	The status of a degree qualification, represented through reputational prestige and subject status
	5.2.1c Value as positionality	Preparation for employment through credentialising and self-commodification
5.2.2 Intrinsic Value	5.2.2a Knowledge formation	The advancement of disciplinary knowledge and intellectual development
	5.2.2b Identity formation	Personal growth and development of self

5.2.1   Instrumental value

The previous chapter identified that motivations and decision making around going to university was strongly influenced by the societal, educational and familial contexts that were forming and shaping perceptions of the instrumental value of their degree, in terms of its economic value in the post-graduation labour market. This section considers the higher education environment in which these decisions were being made and perceptions and expectations about university formed. The three sub-themes explored in this section are *Value as a commodity* (5.2.1.1), which considers notions of consumerism in higher education, perceptions of value for money and the connection with tuition fees; *Value as status* (5.2.1.2), which considers the standing of a degree

qualification as represented through reputational prestige and perceptions about subject hierarchy and their perceived value in the job market; and *Value as positionality* (5.2.1.3), which explores preparation for employment through the notions of credentialising and self-commodification.

5.2.1.1 Value as a commodity

The increase of the marketisation of higher education, as felt through the societal, familial and educational contexts, resulted in students framing their perceptions of value in instrumental terms. Using the qualitative data in the surveys, focus groups with current students and individual interviews with graduates, this section explores how tuition fees were understood, the notion of value for money and expectations of the university experience in a consumerist culture.

Tuition fees

Question 5b in both the current student and graduate surveys asked about the downsides to going to university. The question in the survey to current students asked*, "What downsides, if any, do you think you will experience from going to university?"* This was a free-text question that allowed participants to respond in their own words. The responses to this question were collated and formed in to a wordcloud as a visual means to identify any trends and patterns in their understanding of what they perceived were the downsides to going to university. Figure 3.0 below shows the wordcloud for Question 5b from the current student survey.

Figure 3.0: A wordcloud from the responses to Question 5b from the current student survey, which asked, "What downsides, if any, do you think you will experience from going to university?"3

As can be seen from the above wordcloud the overriding concern for the current students related to debt. Although many of the free text comments were a singular word - "debt", others offered more explanation as to how the debt affected them. Many referred to the worry and stress they felt of having the debt follow them in to adulthood, as well as feelings of uncertainty with finding a job post-graduation where intensified competition in the graduate job market meant having a degree was no guarantee for finding a job. These views are reflected in the following comments.

An extreme amount of debt will obviously be something I will have hanging over my shoulders for the rest of my life. (CS/Q5b/BA Music & Management Science with a Year Abroad/Yr1)

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3 The data in the wordclouds include all words used in the responses

The ridiculously high debts that you are left with after uni. Also, due to the high numbers

of people who now go to university, having a degree has no guarantee that you will be

able to find employment once you graduate. (CS/Q5b/BA French and Spanish/FY)

The data showed that this uncertainty of finding a job was a significant cause for concern, as it was felt that the amount of debt being accrued might not actually be worth it if they were unable to find what they believed to be a suitable job after graduation. A second year languages student described how they expected their degree would result in a job post-graduation to be "well-paid"- negating any lost earnings whilst studying for their degree.

Finishing university in debt, missing out on 4 years of time that could have potentially

have been spent earning if I cannot find a well-paid job after getting my degree.

(CS/Q5b/ BA Spanish and Portuguese/Y2)

These comments show that students determined whether the debt associated with their degree was worth it by attributing a value to their degree that was based on their future employment outcomes. A similar question was also asked in the graduate survey. Question 5b in the graduate survey asked participants to reflect on their university experience in the context of their familiarity with negotiating the job market post-graduation- *"What ways, if any, have you experienced any downsides from going to university?"* Figure 3.1below shows the wordcloud for Question 5b from the graduate survey.

Figure 3.1: A wordcloud from the responses to Question 5b from the graduate survey, which asked, "What downsides, if any, have you experienced from going to university?"[4]

Even though the graduates who paid tuition fees were not paying as much as the current students at £9000, as can be seen from the wordcloud above there was still a concern about debt for some of the graduates. A history graduate who studied between 1998–2001, and paid tuition fees of £1000, mirrored the comment from the current student above, and described the debt as an ongoing cause of anxiety post-graduation.

The debt was a millstone around my neck for the next for 11 years (G/Q5b/BA History/1998-2001)

A number of the graduates also made reference to the uncertainty of the job market, as is reflected in the comment below made by a History graduate who studied between 2011 - 2014.

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[4] The data in the wordclouds include all words used in the responses

Student loan debt and uncertain job prospects. (G/Q5b/BA Archaeology and History/2011-2014)

To explore further and provide context to some of the issues raised in the survey, the subject of tuition fees was also discussed as part of the focus groups and individual interviews. Chapter 4 highlighted that current students felt pressured to have to justify to others as well as themselves their decision making for going to university and choice of subject. The cost of going to university was a significant contributory factor to this need to have to rationalise their choices, in order to demonstrate its usefulness in economic terms. A first year history student explained how the rising cost of tuition fees meant that there was now an additional pressure to have to stay at university, even if they had decided that it was not something they wanted to do anymore.

[…] it's not as it was in the past, you can't kind of say […], "oh it's only, you know, a small bit of money that I'm spending, if I don't like it I can drop out", […] it's a lot of money that you've wasted…. (CS/FG2/BA History with a Year Abroad/Y1)

This sentiment was mirrored in the graduate data, where it was recognised that because of the lower costs associated with going to university, there was less pressure on them to have to complete. This can be seen in following comment by a history graduate who studied at a time when there were no tuition fees. They explained how they found comfort in the fact that they were not being overburdened with the cost of going to university, which gave them flexibility to experiment with degree subjects whilst not having any defined career plans - something they recognised would be a significant challenge for students today with the high cost of tuition fees.

[…] at the time I went to university because there were no fees and I was going to be on a full grant as well, it didn't seem such a big deal. […] there was no financial penalty if I dropped out or I didn't like it […] what it does now is deter some students who are not really sure what they want to do or why, because it is such a big financial commitment… (G/I/BA History/1996-1999)

There was a common perception from the graduates that the significantly increased tuition fees was influencing how the value of a degree was being understood by students today, which was shaping their decision making. A history graduate who paid tuition fees of £1225 reflected how they might have made different decisions about their choice of degree subject if they were paying more tuition fees.

> *[…] I possibly would have applied for something slightly more vocational […] that might have actually lead to an obvious job […] education or midwifery or something […] When I applied I didn't really think about it…* (G/I/BA History/2005-2008)

This was a collective theme found in the data from the graduates, and although many of them enjoyed their degree and university experience, they questioned whether the substantial cost of tuition fees today would mean that they would make the same choices. In the following comment by a history graduate, they reflect on how if they were paying £9000 tuition fees this might have meant choosing to study law rather than history – believing this would have led to a more direct route in to employment, and an easier way to justify spending that amount of money.

> *[..] I probably would have studied law because I think I would have found it quite hard to justify to myself and my family- "I really like history, I'm going to do that". Whereas there could have been a route that would lead me more directly in to employment.* (G/I/BA History/1996-1999)

The ways in which graduates reflected on the value of their degree was not solely related to the tuition fee nexus. This will be explored throughout each of the sections in this chapter as the data builds a more detailed picture as to how they understood the value of their degree in the context of having negotiated the graduate labour market.

Consumerist attitudes

Given the inflated costs with going to university, the data showed that there was a certain level of expectation and feelings of entitlement about what students should receive from their tuition

fees. The data indicated that consumerist attitudes were prevalent amongst the current students with references being made about the value for money they were getting from their degree in terms of the quality of their educational experience. The following comments highlight the dissatisfaction with the intensity and quality of teaching they received, which they did not feel was reflective of the amount of tuition fees they were paying. Comparisons were also made with other discipline areas, where for the same amount of tuition fees, they were receiving more contact hours.

I do question what I am paying for sometimes. I have 7 hours of contact time a week, […] why is this costing me £9000? (CS/Q4/BA English with Year Abroad/Y1

[…] I mean like some degrees have something like 30 hours of like contact hours whereas we have 7 and I think it's a bit strange that we're paying the same amount as them for a lot less hours of teaching… (CS/FG1/BA History/Y1)

The data also indicated that because there were less contact hours, this created negative perceptions from non-humanities students about the academic rigour of their degree. This view was highlighted in a focus group discussion between two final year students who agreed that there was a perceived assumption by others outside of the discipline that because there were less contact hours than it must be easier to get a First class degree classification in a humanities subject. One of the students commented that they believed the opposite to be true, and that in their view it was harder to get a higher degree classification in a humanities discipline. This indicated a notion that some subjects were considered to be more rigorous than others. Notions of subject hierarchy are discussed in more detail in section 5.2.1b below.

[…] that's always the thing….that you only have ten contact hours a week… (CS/FG4/BA Spanish (Linguistic Studies)/FY)

...so you must do no work ever, and it must be really easy to get a First and stuff like that…[…] I think actually the opposite is true… (CS/FG4/BA English and French /FY)

As well as expectations of getting value for money relating to contact hours, there was also a level of expectation with the quality of learning resources, such as the availability of books in the library. A languages student compared the university with the one that they studied at in their year abroad in France, commenting that the lower tuition fees at the French university was reflected in the limited facilities they offered.

> *[…] you definitely get what you pay for. Like in France they pay 150 Euros a semester, but there's just no facilities. The library is probably half the size of this building […], there was no books that were relevant […] no computers in the classrooms […] chalkboards and broken chairs and broken tables and graffiti everywhere and one tiny little café…* (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

Based on this understanding that higher tuition fees should mean better quality learning resources, when this did not meet students' expectations, this caused feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction about the value for money they were receiving. The following comment from a focus group discussion describes a conversation the student had with the library and their annoyance with not having the necessary books available to write their dissertation.

> *[…] I'm only allowed to have two inter-library loans and I've used both of them, and so I've kind of said, 'oh have you got the books?', then she's like, 'oh I haven't got them', but they should have them […] it is annoying….* (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

The notion of consumerism was also discussed with the graduates within the individual interviews. Those who were paying tuition fees made similar comments to the current students, as reflected in the following quote from an archaeology graduate who was paying tuition fees of £3070. They described how they calculated the cost of their lectures to determine whether they were getting value for money.

> *[…] I worked out how much my tuition fees were costing in lectures and realised that actually I was getting a raw deal compared to my maths friends...* (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

There was also a sense from the data that it was only when you were paying a certain amount of tuition fees that it would be appropriate to have concerns about the value for money you were receiving from your degree. A graduate who paid £1225 described how although they were cognisant of the limited contact hours they received at the time, because they paid such a minimal amount of fees, they did not feel that they were entitled to any more. This suggests an understanding of there being a correlation between the amount of tuition fees being paid and the value for money you should receive.

[…] I remember teacher contact hours being an issue when I was at uni […] it did seem kind of ridiculous, but you were only paying £1,000 a year, so it didn't seem like you could really expect to ask for more… (G/I/BA History/2005-2008)

There was a consensus amongst the graduates that because current students were paying a much higher rate of tuition fees that it was logical that they would feel entitled to receive more for their money. A history graduate explained how attributing a cost to something would naturally lead to having a perceived set of expectations and standards of service for their money, and understood how when these expectations were not met this could cause feelings of dissatisfaction.

I think the moment you start paying for anything you have expectations and customer standards, and I think it's easier to put up with something if it's a free or perceived as a free service… (G/I/BA History/1996-1999).

Despite recognising the impact that the higher rate of tuition fees may be having on students' perceptions and expectations of the value for money they were getting from their degree, there was also a feeling that notions of consumerism sat uncomfortably in an educational setting. An observation from one of the graduates was that there needed to be a distinction between a *customer* and a *consumer*, particularly when it was related to a degree, as they believed being a consumer had connotations of passiveness, whereas obtaining a degree involved effort and having active engagement. They additionally raised a concern that notions of student consumerism could potentially lead to feelings of a sense of entitlement with post-degree outcomes, thus shaping expectations for success in the job market.

[…] students as customers I don't have a problem with […], if you're paying all that money you should expect a good experience [….] Students as consumers is more challenging because consumers are often quite passive […] a degree isn't like that at all. A degree you have to work for, and engage with it […] the danger is that it [tuition fees] might instil a sense of entitlement in the sense that, […] 'well, of course I'll get a job because I've just paid £27,000 in fees, let alone maintenance grant… (G/I/BA Philosophy/2006-2008)

The data highlighted that increased tuition fees had encouraged consumerist attitudes. Perceptions of value for money were being shaped by expectations of the quality of their university experience and future success in the graduate labour market. How students understood the status value of their degree as an economic currency in the graduate labour market is explored next.

5.2.1.2   Value as status

Given the greater competition in the graduate labour market, the data showed there was a strong understanding of how their degree might give them an advantage when it came to applying for jobs. Building on the findings in Chapter 4, this section considers the standing of a degree qualification as represented through notions of reputational prestige and perceptions about subject hierarchy and their perceived value in the job market.

Reputational prestige

The previous chapter identified that the primary filter for choosing which university to attend was league table position. The data highlighted a perception that a higher ranked university was synonymous with being a more prestigious university and therefore would have greater economic currency in the labour market, thus suggesting that reputational prestige was seen as a status good. Given the significant costs associated with going to university and the anxiety this caused, as described above, there was a view that it would be a better investment to go to a university that employers placed a premium on.

> *[…] I thought if I was spending all this money I'd want to, you know, go to one that is going to be recognised by a lot of companies….* (CS/FG4/BA Philosophy/FY)

The notion of degree hierarchy was discussed in the focus groups, which suggested a general understanding that not all degree are equal, with some having more currency in the labour market than others. A first year history student explained how they believed that a degree from a Russell Group university would give them a competitive advantage in the graduate labour market over others who had been to a non-Russell Group university.

> *I'm quite a firm believer that all degrees are not equal […] not everyone's going to have a degree from a Russell Group…* (CS/FG2/BA History with Year Abroad/Y1)

The focus group discussions also indicated a sense of there being a hierarchy within the Russell Group universities, with the view that some had more currency in the labour market than others did. A second year student explained how they believed the value of a degree from the University of Cambridge was seen as more attractive by employers, solely based on its prestigious reputation.

> *When you get a degree from there, on your certificate it doesn't say the subject and it doesn't say the class of your degree, it just says University of Cambridge and your name […] So you go to your employer […] 'look I went to Cambridge', and that's it- no questions asked….* CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2

The graduates ruminated on their experience of the graduate job market and considered how important it was to employers where a degree came from. The view that some universities had a greater value than others was also commonly reflected in the graduate data, as can be seen in the following comment by a history graduate who believed that a degree from Cambridge or Oxford University, regardless of the subject it was in, had a greater value with employers.

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[…] I think Cambridge and Oxford are the two, which I think it doesn't matter what you get from them, you're probably get looked at because you've got a degree from them… (G/I/BA History/2011-2014)

Another graduate recalled an instance of when they were first employed and watched how their manager filtered the applications, which was initially based on having a degree and then on the quality of the degree as determined by the degree classification.

[…] the head of the department would sit in the middle of the office going through CVs. […] and see if they had a degree or not - and say, 'No', throw them in the bin; 'Yes', keep them; and when he'd done that he'd get rid of all the ones which had less than a 2:1, and then actually read them… (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

This concept of a degree classification as an indicator of being a more valuable currency in the graduate labour market was also evident in the reflections of other graduates. In the following comment by a history graduate, they describe their uncertainty of whether *where* they obtained their degree was given any importance by employers when they first graduated, however was conscious that the degree classification was regarded as significant in finding employment.

