UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

School of Education

The Use of Level 1 Skills-based Intervention Strategies to Influence Expectations and Improve the Student Learning Experience.

Volume 1 of 2

by

Neil Harris

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ABSTRACT
FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
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THE USE OF LEVEL 1 SKILLS-BASED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO INFLUENCE EXPECTATIONS AND IMPROVE THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

by Neil Harris

This thesis explores student and staff expectations and experiences of student learning, and specifically skills developments, during 2002-03. It determines whether influencing expectations, through a skills-based intervention strategy, can improve student learning and hence retention, which is part of the student experience. Two alternative Level 1 strategies are considered: a stand-alone skills unit and a skills unit integrated with other Level 1units. Data triangulation is employed using student and staff interviews, student questionnaires and telephone interviews with withdrawn students. A hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm is used to develop an interpreted and integrated analysis of the underlying connected themes of skills development, the student experience and student retention, and of their contexts. This is based on a modified version of Biggs' (1999) Presage-Process-Product model, the current literature and the researcher's experiences in higher education.

Several inter-related themes emerge from the research. These are the extent of the match of student and staff expectations and experiences and the implications of mismatches; the mature student learning experience; motivation; the Level 1 intellectual challenge; the student work-life balance; the extent of skills development; and student retention. What develops from these themes is an holistic model of dominant Level 1 student types: *Workers*; *Mature*; *Socialisers*; *Leavers*; and *Returners*. Each has different characteristics and to some extent different approaches to learning, although surface-strategic approaches dominate. Students can and do migrate between these categories.

When beginning this research it was assumed that a fully integrated skills unit would be more effective than a stand-alone skills unit in influencing student expectations and providing the tools to be an effective learner. In fact, students perceive both to be effective. However, a skills-based intervention strategy alone is insufficient. Rather, an holistic strategy is needed encompassing more explicit recognition of the central role of expectations, other support mechanisms and faculty and university actions.

The contribution to knowledge from this research is the model of dominant student types; an holistic intervention strategy, encompassing expectations and skills, to move students to the *Workers* category in this model; identifying the lack of initial student predictive expectations but their formation during their early weeks; and the need for the University of Wessex to re-examine the impact of its assessment regulations on the inter-connected themes of skills development, the Level 1 student learning experience and retention.

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List of Abbreviations

BBus	Bachelor of Business degree (Australia)
BTEC	Business and Technician Education Council
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CIT	Communication and Information Technology – see also ICT
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
COR	Chain of Response model
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DFES	Department for Education and Skills
ELPO	Expectations Led Planned Organisation
FE	Further Education
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FYE	First Year Experience
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Fund
ICT	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – see also CIT
IT	Information Technology
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
M&L	Marketing and Leisure (Academic) School, UWBS
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NAB	National Advisory Board
NAO	National Audit Office
NCC	National Curriculum Council
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
OCSLD	Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OU	Open University
PDP	Personal Development Planning

3Ps	Presage-Process-Product model
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RDA	Regional Development Agency
RSA	Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
SEEDA	South East England Development Agency
SERVPREF	Service Quality Approach
SERVQUAL	Service Performance-based Measurement Approach
SRHE	Society for Research into Higher Education
SSN	Student Support Network
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UCAS	Universities Clearing and Admissions System
UDACE	Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education
US	Undergraduate Skills (unit)
USET	University Students' Expectations of Teaching
UWE	University of the West of England, Bristol
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
UW	The University of Wessex
UWBS	The University of Wessex Business School
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND, CONTENTS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The purpose statement

This research explores student and staff expectations and experiences of student learning, and specifically skills demands, on selected University of Wessex Business School (UWBS) Level 1 courses during the academic year 2002-03. I use a hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm to develop an interpreted analysis of the underlying themes and contexts and determine whether influencing expectations through a skills-based intervention strategy can improve student learning and its concomitant retention. Data triangulation is employed using student and staff interviews, student questionnaires and telephone interviews with withdrawn students.

1.1.2 The origins of my research

The national policy debate on skills development in British higher education (HE) goes back at least 40 years to the Robbins Report (HMSO 1963) and the 1964 creation of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and may now be perceived as EU-wide. There have been many reports from successive governments e.g. the White Paper *Higher education: meeting the challenges* (DES 1987), the report of *the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (Dearing 1997) and the White Paper *The future of higher education* (DfES 2003); from employers' organisations and unions e.g. the CBI's *Towards a skills revolution* (CBI 1989) and the TUC's *Skills 2000* (TUC 1989); and from other stakeholders e.g. the Association of Graduate Recruiters' *Roles for graduates in the 21st century: getting the balance right* (Association of Graduate Recruiters 1993), the European Commission's report *Teaching and learning: towards the learning society* (European Commission 1995) and the CVCP/CBI/CIHE report *Helping students towards success at work: an intent being met* (CVCP/CBI/CIHE 1998). These have emphasised the importance of skills development in enabling the UK to compete globally, and the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in effectively preparing graduates for work. I review this historical development in Appendix 1.1 and list these reports more fully in Appendix 1.6.

My doctoral research arose from work that colleagues and I undertook in the mid-to-late 1990s examining the student experience, specifically the Level 3 honours challenge, on undergraduate courses at a Southern English HEI, and, subsequently, the University of Maine, USA. It also explored how far critical thinking skills were being developed at both HEIs (Harris & Palmer, 1995, 1996; Harris, Lawson and Palmer, 1997, 1998). This was consistent with a contemporary emphasis on critical thinking skills development in UK HE (Assiter 1995).

From this, we developed a10 CATS skills unit, *Undergraduate Success,* offered on a Marketing & Leisure (M&L) course that is part of this research. It introduced transferable skills and critical thinking skills to Level 1 students to facilitate independent learning, a key objective of UW's Learning & Teaching Strategy. Subsequently, the unit was revised as *Undergraduate Core Skills* (Appendix 1.2) and extended to 20 CATS including key skills (Dearing 1997) as *Undergraduate Skills* (Appendix 1.3). Apart from the coverage of mathematics / statistics and IT in the latter, whereas in the former this is developed through other units on the course where *Undergraduate Core Skills* is offered, the two skills units are very similar.

Other UWBS courses, including two business ones in this research, offer a Level 1 *Business Methods* unit, covering key skills of communications, numeracy and IT (Appendix 1.4). It is assumed these courses develop transferable skills within other Level 1 units, what Harris, Lawson & Palmer (1997) termed the 'osmosis model'. For my research, I use Shepherd's (2000 p. 8) definition of transferable skills as 'non-specific or general skills that, it is assumed, can be used in a wide range of applications and contexts'.

1.2 Skills

1.2.1 Types of skills

In recent years, different terms have been used to identify skills graduates should have (Fallows and Steven 2000). Many definitions are broadly similar with skills called core, generic, professional, common, general, portable, employability, cognitive, inter-personal, transferable, personal transferable, generalisable or key, to

name some (Nijhof and Brandsma 1999; Shepherd 2000). Blaskó (2002, p.1) describes generic skills as 'similarly important for all the graduates' while Gibbs et al (1994) argue they are completely general. They also accept (p.5) that transferable skills can be used in different disciplines, although 'what may seem an advanced or specialised skill in one discipline may be a basic skill in another'. As Dockerell et al (1997) note, they are distinct from specific disciplinary or vocational skills at the other end of the spectrum.

There is also a debate concerning whether key/transferable skills actually transfer, although reports from employers and government, most recently the latter's *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003), usually assume this occurs automatically. However, some researchers e.g. Bridges (1994) and Shepherd (2000) distinguish transferable skills from transferring or transfer skills arguing a need to develop the latter to enable one to adapt transferable skills to different situations. A detailed discussion follows in Chapter 2.5.2.

1.2.2 Competing models of skills development

There is considerable debate in the literature regarding different skills development models e.g. Laybourn, Falchikov, Goldfinch and Westwood (2000); Figure 1.1 presents some of these. Drummond et al (1997) summarise three: stand-alone, embedded and work placement / work-based projects, while CVCP et al (1998) identify the first two. The 'stand-alone', discrete or 'bolt-on' skills module, applies whether developing study skills or general transferable skills (Murray and Gore 1994; Chance 1994; Wilkins 1994; Clarke and Tomlinson 1995; Harding 2000); the unit *Business Methods* is an example of this for key skills development. Many authors argue it does not develop skills since students perceive it as separate from other modules and not enabling them to transfer skills from the bolt-on module to other modules.

Early research by Gibbs (1981, p.92) counselled against discrete study skills modules, arguing that learning skills (to use another term) need to be integrated into existing modules. This is endorsed by Martin and Ramsden (1987); Zuber-Skerett (1987); Entwistle and Tait (1991); Entwistle et al (1992); Gibbs, Rust, Jenkins and

Jacques (1994), Booth (1997), Stephenson (1998), Laybourn et al (ibid) etc. Ramsden (1992, p.137) supports this but further acknowledges that widening access implies 'increasing attention will have to be paid to studying the variety of understandings and skills with which students begin a course in higher education'. Subsequent work by Gibbs (1992) stresses the need to help students develop learning skills to discourage them from adopting a surface learning approach through using inappropriate learning skills developed in previous contexts e.g. further education (FE).

An alternative model is a skills module fully integrated with other modules at the same level, drawing on relevant examples from the latter and its content being practised in (transferred to) the latter; this should impact positively on student learning (Gibbs 1981; McPeck 1990; Otter 1997, cited in Shepherd 2000). This is Drummond et al's (1997) embedded-skills model, delivered at Sheffield Hallam University via Blackboard, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Harris et al (1997) argue this model applied to *Undergraduate Success*, which was a discrete yet subject-relevant model, because of the subject expertise of staff delivering it, and the two-way transfer of content and the practising of skills between it and other Level 1 units; what Shepherd (2000) calls 'near transfer'. Holman (1995) argues that, although skills-based modules facilitate skills development, they promote individual rather than socially negotiated development that employers seek (so-called 'soft' skills e.g. group working). The integrated skills module is equivalent to Bennett et al's (2000) Pattern 4 model (Appendix 1.5).

A third model in Figure 1.1 is the skills-within-discipline model e.g. IT skills within a Marketing module (De La Harpe et al 2000; Hilliger and Roberts 2001). This equates to Bennett et al's (ibid) Pattern 5 model. It assumes key/transferable skills are developed within modules with a course overview across levels to ensure skills-based learning outcomes are met and assessed (Leask 1994; Fallows and Steven 2000). This may not always happen (Holman 1995) through course managers not taking an overview, or through a module leader assuming other same-level module leaders are developing the skills. However, where it is central to the curriculum, as at Alverno College, USA, it can be very effective (O'Brien 2000). For UWBS, this model overlaps with the stand-alone model. *Business Methods* develops key skills as

a stand-alone unit while transferable skills are assumed to be developed within other Level 1 units.

The fourth model in Figure 1.1 is the osmosis model, where there is no skills module, nor any explicit development within other modules. Rather it is assumed students acquire transferable skills automatically as part of discipline-specific studying; the danger is either that skills are not developed or that students do not realise that they have developed them (Hare and Powrie 1992). This model links to Holman's (1995) tacit and negotiated skills.

There are other models of skills development e.g. through induction programmes (UWBS 2003a), or second-year students peer-mentoring first-year students' acquisition of academic writing study-skills (Durkin and Main 2002). As noted above, Drummond et al (1997) identify work-based learning / work placements but this is not appropriate for my research. Barnett (1994) proposes a 'Skills in HE' model, while Bennett et al (2000) develop a 'model of course provision'; these are discussed in Chapter 2.5.

1.2.3 Higher Education Institutions and skills development

OECD research shows that obtaining a degree brings major benefit to UK graduates, with higher pay and reduced unemployment risk compared with UK secondary-school leavers (Anon 2002a). However, evidence of HEI effectiveness in developing business-relevant skills is inconclusive. The debate in the literature has a number of themes including whether universities understand business needs, whether a business benefits from employing skilled graduates, whether business expectations affect student learning, whether undergraduate students perceive themselves as developing skills and whether graduates find these skills beneficial when in employment. What does emerge is that universities have responded since 1990 substantially adapting curricula to provide skills provision that they perceive graduates need, although this may not match employers' perceptions. At times, this creates tensions between both parties but, long term and backed by government, businesses are winning this debate. As noted previously, Appendix 1.6 presents some government and employers' skills publications during the last quarter-century as illustration of the work devoted to

skills. However, student and graduate perceptions are that they still have skills deficiencies that disadvantage them in employment; a more detailed discussion is presented in Appendix 1.7. Additionally, skills development in HE needs to contribute to developing deep approaches to learning, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

1.2.4 The University of Wessex's position regarding skills

UW's mission statement is 'courses for careers, learning for life' (UW 1999; UW 2002b). Its 2004-08 strategic plan (University of Wessex 2004) emphasises vocational courses that educate graduates with skills to meet local community, including employers', needs. It also identifies a graduate profile encompassing key skills, general transferable skills, and subject specific knowledge and abilities, to be developed within courses. Appendix 1.8 lists these taken from a course validation document. Hence, each unit taught has a descriptor identifying knowledge and understanding; cognitive skills; practical and professional skills; and transferable and key skills (Appendices 1.2-1.4).

Further, through the Academic Framework project, the Key Skills and PDP Task Group examined skills development. The minutes of its meeting of 21 May 2002 note that 'apart from two courses where skills are taught as part of a skills unit, it is left to unit leaders to interpret and decide how they will integrate skills according to the unit specification' (University of Wessex 2002a). Another recommendation of the Group has been 'that all students have the opportunity to develop and be supported in the development of a personal development profile with a particular emphasis at Level 1 on developing the skill of "learning to learn" (Dearing, 1997)' (Collins and Lim 2002). This is reinforced by moves from a personal tutoring system to a Student Support Network (SSN) (Collins and Lim, 2003) which includes a five-week Level 1 spiral induction programme (Appendix 1.9) to develop some transferable skills.

Personal development profiles (PDPs) have been trialed on some courses during 2003-04 to encourage student reflection on learning, including skills development. Linking skills development to personal skills portfolios is common in the literature

e.g. De La Harpe et al 2000, and widely used in Australia and the U.S. with Starr (1994) writing about personal profiling ten years ago.

1.2.5 My choice of skills

Bennett et al (2000) criticise the lack of theoretical underpinning of much skills-based research so develop their own 'model of course provision' with the skills they choose emerging from interviews with academic staff. These fall under the headings of self; others; information; and task and are presented as Figure 2.6. Accepting the logic of Bennett et al, Figure 1.1 is my model of Level 1 skills development. It draws on Barnett (1994), Drummond et al (1997), Harris et al (1997) and Bennett et al (2000) and recognises the inevitable overlap between discipline-specific skills, key/transferable skills, and work experience. Formal work experience is not common at Level 1 but part-time work experience, or experience brought from working prior to university, certainly is. Also, UWBS courses are vocational with a mix of contextualised examples and assessments, guest speakers, work simulation etc. For my current research I focus on the stand-alone skills model and the skills-within-discipline model for Business courses and the skills module integrated with other modules at the same level for Marketing and Leisure courses.

Regarding skills terms, I distinguish between key skills and transferable skills and have developed these drawing on the literature, pilot interviews with students and staff, my knowledge of UWBS units (UWBS 2001; UWBS 2003b)) and the QAA's (2000a) *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications.* I also mapped them against Dearing (1997) and subsequently revisited and retested them e.g. adding 'problem-solving' through staff feedback and inter-personal skills through student feedback.

I choose three key skills that align with Dearing (ibid) although Dearing's 'learning to learn' is included as a transferable skill 'learn independently of tutors', or autonomous learning as Fazey and Fazey (2001) call it. I have included 'communication skills' under key skills but 'make a quality presentation', 'express your thoughts in class' and 'write a structured essay or report' as transferable skills. This is because key skills are covered in both *Business Methods* and *Undergraduate*

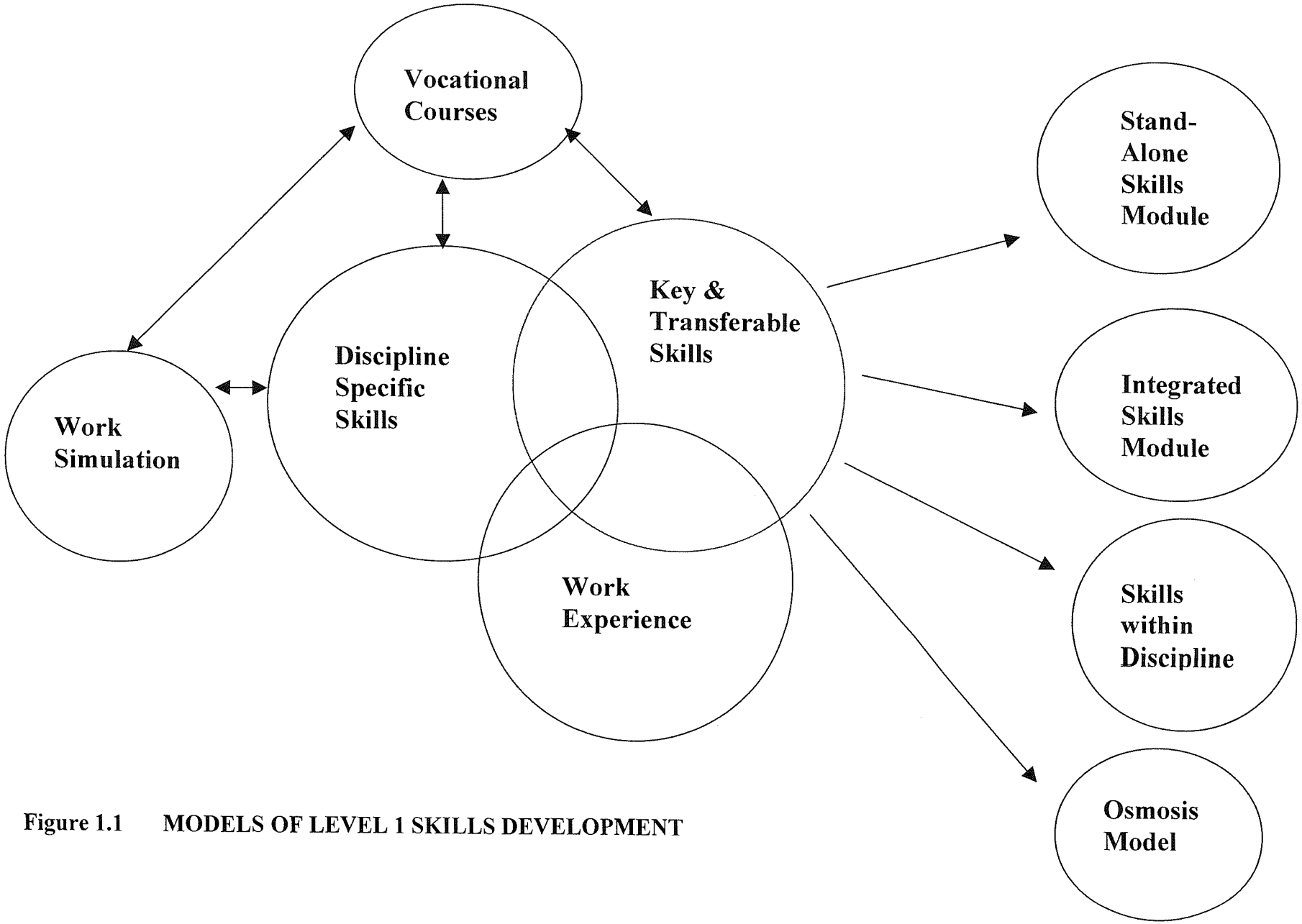

Figure 1.1 MODELS OF LEVEL 1 SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Skills but whereas transferable skills are covered explicitly in the latter, for business courses they are developed, in theory, within other units. To be able to give each student and member of staff on business and leisure courses the same breadth of questions, an element of duplication was inevitable.