[…] in terms of where it [my degree] came from never really came up […] I wonder if maybe it would have, had I studied somewhere else […] that was perhaps lower down the league tables […] approaching the end of my degree, there was an emphasis on what grade you got […] having a First meant a lot…. (G/I/BA History/2005- 2008)

That the degree classification was a valuable commodity used to manage risk in the graduate labour market was also widely evident in the data from the current students. Students were aware of there being a greater pressure to get a First degree classification because of the highly competitive graduate labour market. There was also an understanding that not all degree classifications were equal, with its value being determined by the reputational prestige of the university.

[…] as university is highly pressurised and jobs are competitive, there is great emphasis to get a First […], which creates massive stress and pressure... (CS/Q5b/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1

[…] someone getting a First in the University of Northampton where they've got D's to get in to the system, it's not the same as getting a First from the University of [name of institution] - *it's not the same quality…* (CS/FG4/BA Philosophy/FY)

The data also indicated that the ways in which universities were responding to the current higher education policy of increased marketisation was having an impact on the status value of their degree. A focus group discussion with final year students reflected on how the combination of lower entry qualifications and increase in cohort size was depreciating the value of their degree.

[…] everyone in this room has an A or an A* in English […] that isn't the case anymore […] there are students who have got in this year with BBC […] I feel like it makes my degree […] less valuable than it was when I started. (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

Yet despite the view that the reputation of the university and degree classification could be used as status goods, which would provide them with a positional advantage with employers, paradoxically, this did not sit comfortably with the students and there was a feeling that these notions of status markers should not solely determine suitability for a job. A first year history student explained their uneasiness with how employers misused degrees and qualification as an indicator of ability and skills.

[…] I think they [employers] are looking for qualifications, where they are from - that's going to be a good indicator of your ability and skills- even if it's not, I still feel they see it as being so… (CS/FG2/BA History with Year Abroad/Y1)

The data has shown that the value of a degree in terms of its currency in the labour market was being determined by a number of weighted variables, which included the reputational prestige of

a university and degree classification. An additional variable that was also give importance was the degree subject itself.

Subject status

As highlighted in the previous chapter there was a complex picture for choosing a degree subject, which was very closely linked to notions of value. Negative perceptions of humanities degrees (soft-pure disciplines[5]) compared to degrees in the hard-pure and hard-applied disciplines, by the societal contexts reinforced by the familial contexts, because of their unclear link to a specific job or career, resulted in students feeling a need to have to validate the value of their degree in economic terms. Just as there were perceptions of a hierarchy of universities and the additional value this would provide when competing for jobs, the data also evidenced an understanding that some discipline areas were considered to have more economic value than others did. A final year history student described how they believed that a degree in a humanities subject provided a much more "rounded education" compared with a subject like chemistry that was much narrower in focus. This highlights how students were responding to these negative perceptions through re-engineering aspects of their degree to give them a greater economic value.

> *[…] in the humanities environment you get the opportunity to sort of have a far broader, more rounded education than if you were becoming a chemist or something like that where […] it's actually very narrow…* (CS/FG4/BA History/FY).

This practice of reformulating the value of their degree in economic terms in order to respond to the negative perceptions of humanities degrees as soft-pure disciplines having less traction in the graduate labour market was reflected across the focus groups discussions. The way in which humanities subjects were taught and assessed in comparison to other hard- pure or hard-applied subjects was also framed positively by the current students and given added value, as it was felt that their degrees allowed for a means of developing a skillset that was found less in more science focused subjects. A final year English and French student explained how being taught in a smaller seminar environment gave more opportunity to have discussions and give presentations, therefore developing skills and confidence in these areas. They compared this to students studying

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[5] Biglan (1973) classification of disciplines

a science subject who although may be performing well academically, because of the large lecture-style teaching would not be developing any similar skillsets to those taking humanities subjects.

> *There's just so much more discussion in the humanities subjects […] because you have the kind of the seminar environment. […] it makes you much more confident, because you could […] study a science subject but […] sat at the back and done all your work and you know got nineties in everything, but actually not developed any other skills....*
> (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY).

The previous section identified a frustration with the low number of contact and teaching hours in humanities subjects, however this negative aspect was also reformulated in order to extricate a positive aspect, through suggesting it developed skills in self-motivation. A second year languages student described how they believed self-motivation was a key skill developed in the humanities due to the limited contact hours, and saw this skill as being of particular value in the workplace. They compared themselves to their flat mate studying physics (hard-pure discipline) who did no independent learning outside of the classroom, and perceived that their languages degree would better prepare them in a workplace environment, as they would be able to be more proactive and autonomous with their work.

> *[…] a flat mate of mine last year from physics had 27 hours of lectures and I had about 10 […] he was sat in lectures but he did nothing outside […] whereas I'd go to my one lecture that day and then you'd have to really self-motivate […] and be proactive in what you're learning […] which I think is a really good skill to have in the workplace…*
> (CS/FG4/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

This notion of subject hierarchy and economic value was not just a battle between the hard and soft discipline areas, but also reflected within the soft disciplines, with there being a perception that some of the soft-pure disciplines *(e.g. English, Philosophy, Music etc.)* were *better* than some of the soft-applied disciplines *(e.g. Journalism, Accounting, Marketing etc.)*. An archaeology student explained how they believed their degree would give them a competitive advantage over someone else who was taking a degree in events management or similar degree from a less

"rigorous" university, not only because of the subject area itself having higher regard but also the added benefit of where the degree came from- thus giving their degree a super-value status in economic terms.

> *[…] coming out with an archaeology degree from* [name of university] *is better than coming out with an events management degree from I don't know…Solent….or a Football degree. […] on paper next to each other they're clearly going to take you because they know that* [name of university] *is rigorous […] and the degree will mean more… (CS/FG3/BA Archaeology/Y2)*

There was a strong sense across the focus groups of some subject areas not being appropriate to be taught at university as they were more vocational than academic in nature, and were better suited to further education.

> *[…] I think some of the institutions, which are now called universities […] could be much better served being further education colleges where the courses could be more vocational and they're not academic… (*CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

This caused feelings of some animosity and a sense of injustice with students seeing themselves as competing with non-comparable degree subjects in a highly competitive graduate labour market. A final year student described how as a result of there being a degree available in so many different career related subjects, those studying humanities degrees were missing out on job opportunities despite having what they believed as much more valuable competencies from their degrees.

> *[…] there is pretty much a degree for every single career now. […] and people who study humanities are perhaps losing out on those jobs, even though they may have a much broader knowledge….* (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

This was evidenced further in one of the focus group discussions, where a student described how they would like to go in to a career of events management, and despite having relevant work experience and appropriate aptitudes and skills from their degree, had been continuously unsuccessful when applying for jobs in that area as a result of not having a specific degree in events management. The student additionally reinforced the demarcation between some soft-pure and soft-applied disciplines areas, and proposed that the more vocationally aligned subject areas were not perceived as appropriately academic enough for a prestigious university, such as those in the Russell group.

> *[…] I want to go in to like Events Management and I've been lucky enough to have now quite a few jobs doing that […] but I keep getting rejected from loads of jobs because I don't have an Events Management degree […] there's a reason that Russell Group universities don't teach that […] it's actually a very narrow subject area compared to being able to kind of articulate yourself well […] I study English and speak an extra language….* (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

Despite university and subject hierarchies being used as indicators of economic value that, given the significant competition in the graduate labour market, in reality there was a limit to the *super-value* of a degree- in that having the "right" degree from the "right" university was not always enough.

The data suggested that students wanted employers to be more specific about the particular degrees they sought, which would demonstrate to them that they had an understanding about the different competencies that were gained from different discipline areas and which they valued more. A languages student described their frustration of there being no specific directive from employers in terms of the degree they wanted, which as a result was making the competition pool bigger and more importantly for them, not recognising the value of their specific degree.

> *[…] every single job you apply for needs to have a degree and they just say a degree in something and they don't care what it is, which I think takes away from again the value of having a degree […] I can just apply for a job and football studies guy can apply for the*

same job, but we both fit the qualifications which to me feels slightly wrong. (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

Similar to the findings from the current students, there was also a sense from the graduates that there was a lack of understanding from employers about their degree and the specific skills that they gained from it. A graduate described the competencies that they felt were gained from doing archaeology, and explained how from their experience of negotiating the graduate labour market there was a lack of knowledge about what his degree involved.

[…] you get the history side of good essay writing, […] the sort of science side […] you do experiments, you'd go on your dig, you would do fieldwork, you might do some section drawing […] I don't think there's that broader understanding of what you actually do in it as a degree… (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

Although all the graduates could recognise the competencies and skills they gained from their degree, their experience of negotiating the job market was mixed, with some finding it easier than others to get a job, which was related to the economic context of the country at the time and the qualifications needed for a specific career. This is reflected in the following two comments from individual interviews with graduates. The first comment by a graduate who studied history between 1998 -2001 described how they easily found employment initially and then once they decided what career path they wanted to pursue, found they needed to extend their hard credentials through taking a further postgraduate qualification in the specific subject area.

I kind of walked in to things really […] I've kind of always thought that it would be nice to work in an "interesting" job, so for me that would be arts, heritage, museums, archives, that kind of thing. And I think I then rapidly realised that in that sector a history degree at BA is not enough […] so I knew I needed to do a Masters at that point. (G/I/BA History/1998-2001)

The second comment by a philosophy graduate who studied between 2006-2009 described how they struggled to find a job after they graduated due to the economic context of the country at the

time and how they felt they were "under-employed" for a period - thus suggesting that they had an expectation about how their degree would be valued in the graduate labour market and the type of employment it would lead to.

> *[…] I did have a year almost where I was I suppose you call it under employed, so doing sort of shop work […] it was also a very difficult year in terms of the economy- I think I was in probably the worst year to graduate in terms of graduate recruitment…* (G/I/BA Philosophy/2006-2009)

Whilst reflecting on their experiences post-graduation of entering the job market, there was also a feeling amongst the graduates that their humanities degrees may have hindered them in finding employment compared with those who had degrees in hard-pure or hard-applied disciplines. An archaeology graduate described how in their experience, those who graduated with a degree in maths or similarly related degree, found it easier to get employment as there was a clearer understanding by employers as to what the degree entailed and a much more obvious alignment with the skills needed for a specific job.

> *[…] everybody I know who did maths or maths related degrees seemed to find it easier to get jobs, but I think it's because that it's seen as if you can do maths you're likely to be good at spreadsheets or good with coding […] I don't think that employers always realised that people from other backgrounds can do all of that stuff….* (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

This impression that a humanities degree may not quite have given them enough traction in the graduate labour market was a common theme found in the graduate data, and was felt across the different higher education policy contexts under which they went to university. Question 15a in the graduate survey asked the question, *"If you had your chance again, would you still choose to study the same degree?"* The results are shown as a pie chart in Figure 4.0 below.

Figure 4.0: Graduates' responses to survey question 15a, "If you had your chance again, would you still choose to study the same degree?"
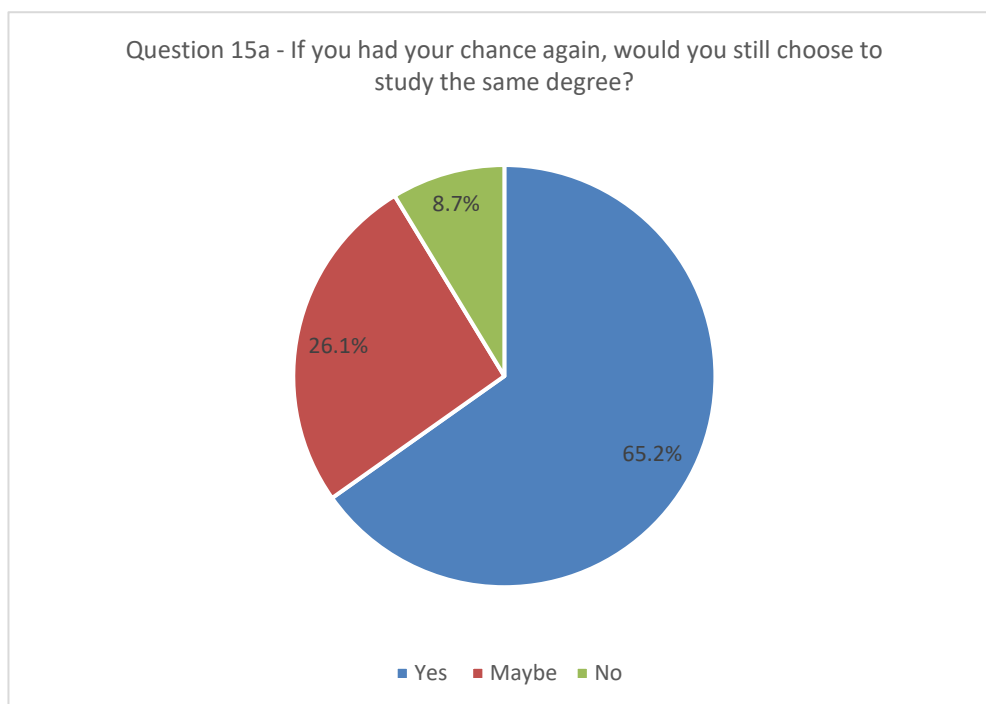
Although the majority of graduates (65.2%) said they would still choose to study the same degree, the free text comments associated with this survey question were insightful as they showed a real tension between wanting to say 'yes' because of how much they enjoyed their time at university, however feeling that it may have had its limitations as a currency in the graduate job market. This dichotomy can be seen in the following two free text comments where the graduates emphasised how much they enjoyed their degree, however because of difficulties in being able to find a career this was causing them to rethink whether they would have still chosen to study the same subject. This indicates a perception that their degree subject was considered to be a limiting factor in finding a career.

I really really enjoyed my degree. Some part of me wanted to say no, because I am really struggling to find a career, but I cannot take away from how much I enjoyed studying what I studied. (G/Q15a/BA Philosophy/2011- 2014)

The subject was interesting but would probably have done a more focus [sic] *degree in specific area rather than a broad one.* (G/Q15a/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

The individual interviews with graduates allowed this retrospection to be explored in more detail. Despite the positives that many of the graduates (and students) felt there were by taking a broad degree like a humanities subject where there was not always a specific career focus, on reflection having had experience in negotiating the graduate labour market, there was a feeling that a more focused degree aligned to a specific career may have been more beneficial. A history graduate described their struggle with finding employment post-graduation and how that meant on occasion they questioned whether they made the right subject choice at university. They explained how if they were to choose their degree subject again, they would take a degree that would support them to access a career in IT more easily, something they struggled with by not having a "formal qualification".

[…] there's obviously days when I think I wish I had ended up in a much better job […] other days I'm like, yeah, I had a great time and I wouldn't change that and I learnt a lot […] if I knew what was coming on with IT […], I would have tried to get more IT skills. […] I taught myself to website code […] none of those jobs are open to me because I don't have the formal qualifications… (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

This section has shown that current students formulated conceptions of value within the labour market contexts of oversupply and competition, as they looked for ways to maximise their success in the graduate labour market by capitalising on the reputation and status of their degree. They also reformulated certain aspects of their humanities degree that were often portrayed negatively (such as contact hours) as a further means of enhancing their employment outcomes. Graduates' understanding of the value of their degree was also being framed in the context of their success in having negotiated the labour market.

5.2.1.3   Value as positionality

Despite the perceived importance of reputational prestige and the value attributed to subjects in terms of employment outcomes, there was still a strong sense that a degree by itself- i.e. the hard credentials, was not enough and there was a need to enhance this further in order to gain a positional advantage in a strongly competitive graduate labour market. The data provided an insight in to how the value of their degree in terms of preparation for future employment was being understood. Question 5a in the surveys asked an open question about the benefits of going

to university, giving respondents the opportunity to share their views in their own words. The current students were asked about their expectations, *"How do you think you will benefit from going to university?"*, and the graduates were asked to reflect on their university experience, *"How do you think you have benefitted from going to university?"* These responses were collated and then formed in to a wordcloud as a visual means to identify any trends and patterns in their understanding of how they felt they would benefit/have benefitted from going to university. Figures 5.0 and 5.1below shows the responses from the surveys represented as wordclouds.[6]

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[6] The data in the wordclouds include all words used in the responses

Figure 5.0: Responses to Question 5a in the current student survey presented as a wordcloud –

"How do you think you will benefit from going to university?"

Figure 5.1: Responses to Question 5b in the graduate survey presented as a wordcloud – "How

do you think you benefited from going to university?"

The visual representation from the wordclouds clearly shows that for both the current students and graduates, 'skills' was understood to be a significant benefit from going to university. When analysing the comments in detail, the data showed that 'skills' was being understood in two senses - in terms of the "work-related skills" that they felt they would be needed for future employment (e.g. *"analysis", "research", "communication",* "team-work", "*organisation*"), but also the "*general life skills*" they would develop as a result of their experiences whilst being at university (e.g. *"independence", "confidence", "maturity"*, "*emotional* intelligence", "*living away from home")*. The 248 free text comments to Question 5a in the current student survey provided a great deal of insight in to students' expectations of the value of their degree. Although there was a recognition of the range of valuable skills and capabilities they would gain by going to university, what was apparent from the data was that most of the comments were framed in terms of the value they expected their degree to bring them in the context of preparation for future employment. This is evidenced in the following examples, which demonstrate the belief that their degree is inextricably linked to a successful employment outcomes, giving them a positional advantage over others who either did not go to university or had lower qualifications.

Become more employable, will have experienced many aspects of life that will perhaps give me the edge against others who did not go to university. (CS/Q5a/BA History/Y2}

I think that by having a degree will make me stand out in interviews against others with lower qualifications. (CS/Q5a/BA English/Y1)

A noticeable difference between the two wordclouds is the emphasis of the word "job" in the current student wordcloud, which is given minor importance in the graduate wordcloud. This observation, along with the emphasis of the comments being framed in terms of their economic currency in the labour market, contextualises the findings in chapter 4, which found that students felt pressured by the societal, familial and educational contexts to offer a justification for their reasons for going to university and their choice of subject framed by its usefulness in the labour market.

Although this research did not include a specific linguistic analysis, the language used in the qualitative data is insightful. The use of phrases and terms used to describe their expectations of the value of their degree in the job market, gives the impression that they were reproducing terminology and using "jargon" they had heard from the societal, familial and educational contexts as well as employers, in order to give value to their degree. The most common expressions and

phrases used in Question 5a in the current student survey included *"transferrable skills", "wide range of skills", "work related skills"*, "*more employable", "well-rounded person".* This practise of mimicking terminology used by other influencing agents as a means of justification and giving value to their degree was also evidenced in the focus group data, as can be seen in the following comment by a final year languages student who described how their degree was "sold" to them based on the perceived economic value it had in the job market.

> *[…] that's what they kind of sell it to you as, they say you're very employable if you do languages.* (CS/FG2/BA Spanish (Linguistic Studies)/FY)

This suggests that the strong employability agenda reflected in current higher education policy was having a strong impact on how students were understanding the purpose of their degree. Students framed the benefits from their degree in instrumental terms as a strategy to better position themselves in a competitive graduate labour market.

Credentialism

As shown in the sections above, students were making strategic decisions about going to university, where to study and what to study, as a means of maximising the economic currency of their degree. The data from the current students strongly indicated that they were very cognisant of the increased competition in the graduate labour market, and there was a perception that the value of their degree in the labour market may be diminishing. As such there was a strong sense of needing to find ways to establish credibility and to evidence that you were "better" than other people applying for the same position- thus indicating that relative positioning was an important consideration when negotiating the graduate labour market. This understanding can be seen in the following two comments.

> *[…] there's so many different universities, there's so many people going to universities […] just the fact that you have a degree […] it's not impressive…* (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/ Y1)

[…] it's not just that degree that you're showing to employers, you are showing that […] you are better than the candidate that's coming next through the door for interview. (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/ Y1)

This concern with not being able to find employment was a significant cause of worry for the students, and there was an awareness that because of such fierce competition in the graduate labour market that there was not necessarily any guarantee that they would be able to find a job. These feelings of anxiety were expressed by a second year English student who explained how the pressure of having to plan and prepare for life after university was overwhelming, with constant concerns that the credentials they had were not good enough to manage the competitive job market. There was also a strong sense that having the pressure to think about their positioning in the graduate labour market was to the detriment of their wider enjoyment of their university experience.

[…] I'm constantly thinking about this job that I'm not going to be able to get […]this is a product of the environment that we're in and I'm not having fun at uni because it's too much to think about. My grades are good but because they're not top of the top - I'm stressing about that, and if I was getting top of the top I'd be stressing about maintaining it… (CS/FG3/BA Archaeology and History/ Y2)

The data showed that students' perceptions of the graduate labour market were being shaped by the experiences of others who had already negotiated the graduate labour market. A first year student recounted an interaction they had with a previous graduate, who despite enjoying her degree and time at university was unable to get a job in the specific sector she wanted because of the high competition.

[…] she was studying I think Fashion […] she had graduated like two years ago and she said she'd loved uni but everything that came after it she hates because she couldn't get a job in the Fashion industry because it's so competitive. (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1)

The interviews with the graduates evidenced that they were strongly aware of the pressures that current students were under, and how they might perceive that a degree by itself would not be sufficient in isolation in order to be competitive in an overcrowded graduate labour market. A history graduate (1996-1999) shared their reflections on how the massification of higher education had changed the value of a degree, and recognised that when they studied the pressures were not as extreme as they were today, with there being less of an obligation to have to think about the currency of their degree in the labour market.

> *[….] there's been a push to get more young people in to university that just having a degree isn't good enough, whereas it was still just about good enough when I went through […] there wasn't the encouragement or the necessity I think in our minds to think about what else we would gain from being at university other than studying and socialising.* (G/I/BA History/1996-1999)

This sentiment was also echoed by an archaeology graduate who explained how they felt that students today were more conscious of the competitive graduate job market and as a result knew what they needed to do to prepare themselves to be in a much more advantageous position after graduation. They reflected that this was something they did not give any great consideration to until they finished their degree, as their expectations were that it would be very easy to find a job.

> *[..]. people I know that are applying to university […] they already are fully aware of the job market […] and what they need to do to be better and more employable, and it's not something I thought about at all until I finished my degree. […] you were always told growing up you would just go and get a job and it will be fine.* (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

As the data has shown, there was an acute cognisance of credential inflation and positional competition. In response to this, students looked for strategies to enhance and maximise their positional advantage in the graduate labour market.

Self-commodification

The focus groups indicated that a degree in itself might not be sufficient to mitigate the competitive job market, with there being an understanding that they were competing with other equally qualified graduates for fewer jobs. As a result of this students were very aware of the importance of gaining additional accomplishments whilst at university, recognising that their employment outcomes could be improved through developing their own human capital, be it through work experience, internships, placements, volunteering or specific administrative roles in club and societies. This is captured in in the following comment by a second year languages student.

[….] our degree is not enough, you have to have the extra-curricular experience and you have to already have so much more than just a degree to get that job… (CS/FG3/BA French & Portuguese/Y2)

The data also suggested that because of the broadness of a humanities degree with there not necessarily being a direct alignment with a specific career, that there was even more of a need to supplement their degree. A first year English student explained this, comparing themselves to someone doing an engineering degree, which they perceived that because there was a much clearer career pathway there was less of a pressure to have to do extra-curricular activities.

[…] say you do an engineering degree, like your degree is enough to get you that job, whereas if you do an English degree […] that's not necessarily enough to get you that job. You have to have that extra-curricular experience as well... (CS/FG3/BA English/Y2)

In order to get an understanding as to how students were self-commodifying, question 7b in the current student survey asked whether they had a job, and to provide further details about the option they selected as a free text response. Figure 6.0 below shows the responses as a pie chart.

Figure 6.0: Results from question 7b ("Do you currently have a job?") in the current student survey presented as a pie chart.

QUESTION 7B - DO YOU CURRENTLY HAVE A JOB?

No, I am not looking for a job at all, 33.9%

Yes, I have a paid job, 27.0%

Yes, I am a volunteer, 7.3%

No, however I am currently looking to volunteer, 8.1%

No, however I am currently looking f…
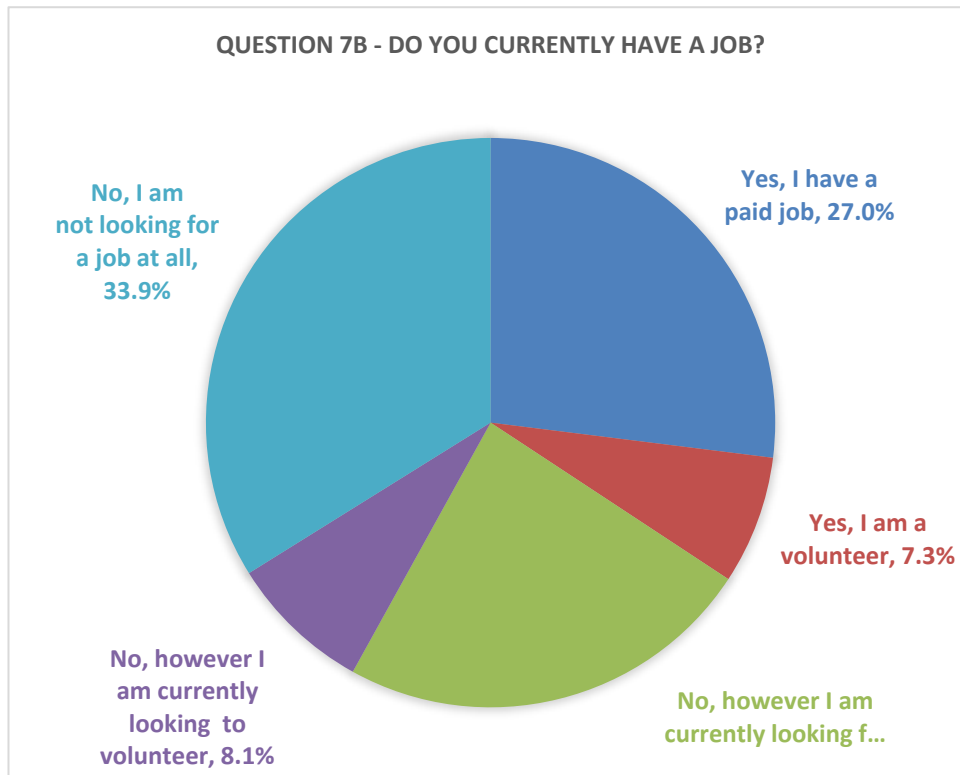
As can be seen from the pie chart, just over a third of students were either in paid employment or volunteering, just under a third were looking for either paid or voluntary work, and a third were not looking for a job at all. The free text comments associated with the question indicated the reasons for wanting and not wanting a job. Many of these comments including references that alluded to using their work experiences as a means of turning themselves in to a productive commodity for the graduate labour market.

[….] to demonstrate proactiveness to future employers (CS/Q7b/BA Philosophy/FY)

[….] to increase my work experience and make me stand out more (CS/Q7/BA History/Y1)

[…] gain experience in my chosen career path and to become more employable (CS/Q7b/BA Archaeology/FY)

Although having a job to supplement student loans and maintenance was a strong motivator for finding a job whilst studying, even where money was not considered to be a cause for concern, either because they had financial support from parents or they had saved money during a gap year, there was still evidence of students taking on voluntary work as a means of enhancing their degree.

> *[…] I'm not desperate for money and volunteering looks good on a CV* (CS/Q7b/BA MLang French and Spanish/Y1)

> *I am definitely in the process of looking for a job, whether paid or unpaid since it's the experience I feel that would be very beneficial in improving my access to great employment opportunities in the future* (CS/Q7b/BA Film Studies/Y2)

For those who took the decision not to find a job, this caused some anxieties as there was a recognition that not gaining work experience would put them at a disadvantage in comparison to those who had decided to find a job.

> *I'm worried having no experience at all will make it harder to succeed later amongst all the others that will have a paid job.* (CS/Q7b/BA English and History/FY)

Current students were also asked *"Do you currently belong to any clubs or societies or are involved in any extra curricula activities?" (s*urvey question 8)*,* and asked to provide further details about the clubs and societies they were involved with and the reasons for choosing them. Over 80% of the current students said that they had joined a club or society. Although the free text comments indicated that the core reason for joining these related to the more intrinsic motivations, such as continuing with an existing a hobby, a desire to pursue a new hobby/interest, and meet new people, there was also evidence to suggest that there were more strategic motivations at play, i.e. that by being involved in these activities would provide a positional advantage when competing for jobs in the graduate job market.

Thinking of joining the Law Society as I am considering Law as a potential career (CS/Q8/ MLang German and Spanish Linguistics /Y1)

SLAPS President […] I need a leadership role for my CV (CS/Q8/BA Modern Languages/Y2)

[…] being treasurer of philsoc is to boost my cv. (CS/Q8/ BA Economics and Philosophy/Y2)

The focus group discussions with the current students allowed this notion of self-commodification to be explored further. The current students were particularly cognisant that they needed to find ways to enrich their own future market value, and engaged in pursuits and used experiences that were once intrinsic as a means to enrich their market potential. An English student described how although the extra-curricular activities they chose were primarily based on their interests, that they were acutely aware that they needed to find ways to "spin" these skills and experiences in to marketable assets. Their comment seemed to touch a chord with the other participants as there was laughter and nods of agreements.

[…] I picked things that I have an interest in that aren't necessarily going lead to anything else in the future. So that's where I suppose you have to sit down and think about what transferable skills you gain from those experiences and think right how can I spin this and make it look like I could be a journalist or whatever….(CS/FG3/BA English/Y2)

This was echoed by another of the focus group participants, who described how they kept a log of the activities they got involved with and the skills they believed that were gained from doing these things. They also emphasised the importance of making the most of the opportunities on offer at university, which they felt that by doing this would minimise the risk of not being able to find a job in the graduate labour market.

[…] every time something happens […] I sit and I write a little paragraph about it and I think right, what skills were involved in that […] I think as long as you're on top of that

and you make the most of the opportunities at university […] you shouldn't need to really
be worried about job opportunities. (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

Although these examples evidence the ways in which students were looking to transform their profiles to have a greater market value beyond just the hard credentials of a degree certificate, they additionally suggest there was an element of *self-exploitation*. There was evidence that students were taking part in activities under a sense of obligation, rather than it being something they enjoyed. A second year history student described how they joined the University's air squadron, an activity that was not enjoyable to them. They reflected that although they put themselves "out there", they realised that it was not something that was intrinsically rewarding to them. This highlights another pressure students felt under- a sense of obligation to self-commodify, which was sometimes at the expense of their own intrinsic motivations.

[…] this year I joined the university air squadron […] I've hated it. […] But I've done things
like this and put myself out there but then realise that those aren't things that I want…
(CS/FG3/History/Y2)

The graduates were asked a similar question in their survey. Question 7b asked, "Did you have a job whilst at university?" The results can be seen in Figure 6.1 below.