- Communication skills
- Mathematics and statistics
- Information technology

Text box 1.1 Key skills used in my research

- Use the library effectively
- Make a quality presentation
- Read an article critically
- Express your thoughts in class
- Work in a group
- Learn independently of tutors
- Write a structured essay or report
- Manage your time effectively
- Be assertive
- Inter-personal skills
- Research skills
- Problem solving

Text box 1.2 Transferable skills used in my research

Most transferable skills are self-explanatory. Using a library effectively includes information searching skills. Reading an article critically and writing a structured essay or report are included as important undergraduate intellectual skills although pilot interviews suggested that, in accordance with Bloom et al (1956), the former was perceived more as a Level 2 skill; nonetheless it is reasonable to expect initial development in Level 1. Other transferable skills are self-explanatory.

1.3 The Research Proposal

1.3.1 My proposed research

My purpose statement in Chapter 1.1 outlines my proposed research. I chose Level 1 because it is a high-risk year where many students secure poor grades, are referred in first assessment attempts or leave.

My research has been undertaken within a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Van Manen 1990) enabling me to explore in depth, through interviews during 2002-03, Level 1 student and staff expectations and experiences concerning the inter-connected themes of skills development, the student experience and retention. I have provided data validity through time (data) triangulation using student questionnaires and telephone interviews with withdrawn students (Denzin 1970). From this I provide a detailed explanation and interpretation referenced against the current literature, my adaption of Biggs' (1999) Presage-Process-Product (3Ps) model, and my experience in higher education.

Originally, I intended using QSR's qualitative data analysis package, N6 to analyse my data. Subsequent difficulties with this forced me to abandon it so, now, I analyse this data manually using multi-view tables and cluster analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). I intend my research findings to inform UWBS policy-making and practice, which may be interpreted as a transferable/general skill identified as a learning outcome of this doctorate (University of Southampton 2003, 10). As Associate Dean (Enhancement), UWBS, part of my remit encompasses faculty learning and teaching issues; hence the quality of the Level 1 student learning experience, which also encompasses skills development and retention, is an important part of this.

1.3.2 Student expectations

The literature on the student HE experience suggests students, especially first-generation, lack accurate expectations initially, expecting an exciting social life and limited studying (Booth 1997; Ozga & Sukhnandan 1998; Cook and Leckey 1999). UWBS previously had an unacceptable Level 1 attrition rate that is now reducing

through remedial measures. Nonetheless, if students join with the wrong expectations, this may significantly impact on their experiences and performance, which could be magnified if tutors have different expectations.

Most HEIs employ a student satisfaction survey while the UK's National Student Survey will be fully implemented from 2005. However, Stevenson, Sander et al (1996, 1997, 1998) and Sander et al (2000) argue that it may also be necessary to employ a questionnaire to determine student expectations and enable tutors to re-design courses and teaching methods to match student-preferred expectations. I explore this in my research.

1.3.3 Staff expectations

Cook and Leckey (1999) found students entering HE retain previous study habits into Year 1 yet tutors expect them to work independently. This suggests both students' and staff expectations are important but Spours (1997) argues there is considerable divergence between these. I explore this more fully in Chapters 2.6, 4 and 5.

1.3.4 Skills development as an intervention strategy

The literature presents two models for addressing student expectations to improve student learning, One identifies student expectations and then adjusts the student learning experience to meet these, which is Stevenson et al's (1997) Expectations-Led Planned Organisation (ELPO) approach. The alternative model, also from these authors, is to influence student expectations, through an intervention strategy, so students adjust to the realities of contemporary HE. This is consistent with Gibbs (1992), Harris, Lawson and Palmer (1997) and McDonald and Stratta (2001). Chapter 2.7 discusses the work of Steele (1992), Brunsden et al (2000) and others regarding intervention strategies, including skills development, while Chapter 5 analyses the impact of the latter on the student learning experience and hence retention.

As noted, I examine student and staff expectations and experiences on Level 1 of four UWBS courses, considering two skills-based intervention strategies to influence student expectations. The first is the 'stand alone model' for key skills development on business courses used in conjunction with the skills-within-discipline model for transferable skills development on business courses (Harris et al, 1997). The second strategy is the skills module integrated with other modules at the same level for key and transferable skills development on M&L courses. Brunsden et al (2000) argue that an intervention strategy influences student experiences by promoting more effective learning. However, skills development also shapes students' course expectations, especially at Level 1, where most skills development is undertaken. For example, developing presentational skills influences students' expectations of future presentations, as well as their current ability to give effective presentations, and hence should contribute to a convergence between expectations and experiences when they undertake presentations in other units. This is consistent with Berman Brown's (1998) argument that if one cause of a poor quality learning experience, and hence poor student retention, is a mismatch between student expectations and experiences, then one aspect of quality is met when expectations and experiences converge.

To conclude, as Bennett et al (2000, p.21) argue, 'very few studies have considered students' acquisition of core skills, their reaction to the teaching of such skills or the degree of skills transfer. The studies so far undertaken have relied exclusively on students' perceptions rather than on independently assessed outcomes. What evidence there is indicates than when skills courses are taught students are generally positive, find the content useful and believe that their skills have improved as a consequence (Tate & Thompson 1994; Greenan et al 1997; Ng et al, 1994)'.

1.4 Retention

Originally, retention was a major part of my research. However, subsequently, I realised it was a sub-set of the Level 1 student learning experience and so it was also likely to be influenced by skills development. Poor retention is evidence of a low quality student learning experience that may arise from the students' inaccurate

initial expectations, or their experiences or from some mismatch between these or those of tutors.

Dearing (1997) does not specifically address retention, not seeing it as a problem; rather he notes in paragraph 12 that 'it [UK HE] continues to produce first degree graduates quickly and with low drop-out rates compared to other countries.' He does, however, acknowledge the growing diversity of the student population with increasing numbers of mature students, part-timers, and women entering HE with a variety of different qualifications. Subsequently, this has been reinforced by the second Blair government's wish to achieve a 50% participation rate in HE of those aged 18-30 by 2010, mainly through 'the expansion of two-year work focused foundation degrees' (DfES 2003, p.57). The intention is that greater numbers will enter from the population groups identified above and, as Dearing (1997, p.14) argues 'from socio-economic groups III-V, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups'. However, as will be seen in Chapter 2.9, widening access has significant implications for retention with non-traditional students, including mature ones, being most likely not to complete their course (Universities UK 2001).

Since the Dearing report, retention has entered the political agenda. For example, in November 2000, then-Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, wrote to the HEFCE Chair, Sir Michael Strickland, stating he expected to see HEFCE 'bear-down' on attrition and asserting that 'there are unacceptable variations in the rate of drop-out which appear to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited'. In contrast, Michael Shattock, then Registrar of Warwick University, when asked how 'we can avoid a high drop-out rate' in HE argued 'I don't think we can. Actually, I'm not sure that a high dropout rate in mass HE is particularly reprehensible' (http://www.warwick.ac.uk/alumni/network/6/death.htm, 2000).

The March 2001 report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment looked specifically at student retention, its first sentence arguing 'access to HE is not only a matter of getting into HE; *it is also a matter of staying in* and emerging in good standing ' (my italics). It notes that only recently have the terms 'retention' and 'attrition' entered common parlance, replacing earlier terms

'dropout' and 'wastage, the latter being unhelpful because of HE's changing nature. This is significant to my research with UW experiencing a diminishing unit of resource, more students part-time in all but name through working, increasing mature students and other non-traditional entrants who are most at risk regarding attrition, and students leaving UW only to return later to us or another HEI. HEFCE data shows 20 percent of students leave their course at the end of Level 1, resuming one year later, while nine percent transfer to a different HEI (http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmeduemp/124/12402.htm, 2001).

Much work has been undertaken on retention with Tinto the most influential researcher since the 1970s, and Yorke active in the UK. Others also research retention particularly following moves to the massification of HE (Peelo and Wareham 2002) and the consequent potential for the worsening of retention trends with funding implications for HEIs. As illustration, Pitkeithly and Prosser (2001) discuss concerns regarding first-year student withdrawals and the impact of initial campus experiences on these. As they note, one-third of all students entering Australian HEIs fail to graduate and half of withdrawals occur during Year 1, with Year 1 issues also impacting on Year 2 and 3 withdrawals. Citing Williams (1982), and Tinto (1995), they argue many students leave or fail their course not through the intellectual challenge but through adjustment difficulties or environmental problems i.e. experiences. These include lack of clearly defined goals by students, mismatch between student and course, and isolation. However, as they note, generalisations alone are insufficient; 'because of the inherent differences between university campuses, each university must understand the needs and experiences of its own students if it is to address student attrition' (p.188). This is, in part, a function of my research.

1.5 Other research themes

1.5.1 Introduction

These were considered to some extent when I began my research but subsequently emerged as of considerable significance. Hence they are introduced here and developed in the rest of the thesis.

1.5.2 Motivation

This emerged from my reading of the 3Ps model and my modification of Biggs' (1999) version to include the related themes of skills development, the first-year experience and retention. There appear two schools of thought regarding motivation, those who argue it is essentially inherent in students to varying degrees and those e.g. Biggs, who argue motivation is developed by quality (level three) learning. Without denying the latter, my research findings suggest that the balance lies between the two.

1.5.3 The Level 1 intellectual challenge

In Chapters 4 and 5 I develop, in conjunction with the above, the extent of the intellectual challenge Level 1 UWBS courses afford as a motivating factor. This also links to administrative regulations within UW and the mindset of some tutors regarding new entrants.

1.5.4 Living strategically

This is another topic that has emerged from my research. Students now live strategically, juggling a range of different activities including studying, socialising and working. This has implications for their approaches to learning including how far they have time to reflect, an important aspect of deep learning approaches, and for their inter-related skills development, particularly of time-management and financial management, and for their retention.

1.5.5 Mature students

As discussed previously, more mature students i.e. over 21 now enter HE, with a greater risk of non-completion compared with under-21s. For UWBS, 39 percent of the 2002-03 intake were mature. Mature students were always intended to be part of my research. However, it was only when securing my 10 student-interviewees that I realised five were mature. Additionally, issues emerged during the year, from the

mature student-interviewees, and younger peers, that subsequently made this a key research theme.

The literature on mature students is limited but there is much on adult learners. In the past these were regarded as a different group, often associated with professional qualifications gained part-time, or evening classes. However, with the breakdown of traditional school-leaver students dominating HE, a blurring has occurred with mature students. I have therefore drawn on adult learner literature to inform mature student research.

1.6 My research questions

Mason (1996) argues that research questions, which make explicit the intellectual puzzle being explored, must be clearly formulated, intellectually worthwhile and researchable. I use them, therefore, to problematise links between my and other research in the related areas of the first-year experience, skills development and student retention and so avoid duplicating previous work. I have evaluated my questions against these criteria and reformulated them within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition. They are presented as text box 1.3 and I answer them in this thesis.

1. From the perspective of students and staff, what are the structures of their expectations and experiences of student learning, and specifically skills demands, on Level 1 of UWBS undergraduate courses, and what do these mean?

2. What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for their expectations and experiences?

3. What are the implications, for the quality of first year student learning, of staff and student expectations and experiences, specifically of skills demands, and any divergences between them?

4. How might the quality of first year student learning, and retention, be improved through a skills-based intervention strategy to influence student expectations?

Text box 1.3 My research questions

1.7 A summary of the thesis contents

This section summarises the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 2 is my literature review chapter. I focus on the themes emerging from my research, as well as those I initially identified, aligning them with my research questions. I examine hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology and then review approaches to learning, leading to Biggs' (1999) 3Ps model, and my modifications to it, his three theories of learning, and work concerning reflection. Linked to this is motivation literature. I then explore key/transferable and transfer skills development to influence student expectations and improve the quality of the student learning experience. From this, I examine research into student and staff expectations and experiences. Finally, I review the literature on retention, as a part of the student experience, including student debt, mature students and adult learners.

Chapter 3 is my methodology chapter and is informed by the literature review. I discuss my research design, testing it against Cohen et al's framework (2000) and then address my ontological and epistemological assumptions. I discuss hermeneutic phenomenology as my research methodology, and the use of triangulation. I then review my research ethics, including the challenges of researching within one's own organisation, before presenting my research methods and the rationale for using them. I conclude this chapter by discussing validity, generalisability and reliability.

Chapter 4 is my data presentation chapter. I use graphical presentations, quotations and multi-view tables to present a thick description of the experience of some students in UWBS during 2002-03. I begin with student and staff perceptions of why students choose UW, before presenting in-depth data of what students and tutors expect and experience. I then present data on the Level 1 intellectual challenge, the student work-life-studying balance, skills and mature students, before concluding with retention.

Chapter 5 presents my analysis and discussion of the data. I use my modified 3Ps model, the literature and my experiences to interpret the data. First I explore the match of student and staff expectations and experiences, and the implications of

mismatches. I then discuss the other themes identified above, particularly the inter-related themes of skills development, the first year student experience and student retention. I also link my analysis to the UK policy debate relating to widening participation – promoting the so-called massification of HE – the skills debate and retention. From this emerges a model of dominant student types.

Chapter 6 is where I draw my conclusions, linking these to my research questions. I discuss the extent to which a skills-based intervention strategy can be used to influence student expectations and hence provide a quality learning experience, including improved retention; I link this to the themes I have explored in previous chapters. I also tie this into the dominant student-types model and develop a revised intervention strategy.

Chapter 7 presents my research recommendations to be implemented mainly by UWBS and, to some extent, by UW. It further offers my final evaluation of my research including acknowledging its limitations and how it might be taken forward in further work. It also identifies how my research makes an original contribution to knowledge.

CHAPTER 2 THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I review the theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, the Presage-Process-Product (3Ps) model and Tinto's student retention work. I also explore the literature underpinning areas identified initially i.e. expectations, skills and retention, and topics subsequently emerging from my research i.e. mature students and motivation. Figure 2.1 presents this. In this thesis, Biggs' theories of learning are denoted level one, two or three to distinguish them from Level (Year) 1, 2 or 3 of a UWBS course.

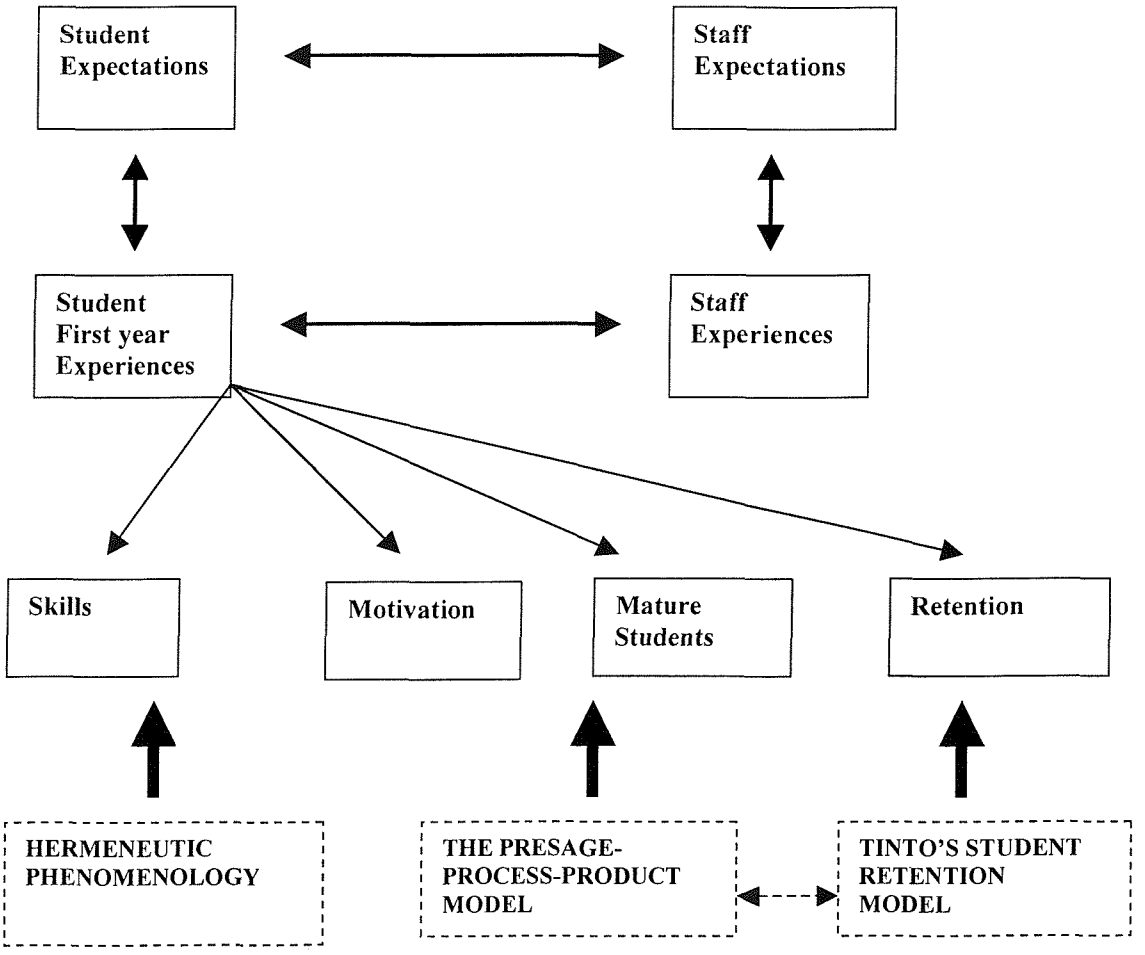

Figure 2.1 Visualisation of themes for the literature review

2.2 Phenomenology

2.2.1 Introduction

Phenomenology originates with Edmund Husserl (Figueroa 2001) and is located within the qualitative paradigm. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000 p.36) note, its 'battle cry' was '*Zu den Sachen selbst'* [to the things themselves]. Hammond, Howarth and Keat (1991, p.1) argue that 'phenomenology involves the description of things as one experiences them, or of one's experiences of things'. Cohen et al (2000), drawing on Curtis et al (1978), identify common issues epitomising phenomenology: the pre-eminence of subjective consciousness, which gives meaning to human experiences and perspectives; an understanding that consciousness is active and bestows meaning i.e. socially constructed truth; and that there are 'certain essential structures to consciousness of which we gain direct knowledge by a certain kind of reflection' (p.23). They also note that phenomenologists disagree exactly what these structures are.

Little (1997) cites Oiler (1982) who argues that, to be consistent with Husserl, a literature review should be delayed until data generation is complete 'to ensure that the phenomenon of interest remains uncontaminated.' However, Figueroa (2001) argues that, although phenomenology requires awareness of one's pre-conceptions and pre-suppositions, a researcher needs to consider these, and the relevant literature, self-critically.

2.2.2 Husserl's transcendental phenomenology

Husserl argued that everyday life is obfuscated by its culture and symbolism. We need to return to the essences underlying it by putting aside how we normally look at life, which Husserl termed 'bracketing.' We put the focus of our research (some aspect of the phenomenal world) into brackets while everything else (the obscuring effects of culture and symbolism) is put aside. We can then look at the world of ideas (in the brackets) with fresh or new eyes. This is also termed phenomenological reduction or epochĕ.

From this, Husserl introduced a second reduction, the 'eidetic.' Its purpose, argue Alvesson et al (2000, p.36), is to leave behind individual phenomena and reach the 'essences', or universals. To move to the general from the individual phenomenon, Husserl introduces a 'comparative analysis of the elements of our thought processes', which he calls the 'intuition of essences' [*Wesensschau*].

The third stage of reduction, argue Alvesson et al (ibid), is moving from studying essences i.e. eidetic reduction, to their construction, i.e. transcendental reduction. Husserl called these constructions or structures 'the transcendental ego' which ultimately creates its own world. In other words, it is the only knowable or existent thing and external factors are only a category of the transcendental ego.