Figure 6.1: Results from question 7b in the graduate survey presented as a pie chart – "Did you have a job whilst at university?"
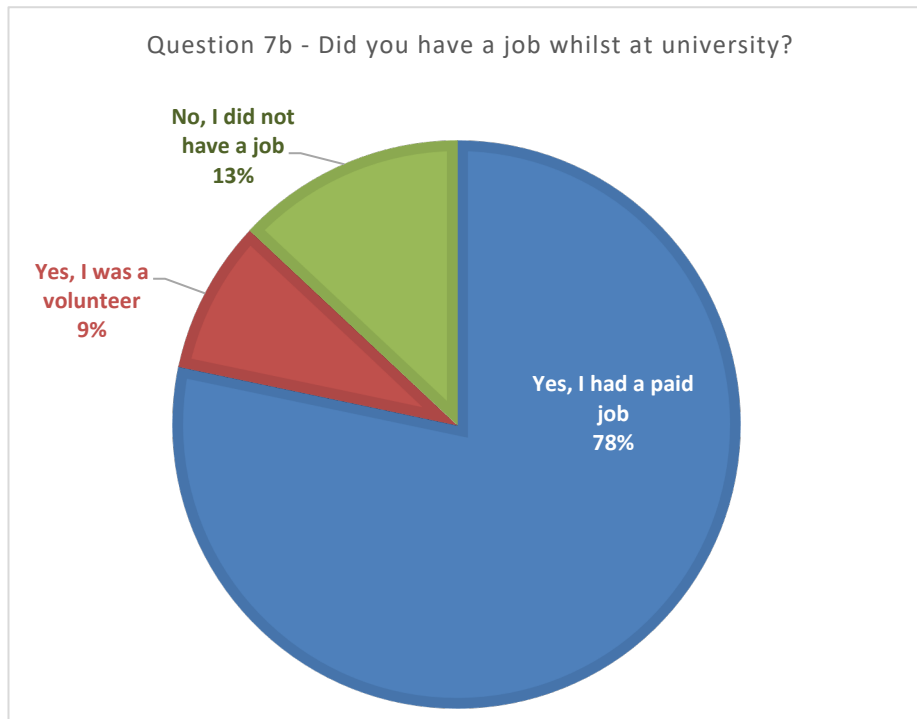
As can be seen from the above chart, just under 80% of the graduates had a paid job whilst at university, which is higher compared to the current students where just over half (50.8%) either had a paid job or were looking for a paid job. The current students were more likely to be volunteering or looking to volunteer (15.4%), compared with graduates (8.7%). Analysing the free text comments associated with this question, the main impetus for the graduates wanting a job alongside their studies was for financial stability, however there were a small number of comments relating to wanting a job as a means to enhance their C.V.

[…] I wanted to be able to fill my CV with something beyond my degree (G/QQ7b/ BA History/2005-2008)

Having at least something on my CV when I left. G/Q/Q7b/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

The graduates were also asked in the survey, *"Did you belong to any societies or clubs or were involved in any extra curricula activities?"* (Question 8). A similar proportion of graduates (82.6%) to current students (80.9%) belonged to a club or society, however the sole motivation for joining these was related to the intrinsic drivers, rather than from any pressure or a sense of obligation to self-commodify as was seen for the current students. Although there was no evidence of instrumental outcomes being a primary motivator for participating in clubs and societies, the interviews with the graduates highlighted that when it came to negotiating the graduate labour market that their involvement in and experiences of being part of a club and/or society was used as a commodity. A philosophy graduate explained how they used their involvement in extracurricular activities when applying for jobs, as by not having any work experience whilst at university, meant their CV was limited.

> *[…] it was almost all I had to go on, I hadn't had a part time job whilst at university […] my CV was pretty blank I suppose; so yeah, I used those quite a lot…*(G/I/BA Philosophy and Politic/2006-2009)

This understanding of extra-curricular activities having an economic currency in the graduate labour market was also echoed by other graduates. A graduate in philosophy and maths was asked in their interview how prepared they felt for employment when graduating. They reflected that had they not been involved in extra-curricular activities, they would have felt much less prepared for employment and not able to demonstrate to an employer the skills and capabilities being looked for.

> *[I]…developed a lot of the skills that showed an employer that I have something to offer through those extra-curricular activities […] if I hadn't done any of that stuff it would be difficult to see how I'd be able to package myself at a job interview in a confident way.*
> (G/I/BA Philosophy and Maths/2009-2012)

The data indicated that current students were acutely aware of the challenging environment and what they needed to do to maximise their chances in an over-crowded labour market by proactively and consciously self-commodified to give themselves a competitive advantage.

Whereas the graduates retrospectively converted any extra-curricular experiences they had in to commodities at the stage of applying for jobs post-graduation.

5.2.2 Intrinsic value

As has been shown in the preceding sections, the data indicated a complex picture as to how the purpose of university was being perceived and understood, with varying emphasis on the instrumental functions in its role as preparation for employment, and the more intrinsic functions such as subject knowledge development and personal growth. Building on these findings, this section focuses specifically on how the intrinsic value of a degree was being understood. The two sub-themes explored in this section are *Knowledge formation* (5.1.2.1), which firstly considers how the advancement of their disciplinary knowledge was being valued, and secondly considers the value attributed to intellectual development [*i.e. learning how to learn - reasoning, problem solving, decision making etc.*), and *Identity formation* (5.1.2.2), which explores how notions of personal growth and development of self were being shaped by their university experience and how this was valued.

5.2.2.1 Knowledge formation

Disciplinary knowledge

Chapter 4 identified that having a passion for the subject area was an important aspect when it came to choosing what to study at university. Despite the pressures that were felt from the influencing agencies to justify decisions in instrumental terms and how it would be beneficial in the graduate labour market, there was a strong sense in the data of students trying to find ways to balance these pressures and retain motives that they considered to be of personal value to them. This section will explore in more detail how the advancement of disciplinary knowledge was intrinsically valued.

The qualitative data from the current students from the free text comments in the survey and focus group discussions evidenced how developing disciplinary knowledge brought personal joy and satisfaction, and in some cases allowed them to achieve their individual goals. There was also a sense that university provided a window of opportunity to feed a

curiosity about a subject you were passionate about, and that having such an opportunity to be able to focus on this subject for three years was a privilege.

> *I've discovered a whole topic area I am hugely passionate about through university study* (CS/Q5a/BA History/FY)
>
> *I have achieved my goal of becoming fluent in my target language* (CS/Q5a/BA French and Spanish linguistics/FY)
>
> *[…] we get the opportunity to take three years to study this one subject and all its different facets and aspects…* (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

The breadth of humanities as a discipline and the flexibility of the curriculum, which allowed the freedom to explore different areas of interest, was widely thought to be a positive attribute. This quality was considered to be specific to humanities degrees, as it was perceived that subjects that were more maths and science focussed would have a more rigid curriculum. This is captured in the following comment from a second year languages student who described enthusiastically and passionately how they welcomed the opportunity to be able to follow their own interests across a range of disciplines.

> *[…] like say medicine, you have no choice of what you do, you have to learn these specific things, and things like say physics […] they are very sort of prescriptive, […] whereas in like humanities, you know, I write essays about poetry and history and music and all kinds of strange, random things […] you get a bit more freedom to pursue what you individually want to do...* (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

The data also indicated a view that coming to university to study a subject you enjoyed created a sense of belonging and acceptance. This was highlighted in a conversation between two final year students in a focus group discussion. The students described how at school there was a stigma attached to wanting to study hard and where there was a perception of being "uncool" if you showed an interest in a specific area; whereas when coming to university they felt they were in an environment where this was more acceptable.

The one thing I liked most when I arrived at university is that I think when you're at a school there's a stigma attached to kind of wanting to do work […] when you come to university everyone's actually interested […].if you want to spend time doing your subject that's considered a good thing... (CS/FG4/BA Spanish Linguistic Studies/FY)

[…] I know what you mean, like at school you didn't want to be that not cool person who was really interested in this one part of English or Languages, and when you come to university everyone is like that, which is nice… (CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

These feelings of passion from advancing disciplinary knowledge was also widely evident in the graduate data, as they reflected on their university experience. As part of the individual interviews with graduates, they shared their fondest memories from university, many of which included their passion for their subject area, recounting feelings of being inspired and intellectually stimulated.

[…] that spark of what I think was my first lecture on human origins, […] I was like, 'this is actually really interesting'… G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

[…] being in certain lectures and being really inspired with the ancient Jewish history ones... (G/I/BA History/1997-2001)

[..] that moment I realised, you know, 'gosh, like at this time I know more about this subject than, you know, most other people in the world', and I'm finding it really enjoyable […] That was quite a profound moment… (G/I/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

Although there was strong evidence to suggest that developing disciplinary knowledge brought much personal joy and satisfaction to both students and graduates, there were still instances evident in the data of *reformulating* things that were inherently intrinsically valued in to something that would have a market value. As evidenced in the previous section, there was much positive discussion in the focus groups relating to having the flexibility to take modules in subjects

outside their core discipline; however this was also branded as a status good. A second year History student described how they believed being able to take a range of modules could be attractive to employers.

[…] you'd be able to say to an employer I've done a module as part of my optional modules in Philosophy or English or whatever to at least say I've had that experience… (CS/FG3/BA History/Y2)

This demonstrates how disciplinary knowledge was also being used as a metric to enhance the market value of a degree.

Intellectual development

As discussed is section 5.2.1c, there was a strong reference to "skills" in the data, which was being understood in terms of the "work-related skills" that they felt they would be needed for future employment (e.g. "*research*", *"communication",* "team-work", "*organisation*") and the "*general life skills*" they would develop as a result of their experiences whilst being at university (e.g. *"independence", "confidence", "maturity"*, *"living away from home"- see section 5.2.5b below).* However, there was also a strong reference in the qualitative data, from both current students and graduates, to their intellectual development resulting from the exposure to new ways of thinking. The data showed that for students who were early on in their student journey, there was an expectation as to how university would contribute to their intellectual development. This is evident from the following free text comments by a first year and second year student associated with Q5a in the comments survey, which asked how they thought they would benefit from going to university.

Ability to think about issues, problems, situations in a more critical way. Ability to problem solve, construct, and question arguments. (CS/Q5a/BA Philosophy and Sociology/Y1)

[…] the ability to analyse a large amount of information and process it... (CS/Q/Q5a/BA History/Y2).

For students who were further along in their student journey, they were able to reflect on their intellectual development during the course of their degree. A final year history student described how they had benefitted from going to university, through an increase in their reasoning, intellectual and analytical abilities.

> *It has developed my intellectual capacity, my ability to actively interrogate information and question seemingly obvious statements.* (CS/Q5a/BA History/FY)

The focus group discussions with the current students provided an opportunity to gain a deeper insight in to the ways in which they understood how their intellectual abilities were being developed through their degree and the value that they attributed to this. A mature student in their final year of a history degree reflected on the value of their university experience, and compared it to his previous career as an officer in the Army. They described their realisation of how university changed their approach to reasoning and thinking.

> *[…] I genuinely view the world differently now three years later […] I was a better army officer having been here for six months […] I understood the value of education, but I didn't appreciate it until I came here […] the value is that it just broadens the mind and it just educates you to think differently about things…* (CS/FG4/ BA History/FY)

Akin to students in their final year of study, the graduates similarly considered how university had contributed to their intellectual development. A philosophy graduate reflected on the personal value of their degree and described how their attitude and approach to situations had changed as a result, questioning as to whether this was a unique trait to humanities disciplines or specific to philosophy degrees.

> *[…] the main sort of personal things it's given me, that way of thinking I suppose, and deconstructing problems and listening to other people's ideas and seeing the value of those ideas […] I don't know if that's unique to philosophy or whether humanities degrees always give you that …* (G/I/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

As well as making a comparison to other degrees, the data also highlighted that when considering intellectual abilities, they compared themselves with those who did not go to university, suggesting that there was a noticeable difference between the two groups. This understanding of university providing you with a unique set of intellectual abilities was a reoccurring theme seen in both the data from the current students and the graduates.

[…] I certainly feel different having been here […] friends- the ones that haven't been to university […] I sometimes find it hard to understand what they're thinking because you don't think like that anymore… (CS/FG4/BA History/FY)

[…] I notice it when I see my friends who haven't been to uni […] I apply a completely different mind-set to them […] I analyse the situation […] you make informed decisions in life. (G/I/BA History/2011-2014)

Although the graduates personally valued their intellectual development, the data also indicated that they framed this in the context of their experience in negotiating the labour market, thus allocating this an indirect instrumental value. The graduates in their individual interviews reflected on how valuable their degree had been to them, giving consideration to how the development of their intellectual abilities had benefited them in the job market. A philosophy graduate described how they utilised the aptitudes developed from their degree on a daily basis.

[…] I use the tools that philosophy gave me on an almost daily basis I think, because it just informs the way you process information... (G/I/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

A History graduate also reflected on the development of the analytical abilities and emotional intelligence, which they attributed to their degree, and reflected that it was only when they started putting these *skills* in to practice, did they begin to realise the value they had. They described how the ability to understand people, processes and patterns were aptitudes developed from doing a humanities degree, which were an invaluable resource for "getting through any door".

> *[…] studying history it teaches you skills that you don't even realise that you're learning until you use them later on […] analytical skills and being able to kind of read between the lines, and that kind of emotional intelligence […] you learn that from a humanities degree; […] understanding people, understanding processes, understanding patterns and being able to identify them […] it's completely invaluable because ultimately then you can pretty much get through any door…* (G/I/BA History/2005-2008)

This understanding of the intellectual development that came from studying a degree in the humanities having an economic currency in the job market was echoed throughout the qualitative data from the graduates. A graduate in English and French described the intellectual abilities they developed from learning to speak French fluently and commented that some intellectual aptitudes were more likely to be developed from studying a humanities degree than a science-based discipline, which they believed were invaluable in the job market.

> *I'm now a fluent speaker of French, I mean which is priceless […] it's made me the articulate, thinker and writer that I am […] doing a History or an English degree, those kind of things […] you're learning to be a critical thinker […] it's harder to quantify and harder to explain than the kind of solid facts that you learn in a lot of science based disciplines, but Humanities is just invaluable […] in so many different aspects of the working world…* (G/I/BA English and French/2010-2014)

Although the data showed that there was a strong recognition of the personal value of the intellectual development that they gained from their degree, and how they felt it benefitted them as a wider life proficiency (particularly when comparing themselves to others who had not been to university) - it was often perceived as synonymous with being a "transferrable skills" for employment. This suggests that intellectual development was perceived as a status good, being allocated an economic value in the labour market.

5.2.2.2   Identity formation

There were no direct questions as part of the methodological approach that asked specifically about "identity formation", however the free text comments in the surveys and data from the focus groups discussions with current students and individual interviews with graduates provided an insight in to how this term was understood and the ways in which it was being valued. The data identified that notions of self-formation, personal growth and a sense of 'becoming' was an important function of university, which current students understood in the following ways: "becoming more *independent", "learning to budget, "meeting new people, "living in a house and handling bills", "cooking", "living away from home in a new city and coping with the distance", "confidence", "maturity", "growing up".* Reflecting on their own experiences of personal growth whilst at university, the graduates echoed many of the comments made by the current students in how they understood identify formation through personal growth – "self-discovery", *"chance to grow up", "cooking and cleaning and washing my clothes", "taking responsibility for myself", "how to live with other people", "manage money".*

University was perceived as an incubator for the cultivation of personal growth. This was echoed throughout the data with students and graduates, who not only placed a significant personal value on development of self, but also valued being in a stimulating environment surrounded by likeminded people.

> *The 'discover who you' are I think is a big part of it […] it just helps you to develop as a person and find other people that share common interests…* (CS/FG3/BA Archaeology/Y2)

> *I spent three very enjoyable years in a […] stimulating environment, and experienced new cultures, ways of thinking, and opportunities.* (G/Q5a/BA Philosophy and Politics/2006-2009)

There was a strong perception that university was a hotbed of opportunity that provided a means to have experiences *"nothing like anything you can experience elsewhere" (CSQ/Q5a/BA French and Spanish/FY).* For example, those who had been on a year abroad as part of their degree perceived this to be a unique opportunity and a valuable experience to grow as an individual. This was emphasised by a French and Music student who was on their year abroad.

[…] I'm currently on my year abroad, something not everyone gets the opportunity to do, another experience where I can learn more about myself and about other cultures I've not had much experiences with. (CS/Q5a/BA French and Music/FY)

Graduates who had been on a year abroad as part of their degree were also able to reflect how the experience had benefitted them personally. A French and Spanish graduate considered their year abroad experience in Mexico, and explained how they valued the opportunity as it enabled them to grow more confident from the experience of living away from home.

I really loved it […] I was in Mexico […] it was difficult being away from home and family, but I think it really turned me into a lot more confident person […] I really appreciated the experience…(G/I/BA French and Spanish/2009-2013)

Not only were certain aspects of their specific degree programme perceived as providing unique opportunities for personal growth, such as the year abroad, the data also indicated that the experience of going to university in itself provided an opportunity for personal growth that could not be experienced in the same way outside of that environment. A final year English and French student made a comparison with others who had not experienced living away from home, and described how even though they may be in a more advanced career position, they missed out on valuable opportunities for personal growth.

[…] people who have never left home, they say, 'oh you know I've got a really good job and I can afford to do this and that', […] but also you haven't moved out, you don't know how to pay bills, you don't know how to cook for yourself, […] things like this that going to university almost forces you to do- […] you have these skills that are invaluable…
(CS/FG4/BA English and French/FY)

The data evidenced the opinion that these personal growth opportunities that university provided were aspects that could be undervalued. This was particularly emphasised by an archaeology graduate who described how they felt they had benefited from becoming more independent by going to university.

[…] the three years of living away from home was far bigger an impact on me growing up [...] that's what was often undervalued [….] that's an important part of university is that moving away, being on your own, looking after yourself, finding a job for yourself to support you... (G/I/BA Archaeology/2007-2010)

This notion of there being a tendency to undervalue the non-academic aspects of going to university was also reflected by other graduates. A history graduate described how they placed a higher personal value on the "life skills" that they had developed by coming to university, more so than what they had learnt in the classroom, explaining that before coming to university they considered university to be purely about academia, rather than all the other opportunities it offered.

[…] university offered a lot of life skills […] Before I thought it was just an education element, a certificate, but when I got here for sure it was more about what I could learn outside of the classroom than within...(G/I/BA History/2011-2014)

The language used to describe the experience of going to university and how it encouraged and nurtured personal growth was insightful, as it suggested that the university offered a safe environment to allow this development. Phrases such as *"bridging the gap"*, "*not thrown in at the deep end"*, "*stepping stone to adulthood"*, *"baby steps"*, *"bubble"*, *"safety blanket"*, suggested that university was perceived as a safe *"middle-ground"* to allow students to experiment, explore and grow in an environment where there was a lot of support available.

It [university] helps on the process of becoming an adult, whilst remaining in a safe learning environment. (CS/Q5a/BA Archaeology and History/Y1)

Although the current students were able to offer some reflection on how they felt they had grown and developed personally from their university experience to date, the graduates were in a better position to allow for retrospection and to be able to articulate this more clearly.

> *[University is] invaluable in terms of that experiential, personal development and self-*
> *fulfilment that you get [...] the leaps and bounds I came on in self-realisation and*
> *personal development, enjoyment, satisfaction [...] is invaluable- and is kind of difficult to*
> *in any way quantify against £20,000...* (G/I/BA Philosophy and Maths/2009-2012)

> *I think I learnt what I'm good at in terms of how I study, how I learn, how I thrived and*
> *how I don't, and what some of my vices are probably [...] when I left I felt much more*
> *confident about who I was, and you know, how I did well and how I was able to kind of*
> *understand myself a little bit more...* (G/I/BA History/2005-2008)

These comments suggest an understanding that university created an environment for personal transformation and their university experience allowed them to have a greater sense of self and understanding as to what their strengths and weaknesses were.

Despite the value that was placed on gaining independence whilst at university, the data from the current students indicated that the financial pressures they faced (see 5.2.1a) in being able to support themselves compromised their ability to become fully independent. This was highlighted by a second year student who described their frustration with how parental income was used to calculate student maintenance, which they saw as paradoxical. Emphasising their reticence in being financially reliant on their parents, they described the measures that they took in order to retain some financial independence and maturity towards money.

> *[...] they say, go and be independent [...] but we'll give you money based on how*
> *much your mum and dad earn- I just don't think it's logical. [..] I was very, very*
> *reticent to take any money off my parents, [...] I have a little log and I fully intend*
> *to pay it back as much as I possibly can...* (CS/FG3/BA French and Portuguese/Y2)

This perception of their being a dichotomy to being independent whilst still being financially reliant on parents was reflected across the focus groups. This can be seen in the following discussion with first year students who shared their views on the student finance system. This highlighted a frustration with the assumption that parents would want to support their children

financially whilst at university and that equally the reverse, where children may not want the financial support from their parents.

> *[…] just because your parents would be able to afford to fund […] doesn't mean that they will […] some students might feel like they don't want to and some parents might feel like they don't want to as well…*(CS/FG2/BA Music/Y1)
>
> *[…] You're told throughout your whole life that university's the time you're going to be independent and then in reality your reliant on your parents until your twenty-five or whatever.* (CS/FG2/BA Modern History and Politics/Y1)

Despite the intrinsic value that was placed on personal growth and self-formation, the environment in which their concepts of value were being formed was compromising their ability to fully realise some of the intrinsic outcomes they were hoping to achieve from their university experience.

5.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has considered the context in which value was being enacted through exploring how marketisation and the impact of oversupply and competition made students think about value, and whether this led to an increase in instrumental motivators and value being framed in instrumental terms. The following discussion chapter will interpret these key findings in the context of the existing research literature.

Chapter 6   Discussion

This chapter aims to interpret and bring together the major findings in the previous two data analysis chapters through contextualising the key discoveries in the existing research literature. The research questions will be answered directly in the next chapter as part of the conclusion to the thesis.

Through an in-depth analysis in to how humanities students understand the value of their undergraduate degree, this research has provided fresh empirical evidence as to how the marketisation of higher education has influenced students' motivations and choice relating to university and shaped notions of the value of a degree. The research found that the motivations and decision-making in choosing to go university, where to study, and what to study were complex, being inextricably linked with how perceptions of value were being enacted in a higher education policy context of marketisation. Although chapters 4 and 5 explored these aspects individually, it is important to note that this was an artificial separation as a means of giving a clear narrative and structure to the data analysis.

6.1   Major research findings

A key finding that emerged from the data was the influential role of others in forming and shaping students' motivations and their decision-making about educational choices relating to university. Three key influencing contexts were identified: *societal*, *familial* and *educational* (see section 4.1, table 6.1). This is consistent with existing research literature on student motivations for going to university/college that have shown social influences, such as family, friends and teachers (Renfrew et al, 2010, Kaye & Bates, 2016), play an influential role in decision making. These similarities with previous studies are noteworthy as it reinforces the continued importance of these "networks of intimacy" (Foskett & Johnston, 2010) when it comes to making choices about university. Although other studies have referred to these influencing contexts as "support networks" (Bowes et al, 2015), the narratives from this research indicated that these networks did not always provide helpful guidance, and in some instances their roles were perceived negatively, as students felt pressured in to making certain choices. What emerged most powerfully from the data was that both humanities students and graduates were strongly influenced by societal expectations in their decision to go to university, borne from political and media discourse enforcing the notion of university as the main progression route post A-levels and a minimum threshold when applying for jobs in the graduate labour market. As well as being influenced first hand from the *societal* context, they were also experiencing these societal pressures second hand

via the *familial* and *educational* contexts that were reinforcing this rhetoric (see section 4.1.1). An unexpected finding from the research was the impact on students where parents had not been to university. As the research participants were not specifically asked to disclose information relating to their socioeconomic contexts, differentials in access to higher education was not a core aim of the study. Both the student and graduate narratives revealed that as a consequence of their parents having little or no higher education experience, they felt at a disadvantage in terms of the advice and guidance that they received when making university related decisions, compared to other students where it was a familial cultural norm to go to university. This is reflected in research by Kettley & Whitehead (2011) which found that whilst parents who have not been to university are supportive of their children's aspirations to go, they often lack the knowledge and experience, or the cultural capital, necessary to guide their children through the practical process. Research has shown that students are not a homogenous group (see Bui, 2002 *(first generation students)*; Moore et al, 2011 *(students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds)*; Villar et al 2010 *(older adults*); Stewart et al, 2007 (*minority students)*. This research provides additional empirical evidence to the body of literature on differentials in access to higher education.

Despite the similar way in which the current students and graduates were influenced by others in their decision making, the data showed that there were differences between the two groups in their actual motivations for going to university (see section 4.1). Whereas the graduates were more likely to be primarily intrinsically motivated to go to university, to develop their subject knowledge and personal growth, the current students were more likely to be motivated from an instrumentalist point of view, suggesting that the intensification of the more recent dominant discourse framing higher education as an investment and a crucial economic currency in the graduate labour market was having an impact. The data, however revealed a more complex story, as current students still considered the intrinsic aspects of going to university, such as passion for the subject area, learning new things and transformational experiences like personal growth, to be as *equally* important as "getting a good job" (see figure 2). This indicates that despite the strong economically centred discourse of investment and returns, students still placed a value on what Tomlinson (2014) called "the less tangible gains of university". Although there are some commonalities with Gedye et al's (2007) research, which found that the reason undergraduate geography students chose to go to university was to improve their job/ career prospects, this was found to be the *dominant* reason rather than the *duality* of extrinsic and intrinsic drivers found in this research study. Similarly, Glover et al's (2002) research in to students' perceptions of the personal outcomes of a university education also found that economic motivation was considered to be more important than the pursuit of knowledge. This study on the other hand found that while employment outcomes were a key consideration for

choosing to attend university for humanities students, it was clear that this was not their sole primary motivator. A possible explanation for the differences with other studies could be related to the degree subject itself. Although Glover et al's methodology included students who were taking a range of subjects areas, the data was not analysed to determine whether there were any differences based on degree subject. As indicated in Skatova and Ferguson's (2014) research in to why people choose different university degrees concluded, those who apply to arts and humanities degrees are more likely to be driven by interest (intrinsic motivation). More empirical research on motivations for attending university that focuses on different degree subjects is needed to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

Related to the pressures students faced from the three influencing contexts, the study revealed compelling evidence that humanities students felt *obligated* to justify and validate their university related decision-making framed in instrumental value terms (see section 4.1). Although other research has similarly shown that the "discourse of higher education as an investment and its facilitation of better overall future outcomes and job prospects frame students' rationale for entering higher education" (Tomlinson, 2014: 5), this study provides a more nuanced representation to this discourse, broadening our understanding. Through using the personal accounts of the current students, the data found that the strong media and political discourse on the financial investment and return of an undergraduate degree meant that it was not enough for humanities students to quantify the value of their degree in terms of its intrinsic value (i.e. their love of the subject area), despite this being their primary motivation for choosing their degree subject. This created an inner conflict as students felt pressured to attribute a value to their degree that was based on their future employment outcomes. This was evidenced not only by the use of phrases and terms to describe the value of their degree in the job market, using "jargon" they had heard from influencing contexts, but also the way in which students emphasised how the "broadness" of their humanities degree - with there being no specific career path it would offer them greater opportunities in the graduate labour market (see section 5.2.1.3). This gives ongoing relevance to Glover et al's (2002) research that concluded students feel greater security with undertaking higher education if they recognise employment links. While Hardee's (2014) research also concluded that law students were motivated primarily out of interest in the subject matter, with law typically perceived to be a more vocationally-aligned degree compared to humanities degrees, it is less likely that law students would be asked the *"what are you going to do with that?"* question. They are therefore less likely to feel the same pressure as humanities students to have to rationalise their degree in instrumental value terms. It is this "means-end" goal narrative that has brought the "usefulness" of a humanities degree in to doubt, and as

discussed in the literature review in chapter 2, has been reflected in the gradual decline of students choosing to study an undergraduate degree in the humanities. The strong political and media discourse around measurable graduate outcomes has had a negative impact on students' decision-making for choosing what to study at university. As such, it is perhaps not unsurprising that this research found that the expectations for going to university created feelings of pressure and stress for students, which manifested itself in justifying their choices and decision-making in instrumental value terms. Does there therefore need to be a shift in the government agenda to help alleviate these pressures that students feel? This sentiment is reflected in recent research by Universities UK (2019), who have called on the government to give greater promotion to the "broader benefits" of higher education, irrespective of potential salary.

Reay et al (2015: xi) stated that "decision-making is often a messy process in which intuition, affective response and serendipity can play a greater role than rational calculation and systematic evaluation of the evidence available". A clear finding from this research study was that in response to the context of oversupply and competition in the graduate labour market, students did in fact purposefully made strategic decisions to increase the currency of their degree, on the understanding that going to a university that employers placed a premium on would result in a better financial return on their investment (see section 5.2.1.3). The study revealed a strong perception (shaped by the influencing contexts) that not all degrees were equal, and that the reputational prestige of a university (as identified by league table positioning), and their degree classification could be used as a status good (see section 4.3.1 and 5.2.1.2). These findings are consistent with research by Whitehead et al (2006), Briggs (2006), Tomlinson (2008), and Drayson et al (2013) who also concluded that the prestige of the university was a significant choice dimension, which students saw as a potential means of achieving a positional advantage in the labour market amongst a growing supply of graduates with similar profiles and aspirations (Tomlinson, 2008). As such, this study not only provides further empirical evidence to support how a market-driven agenda has shaped students' decision making around university choice in a prestige economy, it also highlights that the practice of strategic decision-making as a means of gaining a positional advantage in the labour market is not specific to students choosing to study a humanities degree. Rather, it is a response by the contemporary student who is cognisant of the diminishing value of a degree. Nevertheless, the research revealed a complexity as to how humanities students understood the value of their humanities degree as a currency in the graduate labour market. The political and media discourse reinforcing humanities degrees as a riskier "investment" was clearly evident in the data, with contradictory notions of the value of a humanities degree prevalent in the students' narratives. While the data revealed that students considered there to be many positive attributes specific to a humanities degree that would give

them a greater positional advantage in the graduate labour market (e.g. intellectual competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving etc.) compared to subjects in the STEM disciplines, paradoxically, the data also revealed a perception that a humanities degree might be a limiting factor when competing for jobs. As such students sought strategies to supplement and enhance the value of their degree by developing their own human capital through undertaking extra-curricular activities, (e.g. placements, work experience etc.). This suggests that not only did humanities students feel they needed to add value to their academic credentials in light of a weakening currency (Tomlinson 2008), they also felt there was an additional requirement to give their humanities degree greater traction in the graduate labour market by making themselves more vocationally relevant against degree subjects considered to be more vocationally-aligned.

The research revealed that the ways in which humanities students responded to the pressure to self-commodify (see section 5.2.1.3) could be grouped in a similar way to Roderick's (2010) findings- either by *complying with commodification* (i.e. achieving economic prosperity out of fear of veering from expected behavioural norms and to please others); *resisting commodification* (i.e. seeking happiness and self-fulfilment through delaying/avoiding/rebelling, to develop self-awareness and explore personal interests); or *humanizing commodification* (i.e. to maintain a sense of self through pursuing own interests where learning is valued and sought for its own sake). Although the data showed elements of all three of Roderick's (2010) groupings, the dominant group was *complying*, as evidenced by the strong pressures from the influencing contexts and justification of decision making in instrumental value terms – *"the path of least resistance".* Whereas Roderick's research only included students in their senior year of an undergraduate degree, this research enhances these findings by demonstrating that this pressure to self-commodify "in order to fulfil parental and societal expectations" was not unique to final year students, but rather a theme that was pertinent across all years of undergraduate study. The data found that current students were more likely to proactively and consciously self-commodify to give themselves a competitive advantage, whereas graduates were more likely to activate this approach retrospectively through converting any extra-curricular experiences they had in to commodities when entering the job market. With contemporary students heavily influenced by political and media discourse emphasising that having a degree is a valuable and necessary commodity in the graduate labour market, it is not surprising that the current humanities students would opt to comply with commodification over resistance and humanising commodification.