2.2.3 Hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with interpreting lived experience i.e. peoples' realities and lifeworld (van Manen 1990), and is particularly associated with German (1900-1965) and Dutch (1945-1970) traditions. It is distinct from transcendental phenomenology, more recently evidenced by Hycner (1985), Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998), which is concerned with description not explanation or analysis. Although Creswell discusses interpretation in the context of data analysis, he means sorting rich description, while Hycner (ibid) argues absence of interpretation is a key characteristic of phenomenology, since its presence would distort an intuiting (direct grasp) of the essential structure of the phenomena.
In contrast, Heidegger (1962, p,37) argues that 'the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in/ interpretation'. Silverman (1985) distinguishes between descriptive phenomenology, which provides a description of a lived experience, and hermeneutic phenomenology that provides an interpretation of that experience. Van Manen cites Gadamer (1986), who distinguishes between interpreting as pointing to something (descriptive phenomenology) and interpreting as pointing out the meaning of something (hermeneutic phenomenology). Van Manen argues he uses descriptive in the sense both of the interpretive (hermeneutic) and the descriptive (phenomenological) element.

He also argues (p.9) that hermeneutic phenomenology 'attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively without classifying, taxonomising or abstracting it. It does not offer us effective theory with which to explain and/or control the world - rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world'; hence it is descriptive and interpretive. It is also retrospective, with co-researchers reflecting on experiences already lived through. As Chapter 5 shows, I do not fully agree with Van Manen's interpretation, rather developing a model to explain my researched world while staying within the broad framework of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Methodologically, van Manen (1990, p.11) argues, hermeneutic phenomenology is 'systematic, explicit, self-critical, and inter-subjective'. Defending it against positivist criticisms of lacking rationality e.g. ambiguity, inadequately based on observational and measurable data, not replicable, poorly generalisable to definite populations, irrational, unscientific and subjectivist, he argues the notion of rationality needs broadening to encompass the fact that we can make experiences intelligible and understandable to each other; human science has its own criteria that address the issues of precision, exactness and rigour. Precision is addressed, not by exactness of measurement and perfection of research design, but by exact fullness and completeness of detail in interpretive description. Human science is rigorous, not in terms of observable measures but in 'its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself' (p.18). As such, he argues, there are no solutions, correct knowledge or effective procedures – merely phenomenological questions to be inquired into. This is my justification for the model I develop.

2.2.4 Criticisms of hermeneutic phenomenology

Several researchers have critiqued phenomenology as a methodology e.g. Howard (2002) argues one criticism is phenomenology's subjective interpretation, citing Fielding (1993) who cautions that a researcher may inaccurately interpret data to fit own views. I have sought to address this by triangulation of data sources and using the 3Ps model, as well as my experiences, to provide methodological rigour.

Green and Holloway (1996, p.71) criticise interpretive phenomenology, firstly for neglecting 'the relationship between individuals' interpretations (and actions) and the social conditions within which these interpretations occur'. Using the 3Ps model, rather than just my experiences, is intended to address this criticism. Secondly, 'the approach does not take account of the unintended consequences of social actions...[which]... cannot be explained simply by reference to intentions and meanings attributed to individual actors'. This is true yet, if taken to the extreme, one would only work to a positivist methodology. So risks are inherent but this is the nature of a qualitative approach; effective data validity using triangulation and methodological rigour are ways to limit the effects. Thirdly, 'the interpretive view...incorporates conservative assumptions regarding the nature of change' i.e. 'conflicts arising from change are the results of groups and individuals having conflicting interpretations of the social reality and that these can be overcome by revealing misunderstandings of meanings (and actions)'. The authors' identified cause is correct but the suggested effect may not follow since people do not think logically and without emotion. Moreover, outcomes are appropriate to action research but do not have to follow here.

2.3 The basis for hermeneutic interpretation: the 3Ps model

2.3.1 Approaches to learning

Johnston (2001) describes an approach to learning as 'a description of a relationship between a learner and a learning task'. Deep learning approaches occur when students approach learning holistically seeking relationships between, say, modules, and creating their own understanding and body of knowledge; they also draw on prior knowledge, experiences and interests. This promotes high quality learning outcomes. Boyce et al (2001), referring to Schmeck's (1983) inventory of learning processes, argue skills development must also promote deep learning if it is to be part of a student-created body of knowledge. With surface approaches to learning, students disjointedly memorise taught information, often to pass examinations, without understanding connections between components, and with low subsequent recall. Strategic learning, which Entwistle (2000) argues is better described as an approach to studying, involves student interest in the subjects studied which is

typical of a deep approach, but which is also geared to assessments which, argues Entwistle, is strategic. This may be used, as appropriate, to achieve efficient time-management between different tasks; however, due to Level 1 student lack of time-management skills, I believe that assessment often militates towards surface learning. Appendix 2.1 discusses these more.

Booth (2001, p.490) talks of passive Year 1 Nottingham University history students needing to take ownership of their learning, become independent learners 'able to think critically and creatively, and apply their knowledge, skills and understanding flexibly in a variety of contexts' i.e. deep learning. Johnston, C. (2001) finds Year 1 University of Melbourne students' expectations of learning are not realised; they tend towards reproducing information resulting in surface learning approaches. She surmises this may be through freedom from home-life, part-time working, fear of assessment failure, or a looser learning environment with tutors assuming independent learning, yet students lacking this skill.

Laurillard (1979), discussing reading strategies, found students might adopt a mix of surface and deep learning approaches depending upon the work, while Hartley (2002) confirms this with study skills. James (2003, p.72), in Coaldrake (2003), argues many staff now believe student expectations have changed fundamentally with more students seeking 'greater spoon-feeding and narrowly reproductive approaches to assessment'. Booth (ibid) disagrees, arguing time pressures are students' major problem and they still seek intellectual development.

Johnson (1998) argues staff approaches to teaching are equally important for student deep learning e.g. relevant, appropriate and well-organised teaching and assessment material; careers options available to students; and knowledgeable tutors challenging students and promoting independent learning. Assessments need to be well spaced since bunching contributes to surface learning through student-workload peaks.

Associated with approaches to learning are students' conceptions of learning i.e. how a person makes sense of something, or relates to the world outside him/her. Saljo (1979) identifies five and Marton et al (1993) add a sixth (Appendix 2.2). Hence a

student conceiving learning as memorising facts is likely to adopt a surface learning approach (Biggs 1999).

Schmeck (1983), cited in Boyce et al (2001), identifies a student's learning style as tending to adopt a particular learning strategy regardless of what needs to be done; by learning strategy is meant the learning processes s/he adopts. A student's learning strategy is more important than his/her innate ability. To identify a student's learning style, Schmeck develops an inventory of learning processes (Appendix 2.3). Parallels exist between Schmeck's learning style and Marton and Saljo's (ibid) conceptions of learning, and between Schmeck's learning strategy and the latter's approaches to learning. However, as Biggs argues, Marton and Saljo believe the converse of Schmeck i.e. approaches to learning are determined by context without students having any preference for approaches to learning. The truth, argues Biggs, lies between the two.

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Ramsden (1984) argues that understanding students' approaches to learning involves thinking about learning and teaching holistically to include prior experience, learning skills and personal characteristics, as well as the HE teaching methodology and subject content students experience. This will influence their approaches to learning. It means considering not changes within students but rather changes between students and their world i.e. how they perceive their learning process and the context within which it takes place [Teaching Context in Figure 2.2 below]. If we examine students' *perceptions of learning* and their professed approaches to learning, we can understand how these perceptions constrain or enhance their achieving desired learning outcomes. 'Ramsden (1988) describes perception as the "point of contact" between the educational context and student experience (orientation to learning)' (Case and Gunstone 2003). Ramsden (1992, p.44) also cautions that 'approaches to learning are not something a student *has*; they represent what a learning task or set of tasks *is* for the learner...Everyone is capable of both deep and surface approaches'.

Case and Gunstone (2003) are critical of Ramsden's work concerning student perceptions on the grounds of his definition of these, which also involves a theoretical ambiguity. Drawing on socio-linguistics literature, they explore the relationship between approaches to learning and student perceptions of time and

conclude students have two distinct ways of talking about it. One demonstrates a perception of 'being-in-control', the other of 'being out of control'. With the former, where students used a conceptual approach to learning which is equivalent to a deep approach, this determined their allocation of time. For those perceiving time to be out of control, this seems to deter a conceptual approach.

2.3.2 The Presage-Process-Product Model

Prosser and Trigwell (1994) and Biggs (1999) have taken forward previous work e.g. Biggs (1978); Ramsden (1992) and Prosser et al (1994) with the Presage-Process-Product (3Ps) model, Biggs' version of which, relating to learning and teaching, is Figure 2.2. Prosser and Trigwell's version relates to learning and is in Appendix 2.4.

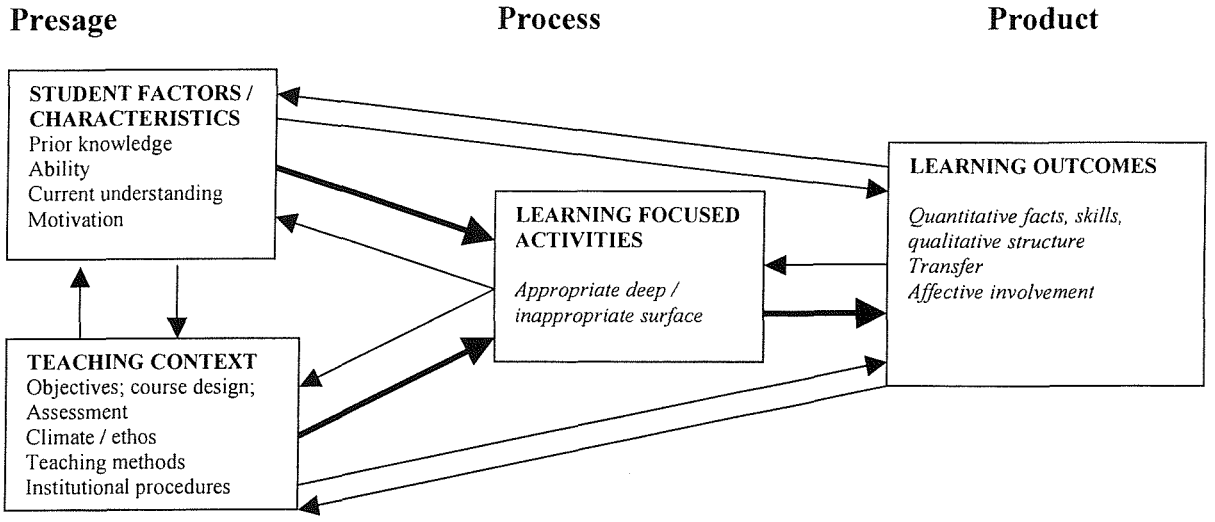


Figure 2.2 The 3Ps Model of Learning and Teaching
[source Biggs (1999)]

The two versions are broadly similar in content, although not in philosophy. The common part is that meaning is not imposed or transmitted by direct teaching but, rather, is created by students' learning activities – their 'approaches to learning'. Prosser and Trigwell's (ibid) additional box, 'Students' Perceptions of Context', is subsumed within Biggs' model underpinning 'Learner Focused Activities'.

Biggs' learning and teaching model is linear describing 'three points in time at which learning-related factors are placed: presage, before learning takes place; process,

during learning; and product, the outcome of learning' (Biggs 1999, p.18). The thin arrows connect each box to form a complete system. The thick arrows show the general direction of effects with student factors and teaching context [Presage] determining a student's approach to learning in a particular situation [Process] that, in turn, determines the learning outcome [Product]. All components on the 3Ps model must be constructively aligned with each other otherwise there are poor teaching and surface learning, inconsistencies and unmet expectations and practices that contradict this learning theory.

2.3.3 Three theories of learning

Biggs (ibid) argues the 3Ps model depicts 3 sources that could impact on learning outcomes, arising from Student Factors/Characteristics, Teaching Context and system interaction. Each of these three ways of determining learning provides a theory of teaching.

Level one learning, arising from student factors/characteristics, is a tutor-focused, blame-the-student method of information-transmitting, usually employing lectures. Differences in students' learning are explained by inherent ability, entry qualifications, motivation etc, with ability most important. Assessment is used to separate good and poor students with correct or incorrect outcomes. Since students are blamed for failure, level one learning lacks reflection. Level two learning, arising from teaching context, transmits concepts, understanding and information, with the emphasis on good teaching i.e. responsibility has passed from student to tutor. This is a deficit model, argues Biggs, since it manages teaching rather than facilitating student learning. Level three learning arises from system interaction, emphasising student engagement and learning, not tutor teaching. It depends on student factors/characteristics and teaching context and, unlike levels one and two learning, creates deep approaches to learning.

The above has parallels with McGregor's (1960) theory X and theory Y that are meta-theories, as are transfer skills in Chapter 2.6. Theory X learning is a bureaucratic tutor-controlled, blame-the-student learning model, denying student choice and not trusting them. It creates an anxiety-provoking environment and has

parallels with Biggs' level one, and to some extent level two, learning; it promotes surface learning and expectations of failure e.g. by emphasising lack of ability or skills.

However, theory Y learning, which parallels level three learning, promotes student freedom to manage own learning, choice, and supports it with administrative systems. It encourages deep learning and promotes expectations of success. In reality, argues Biggs, a learning environment is a mix of both theories. If an HEI espouses level 3 learning it must create a theory Y learning culture that prioritises student learning e.g. using criterion-referenced assessment, allowing reflection, reducing anxiety and adopting constructive alignment, so all stages of the 3Ps model align. This shows learning tasks are worth doing and, with motivation, should eliminate surface learning.

2.3.4. Reflection

In the 3Ps model, the 'Learning Focused Activities' box relates to student approaches to learning. One important aspect of deep learning is the opportunity for student and staff reflection. For this, I consider the work of Kolb (1984), Schon (1987), and Cowan (1998). Kolb's experiential learning cycle is presented as Figure 2.3 with its four stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, generalising / conceptualising and active experimenting (testing). Kolb argues that merely perceiving an experience is insufficient; a student also needs to transform his/her representation of their experience. With level 3 learning, Cowan argues, Kolbian reflection is analytical, and tutors take students around his cycle by directed activities promoting reflection and generalising, and hence deep learning approaches.

Schon (ibid) also discusses reflection, distinguishing reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, while Cowan (1998) adds reflection-for-action. Cowan argues that Schon's reflection is evaluative, a reflective practitioner being someone who engages in reflection related to action. Clouder (2000) is critical of Schon for his lack of reflexivity.

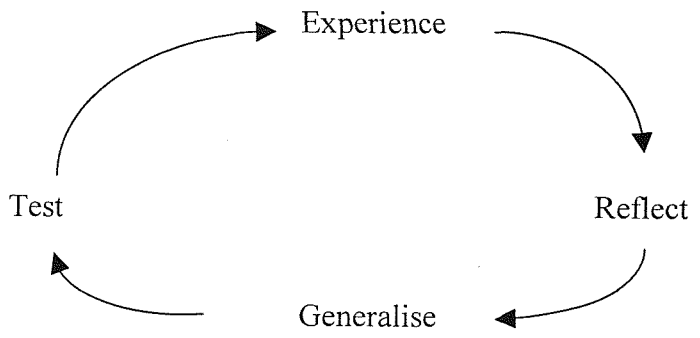


Figure 2.3 The Kolb Cycle

Paraphrasing Cowan (ibid), reflection-on-action is retrospective, looking backwards to actions in past experiences, summarising the main issues, analysing them and then generalising them to future experiences. Clouder (2000) argues this is passive. A skills audit would seek to develop this. In contrast, reflection-in-action looks back to recent experiences and forward to impending experiences but the emphasis is as much on thinking-in-anticipation as on reflecting on previous activity, to improve future performance. With reflection-for-action, Cowan argues his model combines Kolb's analytical reflection and Schon's evaluative reflection. It is an anticipatory reflection that prioritises subsequent learning by identifying the learner's needs, aspirations and objectives. This equates to critical practice and is spontaneous (Clouder, 2000).

Cowan emphasises that Kolbian and Schonian reflections are different. The former is one closed-ended stage in a cycle linking experience and generalisation. The latter is open-ended and removed from the action, albeit briefly, with outcomes determined within the process and which is not necessary for the action to proceed. Cowan is critical of the Kolbian diagram arguing its beginning is difficult to identify and the cycle is misleading or depressing or both; he argues some have suggested it should be a spiral going ever-upwards. Cowan derives a model from Kolb and Schon that is in Appendix 2.5.

2.3.5 Modifying Biggs' 3Ps model

Biggs' 3Ps model is widely used in the literature although Haggis (2004) criticises the latter for offering new university teachers a narrow range of conceptual models

based around the approaches to learning / conceptions of learning model. For my research it provides an insufficient picture. At the presage stage, some students bring skills and expectations to their learning; also, as part of the teaching context, they encounter tutor expectations located, in part, within the context of course structures and assessment regulations. I also believe there is a stronger two-way flow between Presage and Process than Biggs' model identifies. I further believe skills development is part of the process as well as an output, including transfer skills e.g. deep learning being allied to research skills, problem solving and independent learning (Booth 2001). However, most important, is the totality of the student experience which covers such issues as the convergence, or otherwise, of experiences with expectations.

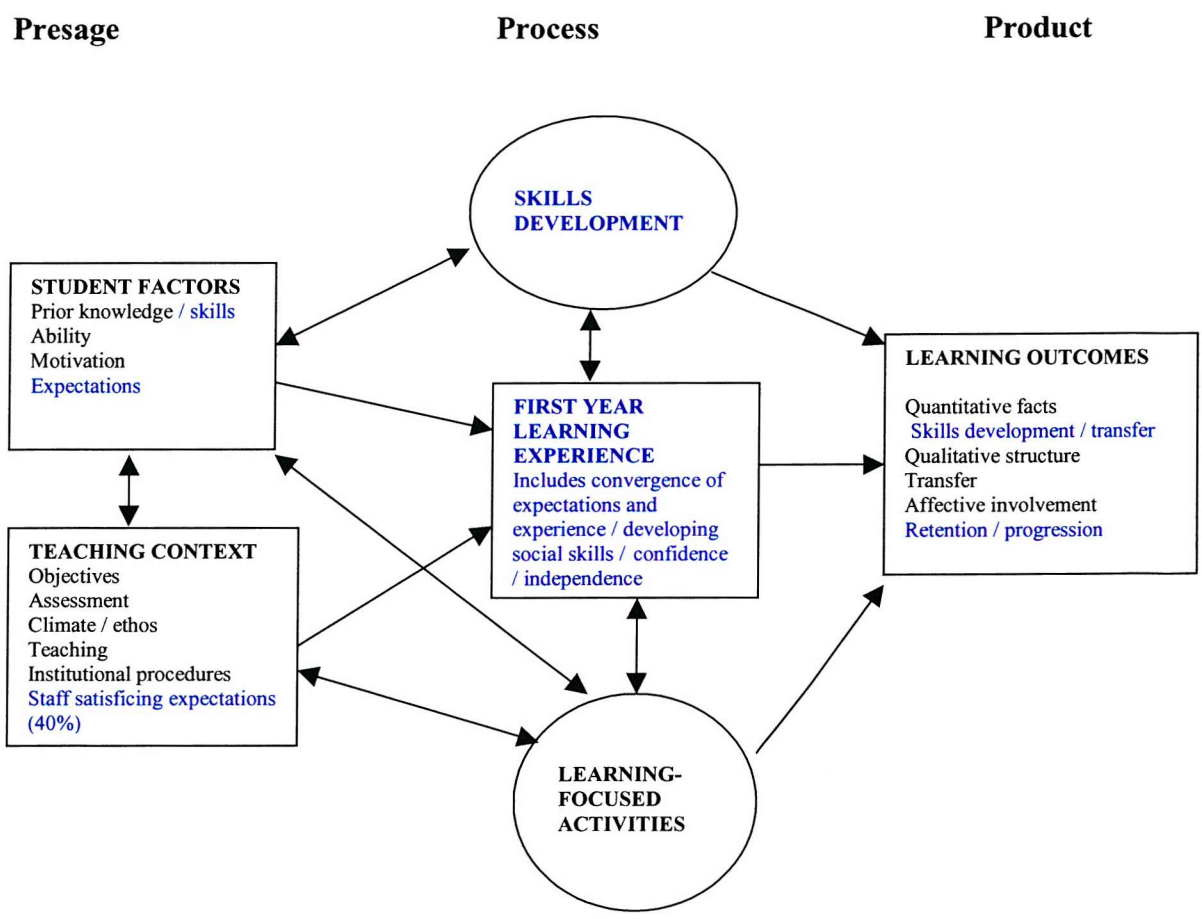


Figure 2.4 Modified version of the 3Ps model
[adapted from Biggs (1999)]

At the Product stage I identify skills development, perceptions of a quality experience including developing social skills, independence from parents and a

restrictive FE teaching timetable, confidence and ability to cope with a new environment. I also use retention/progression as additional learning outcomes.

Figure 2.4 presents my revised 3Ps model, with additions in blue.

2.4 Motivation

Motivation may be defined as 'the driving force that makes us do the things we do' (Chambers, 2001 p.3). Among the schools of thought, the cognitive approach, which focuses on what we cannot observe, such as 'thought processes, intentions, expectations, interpretations of given situations' (ibid), is most appropriate to hermeneutic phenomenology. Success, for example, is perceived by subjects to be related to 'internal factors of ability and effort and the external factors of luck and task difficulty' (ibid); there are similarities with Biggs' articulation of student approaches to learning.

> *Universities up and down the country advertise the comprehensive range of services that they provide so that students can cope with temporary or long-term challenges and difficulties ... However, they can do little to help those who lack the motivation to study in the first place. The fact that widening-access policies are used not to motivate but simply to recruit potential students creates a serious problem for higher education. Unless, students really aspire to study in the first place, universities cannot play a constructive role in encouraging their intellectual development. Unable to motivate, many sectors of higher education are forced to compromise and lower their expectations of new recruits.*
>
> Furedi (2002), 18.

Text box 2.1 One perception of the motivation-widening participation relationship

For Furedi (2002), motivation is an inherent characteristic that can, in part, be addressed by providing additional support at the Presage stage of the 3Ps model i.e. at school / FE college, through universities targeting potential students from educationally-disadvantaged backgrounds. Biggs would agree with this but focuses equally on the process, at university, and product i.e. intended learning outcomes.

To Biggs (1999), student motivation develops from level three learning, or McGregor's theory Y, which is intellectually challenging, offers choice, promotes

independence and ownership and is student-centred; Bennett (2003) concurs, citing 'the critical importance of teaching [and learning] quality as a determinant of student satisfaction and hence of commitment' (p.137). Level 3 learning has clear goals and learning outcomes, uses appropriate assessment and feedback to promote learning, and there is constructive alignment between the three stages of the 3Ps model; also tutors learn from students (Ramsden 1992). Reflection in the Kolbian sense, or in Schön's reflection-in-action or on-action, is central to this and contributes to deep approaches to learning. Hence, to Biggs, motivation is an outcome of learning rather than an inherent student characteristic, whereas level one learning, as with Furedi, perceives motivation to be an attribute students possess to varying extents. If a classroom climate creates negative feelings, which can be affective or cognitive, this will be de-motivational, says Biggs, and lead to surface learning.

This reiterates Ramsden (1992) who argues that surface approaches are linked to negative studying attitudes, and hence assessment failure; in turn, argues Bennett (2003), there is a strong correlation between student stress and problems with academic performance that, consequently, impact on their motivation. So, if students appear unmotivated, we should examine their learning approaches rather than blaming them for being idle. However, as MacLallan (2001) argues, staff and student perceptions, e.g. regarding assessment purposes, may differ with academics believing assessment is a motivator of learning but 25% of students asserting assessment never motivates.

Drawing on Feather (1982), Biggs (ibid) cites the multiplicative expectancy-value theory of motivation to explain initial motivation at Level 1, whereby students must perceive that a task is important, and expect success, to be motivated to undertake it. Hence, paralleling Chambers (ibid) above, expectations of success, if based on previous success and perceived to be through ability and effort rather than being luck, will motivate if the second condition also holds. A learning climate promoting level three learning, or working to McGregor's theory Y, is likely to promote student effort. Regarding task importance, Biggs distinguishes extrinsic, social, achievement and intrinsic motivations. The last, the desire to learn for its own sake and based on 'an innate need for competence, relatedness and autonomy' (Deci and Ryan 1991 p.327, in Lamb, 2001), is most likely to lead to deep learning, and achievement

motivation may also do so; the first two motivations are likely to promote surface learning, particularly extrinsic through assessments and attendance monitoring; extrinsic rewards such as praise may be motivational if delivered individually rather than to a class, and especially for young males (Suzi Bowyer, January 2003).

Biggs (ibid) perceives skills development to be part of motivation, a point also picked up by Hopkins (2001). Biggs argues that part of creating an expectation of success, and hence a McGregor theory Y learning environment, is showing students factors that influenced previous success or failure, e.g. lack of appropriate skills, can be changed. Hopkins (ibid) agrees, arguing for key-skills development as opposed to the 'old' universities' assumption that students have these skills. Implementing a skills-based intervention strategy, which my research focuses on, is one way of achieving this although, as we shall see later, I conclude that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a quality Level 1 learning experience.

James (2003) in Coaldrake (2003) and Aldridge and Rowley (2001) cite Herzberg et al's (1993) argument that two sets of motivational factors affect people's willingness to work. The first are satisfiers, motivation factors such as intellectually stimulating work, responsibility, promotion prospects and strong leadership, that inspire high levels of involvement and make people feel good about studying; to this Bennett (2003) adds the external reputation of their course. These are linked to self-actualisation in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1970). The other set of factors, dissatisfiers or hygiene factors, such as the quality of working space amenities e.g. IT / library, university policies and, for employment, salaries and superannuation, have the opposite effect.

When students first arrive, argues James, their expectations will be closer to hygiene factors since these are readily observable and influence student choice at open days. However, since education is also a trans-formative process, there is a strong argument for creating a degree of mismatch of expectations to challenge students' outlook and motivate them. This seems a high-risk strategy and Aldridge and Rowley (ibid) argue that, even if an HEI can minimise dissatisfiers, this still may not promote positive motivation in students, suggesting the need for a differentiated approach to each group.

2.5 STUDENT AND STAFF EXPECTATIONS

2.5.1 Student expectations

Much work has been undertaken to measure students' satisfaction with their college or university experience or service. Normally a questionnaire is administered to students that may include expectations. Appendix 2.6 provides a brief summary.

Yanhong and Kaye (1998) note there is no agreed definition of service expectations. Citing Parasuraman et al (1988), they argue it has been defined as 'desires', 'wants', 'what a service provider should offer', 'normative expectations', and 'ideal standards'. Rowley (1996) distinguishes between predictive expectations in the satisfaction literature i.e. consumer predictions of what could happen in a forthcoming transaction, and normative expectations in the service quality literature i.e. consumer desires or wants. Stevenson, Sander et al (1996, 1997, 1998) and Sander et al (2000) have undertaken work on student expectations of, and preferences for learning, teaching and assessment, often concerning distance-learning courses. They also identify ideal [what students would like to happen] and counter-ideal [what students do not want to happen] expectations.

Stevenson, Sander et al (1997) argue the need to determine students expectations of, as well as satisfaction with, their learning experiences through questionnaires; for the former they developed the University Students' Expectations of Teaching (USET) questionnaire. If an Expectations Led Planned Organisation (ELPO) model for designing learning and teaching programmes is employed, using students' pre-course expectations of teaching styles they will encounter e.g. disliking formal lectures yet expecting this will be the norm, then more appropriate teaching styles e.g. interactive lectures, can be used.

Berman Brown (1998) raises an important issue regarding expectations. In asking students about their course expectations, the researcher immediately creates new expectations of what the course should be like; this is inevitable but needs to be recognised. Cook & Leckey (1999) identify peer-students and staff colouring new students' expectations.

Many students are first-generation HE with expectations of university life shaped by many sources, not all accurate. Booth (1997) found some Nottingham University history students thought university life would be like 'Brideshead Revisited' while, as Chapter 1.3 notes, Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) found student Year 1 expectations of limited studying but exciting social life. Cook and Leckey (1999) concur, finding that 75% of students significantly underestimate expected workload while May & Bousted (2003) confirm student vulnerability and uncertain expectations when entering an HEI. In contrast, Universities UK (2001), surveying 4000 students during 2000/1, found that most students' expectations of their HEI were mostly met.

Coaldrake (2003) presents a picture of changing student expectations as student characteristics have changed. Expectations now relate to the quality of the learning experience, staff professionalism, learning resources, support, convenient delivery, value for money, high academic standards, skills development and subsequent employability. Former models of physical attendance at the HEI, staff-perceived cheap student time, low standards of service quality etc are no longer acceptable.

However, James (2003) in Coaldrake (ibid) argues that, although students may be perceived as customers and stakeholders, government and employers also have vested interests. Hence, students have an obligation to engage in HE as equal partners yet many staff identify disinterest through competing time-pressures. This, says James, echoing Sander et al (2000), raises the question of whether to give students what they want or what staff perceive they need, with the implicit assumption that staff know best. Sander et al (ibid) also discuss this, distinguishing between the 'inside-out' approach traditionally adopted by HEIs, which assumes educators know what students need and what they [the students] expect the tutor to provide; and the 'outside-in' approach of other service-providers that determine what customers want, then provide the type and quality of service to match those expectations, and hence customer / student satisfaction. This is a separate research area that I do not pursue. My summary of the argument is in Appendix 2.7.

2.5.2 Academic staff expectations

Martinez (2001a) cites Bosker and Scheerens (1997) who emphasise the importance of high teacher expectations of students. Yet a THES / ICM 2003 poll of UK academics found that 67% believe students are less well-prepared for HE than previously with 77% having to adapt their teaching techniques in response to this. 58% argued there is a dumbing-down of standards with easier entry contributing to higher attrition rates, while 81% believe students value job prospects over knowledge (Jobbins 2003).

In contrast, Maunder and Harrop (2003) asked tutors at Liverpool John Moores University to predict student responses as to what contributes to educationally useful seminars and lectures and found that staff were 'reasonably accurate in their predictions of student responses' (p.443). The major Level 1 differences were staff perceptions that lectures be smooth and structured while students wanted more interaction and new material fully explained, with seminars run more as workshops. Sutherland and Badger (2004) reinforce Maunder and Harrop finding that lecturers perceive their main function to be 'transmitting knowledge in some form or other' (p.277) with structure again a key feature and lecturing linked directly to subsequent assessment.

However, other research does not fully agree with Maunder and Harrop. As Chapter 1.3 noted, Cook and Leckey (1999) found that, when students enter Ulster University, they retain many previous study habits into their first year. Hence, tutors expect students to work independently, despite decreased access to them through diminishing resources, yet it does not happen. Fazey and Fazey (2001) investigate autonomous-learning related characteristics in new students at University of Wales, Bangor considering motivation, perceived control and self-perceived competence. They conclude that the sample of students have high perceptions of personal control and internalised motivation enabling them to be self-determined in their studying. However, their self-perceived competence is lower for academic studies than for social integration. Mature student appear more intrinsically motivated but also more anxious about achievement than younger students

Killen (1994) reinforces Cook and Leckey (ibid) finding that students and staff perceive differently the factors required for student success at university; students blame factors beyond their control for failure e.g. lecturers, while staff blame students for lacking commitment. Students who leave their course before completion do not see themselves as failures or drop-outs but rather as making strategic damage-limitation decisions enabling them to relocate to another HEI or to seek employment before incurring excessive debts (Medway & Pennay, 1994; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Brunsden et al, 2000).

This suggests that both student and staff expectations matter. Spours (1997) gathers staff expectations of retention in FE to develop college-based retention strategies. Citing Martinez (1995), he argues there is considerable divergence between student and staff expectations; staff cite external causes for student withdrawal (finances; childcare arrangements; students on unsuitable courses; previous learning experiences) while withdrawing students cite learning and teaching issues among others (unhelpful teachers; poor induction; lack of tutorial support). Comparing Martinez's and Killen's findings, in both students blame academic staff as one significant cause of their need to leave their course; staff blame lack of commitment in Killen's research, that may be contributed to, in part, by students choosing the wrong course, or by previous learning experiences, in Martinez (1995). One previous learning experience may be the inability to have acquired effective key or transferable skills.

Palmer (2001), using a case-study of Barnsley College of FE, disputes Martinez's findings that students blame academic staff, finding that external (to the college) factors are three times as significant as internal factors in explaining student withdrawal, especially 'starting a job' and 'other family/personal factors'. Financial reasons accounted for 6% while course expectations was not identified as a reason for withdrawal. The study also found higher affluence levels, identified by home, car and computer ownership, did impact on student completion rates. Other influences on whether students stay or leave early are cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) i.e. parental qualifications, part-time work and 'sudden transformations' in career expectations e.g. effectively trying a range of different courses appropriate to different careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997).

2.5.3 Differences in student and staff expectations and perceptions

Work by Collins and Lim (2002), paralleling mine, identifies disparities between staff expectations of Level 1 students, and their resulting responses to perceived student needs, and what students expect from student life. Staff identify students as 'academically inferior/weak' and 'generally lack[ing] all the abilities they need to succeed in a higher education environment, especially at Level 1'. They believe that 'the majority of students don't want to be at the [university]' yet expect them to be independent learners, life-long learners and be able to 'hit the ground running' (p.3). They also indicate an inability to motivate students while employing didactic delivery methods and referring to detailed handouts and overheads. Student experiences relate to uncertainty, a desire for more guidance, knowing they should take responsibility for own-learning but not knowing how, a perception that non-contact time is free time, a lack of understanding of academic language and an inability to make links between course units. Clearly there are student-staff disparities and I address these in my findings within UWBS. However, this research does not provide a strong methodology nor does it draw meaningful conclusions for future action.

Alder, Milne and Stringer (2000) examine, at Otago University, 'accounting educators' perceptions of the extent to which they have adopted learner-centred approaches. They conclude that a lack of student readiness [for this approach], particularly staff perceptions of students having 'a rigid set of expectations regarding the proper role of students and teachers in the learning context'(p.118) i.e. preference for passive and didactic learning; inadequate educator support mechanisms; and non-reflective teacher practices e.g. continually increasing the amount of material taught or leaving generic skills development to liberal studies lecturers, are the main groups of impediments, suggesting a need for 'a more vigorous and pro-active approach'. However, staff seek to satisfy rather than change student expectations by continuing tutor-centred approaches to learning.

Maclallan (2001) considers assessment practices experienced by students and staff at Strathclyde University and finds differences between their perceptions. Although staff profess commitment to the standards-model of assessment i.e. criterion-

referenced, formative assessment and assessing 'the full range of learning', in reality assessment practices employed, particularly the standard academic essay, militate against this. Students' perceptions differ from staff regarding assessment purposes, its motivation, the range of assessment instruments employed, criteria for assessment and the value of feedback provided. Students perceive assessment as judging levels of achievement rather than facilitating learning, which has serious implications for their learning experience. Maclallan concludes that students cannot distinguish between learning activities and learning goals, lack ownership of their assessment and that there is a lack of constructive alignment.

2.6 Mature students

Mature students are both the same and different. Wilson (1997)

Text box 2.2: Mature students

2.6.1 Mature students in HE

Mature HE students are aged 21 or more at entry (Moore 1995), although McGivney (1996) and Wilson (1997) argue such definitions don't help since early-20s mature students have more in common with 18-19 year-olds than 30-to-40 year-olds. Metcalfe (1993) argues that it is more useful, therefore, to consider sub-groups such as mature women. However, that focus is beyond this research. Bean and Metzner (1985) define a non-traditional student as one over 24, who does not live on campus, or is part-time; this may be more useful in the light of McGivney and Wilson's observations. As mature HE students have increased in numbers so more research on them has been undertaken although, as Wilson (1997) and Walters (2000) note, it is still limited.

2.6.2 Mature student non-completion

In the late 1990s, new universities had more mature students than old universities (33.4% against 13.4%) (HEFCE 2000; Yorke 2001a), and higher non-completion rates (22.6% against 10.6%). Additionally, new universities had more students from socio-economic classes IIIb, IV and V (32.4% against 18.8%). McGivney (1996) concurs that mature students are more likely to be in these classes and in new universities. He says mature students receive limited advice before starting their course, often find it more demanding than expected, and don't tell their HEI their real reasons for leaving. Appendix 2.8 gives Cross' (1981) model of participation in adult learning activities, with all stages relevant to mature students at UW. He argues students with low self-esteem are deterred from participation and hence, anticipating Bamber and Tett (2001), educators must create low-risk, low-threat learning opportunities. The model is also a useful forerunner of the presage stage of Biggs' 3Ps model.

Using HEFCE and National Audit Office (NAO) reports, Lewis (2003) confirms that the non-continuation rate [i.e. the proportion of students not continuing in an HEI after Year 1] of mature students is twice that of school-leavers; additionally this rate is increasing (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee 2001). Bamber and Tett's (2001) argument, that working-class students entering elite universities are more likely to drop out, links to this. There is also a strong correlation between A-level entry points and non-completion rates (Bekhradnia 2002); as mature students are less likely to enter HE with A levels, this may be one factor explaining mature students' higher attrition rates.

Many student unions warn that, if students work more than 15 hours per week, they will not be able to cope (Sodexho / THES 2004); as mature students often work longer hours through being used to a higher income, they are clearly disadvantaged. In suggesting maturity and social class account for most non-completion Yorke (2001b) argues they are associated with a lack of financial strength or lack of involvement in HE by family and friends. McGivney (ibid) asserts that many research studies identify non-academic factors as the main reasons mature student withdraw, such as domestic and work circumstances, particularly combining work

and study, while PUSH (1994) finds financial issues are the major cause of mature student withdrawals; the 'facts of life' reasons. Osbourne et al (2001) reinforce this arguing fear of debt accumulation is the major factor for almost all potential mature students although this is largely abstract as most have little information about the costs and benefits of HE.

Osbourne et al (ibid) also identify mature students' concerns about their integration into an 'alien environment', an issue confirmed by McGivney (ibid) who distinguishes students living off-campus as particularly vulnerable; however positive factors overcoming these negative ones for highly motivated students are the desire for a better job and the opportunity to prove they can secure a degree. Bennett (2003) also notes a correlation between late enrolment, which often applies to mature students, and poor subsequent academic performance.

Even if mature students cite external (to the HEI) reasons for leaving (Hatt and Baxter 2003), often these are associated with internal factors e.g. dissatisfaction with their classroom experience says McGivney (ibid). Peelo and Wareham (2002) agree that external and internal factors may both contribute to failing HE students of all ages. In terms of gender, argues McGivney (ibid), men cite as reasons for course withdrawal finance and employment-related issues, while women cite family as their main reason.

Laing and Robinson (2003) seek to develop a model to explain non-traditional student withdrawal at Southampton Institute. They argue that more attention needs to be given to the nature of an HEI's learning and teaching environment, including communication channels, and how it influences student expectations, and perceptions and non-completion. This is to address possible inappropriate support being given to students encountering difficulties. However, it is more of a flow-chart to achieve effective student integration and adds nothing that is new.

2.6.3 Mature students' skills

McGivney (ibid) argues that, since mature students often lack formal qualifications, they believe they lack the skills needed for HE. Bamber and Tett (ibid) argue some

mature students cite reading the literature and writing formal essays as unnecessary hoops to jump through. They perceive theory as 'alien, rather than explanatory' consisting of a 'simple set of instructions for the resolution of practical problems' (ibid. p.12). Under-estimating the course workload exacerbates their difficulties, as does the baggage they bring with them, making mature students higher-risk.

Sewell (2000) investigates the skills-base Birkbeck students believe they possess, to permit improved course delivery and student-learning strategies, and finds considerable overlap between the skills students believe they possess and those needed for study. Areas outside the HEI, where skills development does not occur sufficiently are essay writing, formal presentations and certain IT skills; however, students possess many organisational skills necessary for academic success. The main qualities mature students perceive they have over school-leavers are all experienced-based: their abilities to put ideas into a wider context, apply professional skills and knowledge to studies, and know the value of time. May and Bousted (2003) confirm the latter as does Levine (1993, p.4) who argues that mature students view HE as 'just one of a multiplicity of activities in which they are engaged every day' rather than 'the central feature of their lives' i.e. they live strategically. Wright and O'Neill (2002, p.24) add to this that mature students view education as any other commercial activity and hence are 'demanding in terms of the product purchased and service received in relation to the delivery of that product'. May and Bousted (ibid) also argue the importance of academic / pastoral support through a managed learning environment to facilitate effective time-management.