A further dissimilarity between the current humanities students and graduates that revealed itself in the data was the difference in their expectations for future employment. Whereas the current students had a critical awareness of the perceived limitations of their degree and the challenges

they would face in securing employment in an overcrowded graduate labour market, which included the possibility of being in a "non-graduate" job, for the graduates who studied under a lower or no tuition fee policy, there seemed to be a greater disappointment when they were unable to find "appropriate" employment, as this was a different reality from the one they had expected. For many graduates there was an understanding that their degree would enable them to relatively easily find a graduate level job on completion of their degree. Although this study found that graduates were more likely to place a higher value on the intrinsic aspects of their university experience, those who described satisfaction with their career trajectory post-graduation and contentment with their current job were more likely to reflect positively on the value of their humanities degree. Conversely, those who showed signs of dissatisfaction or frustration with their experiences of negotiating the graduate labour market and were unhappy with their current employment situation, were more likely to perceive their degree to have hindered them in finding a job. As such, they ascribed a greater value to degrees that were perceived to be more aligned to specific careers. Although the data discovered that the majority of graduates would on reflection still choose the same degree (see figure 4), the narratives suggested there was a clear tension between reflecting on the enjoyment they got from their degree and wider university experience, and the limitations of the degree as a currency in the graduate job market. This suggests that not only does the higher education policy under which students study shape expectations for employment, it also highlights that perceptions of the value of a degree are not static- rather they are interwoven with experiences of negotiating the labour market. While the higher education policy context under which the graduates studied may not have influenced their university-related decision making in the same way or to the same extent as current humanities students, the data evidenced that as a result of the current political and media discourses around value for money, both current students' and graduates' perceptions of value were being enacted in a higher education policy context of marketisation. As was highlighted in section 3.1.4.3, causality was not an aim of this research; rather it was to explore students' and graduates' perceptions and experiences through emerging themes, patterns and relationships in the data to identify possible influences for how notions of value were being framed. Context and human behaviour are fundamental to understand fully students' motivations and how they ascribe value to their degree. As Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory proposes (Chapter 2, section 2.2.1), it is through self-reflection that people make sense of their experiences, explore their cognitions and beliefs, engage in self-evaluation and alter their thinking and behaviour accordingly (Schunk & Pajares, 2009: 36).

Building on existing literature that contends intensified costs associated with going to university have created a level of expectation among students about the quality and value for money of

their university experience (Tomlinson, 2014; Kandiko & Mawyer, 2014; Saunders, 2014), the data discovered a prevalence of consumerist attitudes amongst the current students (see section 5.2.1.1). The research exposed a perception amongst the graduates of there being a conflict with notions of consumerism in an educational setting (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Williams, 2013). It was felt that obtaining a degree involved effort and active engagement, whereas being a consumer had connotations of passiveness that could potentially lead to feelings of what Holdford (2014) describes as *academic entitlement*, i.e. the tendency to expect academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success. Whereas other research studies have found that increasing consumerism in higher education has resulted in students demonstrating a sense of entitlement to having a degree and a lack of engagement with the course (Molesworth, 2009; Holdford, 2014; Marshall, Fayombo & Marshall 2015, Fairchild & Crage, 2014, Glater, 2013, Plunkett, 2014) this understanding was not evident amongst the humanities students who participated in this research study. A possible explanation for this could be related to the significance that they attached to choosing a degree based on the love and interest in the subject area, a theme repeatedly emphasised by the students in the data. Research by Bunce et al (2017) has concluded that studying a STEM subject was related to a higher level of consumer orientation. Additional research that looks at consumerist attitudes by degree subject may provide further understanding as to whether there are any distinct relationships. Although there was no evidence to suggest humanities students felt entitled to having a degree or showed signs of having a lack of engagement with their course, the data did however indicate that consumerist attitudes were dominant amongst the current students in terms of value as a financial return on investment, such as teaching contact hours, availability of staff, availability of resources and facilities (Kandiko & Mawer, 2012). An insightful finding from the graduates' reflections revealed a perception that it was only when you were paying a certain amount of tuition fees that it would be appropriate to have concerns about the value for money you were receiving from your degree. This suggests an understanding of there being a correlation between the amount of tuition fees being paid and the value for money you should receive.

Molesworth et al (2011:279) have argued that the marketisation of higher education has led to students being *"not particularly receptive to the idea that through immersing themselves in their subject they may change as a person; rather their desire to attend university is primarily to become a more employable person."* Although the findings from this study reflect research by Ashwin et al (2016) and Bunce (2017) who have concluded that students view higher education as a transformative experience (see section 5.2.2) and want to learn, develop and challenge themselves in order to better themselves, the data indicated that the reality was far more

complex. Students did acknowledge that university was about *transformation* - in terms of intellectual, personal and social identity development, however the data also revealed a practice of converting what was once inherently intrinsically valued in to something that would have a market value and give a positional advantage in the labour market. This suggests that how the purpose of higher education was being understood was closely intertwined with perceptions of the economic value of the degree and its currency in the post-graduation labour market. To add further complexity to the findings, there was not a homogenous perception of what the role of university should be, rather the data revealed conflicting views as students placed varying emphasis on the instrumental functions in its role as preparation for employment, and the more intrinsic functions such as subject knowledge development and personal growth (see section 5.1). Conversely, the graduates were more inclined to emphasise the intrinsic purposes of university, in terms of providing wider, longer-term benefits and as a vehicle for personal and social change (Tomlinson, 2014). They nonetheless acknowledged that a higher education policy context with a robust employability agenda, was likely to have an impact on the role universities played in preparing students for the labour market. For many of the students and graduates, these conflicting notions created a perception of there being a potential dichotomy in the purpose of university.

McCowan (2015) argued that with employability being an element of a contemporary capitalist economic system, leaving individuals 'without' employability would considerably diminish their life chances. It could therefore be argued that universities in fact have a moral obligation to support students in this pursuit. Yet, with such varying perceptions about the role of a university, it makes it increasingly difficult for universities to meet such diverse and often competing expectations. Not being able to meet students' expectations has significant consequences for universities. As Douglas et al (2015) states, increasingly upset and unhappy students have a means to voice their concerns in public forums, which affects league table results potentially impacting universities' ability to attract new students. And as this research has indicated, students associate league table rankings with reputational prestige, which in turn they perceive as having more economic currency in the labour market.

6.2   The dichotomy of the contemporary humanities student

Given the government's strong employability agenda, the emphasis in media and political discourse focusing on the financial investment and return of an undergraduate degree, and fiscal research that shows some of the lowest earning subjects including a number of degrees in the humanities,

why then do contemporary students choose to study a humanities degree? Are they consciously choosing to study these subjects because of their broadness and flexibility of career opportunities, or do they follow their passion, and simply reformulate their motivations through the lens of instrumental value in order to appease those who ask, "*What are you going to do with that?*"

The idea for this research study came about from this one question being asked. I undertook the research in the hope that the data would show that the intellectual curiosity and passion that I had for a humanities subject and love of learning was still a strong motivator with students today choosing to study an undergraduate degree in the humanities, despite the current higher education policy context of marketisation emphatically emphasising the economic value of degree. Although the research discovered there were undoubtedly elements of this intrinsic motivation, the results highlighted that I had underestimated the role of the higher education policy context in shaping students' perceptions of the purpose of university and the value of their humanities degree. My dual identity as a humanities graduate as well as a higher education professional leaves me conflicted as to how best to respond in future to concerned parents and supporters of applicants and students who question the usefulness of a humanities degree. The answer I would like to give in response to the "*What are you going to do with that?*" question is "*Anything you want";* however, I question whether this would be helpful to students who are faced with such pressures from the *societal, familial* and *educational* influencing contexts, as they endeavour to find ways to consolidate their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. As long as the government continues to reinforce the instrumental value of a degree through exclusively focusing on the financial investment and return of an undergraduate degree, humanities subjects will continue to be seen as a "riskier" investment and will further strengthen the perception of a dichotomy between the extrinsic and intrinsic functions of higher education. Silver & Brennan (1988) in their research on 'liberal' and 'vocational' education, argued that there needed to be a reappraisal that brings discussions of higher education away from the extreme positions in defending the liberal and vocational traditions to a more central position, calling for a "hybrid phase" of "liberal vocationalism". In light of the findings from this research, this still feels very relevant. Perhaps therefore it is time to move away from the dichotomy discourse, and look towards starting a more supportive discussion that equally encompasses both the intrinsic and instrumental value of a humanities degree.

It seems appropriate to end with a quote from Kent (2012: 275) from her aptly entitled research paper *"What are you going to do with that?"*

For the sake of those students who do find their way in to our classrooms, and even more so for those who are inspired by the love of philosophy, music, art, religion and languages [….] we need to have good answers readily at hand to the anxiety-laden question so frequently asked by solicitous friends, relatives and strangers: "What are you going to do with a degree in that"?.

Chapter 7   Conclusions

This chapter seeks to answer the research questions directly as a conclusion to the previous chapter, highlighting the implications of this study and its contribution to the existing literature.

The core aim of this research has been to discover how students understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree in a humanities discipline, by exploring their motivations for studying their chosen degree, and how their perceptions of the value of their degree are being enacted in the current higher education policy context of marketisation. To make meaning of what is a broad and complex subject matter, the research focused on a particular institutional context, which allowed for an in-depth investigation. Data was collected from students studying for an undergraduate degree in the humanities at a UK research-intensive university, who commenced their studies between 2012-13 and 2015-16, and from graduates who commenced their studies prior to 2012.

7.1   Returning to the research questions

This research set out to answer four main research questions:

1. What are humanities students' motivations for participating in university and choice of subject?
2. What value do humanities students ascribe to their degree?
3. How do humanities students understand the role university plays in preparing them for future employment?
4. Are there any relationships between humanities students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and how they understand the value of their degree, and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation?

Research question 1: What are humanities students' motivations for participating in university and choice of subject?

Students studying for an undergraduate degree in the humanities are motivated by a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Humanities students studying under a higher education policy context of increased marketisation are motivated to attend university by the prospect of having better employment opportunities (instrumental motivation), however choosing a degree course that is inherently interesting that allows them to pursue their passion is equally as important to them (intrinsic motivation). Although employment opportunities are an essential

consideration, humanities students do not necessarily have a definite career in mind when applying to university. Humanities students' decision-making for going to university, where to study and choice of degree subject is strongly shaped by societal pressures which are reinforced by family members and education professionals, such as teachers and career advisors. Humanities students whose parents have little or no experience of higher education can feel at a disadvantage when it comes to making university related-decisions, compared to other students with family members that have been to university who can offer support and guidance on the practical processes and considerations based on their first-hand experiences.

Research question 2: What value do humanities students ascribe to their degree?

Humanities students do not perceive all degrees to be equal, with some having more currency in the graduate labour market than others depending on the subject, degree classification and the university where the degree was studied. In response to the perception of an undergraduate degree having a diminishing economic value in the context of oversupply and competition, this in combination with negative perceptions of humanities degrees having less traction in the graduate labour market compared to more vocationally-aligned subjects, humanities students feel pressured not only to validate their decision-making framed in instrumental terms based on their future employment outcomes, but they also proactively seek to boost their own human capital through extra-curricular activities as a means to give themselves a competitive advantage in the graduate labour market.

Humanities students acknowledge the intrinsic value of their degree in fulfilling their intellectual curiosity of their chosen subject area and recognising its transformational potential in terms of personal growth and intellectual and cognitive gains. However, as means to give them further positional advantage in the graduate labour market, humanities students assign these intrinsic aspects a market value. Humanities students therefore do not perceive their degrees to be vocational and look to find ways to make them more vocationally relevant, by turning ordinary assets developed through and alongside their degree in to commodities in order to enrich their market potential.

Research question 3: How do humanities students understand the role university plays in preparing them for future employment?

The ways in which humanities students understand the role of university is shaped by the societal influences and pressures they experience in their decision making for going to university, where

to study and choice of degree subject. As such they have an expectation that university will provide them with opportunities (such as placements, internships, study abroad, relevant career guidance) that will enable them to prepare for future employment. Although humanities students claim university has a dual function- instrumental in terms of preparation for employment and development of work- related skills, and intrinsic in terms of personal growth and expansion of subject knowledge, they are concerned that these are dichotomous purposes that may not be able to be converged.

Research question 4 - Are there any relationships between humanities students' perceptions and expectations of going to university and how they understand the value of their degree, and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation?

Humanities graduates were more likely to be intrinsically motivated to participate in university than contemporary humanities students, placing greater emphasis on the intrinsic aspects rather than the more instrumentally driven purposes. They were also less likely to have clearer ideas about future employment options compared with their contemporary counterparts. This suggests that the higher education policy context under which students were going to university was influencing and shaping their motivations.

Although two-thirds of humanities graduates would on reflection still choose to study the same degree based on their enjoyment of the subject matter and wider university experience, there was an understanding that their humanities degree may have been a limiting factor in the graduate labour market. As such, humanities graduates ascribe a value to their degree determined by their labour market outcomes. Graduates who are satisfied with their career trajectory post-graduation and content with their current job are more likely to reflect positively on the value of their humanities degree, whilst graduates who are frustrated with their experiences of negotiating the graduate labour market and dissatisfied with their current employment situation, will perceive their degree to have hindered them in finding a job. In the case of the latter, graduates ascribe a greater value to degrees that they consider to be more aligned to a specific career. This suggests that graduates' perceptions of value are being enacted within the current higher education policy context of marketisation rather than the higher education policy context under which they studied.

Contemporary humanities students are acutely aware of the challenging economic environment and what they need to do to maximise their chances in an over-crowded labour market. Whereas they proactively self-commodify to give themselves a competitive advantage, humanities graduates are less likely to have consciously chosen to self-commodify when they were at

university and instead retrospectively convert any extra-curricular experiences they have in to commodities when applying for jobs.

Humanities students studying for an undergraduate degree under a higher university tuition fee regime are more likely to have consumerist attitudes in terms of value as a financial return on investment (e.g. teaching contact hours, availability of staff, availability of resources and facilities) compared with those who studied under a lower or no tuition fee regime. Humanities graduates are however cognisant of the changing higher education policy context and recognise the impact that the higher rate of tuition fees has on students' perceptions and expectations of value for money.

7.2   Research design reflections and future research possibilities

The research was conducted through the lens of one Humanities Faculty in a research intensive university in the UK, and while these findings may be reflective of other universities with a similar profile and ethos, caution may need to be given to automatically assigning these research findings to other universities. The students and graduates who participated in the study were self-selecting, and therefore it may be possible that those who took part either had a more positive experience of higher education, or conversely a poor student experience wanting to use the study as an opportunity to raise particular issues.

Much could be learnt from developing the findings in this research to discover whether there are any similarities outside of a research-intensive university, or if there are significant differences in the perceptions and motivations for students studying more vocationally aligned degree subjects or those in STEM disciplines.

The undergraduates and graduates who participated in the survey were from two separate groups, rather than the same group of undergraduate students after they had graduated a few years later. Although a key research question was to determine whether there were any relationships between notions of value and the higher education policy context, a future longitudinal research study may provide an interesting insight in to how the value of a degree is enacted across the student lifecycle and negotiating the graduate labour market.

Research question four was framed specifically to explore whether there were any *relationships* between humanities students' perceptions of and expectations for going to university and how they understood the value of their degree, and the current higher education policy context linked to marketisation. The importance of context and human behaviour has been central to this

research, and because of the multiple variables associated with this, to conclude any sort of causation would be misleading and problematic. Future research in this field may benefit from specifically exploring causality.