Finally, Bamber and Tett (ibid), assert that tutors need to review their own attitudes and practices, while changes may also be needed at institutional level e.g. by sustained pastoral and academic support, group-work and inter-active rather than didactic learning. Further, 'we find that our students need...intensive practice and tutoring in writing, comprehension and basic study skills...At the same time there needs to be an emphasis on critical thinking to open up and re-examine experience' (ibid, p.14). This is significant to my research.

2.6.4 Mature student degree outcomes

In terms of degree results, in the late 1990s there was uncertainty as to whether mature students were more or less likely to succeed in HE than younger students (Wilson 1997). Richardson and Woodley (2003. p.489) agree that there 'does not seem to be a straightforward relationship between age and academic attainment as measured by first degree classifications'. They argue that graduates between 25-50, the age range in which most mature students are recruited, achieve a high proportion of good degrees (firsts and upper seconds). However, within individual subjects women are more likely than men to secure good degrees on both full-time and part-time courses. Richardson and Woodley attribute this to variations in teaching and assessment practices in cognate disciplines.

Hatt and Baxter (2003) conclude that entrants to a UWE, Bristol modular social science programme who possess vocational qualifications e.g. BTEC qualification, perform less well than students with A levels, or franchise or Access students. Mature students may well have vocational qualifications since they return to education after working, although they may also enter HE through franchise colleges or the Access route.

2.7 Skills development

2.7.1 Defining skills in the curriculum

Bridges (1994) distinguishes a spectrum from skills and training at one end to knowledge and understanding at the other; the former may contain varying levels of cognitive content. Academic researchers, he argues, seek to apply cross-curricular or core/key skills across different cognitive domains, suggesting they can be taught in their own right, independently of subject content; they also seek to apply transferable skills across varied social situations, especially HE and work. In both cases, it is assumed these higher order generic skills or competences 'underpin a wide range of competence exercised in a variety of social settings' (p.9).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) distinguish five stages of skills development from novice to expert (Appendix 2.9). Barnett (1994, p.56) focuses on outcomes, identifying 'four criteria for the application of the term skilful' (Appendix 2.10). Hence, situations in which skills can be applied are open to interpretation, involving prior judgement of the limits and nature of them. A wide variety of skills exist, calling for varying degrees of cognitive insight, which may be brought to these situations. In this way, Barnett can define skills characteristics without developing a detailed skills taxonomy.

To explain the modern university curriculum, Barnett distinguishes four groups of skills: discipline-specific; cross-disciplinary; profession-specific; and personal transferable; he also argues there is no significant difference in skills discussions within academic and non-academic worlds. Figure 2.5 presents this model with the balance of the modern curriculum shifting from top left to bottom right. As Assiter (1995) argues, Barnett's concern is over employers determining what knowledge (and hence transferable skills) students need, which determines what universities teach, rather than the traditional reverse model.

Bennett et al (2000) agree skills are often situation-located and accept similarities between academics and employers regarding the importance of transferable skills, although arguing there are semantic differences. However, as noted in Chapter 1.2.5, they assert that skills research often lacks theoretical and empirical underpinnings; this parallels Bolton and Hyland's (2003) argument that generic skills have limited philosophical foundation. Bennett et al critique both Barnett's model and Drummond et al's (1997) 3 models of skills development, discussed in Chapter 1.13. The former is criticised for setting transferable skills outside the subject framework when, as researchers such as Otter (1992) have argued, skills are often learned and developed within academic disciplines. Drummond et al (1997) are criticised for considering 'only broad structural factors' in their three models of skills development.

Bennett et al present an alternative model, Figure 2.6. It appears similar to Barnett's, with their disciplinary skills matching Barnett's discipline-specific skills, and their generic skills equating with Barnett's cross-disciplinary skills plus personal transferable skills. Also, Barnett's profession-specific skills can be acquired, partly,

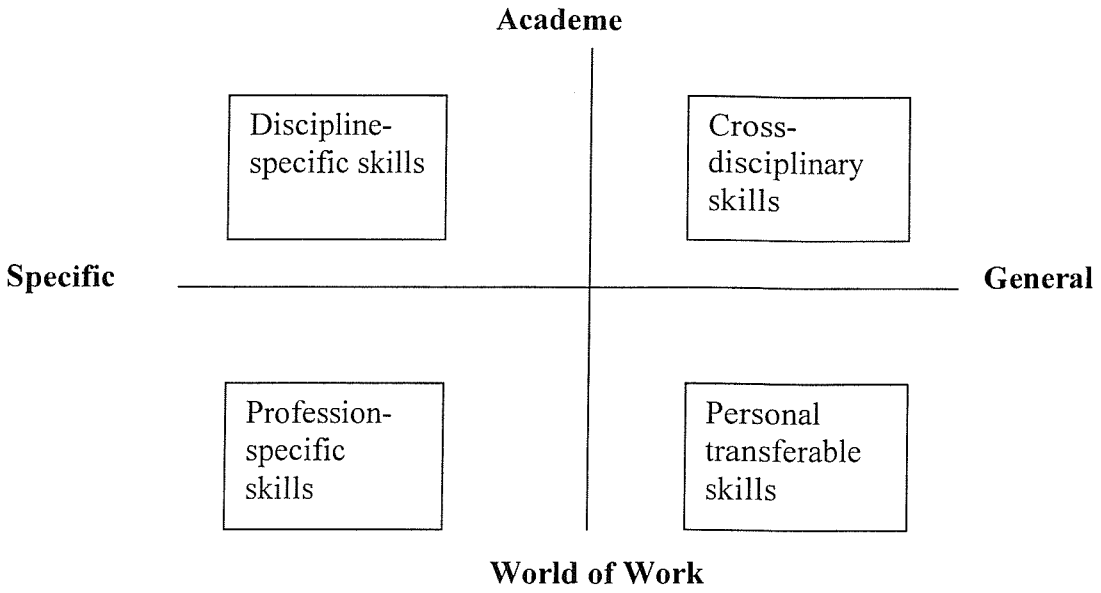


Figure 2.5 Barnett's (1994, p. 62) Skills in Higher Education Grid

through Bennett et al's workplace experience and awareness; this seems consistent with Blunden's (1996, p.175) argument that, ontologically, skills should be viewed as a relationship between 'certain aspects of the worker and certain aspects of the job which he or she undertakes' as opposed to the conception of skills as 'the properties

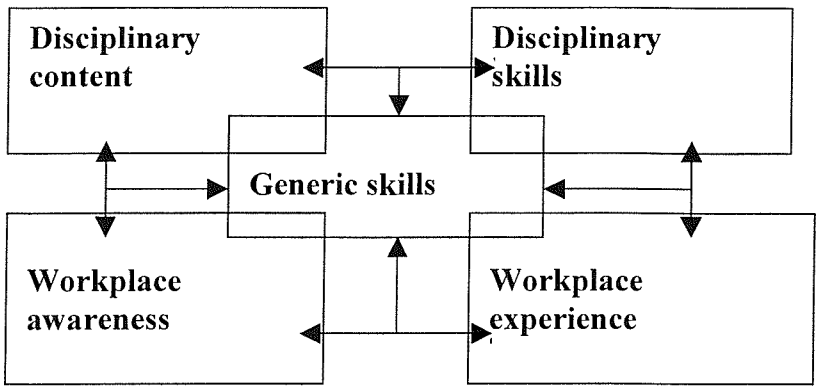


Figure 2.6 Bennett et al's (2000, p.28) Model of Course Provision [684]

of the person' (p.176). However, Bennett et al argue the top two boxes of their model (disciplinary content and disciplinary (or core) skills) are inter-dependent, which research supports.

Discipline knowledge and skills may also be acquired through work experience or work awareness. Generic skills may be acquired as 'bolt-on' modules or through the

academic discipline or work experience and/or awareness. Bennett et al define these generic skills under four headings of management of self; management of others; management of information; and management of task.

2.7.2 Lacking a common skills terminology

As Chapter 1.1.4 notes, lack of a consistent skills terminology poses problems (Ainley and Corbett 1994; Bolton 2001; Bolton and Hyland 2003). Blunden (1996, p.170) argues that 'the notion of a skill is problematic' with different skills placed under the general heading of skills, resulting in 'inconsistent and contradictory findings'. Holmes (1995) has concerns about using skills lists arguing they result from a positivist-business paradigm where skills are perceived to exist outside an individual who can be assessed as to the extent to which s/he possesses them. Rather, a social-discursive model is needed, engaging HE and employment, to help students articulate their claims to do the activities expected of them. Discussing skills below, I use the terminology employed by each author.

Drew and Bingham (1996) define skills by the context of their use, talking of academic skills and skills for employment, a theme of the literature addressed further below. In Chapter 1, I accepted Shepherd's (2000, p.8) definition of transferable skills as 'non-specific or general skills that, it is assumed, can be used in a wide range of applications and contexts'. Whether called transferable, generic, core or key skills, they are generally separate from discipline-specific skills although possibly overlapping at times, and, as researchers argue, are most effectively taught within a cognate discipline. They are separate from critical thinking / cognitive skills. There is also debate about the levels of skills definitions with Burke (1990) arguing that problem solving is an 'overarching construct' whereas Shepherd (2000) argues it is context and knowledge-specific and hence unlikely to transfer.

Even Dearing (1997) continues the terminological confusion; nonetheless, he provides a useful starting point. The intended learning outcomes of a programme specification should, he argues, consist of 'the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion'; 'key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn'; 'cognitive

skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis'; and 'subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills' (Recommendation 21, p.16). This approach is broadly consistent with Barnett (1994) and Bennett et al (2000).

Bolton and Hyland (2003) discuss 'skills' that are not skills e.g. motivation and initiative; citing Barrow (1987. p.190) they argue skills' origins lie in 'experience that comes from training or practice .... especially involving the use of hand or body'. Hence, extending skills to HE has created confusion and reduced knowledge and understanding to 'checklists of routines', a criticism also levied against competences. Other authors discuss overlapping concepts including capability (Jenkins and Walker 1994; Stephenson and Yorke 1998), competences (Holmes 1994; Barnett 1994; Evers, Rush and Berdrow 1998), (personal) attributes (Drew and Bingham 1996) and meta-competences. These are discussed in Appendix 2.11.

2.7.3 Do skills transfer?

> *"If knowledge and skill were not transferable at all we would hardly get through the day being constantly confronted with "new" situations'.*
>
> Whitston (1998)

Text box 2.3 Key skills and curriculum reform

Government, employers and some researchers assume skills are transferable to all situations. Bennett et al (2000) cite the Department of Employment's (1993) argument that the basis of the core skills movement is the assumption that such skills can be transferred between education and work, leading to increased learner flexibility and autonomy; this logic continues with the DfEE (1998; 2000a; 2000b; 2001) and relates to FE and HE. Raggatt and Williams (1999) argue the CBI also supports this position.

However, there is debate whether this is so (Nijhof and Brandsma 1999); other researchers believe skills are normally situation or context-located, a theme already alluded to e.g. Drew and Bingham (ibid), Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), Wolf (1991), Barnett (1994), Hadwin and Winne (1996), De La Harpe et al (2000),

Bennett et al (2000). As Bridges (1994) points out, what is needed, if transferable skills are to benefit graduates in employment, is for students to learn the transfer process.

Perkins and Saloman (1994) argue transfer occurs when a person uses knowledge or skills learned in one situation, in another; this may be between cognitive domains or between academic study and subsequent work. Indeed transfer can occur between modules, from study to part-time or full-time work (Thompson et al 2003) or the reverse or, for mature students, from full-time work to full-time study, (Dockerell et al 1997), although this is barely considered in the literature. Bridges (1994) cautions, however, that the boundaries of cognitive domains may be drawn differently for different purposes. Others e.g. Holmes (1995), Assiter (1994; 1995) and Shepherd (2000) also address transfer skills.

The literature generally fails to support transfer assertions (Oates 1992) with Hyland and Johnson (1998) denying transfer evidence. Barnett (1994), Garnham and Oakhill (1994) and Gibbs et al (1994) doubt skills transferability between cognitive domains, while Bolton (2001), argues transferable skills mean little until 'placed in particular contexts and supported by networks of domain-specific knowledge, understanding and conventions'. He cites Dearden (1984), warning against identifying features common to different skills and, from that, inferring common skills exist e.g. communication in the classroom and in negotiating contracts; what he should also have added is 'and assuming transfer has taken place'. Citing Green (1997), he argues the UK skills approach is a deficit-model redressing inadequate schools. Harvey and Knight (1995) argue it is inappropriate for HEIs to develop (general) transferable skills since there is uncertainty as to what makes them appropriate to HE and problems in identifying those relevant to HE. Clark and Higgett (1997) also assert that skills are not automatically transferable; rather transferring them to new situations is itself a skill needing practising.

Bridges (1994) argues, therefore, for distinguishing between transferable and transferring skills. It is assumed transferable skills can be used in different settings with minimal change although many are highly context-specific e.g. negotiating skills. Transferring skills are the meta-skills or second-order skills enabling one to

adapt transferable skills to different socially situated contexts and perhaps cognitive domains, what Fleming (1991) calls 'the competences that work on other competences'. These, argues Bridges, are what need to be investigated.

Shepherd (2000) calls transfer skills 'super-ordinate' to key/transferable skills and describes them as 'meta-competences', 'meta-cognitive' or 'cognitive strategies'. Citing Erlicher et al (1992), he defines them as 'skills which individuals need in order to transfer and use knowledge and skills in new situations' (p.8), while Green (1994, p.40) describes them as 'the processes used in modifying a skill so that it may be used in other situations'. Green (1994, p.41) argues 'any skill could become a transferable skill if the individual recognises that skills may be applied in several contexts'. Skills should therefore be taught, says Shepherd (ibid), to maximise transference potential when used in other contexts, by developing students' meta-competences.

Bolton (2001) partially counter-argues suggestions of non-transference, based on Blackler's (1995) five forms of knowledge (Appendix 2.12). He says most training and learning consists of all five and, for transfer to occur, it will be the domain-independent part of the training/learning, which is likely to relate to the embrained and embodied knowledge and less likely to relate to encultured and embedded knowledge. He also argues encoded knowledge may or may not be domain-dependent.

There is, as Chapter 1 notes, literature relating to critical thinking skills. Boyce et al (2001) cite Resnick (1987) who argues many aspects of thinking, including oral and written communication skills, reasoning and argument, construction and evaluation are shared across fields of expertise, so can be thought of as enabling skills for learning and thinking; this echoes Klemp's meta-competences in Bridges (1994).

Drew and Bingham (1996) argue that for skills transference between contexts, a person must recognise connections between them, appraise the new context and decide what appropriate behaviour to adopt i.e. Schon's (1987) reflection-in-action. Harvey and Knight (1996) concur, arguing for HE to produce graduates who are

transformative agents i.e. critical reflective learners who cope with a rapidly changing world.

2.7.4 Learning, teaching and assessing skills

2.7.4.1 Skills learning and teaching

Holman (1995) argues there is limited research regarding skills development and how to achieve it. Bennett et al (2000) agree and also identify a lack of research into students' responses to skills acquisition through different models. Certainly, Holman's (ibid) longitudinal study of different skills development models at three UK universities is one attempt while Harris et al's work (1996; 1997; 1998) is another, albeit relating to critical thinking skills.

Drew and Payne (1992) explore how HE students perceive their skills development and find that, post-induction, students have problems discussing personal skills and qualities, dwelling on deficiencies. However, by Year 3, they can distinguish areas of major improvement. Drew and Payne also identify themes, grouped under external [e.g. extra-curricular activities] and internal [e.g. self-awareness] factors affecting the outcomes of learning experiences.

Holman's (ibid) own research identified, as a major student concern, acting intelligibly in different Level 1 course and non-course based circumstances. To do this students attempt to develop two skills-sets, tacit/negotiated and rational. The former is how students normally identify their skills development, in one of two ways. Firstly, they suddenly realise, as an insight, that they have developed skills but can't easily explain how. Secondly, or semi-tacitly, they realise acquired skills are important through being assessed, and can explain how they developed them, but when developing them, had no strategy for so doing. Regarding rational skills development, students explain how they developed their skills more formally and in a planned way taking them from awareness of their skills levels, to planned action to confirm skills development.

So, argues Holman, skills modules and their assessment cause students, individually, to articulate more precisely what they sense (their current skills base) and consequently label their existing actions (identifying their use of existing skills and subsequently developing them). However, to be fully effective, a skills module needs to be used with a learning contract. Also, although students see skills development as an individual activity, skills activity is socially negotiated (Candy 1991) and needs to be made explicit in formal skills learning.

Barnett (1994), of course, argues skills cannot be taught; rather a specific skill must be identified. Bennett at al (2000) show the interrelationship of knowledge and skills development in the curriculum informed, also, by workplace awareness and experience. Shepherd (2000) supports this, arguing skills and knowledge acquisition must be linked to improve transfer likelihood. To develop transfer skills, students need many contexts in which to practice transferable skills; the extent of modification depends on the transfer distance. He presents a transferable skills development model that begins with student skills self-audits; is explicitly taught and assessed; is acquired experientially e.g. by group work to address low student self-esteem regarding skills development; and is practised in the workplace or, in simulated fashion, in the classroom. Of course, this raises again the earlier issue of how similar are academic and business perceptions of transferable skills. Citing Mottershead and Suggitt (1996), he argues student-centred learning is essential to acquire transferable skills rather than formally teaching them, and permits skills development without subject content displacement.

Kember (1998) and McKenzie (1998) agree that tutor-centred teaching, focused on content, may inhibit transferable skills development while Wolf (1991) and Assiter (1995) argue that transferable skills development, linked with student-centred independent learning, creates more effective learners. Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that the optimal model to transform student learning is domain-specific [the student leaves university with a much fuller knowledge than when entering it] plus generic skills, underpinned by meta-cognition i.e. independent learning (Baird 1988); the last of these may be, to some extent, transferable. This has similarities with the capability model discussed in Appendix 2.11.

Transfer =

1. **Analysis** [identifying the essential characteristics of the task] +
2. **Association** [connecting between previous learning and new problem] +
3. **Assessment** [strengths / weaknesses of identified skills] +
4. **Adaption** [making modifications to identified skills] +
5. **Application** [using the modified skills for the current problem] +
6. **Appraisal** [learning from the process to benefit future transfer].

Figure 2.7 The 6As Model of Skills Transfer

[source Shepherd (2000)]

However, Shepherd (2000. p.37) takes the above further, exploring the move from teaching transferable skills to teaching transfer skills [the 6As model]. He draws on Moerkamp et al's (1991) four groups of meta-competences [Appendix 2.13]. Perkins and Salmon (1988), cited in Shepherd (2000), identify key principles for teaching transfer that are presented in Appendix 2.14.

Summarising the 6As model, presented as Figure 2.7, Shepherd presents it as:

Effective skills transfer = transfer-conscious skills acquisition + transfer-conscious skills deployment.

Shepherd (2000) suggests four strategies for ensuring students acquire transferable and transfer skills: learning 'transferable' skills; learning skills with transfer in mind; learning how to transfer skills; and developing personal characteristics to promote skills transference and flexibility.

2.7.4.2 Skills assessment

Skills development needs assessing to facilitate effective learning (Drew and Bingham 1996 citing Becker et al 1968; Shepherd 2000 citing Gubbay 1994 and Tolley and Murphy 1998), yet often it does not happen. As discussed, Bridges (1994) and others argue skills are taught and assessed most effectively when not separated from their cognitive contexts; also the common characteristics of the abilities required or demonstrated in different cognitive contexts need highlighting. Humphreys et al (1997) stress the importance to skills development of student self-

and peer-assessment, although not popular, as well as group-work and presentations, in promoting ownership and responsibility. Toohey (2002) agrees with group-work while Biggs and Moore (1993) reinforce the role of assessment in promoting deep learning.

However, Murphy (2001) argues several skills aspects make them difficult to assess. Transferable skills need assessing in several situations and holistically not discretely, having been developed across modules. He reiterates that skills development and assessment must be directly relevant to students' subject areas or future careers to be effective. Drew and Bingham (1996) argue for the application of four assessment criteria relating to skills. These are validity, consistency [a proxy for reliability], prompt specific feedback to skills development, based on clear assessment criteria, to which students can respond; and the opportunity to self-assess skills development, e.g. through a self-audit.

In conclusion, there are three main research themes in the skills literature. One relates to the need for skills development to be context-specific; this links to the idea of transferable skills being developed more effectively within a cognate discipline. A second theme focuses on transferable skills development impacting on the student experience e.g. promoting independent learning, while the third focuses on transfer skills, challenging whether transfer occurs and, if not, how to develop it. Much research into HE skills development is also undertaken by academic or support-staff practitioners reflecting on their experiences, at times in a particular cognate area. Through space limitations this is presented as Appendix 2.15.

2.8 Influencing student expectations and retention: the use of an intervention strategy

An intervention strategy seeks to achieve intended outcomes through directly intervening to change some aspect of a situation. Examples of its use are discussed in the educational literature.

As noted elsewhere, to provide a quality learning experience, one approach is to tailor a course, as far as possible, to match student expectations. This is the

Stevenson, Sander et al ELPO model (1997) and involves major staff development to rethink approaches to student learning and to teaching styles. An alternative is to influence student expectations, through an intervention strategy, to match their course and HEI (Gibbs, 1992; Harris and Palmer, 1994; McDonald and Stratta, 2001).

As Sander et al (2000) argue, citing Steele's (1992) research into the schooling of African-Americans, carefully manipulating expectations of students from traditionally disadvantaged groups can positively affect retention and performance. They argue this is important since it implies addressing expectations can produce measurable improvements in student outcomes. However, Yanhong and Kaye (1998) argue that research results can be a function of the research methodology, and hence findings need to be treated with caution outside their context; whether findings relating to disadvantaged black American schoolchildren can be translated directly to British undergraduates is, therefore, uncertain. Nonetheless, manipulating student expectations may be valid in more than one context. This is reinforced by Martinez (2001a) who cites Wang et al (1993); the latter emphasises the importance of 'interventions that impact directly on the experience of learners'.

A comparable intervention analysis is Brunsden et al's (2000) testing of Tinto's (1975) student attrition model. As discussed below, Tinto argues attrition occurs when university students fail to integrate socially and academically. Brunsden et al, citing Adams (1996), argue attrition research should identify specific factors influencing withdrawal rather than Tinto's (1975) broad bureaucratic institutional ones e.g. finances, child-care and study-skills, although Tinto (1987 p.10) argues, concerning 'dropout' that 'no single intervention strategy will suffice'. These can easily be targeted to influence student experiences and facilitate more effective learning. This reinforces Steele (1992) and also underpins my research into a skills-based intervention strategy that influences both experiences and expectations. As noted in Chapter 1.3, it is also consistent with Berman Brown (1998).

Booth (1997) also identifies a necessary intervention strategy, arguing for Year 1 students' skills support to address deficiencies e.g. presentations and group-work, through integrated skills development across Year 1 rather than a bolt-on approach.

An effective induction programme, a strong support framework and clarity of objectives are also necessary.

Norton, Scantlebury and Dickins (1999) discuss two competing intervention strategies to improve Liverpool Hope University College's student learning. One is a separate learning-to-learn module, Approaches to Learning (APL), to promote a deep approach to learning on a psychology degree course. It focuses on students' meta-cognitive processes, encouraging them to become aware of their own learning processes in the context of the psychology department's expectations and assessment criteria; hence it is set within Biggs 3Ps model. The second strategy is a practical subject-specific and student-focused approach, called Introduction to the Study of Religion (ISR) to help students develop learning skills on a theology and religious studies course. Their findings were mixed, with some indications that the APL was more effective regarding academic performance but the improvement was not substantial in either case. However, argue Norton et al, doubts whether tutors reward students' deep approaches to learning through assessments reinforces previous perceptions of a mismatch between what tutors say and do (Murray and Macdonald 1997). Unexpectedly, there was a major decline in student attendance, especially on the APL course, suggesting students believe intervention to be valueless, as they already know how to study.

2.9 Retention

2.9.1 Definitions

As with skills, so retention literature uses varied terminology, from retention to its mirror image attrition, to the judgemental wastage. Wastage is an umbrella term including subsequent HE returners, those taking time out, dropouts and those failing academically (Peelo and Wareham 2002). McGivney (1996) acknowledges that dropout often encompasses different types of withdrawal, while Peelo and Wareham (ibid) confirm the same about failing students. McGivney (ibid, p.25 ff) distinguishes between transfers, credit transfers, interrupted learning, delayed completion and positive withdrawals while acknowledging some loss is inevitable and that students often withdraw without explanation. Other researchers add non-starters, failures,

voluntary and involuntary withdrawals and internal and external transfers. HEFCE uses non-completion, defined as students 'who are deemed not to complete their studies in the period for which they have registered' (McGivney ibid, p.23).

McGivney also notes HEIs interpret withdrawal statistics in different ways. The government uses retention rates as a measure of efficiency yet withdrawals can be positive since students minimise costs by leaving an HEI or course they do not enjoy (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998, Peelo and Wareham 2002). Rickinson and Rutherford (1995) and Pitkeithly and Prosser (2001) endorse this while the latter and Yorke (1997) argue that many students leaving HE subsequently return. Peelo and Wareham also argue that failing is a dimension of the educational experience, 'with multiple meanings and many facets' (p.9) rather than a category of people. I accept the first part of this argument but their use of 'failing' students is an emotive judgmental term.

2.9.2 Tinto's model of student attrition

There are a number of models of student retention e.g. Bean (1983), Bean and Metzner (1985) but, due to the constraints of small-scale research, I focus on the work of Tinto. He (1975) distinguishes between academic failure, which is closely associated with grades obtained, and voluntary withdrawal, which is not; he also notes students may leave temporarily or transfer to another HEI. For Tinto, voluntary withdrawal occurs when students fail to integrate socially and academically, due to university social and academic pressures interacting with student personal characteristics or pre-entry attributes e.g. gender, abilities, previous educational achievements, socio-economic status, and parental education level. The latter plus any external commitments s/he has e.g. part-time job, determine the extent of an individual's values, academic intentions and commitment to HE. The greater the initial commitment, the less likely is the student to withdraw. Tinto's (1993) model is portrayed in simplified form as Figure 2.8. Academic dismissal, in contrast, relates to lack of academic and social integration or students are '*socially integrated to an extreme*' (1975, p.117: my italics). The modified 3Ps model has similarities with Tinto at the Presage and Process stages, with the quality of student learning impacting on student withdrawal decisions.

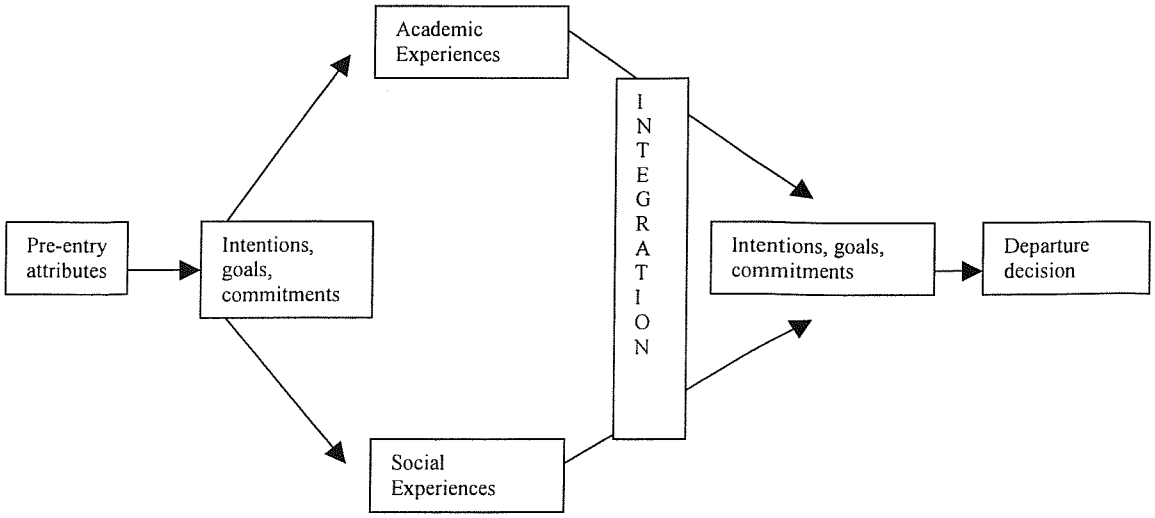


Figure 2.8 Simplified version of Tinto's model of institutional departure (after Tinto 1993, p.114): source Yorke (1999, p.9)

Tinto (1987) distinguishes six principles to improve the first-year student experience. The first is that students enter university with skills to succeed as effective learners, or are able to acquire them; this aligns with my research. He also argues that, since student integration promotes persistence, college initiatives should not aim at retention. Rather, they should concentrate on students' education, and social and intellectual growth; improved retention will then follow.

Reinforcing Tinto, Braxton et al (2000) argue that failure to integrate socially may be explained by student motivation to attend college, financial aid, fulfillment of university expectations, a sense of community in halls and student involvement. Tinto (1993, p.137 in Peelo & Wareham 2002 p.8; 1997) argues social integration needs to occur in the classroom since this is a gateway to student involvement, academically and socially e.g. discussion of course content, or engagement with other students via group-work, promoting independent learning. However, Braxton et al (2000) find that, although class discussions and higher-order thinking activities are statistically significant influences on social integration, group-work and 'knowledge-level exam questions' (p.9 of 25) are not. However, the authors note limitations to their research since it relates to one university and only focuses on Year 1 to Year 2 continuance.

Academic integration is defined by a student's measurement of his/her academic and intellectual development, grades and perception of the extent of faculty concern with teaching and student development (Braxton et al ibid). It may be promoted, they argue, through active learning, defined as any activity that 'involves students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing' (Bonwell & Elson 1991, p.2); this links to deep learning approaches and Biggs' level three learning and independent / autonomous learning. Again, Tinto (1997) identifies co-operative learning e.g. group-work as an example of this, while Terenzini et al (1994) argue that part of this integration is students needing social and academic validation i.e. experiences confirming their belonging at their new university, since they arrive with uncertainty regarding their academic skills and ability. This applies particularly to mature students.

2.9.3 Student expectations and retention

Within retention literature, a major theme is possible mismatches between students' HE expectations (external factors) and subsequent HEI experiences (internal factors); this echoes Chapter 2.5 and Chapter 2.3's 3Ps model, with matching expectations and experiences providing a quality learning experience (Berman Brown 1998) but a mismatch increasing attrition potential. Mismatch is part of Tinto's model and is supported by others e.g. Johnes and Taylor (1990), Johnes (1990), Rickinson and Rutherford (1995), and May and Bousted (2003). Rickinson and Rutherford (ibid) argue that first-term student withdrawals depend on academic and emotional preparedness for HE and the extent of academic and personal support. Major factors contributing to withdrawal are absence from home and course difficulties. However, Mackie (2001) argues that tests of Tinto's model need to be holistic rather than focusing on individual relationships within the model, to the exclusion of others. Ozga and Sukhnandan (ibid) endorse this.

Yorke (1999) comments that, although US and UK funding models differ, causing doubts regarding the transferability of Tinto's research, academic and social integration are important for all full-time students; Ozga and Sukhnandan (ibid) echo his concerns regarding transferability. However, Yorke notes that 'Tinto has little to offer with regard to students' views on their environment, problems with health and,

vitally, little detailed analysis of students' experiences of learning and teaching' (Peelo and Wareham 2002 p.8). Yorke also notes other models explaining attrition, viz Bean (1983), which has similarities with Tinto.

Brunsden et al's (2000) criticism of Tinto, citing Adams (1996), was discussed in Chapter 2.8, arguing a need to identify specific reasons for withdrawal from an HEI, rather than focusing on Tinto's broad bureaucratic institutional causes, which is the opposite to Mackie (2001). In contrast, Ozga and Sukhnandan (ibid) argue that attrition is due to a 'complex social process of student-institution interaction' (p.316) operating within a changing HE environment. One reason for conventional students'withdrawal is lack of preparedness for a course or HEI; e.g. unrealistic expectations of university life, or gaining a place through clearing. The other reason is an expectations-experiences mismatch for student and HEI. These two reasons mainly explain student non-completion.

Yorke (1997, 1999) endorses Ozga and Sukhnandan, suggesting attrition risk increases through students' expectations not being met, incompatibility with course or HEI, lack of commitment to chosen subject, and poor academic progress. Other factors include teaching quality, the academic culture, entry qualifications and financial factors. Aldridge and Rowley (2001) support Yorke (1997) and Rickinson and Rutherford (1996) identifying, as main reasons for student withdrawal, study e.g. course or HEI not as expected, and personal issues e.g. travel, domestic or financial difficulties.

Yorke (2000) presents findings, based on data for 1994-95, and 1995-96, for six N.E. England HEIs, which reinforce his previous work. The main influences on students leaving are choosing 'the wrong field of study, (and the consequences of having done so)' e.g. inability to cope, 'financial problems' (which are beyond the control of the HEI]) 'and dissatisfaction with a number of aspects of the student experience' (p.64). Other data sources show two-thirds of students leave during, or at the end of, Year One. Universities UK (2001), surveying 4000 students during 200/01, endorses this with most also changing subject. The main reason for leaving is dislike of their course (34%) rather than their HEI; this links to Aldridge & Rowley (2001). Cost is the second reason. Women are more likely to leave because they dislike the HEI or

through personal reasons, men through costs or failing exams. Non-traditional students, including mature ones, are most likely to leave their course before completion. Schools are the main source of student information when choosing an HEI followed by visits to HEIs.

Yorke (2000) also argues that wrong course choice is the main reason 18-19 year-olds cite, through poor quality information from careers services and parental pressures. This results in lack of study commitment and poor progress, especially by young males. Twenty-five percent of younger students find considerable problems with teaching suitability, indicating difficulty in adjusting to independent learning, and lack of staff support after a structured FE environment. Yorke (ibid) also cites Johnson (1996) who finds students concentrate on social integration at the expense of academic integration. When broken down by subject, these findings apply to Business & Management.

Baxter and Hatt (2000) consider the performance of Year 1 students at UWE, distinguishing those joining at the last minute, often through work problems, and 'recycled' students returning to HE after trying elsewhere; often these coincide.Yorke (2001b) argues the latter are assumed to complete their new course so are not lost to HE. Others groups are those who did not secure expected A-level grades, those who changed their mind about where they were originally going, and overseas students. Baxter and Hatt (ibid) agree that students be given sufficient information to judge whether their desired course will meet expectations, but also argue students must meet the HEI's expectations. In response to Ozga and Sukhnandan's (ibid) point that student expectations should match the course, they argue that entry through clearing is unlikely to achieve this. Parental pressures are one important influence on applying students. However, when examining Year 1 to 2 progression rates, the authors find some groups entering through clearing can be as successful as non-clearing students, particularly females, through effectively gathering initial information.Younger mature students (21-24) perform particularly badly.

The implications of retention for the UK and for individual HEIs are presented in Appendix 2.16 while research on retention in FE is presented as Appendix 2.17.

2.9.4 Student debt

A second emerging retention theme is student debt, one of several 'external' factors. Ten years ago Bargh et al (1994), and the PUSH Guide to Which University 1995 (1994), cited student debt as a retention issue through LEA grants being frozen, although acknowledging course and institutional factors were main reasons; student fees now pose a greater threat to retention. The Sodexho/THES (2004) university lifestyle survey found that 39% of UK students live on under £40/week, below unemployment benefit. 40% work part-time, with 33% of these working 16+ hours per week and 10% more than 20 hours; business students are among those likely to work most hours. The main reason for working is to finance living costs rather than a social life. It also found working students are under more pressure and worry more compared with non-workers. 59% of students expect debts between £7.5K-£20K on graduation. Hence, as Bennett (2003) argues, debt is a major influence on student decisions to stay on, or withdraw from, a course and significantly impacts on such other factors as academic performance and commitment to studying. Bennett also identifies individual self-esteem, a major determinant of student motivation, as a substantial influence on decisions to stay or withdraw.

This reinforces Metcalfe (2001) who found, in a survey of four UK universities, that nearly 50% of students have term-time work averaging 12 hours, with 65% of these encountering difficulties balancing studying and working. Students whose father did not have a degree were more likely to work part-time while students entering HE to secure a good career were less likely to, preferring studying. Johnston (2001) found a broadly similar situation at the University of Melbourne with students working longer hours than intended. Scott et al (2001) found students were poor at managing their finances and had varying definitions of debt e.g. excluding student loans, while Fair (2003), citing Pitman Training, found students opt for low-skilled, poorly-paid, part-time work e.g. supermarket shelf-stacking or burger bar staff. Scott et al (ibid) reinforce previous research that relaxed student attitudes towards debt are a result rather than a cause of growth in credit usage. They conclude that student debt adversely affects welfare. Finally, Jobbins and Leon (2003), reporting on a THES/ICM poll of academics, found 77% argue that term-time student working harms studying.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, I discuss my research design testing it against Cohen et al's framework (2000). I then follow the sequence identified by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), addressing my ontological and epistemological assumptions. Subsequently, I discuss my methodology including the rationale for broadly locating my research within a qualitative research paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology, and triangulating data sources. I then explore issues relating to the ethics of my data collection, its analysis and use, and conclude with the validity, reliability and generalisability of my data.

3.2 The research design

3.2.1 My research problem

My research explores if the quality of student learning on Level 1 UWBS courses, including retention, can be improved, using a skills-based intervention strategy to influence student expectations and experiences. It explores being Level 1 students in UWBS, particularly the themes of their expectations and experiences, including skills, and the meanings of these. It also analyses whether gaps exist between student and staff expectations and experiences, and the implications of these. Recommendations from this research should be capable of implementation within UWBS.

My research problem is consistent with LeCompte and Preissle (1993) who identify, as key qualitative research outcomes, description and reporting, the creation of key concepts, theory generation, and testing. They argue meanings are accorded to phenomena by researcher and participants, making research hermeneutic, uncovering meanings. My research leads to theory generation but hermeneutic phenomenology does not normally involve this.

3.2.2 My research questions

My research questions are in text box 1.3. Mason (1996) argues research questions, which make the intellectual puzzle explicit, must be clearly formulated, intellectually worthwhile and researchable. Mine problematise links between my and other research concerning Level 1 student expectations and experiences, to avoid repetition. I have evaluated my questions against these criteria and formulated them within the phenomenological tradition. Cohen et al (2000) argue research questions are formalised in situ and in response to situations observed; this is true for my research.

Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I explore the lived-experience of UWBS Level 1 students and staff through in-depth interviews, obtaining an interpretation of the phenomena of their lifeworld (van Manen 1990); i.e. uncovering meanings (LeCompte and Preissle 1993). I also set my research in its natural setting since, in interpretive research, context is essential to meaning (Cohen et al 2000). Additionally, I use questionnaires and telephone-interviews to triangulate my interview data, this triangulation being the second aspect of my research methodology.

Being a faculty manager can create potential problems; interviewing six staff and ten students, three times, creates time pressures on all parties. Other potential problems of researching within UWBS include engaging students and staff with the research, confidentiality and unequal power relationships between myself, an Associate Dean, faculty tutors and new students. Additionally, to meet ethical requirements, I promised all students and staff confidentiality and non-traceability of responses. Section 3.7 below discusses ethics, including power relationships, more fully. I also argue my position as a research instrument in the triangulation of data sources yet, since 2000, have taught little making me distant from student and staff first-year experiences. Hence I use my literature review and the 3Ps model as the main basis of my interpretation of others' experiences.