While this research did not specifically ask participants for biographic contextual information relating to respondents' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, references were made to these in the data, which suggested that social and cultural capital intertwined with the higher education policy context to shape perceptions and motivations of the value of a degree. There would be value for any future research to explore these findings further.

As highlighted in the methodology in chapter 3, I was keen to ensure that there was good representation of the *student voice* in the research, through having a range of humanities disciplines, students in different years of study, different age groups and gender mix. However, a detailed analysis through the lens of aspects of identity (gender, age) was not part of the scope of this research. As such, the data samples were not broken down and analysed in this way. It is acknowledged that there may be specific identity related sensitivities and differences that could be of value for future research in this area.

7.3   Research implications and recommendations

This research has provided new understanding to the existing knowledge base on how the marketisation of higher education has influenced students' motivations and choice around university and shaped notions of the value of a degree. There has been a paucity in this existing body of literature of studies that specifically centres on *the humanities*, whereas there has been research that focuses on other subjects, these have been situated in non-humanities subjects, such as *Geography (*Gedye, Fender & Chalkley, 2004), *Sociology (*Ashwin, Abbas & McLean, 2013), *Foundation Year (*Robinson, 2012), *Psychology (*Kaye & Bates, 2016), and *Law* (Nicholson, 2020). It is important to have a holistic knowledge base that encompasses research through multiples lenses, such as degree subject, in order to increase our understanding of students' motivations and choice for going to university. Where there has been research focusing on the humanities, this has been centred either on the public and cultural value of humanities (Collini, 2012; Small, 2013; Belifore, 2015; Benneworth, 2014), or the instrumental value of a humanities degree in relation to the skills and employability agenda (Saunders & Addis, 2010). These views only offer a limited and narrow understanding of the value of a humanities degree, and noticeably missing from the literature has been the *voice* of the students who are choosing to study a degree in these subjects. This research has sought to fill this gap. Through using the voice of humanities

students, this study has included both students and graduates who commenced their studies under differing higher education tuition fee regimes. By exploring these groups in parallel, rather than as separate studies, this approach has provided a unique opportunity to understand whether there are any relationships between the perceptions and expectations of going to university and the higher education policy context linked to marketisation. Additionally, the humanities graduates who participated in the research commenced their studies between 1995 and 2011, studying under a higher education tuition fee regime ranging from no tuition fees to £3,375. This has given further insight in to how the higher education policy context has influenced decision making and perceptions of the value of their degree.

Recommendations

Douglas et al (2015) states that an increasingly competitive market place requires the student experience to be excellent, in order to increase future (paying) student numbers. With undergraduate humanities applications dwindling, the findings from this research can be helpful to universities in understanding how students understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree in the humanities and thereby providing them with a much more relevant student experience.

Differing motivations – Humanities students are not a homogenous group. Universities therefore need to be mindful, sympathetic and supportive to the duality and complexity of students' motivations for choosing to study an undergraduate degree in the humanities, recognising that whilst vocational relevance may be important to some humanities students, for others, the more intrinsic aspects may hold greater significance. Instrumental motivations need to be acknowledged and supported without side-lining and dismissing notions of learning for the sake of learning.

Guidance - The decision to go to university is a big step in a young person's life, and for many the information can be daunting and confusing. The research findings suggest that parents and supporters play an important role in the decision-making to attend university, where to study and subject choice, providing welcomed support and guidance for many. For parents and supporters who have been to university they are able to provide information and guidance based on their own experiences; however where parents and supporters do not have university experience, this can inhibit young people's decision-making. Universities should look to find ways to offer additional support and guidance to students who are first in their family to go to university. Although this recommendation is not specific to humanities students, it may offer an opportunity to challenge any preconceptions about humanities degrees.

Opportunities - While humanities students may not have a specific career in mind when applying to university, there needs to be greater awareness that for many humanities students vocational relevance is important and that they have an expectation that their university experience will provide them with both co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities as a way to enhance the value of their humanities degree. As such, opportunities such as placements and internships should not be a provision solely offered to degree programmes that are more directly vocationally-aligned.

Career guidance - Related to the above, career advice should be tailored specifically to humanities students, recognising both the advantages and the challenges that the breath of their degree can have in considering career options. This will go some way to help alleviate the pressures that some humanities students feel by having such a wide array of career options available to them. Humanities students do not typically consider their degree to be vocational, and therefore universities can help support them in making these employment links.

Value for money - The findings from the research indicated that humanities students have consumerist attitudes and expectations relating to contact hours, quality of facilities and resources available. As such universities need to find ways to be more transparent about how their tuition fees are being spent and demonstrate how they are getting 'value for money'. There is a perception that less contact time is synonymous with being an easier degree subject. To alleviate students' frustrations with this, universities should look to find ways to address negative perceptions of humanities degrees by those outside of the discipline.

7.4   Final thoughts

With university education now commonly being portrayed as a vocational benefit to students through media and political discourse constantly framing the value of a degree in terms of financial investment and return and whether students are getting value for money, there is a need to understand how these influences formulate and shape students' perceptions of the value of their degree. It is hoped that this research will encourage other researchers who are also interested in perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the humanities to share their ideas.

Appendix A

A.1   Number of applicants applying to an undergraduate degree 2009 - 2018 by subject group as of the 30 June UCAS application deadline.

	2009	2010	2011	£9,000 2012	2013
Group A Medicine and Dentistry	81,900	93,390	96,580	94,040	95,200
Group B Subjects allied to Medicine	246,205	326,890	368,700	369,170	384,440
Group C Biological Sciences	186,445	216,245	228,620	218,430	234,240
Group D Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related	21,350	25,570	28,040	27,010	29,120
Group F Physical Sciences	81,610	92,185	99,320	98,360	104,230
Group G Mathematical Sciences	40,800	44,190	45,630	44,470	45,970
Group H Engineering	122,780	134,725	140,960	137,280	145,600
Group I Computer Sciences	79,880	90,260	96,920	89,820	99,060
Group J Technologies	11,490	12,610	11,990	9,890	9,850
Group K Architecture, Building and Planning	50,490	50,075	49,620	41,520	40,230
Group L Social Studies	204,935	237,130	243,140	215,170	218,830
Group M Law	110,885	117,020	122,870	117,750	123,760
Group N Business and Admin studies	284,540	310,000	330,490	311,540	313,840
Group P Mass Communication and Documentation	53,105	58,705	62,780	53,740	56,840
Group Q Linguistics, Classics and related	70,030	74,475	71,470	65,670	65,500
Group R European Languages, Literature and related	24,415	25,715	25,470	22,490	21,250
Group T Non-European Languages, Literature and related	7,825	8,420	8,440	6,680	6,240
Group V History and Philosophical studies	79,240	84,645	83,190	77,270	78,690
Group W Creative Arts and Design	235,505	286,810	302,020	252,890	258,510
Group X Education	74,950	87,710	94,490	86,020	83,890
Y Combined arts	66,845	72,105	70,470	58,970	57,220
Y Combined sciences	36,805	40,735	42,700	38,580	39,750
Y Combined social sciences	33,720	35,310	34,170	30,080	28,360
Y Sciences combined with Social Sciences or Arts	100,675	110,055	105,880	87,650	82,680
Y Social Sciences combined with Arts	62,460	66,690	64,930	55,860	54,790
Z General, other combined and unknown	18,635	18,990	18,940	26,620	34,270
Total	**2,387,520**	**2,720,655**	**2,847,830**	**2,636,970**	**2,712,360**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Group A Medicine and Dentistry	97,800	87,730	85,710	82,260	89,130
Group B Subjects allied to Medicine	401,030	395,080	401,910	340,980	310,350
Group C Biological Sciences	251,580	273,190	281,300	278,800	282,610
Group D Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related	30,590	31,860	30,560	29,270	29,700
Group F Physical Sciences	109,010	111,910	107,830	105,630	99,660
Group G Mathematical Sciences	45,600	47,420	49,000	50,910	51,170
Group H Engineering	160,690	171,320	170,450	167,180	161,670
Group I Computer Sciences	111,030	123,620	129,140	130,940	133,750
Group J Technologies	11,110	10,050	8,930	7,920	7,190
Group K Architecture, Building and Planning	40,130	42,860	43,600	45,630	45,420
Group L Social Studies	229,350	240,890	247,980	254,440	251,850
Group M Law	122,990	128,260	133,870	140,200	142,950
Group N Business and Admin studies	327,030	344,160	347,550	336,650	329,430
Group P Mass Communication and Documentation	61,730	64,930	65,990	66,220	61,460
Group Q Linguistics, Classics and related	65,860	66,540	64,450	61,240	56,320
Group R European Languages, Literature and related	20,090	19,900	18,630	17,320	15,410
Group T Non-European Languages, Literature and related	5,910	6,130	5,760	5,470	5,010
Group V History and Philosophical studies	81,740	83,080	82,570	76,420	73,880
Group W Creative Arts and Design	270,600	278,440	273,870	259,600	249,120
Group X Education	84,200	94,030	92,840	91,750	85,970
Y Combined arts	56,650	51,700	49,920	45,140	41,770
Y Combined sciences	40,940	36,300	32,640	30,410	30,720
Y Combined social sciences	30,920	31,420	32,920	32,220	33,790
Y Sciences combined with Social Sciences or Arts	80,150	65,440	58,860	54,320	52,620
Y Social Sciences combined with Arts	54,080	51,410	49,640	48,980	48,330
Z General, other combined and unknown	34,240	34,010	34,310	33,920	37,840
Total	**2,825,050**	**2,891,680**	**2,900,230**	**2,793,820**	**2,727,120**

A.2 Percentage change in the number of applicants by subject group (summary level) between 2009 – 2018 at the 30 June deadline - all domiciles between 2009-2011, 2011-2012, 2013-2018

	2009-2011	2011-2012	2013-2018
Group A Medicine and Dentistry	17.9%	-2.6%	-6.4%
Group B Subjects allied to Medicine	49.8%	0.1%	-19.3%
Group C Biological Sciences	22.6%	-4.5%	20.6%
Group D Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and related	31.3%	-3.7%	2.0%
Group F Physical Sciences	21.7%	-1.0%	-4.4%
Group G Mathematical Sciences	11.8%	-2.5%	11.3%
Group H Engineering	14.8%	-2.6%	11.0%
Group I Computer Sciences	21.3%	-7.3%	35.0%
Group J Technologies	4.4%	-17.5%	-27.0%
Group K Architecture, Building and Planning	-1.7%	-16.3%	12.9%
Group L Social Studies	18.6%	-11.5%	15.1%
Group M Law	10.8%	-4.2%	15.5%
Group N Business and Admin studies	16.1%	-5.7%	5.0%
Group P Mass Communication and Documentation	18.2%	-14.4%	8.1%
Group Q Linguistics, Classics and related	2.1%	-8.1%	-14.0%
Group R European Languages, Literature and related	4.3%	-11.7%	-27.5%
Group T Non-European Languages, Literature and related	7.9%	-20.9%	-19.7%
Group V History and Philosophical studies	5.0%	-7.1%	-6.1%
Group W Creative Arts and Design	28.2%	-16.3%	-3.6%
Group X Education	26.1%	-9.0%	2.5%
Y Combined arts	5.4%	-16.3%	-27.0%
Y Combined sciences	16.0%	-9.6%	-22.7%
Y Combined social sciences	1.3%	-12.0%	19.1%
Y Sciences combined with Social Sciences or Arts	5.2%	-17.2%	-36.4%
Y Social Sciences combined with Arts	4.0%	-14.0%	-11.8%
Z General, other combined and unknown	1.6%	40.5%	10.4%
Total	**19.3%**	**-7.4%**	**0.5%**

Appendix A

Appendix B

B.1   Email to undergraduate students inviting them to participate in a survey

*VOLUNTEERS NEEDED * to help with university research and for the chance to win £50

I am carrying out some research that explores students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities. The online questionnaire should take no longer than 10mins to complete and is open to all undergraduate students studying in the Faculty of Humanities.

As a thank you for taking part, you will have the chance of winning one of two £50 Amazon vouchers.

Attached is some further information about the research, which I would encourage you to read before taking part.   You can access the questionnaire here:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/research_humanitiesundergraduatedegree_CS

Thank you very much in advance for your time and I hope you enjoy taking part.

Nicky Stecker-Doxat
Educational Policy Development Officer
University of Southampton

B.2   Research Information Coversheet

Study Title: Students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities.

Researcher: Nicky Stecker-Doxat   Ethics number: 17490

Purpose:

This research project aims to explore how students in the Humanities understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree.
Approach:
The Faculty of Humanities at the University of Southampton will be used as a case study. The following groups of participants from the Departments of Archaeology, English, Film, History, Music, Modern Languages and Philosophy will be invited to participate in the research:

- Undergraduate student
- Alumni/Alumna

Undergraduate students will be invited to:

- complete a short questionnaire
- take part in a focus group

Alumni/Alumna will be invited to:

- complete a short questionnaire
- take part in an individual interview

Questions and discussion topics will be focused around participants' perceptions of a university degree and the reasons for choosing their particular degree programme of study. Full details of what is involved in each of the activities will be provided in advance.

All involvement in the research project will be confidential. When any material from the research project is published participants will remain anonymous. Participants will be referred to only by degree programme and level of study/year of graduation, and where a specific quote is being utilised, a pseudonym instead of their real name will be used to protect their identity.

All participants will be asked to sign a consent form at the start of each phase of their involvement, but can withdraw from the research project at any stage, up to the point of writing and publication.

Outcomes:

Findings from the research:
- will be written up and included in the final thesis submission,
- will be available on request in summary form for participants to receive.

Nicky Stecker-Doxat, University of Southampton, nssd1g11@soton.ac.uk

In the unlikely case that participants have any concerns or complaints about this study, they can contact the Head of Research Governance at the University of Southampton (02380 595058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk), quoting Ethics Reference ID: 17490.

B.3   Email to graduates inviting them to participate in a survey

Thank you for interest in taking part in my research which is exploring students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities.

The online questionnaire should take no longer than 10mins to complete and is open to all graduates who studied their undergraduate degree in a humanities* discipline at the University of Southampton.

As a thank you for taking part, you will have the chance of winning one of two £50 Amazon vouchers.

Attached is some further information about the research, which I would encourage you to read before taking part.   You can access the questionnaire here:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/research_humanitiesundergraduatedegree_G

Thank you very much in advance for your time and I hope you enjoy taking part.

Nicky Stecker-Doxat
Educational Policy Development Officer
University of Southampton

* Please note: this questionnaire is specifically for those who studied an undergraduate degree at the University of Southampton in a subject area which includes one of the following: Archaeology, English, History, Film Studies, Modern Languages, Music, Philosophy.

B.4   Current Student Survey Questions

Students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities

SECTION 1

These first questions are about you.
- **What degree are you studying?** *(Please provide the full degree title, e.g. BA Archaeology & History)*
- **Is this the same degree programme you originally applied to study**? Yes/ No
- **If your answer was 'No', what degree programme did you originally apply for, and why did you change?**
- **What year of study are you currently in**? Y1/Y2/Y3/Final Year
- **Are you studying full-time or part time?** Full-time/Part-time
- **What age bracket are you in?** 18-20/21-25/26-29/30-34/35-39/40-45/46-50/51+
- **Are you male or female?** Male/ Female
- **How would you classify your student status?** UK/EU/International

SECTION 2

The following questions will ask you about your motivations for studying

Question 1: What were your motivations for attending university? Please select your top three statements.