3.3 My ontological and epistemological positions

Mason (1996) emphasises the importance of ontological and epistemological positions, and of reviewing their relationships with the research. Cohen and Manion (1994, p.6) define ontology as dealing with 'the very nature or essence of social phenomena'. They argue the

qualitative paradigm involves consideration of 'open, equivocal, empirical material', which applies to my research. Ontologically, therefore, the nature of reality is subjective and multiple with each research party needing to be reflexive about his/her position (Usher 2001). She also argues the researcher will attempt to suspend his/her subjectivity 'to be objective about the meanings produced by those they are researching', which is consistent with my epochĕ process.

I accept Mason's (ibid) assertion of on-going disagreements between positivists, qualitative researchers, critical theorists, feminists etc concerning ontological positions. I also accept Foskett's (2001a) argument that research methodologies can be viewed as a spectrum rather than a series of mutually exclusive points, or indeed as a binary divide between quantitative and qualitative research. Hence I have used triangulation with hermeneutic phenomenology, drawing on questionnaire and interview data. I have ensured my ontological perspective is consistent with my perception of social reality as multiple and subjective; however one constraint of small-scale research is a need to generalise in data presentation, which inhibits an in-depth picture of multiple realities.

Epistemology concerns the 'theory of the method or grounds of knowledge; the nature of evidence and knowledge of things in the social world' (Cohen and Manion 1994, p.6); Mason (1996 p.13) describes it as 'knowledge or evidence of the entities or social reality'. This relates to the relationship between me as researcher, and staff and students. Using positivist language, Hussey and Hussey (1997, p.49) note 'phenomenologists attempt to minimise the distance between the researcher and that which is being researched'. Mason (ibid) argues 'epistemological questions should, therefore, direct [the researcher] to a consideration of philosophical issues involved in working out exactly what you would count as evidence or knowledge of social things'. Epistemologically, I am in a relationship with staff/students, although this relationship is not equal, through my privileged position, or power, as researcher. Each colleague/student is an interpreter of social meaning. My creation of knowledge is, therefore, about revealing values, interpretation and meaning.

Epistemologically, my data gathering includes, as meaningful elements of the social world, interviews with students and staff involved with two courses in each of the Marketing and Leisure (M&L) and Business academic schools, UWBS, concerning their expectations and

experiences; telephone interviews with withdrawn students; texts e.g. unit documentation; and questionnaires to other students on both groups of courses.

I also retested my ontological and epistemological positions periodically as I undertook my research to ensure methodological consistency with my research questions.

3.4 Locating my research within the qualitative research paradigm

My research is located within the naturalistic, qualitative or interpretive research paradigm, rather than the positivist one. By research paradigm, argue Guba & Lincoln (1994), quoted in Scott (1996, p.61), is meant 'a distinct way of approaching research with particular understandings of purposes, foci, data, analysis, and ... the relationship between data and what they refer to'. For comparison, discussion of the positivist paradigm is in Appendix 3.1. Foster, Gomm and Hammersley (1996) comment that qualitative researchers have a widespread aversion towards positivism. As a former economist, I chose a qualitative methodology because I believed I could obtain much richer, context specific, data.

Echoing Foster et al (ibid), Cohen et al 2000, p.19 note that researchers subscribing to the qualitative paradigm 'are united by their common rejection of the belief that human behaviour is governed by general universal laws and characterised by underlying regularities' i.e. the beliefs of the positivist paradigm. However, following Foskett's (2001a) logic above this does not mean, for example, that the same research instruments, e.g. questionnaires, cannot be employed in both to generate data even though some phenomenologists oppose their use perceiving them to be quantitative and focusing on frequencies.

The central idea of the qualitative research paradigm is to 'understand and interpret [the meaning of] the world in terms of its [social] actors' (Cohen et al 2000, p.28). As they argue, 'individuals' behaviour can only be understood by the researcher sharing their framework of reference.... social science's purpose is to understand reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shape the action they take within that reality'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), talking of ethnography or participant observation, agree with Usher's (ibid) argument that, ontologically, each party in the qualitative research process needs to be reflexive i.e. recognise all accounts of social

settings, and the social settings themselves, are inter-dependent. To use Alvesson & Skoldberg's (2000) terminology, research begins with those being researched and their perspectives, rather than with the researcher, as with positivism.

However, Smith (1998) counter-argues that there is a gulf between researcher and co-researchers/interviewees, and social scientists impose 'their conception of the way social processes operate upon the object in question,' hence telling us more about the researcher than the co-researchers. Scott (1996), who cites Denzin's (1989a) five characteristics of a positivist framework (Appendix 3.2), reinforces this by using them to produce contrasting characteristics of a qualitative methodology. He argues that data is not 'nor can be free of theory under some description'. The researcher's values are implicit in the data produced and in any conclusions which are drawn from it; and the more researchers try and avoid reactivity [in the situation being researched] the less will they be able to narrow the gap between themselves and the researched. Hence, the less valid will be the data that they have collected.

A potential remedy to this, used by me, was to try and suspend my subjectivity by phenomenological reduction i.e. I endeavoured to suspend my pre-conceptions, beliefs, and values about what is real and my knowledge of the phenomenon acquired from my experience and initial research (Creswell, 1998). To do this, I followed the guidance of Moustakas (1994) who argues this is central to undertaking rigorous research, and obtaining objectivity, since it controls bias when reflecting on experience, enabling the researcher to look just at what appears. In my research, potential pre-conceptions and values included the obscuring effects of the culture of UWBS and my perceptions as a former tutor and now manager. However, subsequently I used my experiences as one source of interpretation of the data.

However, I found suspending pre-conceptions and beliefs is easier said than done. Van Manen (1990) says complete phenomenological reduction is impossible; however, rather than give up we should pursue the project more vigorously. He also argues that, in human sciences, objectivity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, objectivity means the researcher being true to the object in his/her description and interpretation of it, while subjectivity means the researcher being as perceptive, insightful and discerning as possible to disclose the phenomenon in its richest form, without being arbitrary, self-indulgent or

carried away by un-reflected pre-conceptions. I have tried to follow this approach in my research.

Phenomenological reduction may also seem at odds with reflexivity although Usher (2001) sees no contradiction between reflexivity and suspending preconceptions with bracketing. To address the issues above, I employed phenomenological reduction but also recognise and acknowledge my subjectivity and make this explicit in my research. I believe, therefore, my research has been consistent with the qualitative paradigm as I developed a social analysis and explanations relating to my research questions. My epistemological position has therefore, as Mason argues (1996, p.13), enabled me to 'generate knowledge and explanations about the ontological components of the social world'.

3.5 Hermeneutic phenomenology as my research methodology

I explained in Chapter 2.2 that hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with interpreting lived experience (van Manen 1990); for my research it is being a Level 1 UWBS student. Hermeneutic phenomenology also interprets experience via some text, here my thesis. My interpretation is based on me as a research instrument, using my experience, and on the literature relating to hermeneutic phenomenology, particularly the 3Ps model. Figure 3.1 illustrates this.

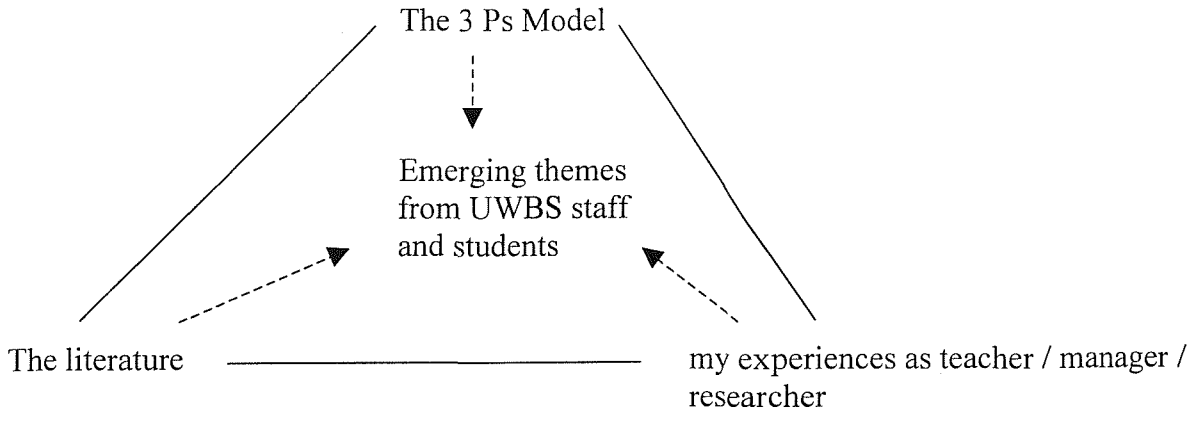


Figure 3.1 My hermeneutic interpretation

The philosophic framework of a human science research methodology, argues van Manen (1990), includes a broad orientation to life, how knowledge is viewed and a sense of what it means to be human; this has implications for my research methods and instruments

employed. He argues quantitative research instruments e.g. surveys and statistical methods are inappropriate for phenomenological research, but also stresses there is no toolkit for it, only guides and recommendations for a principled form of inquiry. Although identifying hermeneutic phenomenology as my main methodology, to ensure valid data I have also triangulated my data sources, one of which has involved questionnaires as a research instrument. I believe this approach is methodologically acceptable, consistent with Foskett (2001a) and not conflicting with my ontological and epistemological positions even though van Manen might well disagree.

3.6 Triangulation

Creswell (1998, p.202) defines triangulation as when 'researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories to provide corroborative evidence'... [or] to shed light on a theme or perspective', to which Cohen et al (2000) would add 'in the study of some aspect of human behaviour'. Denzin (1970) argues there are four types of triangulation: data, investigator, theory and methodological. Appendix 3.3 discusses these. My research uses data, theory and between-methods methodological triangulation. Figure 3.2 shows time and person data triangulation with data generated with past and present students, and staff, three times during 2002-03.

Theory triangulation has been noted as part of my literature review, drawing on phenomenology, the 3P's model and Tinto's work. Between-method triangulation arises through the use of several research instruments viz. interviews, questionnaires, and telephone-interviews.

Not everyone is comfortable with triangulation e.g. Mason (1996 argues it has limitations, conceiving it merely as multiple methods, with which Robson (1998) concurs. This is partly consistent with Creswell (1998), except he argues triangulation corroborates evidence. Mason (ibid. p.79) argues multiple methods 'encourage the qualitative researcher to approach their research questions from different angles, and to explore their intellectual puzzles in a rounded and multi-faceted way'. In other words, she sees triangulation as process rather than outcomes; its main value, in enhancing validity of method, is to emphasise that social phenomena are multi-dimensional. However, she concludes that

using the term triangulation for this is probably misleading since the term is actually used in a specific way i.e. as was defined by Denzin (1970), Creswell (1998) and others.

Mason (ibid) argues that approaching a phenomenon with different research methods doesn't give an accurate measure of it; rather different data sources and gathering methods will provide different versions of answer, rather than one. Triangulation implies there is one objective, knowable social reality, which is not a qualitative perception. Hence, different research methods probably cannot be used to corroborate each other's data since the latter will point in different directions.

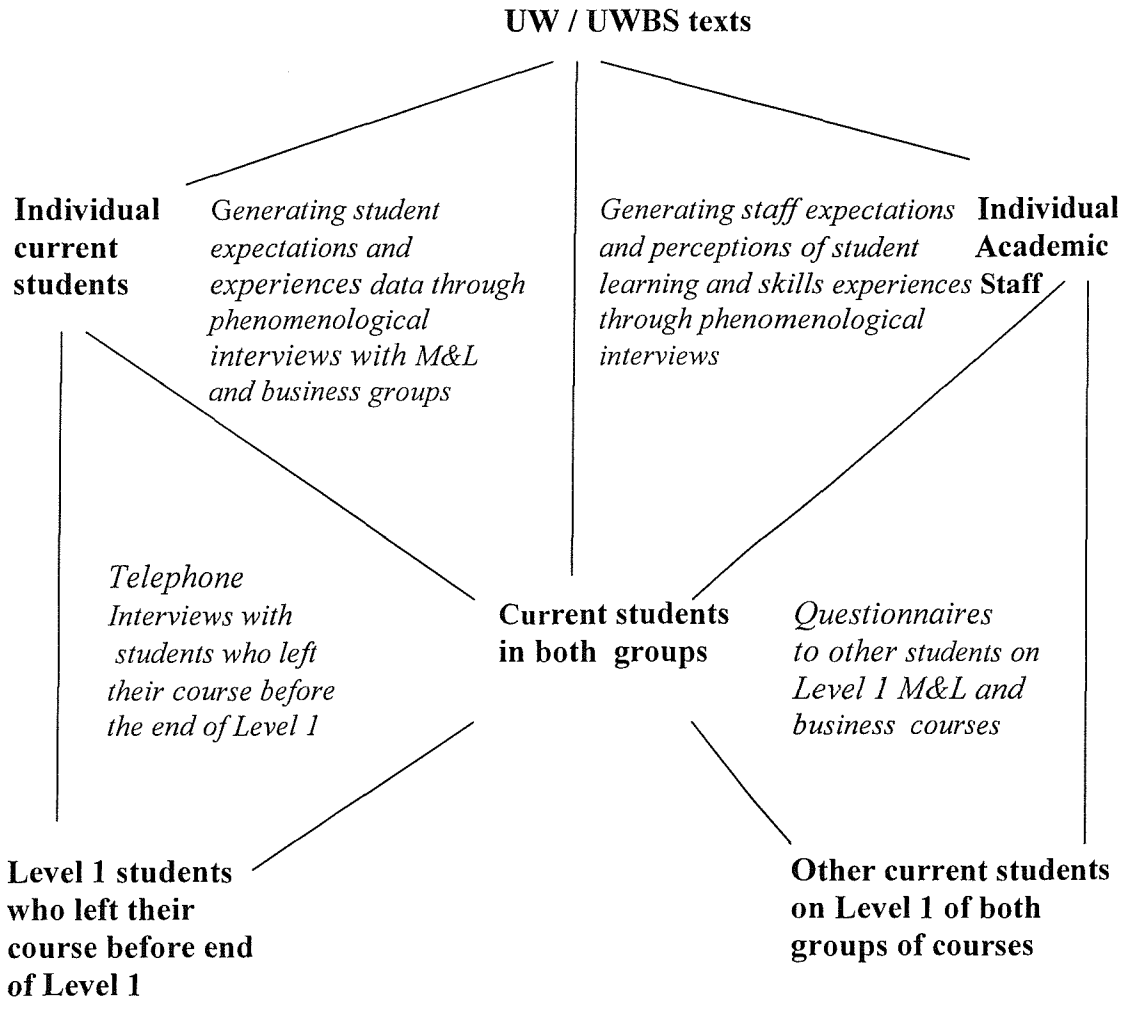


Figure 3.2 The use of data triangulation in my thesis

Although noting Mason's concerns I believe that if data generated with different instruments provides broadly similar findings then these can generally be accepted while

acknowledging that they do not present the only truth. I have therefore used triangulation as a central part of my methodology.

3.7 My research ethics

3.7.1 What are my research ethics?

Educational research ethics are important. Flew (1984, p.112), cited in May (1993), defines ethics as 'a set of standards by which a particular group or community decides to regulate its behaviour – to distinguish what is legitimate or acceptable in pursuit of their aims from what is not'. Ethical issues were relevant for me in identifying interviewees, in my research methods to obtain valid, reliable data, and in my analysis and writing-up (Mason 1996). Cohen et al (2000) emphasise the importance of the researcher having a clear picture of his/her research, including ethics, which I have achieved through careful planning (Appendix 3.4).

A key principle of research ethics is informed consent, which involves procedures enabling interviewees to decide if they wish to participate. I worked to the four principles of competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension identified by Diener and Crandall (1978), in Cohen et al (2000) (Appendix 3.5). I ensured full disclosure of my research details to enable interviewees to make informed decisions.

One challenge of researching within one's own organisation is unequal power relationships, in this case between myself, an Associate Dean, faculty tutors for whom I have some management responsibilities, and students new to the University of Wessex who, initially, are insecure and uncertain (Mason 1996). This has important implications for informed consent that, as Cohen et al 2000, p.52 argue 'will serve as a foundation on which subsequent ethical considerations can be structured'; it includes the boundaries of our relationships within this research. Hence, when a student made adverse comments about the behaviour of a member of staff experiencing personal problems, I was ethically unable to take this back into the work context. While recognising and acknowledging the power imbalance I sought to minimise it by my initial explanations of my research, by adopting a friendly, unthreatening and non-judgmental manner tested through pilot interviews, and by keeping in touch with the students and staff in a friendly manner.

Another key principle of research ethics is the costs/benefits ratio (Cohen et al 2000). I have balanced my needs as a researcher with my interviewees' rights. With current students, this involved my awareness of assessment demands facing them, my extra time-demands on their work-study-life balance and possible inconvenience when contacting them; the latter applies to telephone-interviewees. For tutors, time demands were most significant. However, during my research both students and tutors told me how interesting they found these discussions and, apart from Paul Naylor, assured me they had no problems if these extended beyond the booked time.

Following Moustakas (1994), I also established clear agreements with my interviewees to ensure confidentiality, including anonymity and non-traceability. I respected this in my research including by the use of 'thesis names' rather than real names and by generalised descriptions (Appendices 4.2 and 4.4). I also sought to relate to what people said and to their interests (Miles and Huberman 1994; Mason 1996; Campbell 2001).

3.7.2 Interviews

At all stages I used relevant course leaders as gatekeepers. Using UCAS forms, I identified 40 potential UWBS students whom I hoped to interview, wrote to them twice in August 2002 (Appendix 3.6), with stamped addressed envelopes, asking for their participation and informing them about my research and their right to decline. Eventually, four agreed, one of whom subsequently refused during induction, and one declined. This suggests that, ethically, informed decisions were being made.

I therefore contacted new students in class during induction asking for participants and explaining the issues. Consequently, I was just able to obtain seven more. I was particularly aware that new students are vulnerable and might, inadvertently, feel pressurised to assist; however, the indifference of most convinced me this was not so. Of those who agreed to talk with me, most expressed interest in my research while two felt sorry for me.

I contacted six tutors in June 2002 asking if I could interview them three times during 2002-03, again working to the principles identified above. None declined and several expressed considerable interest in my research.

As noted above, being aware of time pressures, I tried to limit interviews but nearly all tutors and students told me they had no problems with this. This mirrored experiences with tutors and students during the pilot interviews; the non-pilot interviews did not reveal any new ethical issues I had not previously considered. I was also aware of values and value judgements as ethical issues in my research design, interviews and other data collection and my interpretation of the findings (May 1993). I addressed any imposition of my values on interviewees by using phenomenological reduction and making my subjective values explicit.

I had permission to audiotape each interview. When it ended, I thanked the interviewee, explained what was happening next and gave him/her a chance to add anything. As is conventional, I did not use things said to me 'off-the-record' once the tape-recorder was turned off (Creswell 1998). Subsequently, I sent each person a copy of the transcript to amend if desired, and then my summary of the interview for verification purposes. Apart from two amendments, all summaries were accepted.

I paid a typist to transcribe the taped interviews because of the high opportunity cost of me doing it. I have worked with her for years and know she is trustworthy and respects confidences. Nonetheless, I stressed the ethical issue of confidentiality to her and explained this to interviewees to reassure them. I am also mindful of the Data Protection Act (1984). Cohen et al (2000) argue transcription offers the potential for massive data loss, and distortions since it is a translation as much as a transcription and is already interpreted. I sought to limit these effects by re-reading the transcripts, listening to the tapes and reflecting on them; however, the issues identified remain real and cannot be totally avoided.

3.7.3 Questionnaires

I asked questionnaire-students to complete these in class. In each case, I operated to informed consent so they understood they could decline. I was aware of class contact time

I took but, per student, this was not large. I was also aware of questionnaire overload, of which some students complain; however, the willingness of most to participate suggested no ethical issues.

3.7.4 Telephone interviews

With these, the key ethical issues were informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interviews (Cohen et al, 2000). I telephoned ex-students, sometimes speaking to a parent initially, to fix a time for discussion. In all cases when speaking to an ex-student directly, he gave me permission to talk immediately. I provided personal details and information about his course and UW to prove I was genuine. I stated they could withdraw at any time but none did. I then summarised the areas I intended to discuss in the semi-structured interviews (Aldridge and Rowley 2001) and made notes as I talked to them; finally I repeated my summary for confirmation of accuracy.