- To learn more about things that interested me
- To get a good general education
- To experience university life and to make new friends
- To have a better chance of employment and get a good job
- To increase my earning potential
- To prepare for a specific job or career
- Because that's what you're supposed to do after school/college
- Other (please specify below)

Appendix B

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 1:

Question 2: How far do you agree with the following statements? I decided to go to university because...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- I will not be able to find a high-paying job later on   1 2 3 4 5
- I enjoy learning new things   1 2 3 4 5
- It will prepare me for a specific career   1 2 3 4 5
- I want to broaden my knowledge about subjects which appealed to me   1 2 3 4 5
- I want to develop a broad set of work related skills   1 2 3 4 5
- I want to read interesting subject material in an area I enjoy 1 2 3 4 5
- Other (please specify)   1 2 3 4 5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 2:

Question 3: What made you decide to choose your particular degree subject? Please select your top three statements.

- The love of and/or interest in the subject area
- I would have a better chance of employment and getting a good job
- I didn't know what I wanted to study and this seemed like a good choice
- It was at the university I wanted to attend
- It would prepare me for a specific job or career
- My parents/friends wanted me to study this subject
- Other (please specify)

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 3:

Question 4: How far do you agree with the following statements? I was worried about...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- the cost of tuition fees   1 2 3 4 5
- future debt   1 2 3 4 5
- loss of earnings whilst studying   1 2 3 4 5
- the uncertain job market for graduates   1 2 3 4 5
- my degree wouldn't lead to a job   1 2 3 4 5
- Other (please specify)   1 2 3 4 5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 4:

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SECTION 3

The following questions will ask you about your thoughts on the purpose of higher education.

Question 5a - How do you think you will benefit from going to university?

Question 5b - What downsides, if any, do you think you will experience from going to university?

Question 6: How far do you agree with the following statements? The purpose of higher education is to....

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- develop students' knowledge   1 2 3 4 5
- prepare students for future employment   1 2 3 4 5
- develop students as individuals   1 2 3 4 5
- develop broad work related skills and competencies   1 2 3 4 5
- Other (please specify)   1 2 3 4 5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 6:

SECTION 4

The following questions will ask you about your social activities whilst at university.

Question 7a - Did you have a job prior to attending university?   Yes/No

Question 7b - Do you currently have a job?

- Yes, I have a paid job
- Yes, I am a volunteer
- No, however I am currently looking for a paid job
- No, however I am currently looking to volunteer
- No, I am not looking for a job at all

Question 7c: What are your reasons for wanting or not wanting a job?

Question 8 - Do you currently belong to any clubs or societies or are involved in any extra curricula activities? Yes/No

If you answered 'Yes', which ones do you belong to and why did you choose these particular ones to join?

If you answered 'No', what were your reasons for not belonging to any?

Appendix B

SECTION 5

These final questions will ask about what you would like to gain from university and your thoughts on the future

Question 9: How far do you agree with the following statements? My undergraduate degree will enable me to...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- develop as a person   1 2 3 4 5
- get a good job   1 2 3 4 5
- make friends and have a good social life   1 2 3 4 5
- develop my work-related knowledge and skills   1 2 3 4 5
- pursue what interests me   1 2 3 4 5
- Other (please specify)   1 2 3 4 5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 9:

Question 10 - Which of the following statements most applies to you?

- I know exactly what career I want
- I'm deciding from among several possible careers
- I don't know what career I want

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 10

Question 11 - Do you think your undergraduate degree will provide you with all the necessary education and skills needed to get the kind of job you want? Yes/No/Not Sure

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 11:

Question 12a - Has your experience at university so far met, exceeded or fallen short of your expectations? Met/Exceed/Fallen short

Question 12b - Why did you rate your experience in this way?

***

B.5   Graduate Survey

Students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities

SECTION 1

These first questions are about you.

- **What undergraduate degree did you study?** *(Please provide the full degree title, e.g. BA Archaeology & History)*
- **Is this the same degree programme you originally applied to study**? Yes/ No
- **If your answer was 'No', what degree programme did you originally apply for, and why did you change?**
- **How old were you when you started your degree?**
- **What year did you graduate from your undergraduate degree?**
- **Did you study full-time or part time?** Full-time/Part-time
- **Are you male or female?** Male/ Female
- **How would you classify your student status?** UK/EU/International

SECTION 2

The following questions will ask you about your motivations for studying

Question 1: What were your motivations for attending university? Please select your top three statements.

- To learn more about things that interested me
- To get a good general education
- To experience university life and to make new friends
- To have a better chance of employment and get a good job
- To increase my earning potential
- To prepare for a specific job or career
- Because that's what you're supposed to do after school/college
- Other (please specify below)

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 1:

Question 2: How far do you agree with the following statements? I decided to go to university because...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- I would not have been able to find a high-paying job later on   1 2 3 4 5
- I enjoyed learning new things   1 2 3 4 5
- It would prepare me for a specific career   1 2 3 4 5

- I wanted to broaden my knowledge about subjects which appealed to me   1   2   3   4   5
- I wanted to develop a broad set of work related skills   1   2   3   4   5
- I wanted to read interesting subject material in an area I enjoy   1   2   3   4   5
- Other (please specify)   1   2   3   4   5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 2:

Question 3: What made you decide to choose your particular degree subject? Please select your top three statements.

- The love of and/or interest in the subject area
- I would have a better chance of employment and getting a good job
- I didn't know what I wanted to study and this seemed like a good choice
- It was at the university I wanted to attend
- It would prepare me for a specific job or career
- My parents/friends wanted me to study this subject
- Other (please specify)

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 3:

Question 4: How far do you agree with the following statements? I was worried about...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- the cost of tuition fees   1   2   3   4   5
- future debt   1   2   3   4   5
- loss of earnings whilst studying   1   2   3   4   5
- the uncertain job market for graduates   1   2   3   4   5
- my degree wouldn't lead to a job   1   2   3   4   5
- Other (please specify)   1   2   3   4   5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 4:

SECTION 3

The following questions will ask you about your thoughts on the purpose of higher education.

Question 5a - How do you think you benefitted from going to university?

Question 5b – What downsides, if any, you have experienced any downsides from going to university?

Question 6: How far do you agree with the following statements? The purpose of higher education is to....

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5
- develop students' knowledge   1   2   3   4   5
- prepare students for future employment   1   2   3   4   5
- develop students as individuals   1   2   3   4   5
- develop broad work related skills and competencies   1   2   3   4   5
- Other (please specify)   1   2   3   4   5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 6:

SECTION 4

The following questions will ask you about your social activities whilst at university.

Question 7a - Did you have a job prior to attending university?   Yes/No

Question 7b – Did you have a job whilst at university?

- Yes, I had a paid job
- Yes, I was a volunteer
- No, I did not have a job

Question 7c: What are your reasons for wanting or not wanting a job?

Question 8 - Did you belong to any clubs or societies or were involved in any extra curricula activities? Yes/No

If you answered 'Yes', which ones did you belong to and why did you choose these particular ones to join?

If you answered 'No', what were your reasons for not belonging to any?

SECTION 5

These final questions will ask about what to reflect on your degree and your current job

Question 9: How far do you agree with the following statements? My undergraduate degree enabled me to...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- develop as a person   1   2   3   4   5
- get a good job   1   2   3   4   5
- develop my work-related knowledge and skills   1   2   3   4   5
- pursue what interested me   1   2   3   4   5
- Other (please specify)   1   2   3   4   5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 9:

Question 10a - Are you currently in employment?

- Yes
- No
- No, I am studying a postgraduate degree

Question 10b - Does your current job require a degree?

- Yes
- No

Question 10c - Is your current job related to the subject you studied at university?

- Very closely related
- Somewhat related
- Not at all related

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 10

Question 11 -How useful was your undergraduate degree in preparing you for a job or career?

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Not at all useful

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 11

Question 12: How far do you agree with the following statements? On reflection, I wish I had...

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5

- Studied a different undergraduate degree   1 2 3 4 5
- Chosen a different university   1 2 3 4 5
- Gained more work experience whilst at university   1 2 3 4 5
- Started to look for work sooner   1 2 3 4 5
- Studied harder   1 2 3 4 5
- Studied a higher degree qualification   1 2 3 4 5
- Other (please specify)   1 2 3 4 5

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 12:

Question 13 - Which of the following statements most applies to you?

- I knew exactly what career I wanted
- I was undecided from among several possible careers
- I was undecided about the career I wanted when I graduated my undergraduate degree

Please feel free to make any comments about Question 13

Question 14a – Did your experience at university meet, exceed or fall short of your expectations? Met/Exceed/Fall short

Question 14b - Why did you rate your experience in this way?

Question 15a – If you had your chance again, would you still choose to study the same degree?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Question 15b – Please explain why you answered this way?

***

B.6   Focus Group Discussion Questions

<u>Discussion 1</u>

Students were asked what their motivations were for attending university. They were asked to select their top three statements from a list of 7, with an option to specify another answer. The two main reasons the majority of students have for attending university seem to be for a better chance of employment and getting a good job, and to learn more things that interest them. Are you surprised by these results?

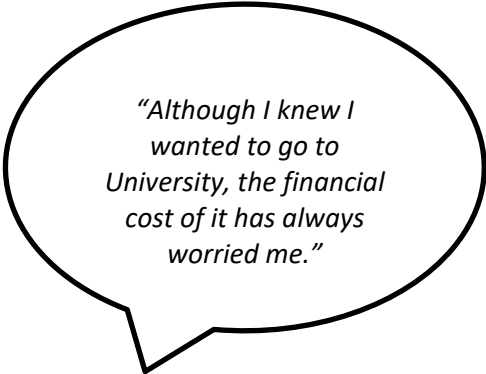| What were your motivations for attending university? Please select your top three statements.	
Answer Options	Response Percent
To have a better chance of employment and get a good job	78.4%
To learn more about things that interest me	76.6%
To experience university life and to make new friends	61.3%
To prepare for a specific job or career	27.9%
To increase my earning potential	27.1%
To get a good general education	25.7%
Because that's what you're supposed to do after school/college	12.3%
Other (please specify) • *"To open new doors to new horizons"* • *"Because I didn't feel ready to go into full time work".* • *"To have the opportunity to study abroad"*	4.5%

Discussion 2

Students were asked why they chose to study their particular degree subject. They were asked to select their top three statements from a list of 6, with an option to specify another answer. The overriding reason students chose to study their degree subject is for the love of the subject area, followed by having a better chance of employment and getting a good job was second. **Are these results what you might have expected?**
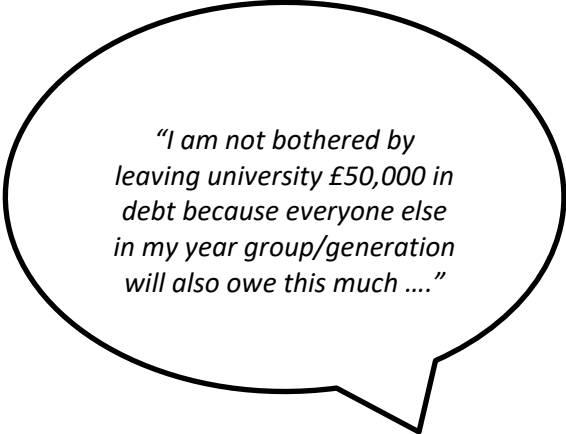
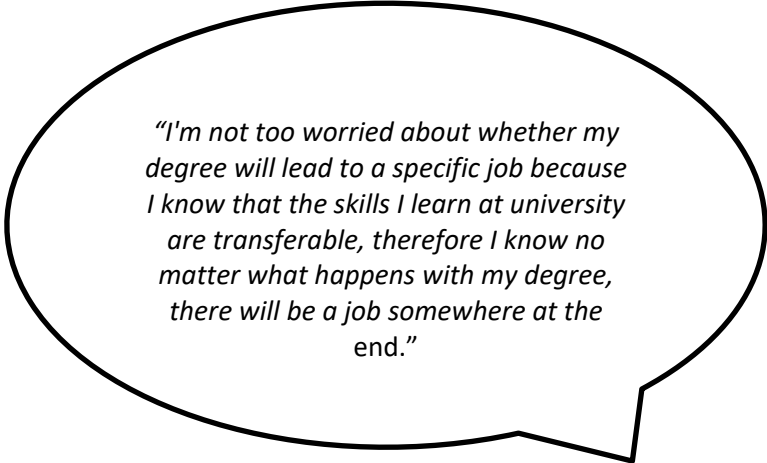| What made you decide to choose your particular degree subject? Please select your top three statements.	
Answer Options	Response Percent
The love of and/or interest in the subject area	95.8%
I will have a better chance of employment and getting a good job	63.3%
It will prepare me for a specific job or career	34.8%
I didn't know what I wanted to study and this seemed like a good choice	28.0%
It was at the university I wanted to attend	28.0%
Other (please specify)	13.3%
My parents/friends wanted me to study this subject	5.7%
Other (please specify) • *"It was what I enjoyed most at school / college"* • *"It's a well-rounded degree to graduate with and will set me in good stead for the future".* • *"…will provide me with a broad set of easily transferable employability skills."*	

Discussion 3

These are some of the responses that students gave when they were asked if they had any worries or concerns about going to university. **What are your thoughts on these statements?**

"Although I knew I wanted to go to University, the financial cost of it has always worried me."

"I am not bothered by leaving university £50,000 in debt because everyone else in my year group/generation will also owe this much …."

"I'm not too worried about whether my degree will lead to a specific job because I know that the skills I learn at university are transferable, therefore I know no matter what happens with my degree, there will be a job somewhere at the end."

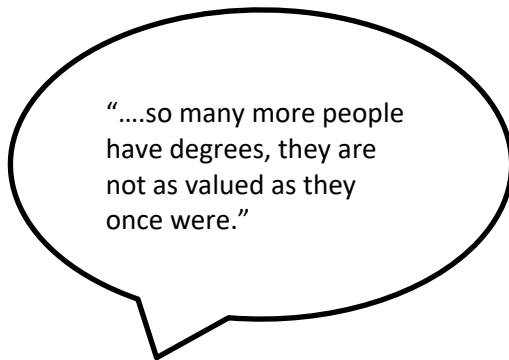"The cost of living while attending University..."

"My main concern is the job opportunities..."

Discussion 4

What do you think the purpose of higher education is?

Discussion 5

What are your views on this statement?

"….so many more people have degrees, they are not as valued as they once were."

B.7   Graduate Individual Interviews – Facilitator Guidance Questions

Choice/motivation

- Tell me how you came about studying [degree subject] at [name of university]?

- At what age did you first become interested in that subject area?

- Did you always want to go to university?

- How much were other people involved in your decision of choosing what and where to study?

- What challenges, if any, did you face when choosing what to study?

- Do you think students today face different challenges to the ones you might have experienced?

- What were your expectations of going to university?

Employment and career choice

- How much consideration did you give to life after university whilst you were studying?

- How prepared for employment did you feel when you left university? *(Extra-curricular activities/work to help supplement degree for CV).*

- What was your experience like of applying for jobs after graduation?

- What were your expectations for employment before you graduated? Were your expectations met?

- What do you understand by the term "employability"? *(reproduction of concepts)*

- What are your views on the role that universities have in preparing students for employment?

Tuition fees

- What are your views on tuition fees?

- What role, if at all, did tuition fees play in choosing what to study?

- Would tuition fees have made any difference to what you studied at university?

- What do you think about students being called "customers" or "consumers"?

- How do you think students' expectations of univeristy have changed?

Value

- How much value do you think your degree has*? (Instrumental vs intrinsic/developmental value)?*

- How interested were employers in what and where you studied at University? (*(value of going to university/type/degree/outcome)*

- How much has what you studied helped you in your jobs since leaving university?

- What benefits did you experience from going to university?

- What disadvantages did you experience from going to university?

- In what ways did you change as a person whilst at university? *(transformation)*

- Imagine that you are applying for university again, would you do anything differently?

- What's your favourite memory from going to University?

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