3.7.5 Conclusions

Confidentiality is important in my research. I protected respondents' identities using thesis names to encourage free speaking and for ethical reasons and by using a fictitious name and location to disguise where I work and conducted my research. At all stages of my research I have demonstrated an ethical aware practice (Mason, 1996). There are internationally used codes, e.g. the American Psychological Association and also local codes e.g. UW's; following advice, I developed my personal code based on the above.

3.8 The research methods

3.8.1 Qualitative methods

Following Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), I discuss my research instruments and explore data-collection methods, weaknesses in my research design and how I addressed them (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Appendix 3.4 provides the framework. Hussey and Hussey (ibid), citing van Manen (1983, p. 9), argue that qualitative methods have been described as 'an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less

naturally occurring phenomena in the social world'. However, since I am triangulating data, including that generated using questionnaires, I have used frequency as one interpretive tool.

3.8.2 Research instruments

This, argue Hussey and Hussey (1997, p.140), mainly refers to questionnaire or interview schedules, which have been tested and used in several studies. I use both in my research, having piloted them before my data generation began. Hussey et al note that, in phenomenological studies, the researcher may be referred to as a research instrument emphasising his/her close involvement. Cohen et al (2000, pp.140-141) argue 'researchers need to be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background, and inductive processes and paradigms shape the(ir) research .... and continually monitor their own interactions with participants, their own reactions, roles, biases and any other matters that might bias the research'. I have done this by regularly writing down my thoughts and ideas and reflecting on them with the above in mind.

3.8.3 Sampling

Figure 3.3 presents my sampling frame. My sampling of students and staff has been planned and deliberate and governed by the criterion of suitability (Cohen et al. 2000). I conducted in-depth individual interviews, or conversations as Cohen et al (2000) argue, with ten students, five on business courses not offering Undergraduate Skills (US) and five on M&L courses offering US. Cohen et al (2000) argue this is sufficient provided corroborative data is obtained by way of validation, while Robson (1998, p.189) argues this is appropriate for finding out what people 'think, feel, believe'. These interviews, which soon became discussions, let me explore the Level 1 student experience in-depth, examining similarities, differences and negative cases (Denzin 1989a cited in Mason 1996), and developing explanation and generalisation rather than just making statistical comparisons between different groups of students (Killen, 1994).

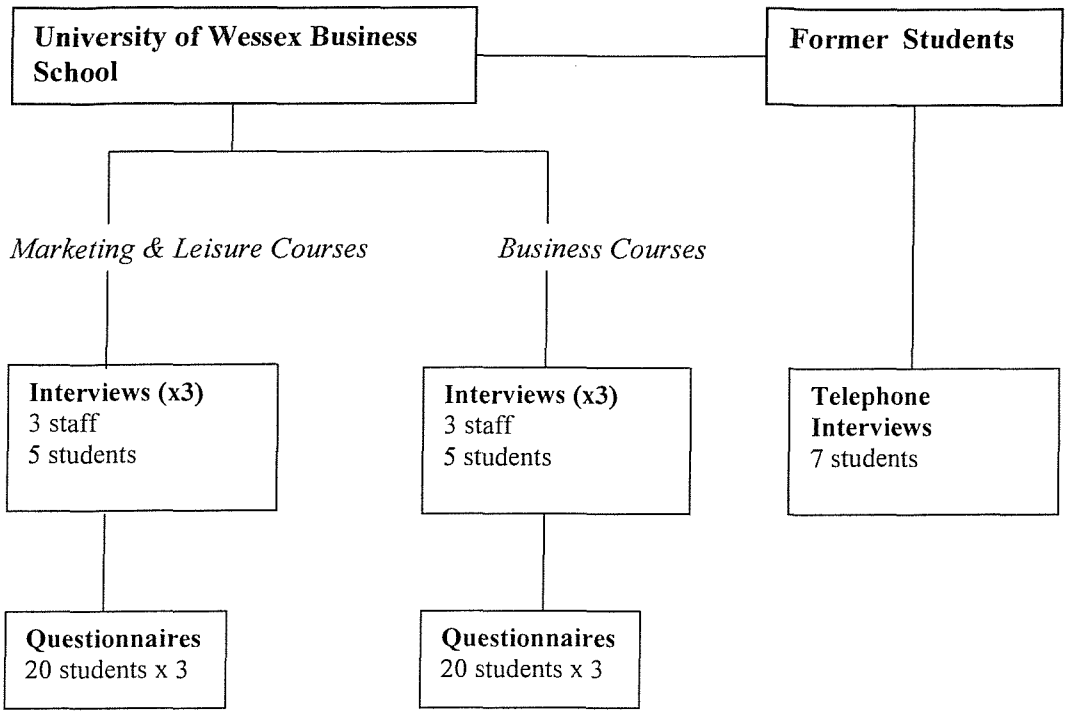


Figure 3.3 Sampling Frame

[based on Bennett et al (2000)]

Initially, I intended using theoretical or purposive not random sampling. I selected students likely to have a range of different background experiences which they could articulate in-depth (Hycner, 1985), who could provide access, interpretively, to my interest in Level 1 and who were meaningful in terms of their relevance to my research questions and my position phenomenologically (Lee and Lawson, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Clouder, 2000; Howard 2002). In other words, I sought to understand the social process of the first year experience rather than represent the population (Mason, 1996).

Due to student unresponsiveness to my letters, I resorted to convenience sampling (Cohen et al, 2000). As they note, it does not represent any group apart from itself, so cannot be generalised to the population. Nonetheless, I believe I have a mix of student voices including gender balance, ethnic minorities, mature students and an unmarried mother. Some students are local while others come from further away; some live in halls while others rent houses or live at home; and some are in long-term relations while others are not. Although these are not the only characteristics of the UWBS student body, I believe

they address Mason's (1996) assertion that the data generated from my sample should signify the key characteristics of the wider population in which I am interested.

3.8.4 Pilot semi-structured interviews

Creswell (1998) argues data collection procedures must be rigorous; Mason (1996), argues 'data generation' should be used instead of 'data collection', since the researcher is not completely neutral. Cohen et al (2000, p.268) echo this, citing Barker and Johnson (1998, p.230), and arguing that far from being neutral, questions display 'peoples' knowledge of cultural forms'; in other words they will be value-laden and subjective. I have tried to address this by phenomenological reduction and making explicit my subjectivity

I conducted pilot interviews in April-May 2002, with five students from both groups of courses, and two academics, one teaching on each group. These were taped and transcribed. I learned from these that, when making notes on non-verbal communications, I lost track of what was being said and created suspicion from the interviewees as to what I was writing. I was also aware of the risk of confabulation (Hycner, 1985) but do not believe this was a real issue since I often stressed the fact that there were no correct answers. Finally, I was aware of the need to listen actively (Whyte (1982) cited in Cohen et al (2000)).

Before the pilot interviews I asked expert colleagues to criticise my questions and topic areas, which they also did before each interview round in 2002-03. After each pilot interview, I asked interviewees for feedback on their perceptions of the discussion; I also made notes of my perceptions, which modified my subsequent thinking e.g. too much reference to me as a (research) student to try and create empathy. After listening to the pilot audiotapes and reading the transcriptions, I was able to eliminate repetition, avoid labouring issues and introduce new topics not fully included previously e.g. students' financial pressures.

3.8.5 Data generation with interviews

The interviews were conducted during induction (September 2002), and in January and May 2003 (Stevenson et al, 1996, 1998; Cook & Leckey, 1999; Sander et al, 2000)

(Appendices 3.7 to 3.9). The timing of the first interviews was crucial since I wanted to explore students' expectations before these were influenced by their experiences (Berman Brown 1998). The later two times were chosen to identify whether student expectations and experiences converged or diverged during the first year, and why; also the literature suggests these are high-risk times for student withdrawal. I further wished to explore the development of student learning during the first year and any negative cases.

As mentioned above, I chose three tutors from M&L courses offering US, and three from business courses without US. Within each academic school, one course was large (80+ students per level) and the other small (20 students per level). The interviews were to explore their expectations and experiences of their students' learning, including skills, during Level 1 (Killen, 1994). Again I used typical case sampling but with some qualifications. I chose one course leader from each group, since they should have the widest span of knowledge. From the courses with US I chose the unit leader. I also chose one female member of staff, which roughly represents the proportion on women academics in UWBS, and two staff, one from each group of courses, who were admissions tutors. I also sought an age spread from approximately 30 to the mid 50s, which is consistent with the UW academic population. All staff had to teach on Level 1 units (Appendices 3.10 to 3.12).

After the first interviews, I identified a failure to give students the topic areas to reflect on before our discussions. Also, my first set of meetings were interviews with specific questions, although I tried to ensure they were discursive not interrogative; for the second and third rounds I tried to make these more like open discussions to enable freer conversations (Mason, 1996). This enabled me to address different issues with different people. This is consistent with Kvale (1996, p.126-7), cited in Cohen et al (2000, p.270), and May (1993) who argues there is a continuum of types of interview; I moved more to the focused interview end of the spectrum and Robson's (1998, p.228) definition of an interview as 'a kind of conversation, a conversation with a purpose'. This is consistent with Merton and Kendall (1946) cited in Cohen et al (2000) and Powney and Watts (1987) cited in Robson (1998).

The questions for my second and third rounds of interviews were not piloted with students although academic staff critiqued them. As I immersed myself in the data generated, I

gained confidence as a researcher including what I wanted us to explore. Also, I believed I was reaching the limit of how many students I could ask to help.

3.8.6 Pilot questionnaires

As noted in Chapter 3.6, I used questionnaires as my second data source. Although collecting only limited rich data, I accessed further students, albeit more superficially than in interviews. I developed my own questionnaire, rather than modifying an existing one, to enable me to employ the most effective research instrument for my needs.

As undergraduate students had left UWBS for the summer, I piloted my questionnaire in July 2002 on research students and UWBS support staff undertaking UWBS courses; this was not ideal but a pragmatic solution. I also asked several academic staff for comments that fed into my revised questionnaire (Appendix 3.13).

The second (Appendix 3.14) and third (Appendix 3.15) questionnaires were not piloted with Level 1 students but were tested with academic and administrative colleagues studying at UW. This was because of my growing immersion in the qualitative data, and hence confidence in what, as a researcher, I was exploring. I did contemplate issuing questionnaires to tutors but decided against this, as I did not believe it would contribute more to my understanding of the student experience than I could secure from in-depth discussions. Also I was triangulating three data sources and thought another would add little extra.

3.8.7 Data generation with questionnaires

I employed the sequence identified in Cohen et al (2000, p.245) and Robson (1998, p.234) to design my questionnaire i.e. starting with easy-to-answer questions, then difficult ones, then high-interest ones to encourage completion, as I had done also with my interviews; I also used headings to provide structure and funnels and filters to make my questionnaire more effective. Following Howard (2002), I used my interview-data to inform the questionnaires I distributed. .

All questionnaires were distributed in class, and were structured using closed and open questions (Geall, 2000). I believed open questions would let students raise issues the closed questions might exclude that could be picked up in future questionnaires (Cook & Leckey, 1999). Because of the duration of this doctoral programme the data collected is cross-sectional rather than time series, as with Holman (1995). I debated also using Liekert scales in some questions, but was concerned this would take me too much down a quantitative route and make a lengthy questionnaire more complex for students.

I distributed questionnaires to students on each group of courses, excluding interview-students to provide a second data source (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Cook & Leckey, 1999). Some refused but I always secured at least 20 completed ones, which was my target number. As each sample was independent, I was not tracking the same 20 students through all three questionnaires. Hence even if some students were to leave during the year i.e. experimental mortality, this would not matter. This is consistent with Cohen et al (2000, p.143) who argue that, unlike quantitative research, ethnography regards experimental mortality as typical; sampling is 'recursive and ad hoc rather than fixed at the outset; it changes and develops over time'.

The first questionnaire was distributed during induction as student expectations start to be influenced by experiences, and was informed by data generated by my pilot interviews and questionnaire and my literature review. Administering subsequent questionnaires coincided with the next two interview rounds.

The literature identifies weaknesses with questionnaires. May (1993) describes these as the idea of causality; the empirical concern with measurement; the concept of standardisation; and the testing of hypotheses. In relation to qualitative research Hycner (1985) addresses causality with the response that the phenomenologist is more concerned with a comprehensive and depthful understanding of a phenomenon, not with cause and effect; nor does s/he believe that most meaningful aspects of human beings can be predicted, which is an outcome of causality. Similarly, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, empirical measurement is not an issue with which the phenomenologist is concerned. In terms of standardisation, each person's experience is unique, while hypothesis testing is not a part of the qualitative paradigm. The phenomenologist wants to be as open to the phenomenon as possible without constricting his perspective.

3.8.8 Telephone interviews

As my third data source, I intended conducting 20 telephone discussions with students who had left both groups of courses (Donald & Denison, 1996; Aldridge & Rowley, 2001; Connor, Pearson, Pollard, Tyers & Willison, 2001; Mackie, 2001). The purposes of the interviews are consistent with those identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Silverman (1993). They also meet Creswell's (1998) requirement for rigorous data collection procedures. From Cohen et al (2000) I was aware of the advantages and disadvantages of telephone interviewing, especially promised confidentiality and suspicion or even hostility from students who might be perceived as having failed. However, the problems identified by May (1993) did not materialise; students were most willing to talk to me, although I note his concerns about the lack of the researcher – co-researcher visual-interaction. I also ensured I did not contact students already approached as part of a University of Wessex telephone survey. I recorded data by using a questionnaire on which I could jot down the responses of former students (Appendix 3.16). In fact, I only spoke to 7 students as I found information repetition by then.

Appendices 3.17 and 3.18 provide copies of SPSS spreadsheets used to analyse the questionnaire and telephone interview data. Appendix 3.19 shows how I dealt with open-ended questions for the Easter student questionnaire while Appendix 3.20 shows the same for telephone-interviewees.

3.9 Validity, generalisability and reliability

3.9.1 Validity

Validity means that the measurements researchers make should accurately represent, measure or capture the concept or phenomenon being studied. Proctor (in Gilbert 1993, p127) argues, using positivist terminology, that 'validity is conceptualised as correlation between the measure (any measure, not only attitudinal) and a relevant independent criterion.' In other words 'you are observing, measuring or 'identifying' what you say you are' (Mason 1996, p.24). Hence, it is fundamental to the credibility of research. Cohen et al (2000) note that there are many different types of validity and reliability and hence different ways a researcher can address them. They identify internal and external validity

which I do not believe are appropriate to my research; I review these briefly in Appendix 3.21.

However, the principle of validity, or its equivalent, needs to be clearly demonstrated whether the term validity is used, or authenticity (Mishler 1990), or fidelity, (Blumenfeld-Jones 1995) or verification (Creswell, 1998). Hycner (1985) argues that, ultimately, validity comes down to consensual validation among researchers i.e. a number of researchers agree this is a valid instrument or approach. A number of levels of validation can be employed including the participants themselves and whether they agree the findings are valid for them; the researcher and whether the findings appear true for him/her; and the current literature, against which the findings should be checked to see if they fit with published research. Finally, findings should be submitted to the scientific and lay communities.

For my research, interviewees received a summary of each discussion with me incorporating emerging themes for their confirmation that it was an accurate interpretation. However, it has been argued that respondents have no privileged position on interpretation, although they can check the accuracy of the transcript. I have also tested the findings of my researching own practice in the context of my experience in HE, against my literature review and Biggs' 3Ps model.

Creswell (1998) says verification rather than validity is appropriate to qualitative research but shares the same concern of knowing a qualitative study is believable, accurate and right. Verification is one category along with description, interpretation, and evaluation and he defines it as 'a process that occurs throughout the data collection, analysis and report writing of a study (Creswell 1998, p.194); I have continually tested this as I have undertaken my research using my reflections. I had considered using expert colleagues in UW but two left and the other is on extended maternity leave. Creswell also links verification to standards that are criteria imposed by the researcher and others after a study is completed; this will result from submitting my thesis to Southampton University and to journals as articles.

Cohen et al (2000) argue that qualitative data validity can be addressed through the honesty, scope and richness of the data achieved; the participants approached; the extent of

triangulation; and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher. The first is addressed in Chapters 4 and 5; the second and third have already been discussed, while the last is addressed through me making my subjectivity explicit.

Lincoln and Guba (1985), Hammersley (1992), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993), all provide comparable tests of the internal validity or verification of qualitative data to those of Cohen et al (2000) above. Among these are credibility or authenticity of data, a balanced representation of the multiple social realities, that the analysis should present a fresh and clear picture, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis and respondent validation. These are all covered in my thesis.

3.9.2 Generalisability

With external validity, there is considerable debate about the extent of generalisability. I am most comfortable with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) argument that the researcher should provide sufficiently rich clear and detailed description and data for others to decide if transferability to another context is feasible; it is not the researcher's responsibility. Hycner (1985) argues that experimentally oriented researchers criticise qualitative research as lacking randomness, hence the results of the research cannot be generalised and are useless. He argues it is true that the 'results' apply only to those being interviewed; however, if they illuminate to some significant degree the 'worlds' of the participants, that, in itself, is valuable. In investigating one unique person, we learn about the phenomenology of human beings in general.

Since this thesis is limited to 45 000 words, I recognise that my small-scale research imposes several constraints. Firstly, my discussion of my methodology is limited involving a less-detailed discussion of my data-generating methods and issues relating to validity, reliability etc. Secondly, there are constraints on the generalisability of my findings. Partly, this is through my qualitative methodology not using random sampling techniques that permit generalisation to the population. Also, my research is context-specific and, although there are similarities between my findings and those of other researchers, mine relates to particular students at a particular time and place.

3.9.3 Reliability

Reliability is concerned with whether a measure works in a consistent way and hence how accurate are one's research methods and instruments and how consistent in producing measurements. For my research, Mason's (1996, p. 146) argument appears the correct one, namely that demonstrating reliability is about if one's data generation and analysis are appropriate to the research questions and also are 'thorough, careful, honest and accurate'. She argues that the way to do this is, in part, to 'demonstrate the degree of reliability and accuracy' in the analysis part of the research paper or thesis. I have noted this very important qualification and have sought to ensure this is clearly demonstrated in this thesis.

Cohen et al (2000) reinforce this with their arguments for reliability to include fidelity to real life (although two researchers studying the same setting may come up with different findings), context and situation-specificity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, and meaningfulness to the respondents.

Replicability is discussed briefly in Appendix 3.22

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

Here, I present my generated data using graphical presentations, quotations and multi-view tables. The latter explore developments in key themes three times during 2002-03 (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and answer my first research question.

> ***Research Question 1***
>
> *From the perspective of students and staff, what are the structures of their expectations and experiences of student learning, and specifically skills demands, on Level 1 of UWBS undergraduate courses?*

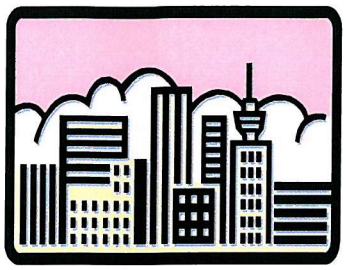
Text box 4.1 Research question 1

Appendix 4.1 provides characteristics of my three data sources. The groups are broadly similar, and comparable to the UWBS population, except for more mature interview students. Appendix 4.2 gives anonymous, non-traceable pen-portraits of my interview-students while Appendix 4.3 is a September 2002 student interview transcript underpinning this chapter. Appendix 4.4 provides anonymous, non-traceable staff pen-portraits while a transcript of a January 2003 staff interview is Appendix 4.5. Appendixes 4.6 and 4.7 provide summaries of the interviews for validity purposes.

4.2 Data presentation: an overview of the Level 1 student experience

My research has generated substantial thick data revealing a complex Level 1 student experience, presented as a rich picture in Figure 4.1. As Cross argues, in Harris (1997, p.13), this 'allows the complete scenario to be outlined on one sheet of paper and forces the creator to apply lateral thinking which may be beneficial in problem solving'. It is a stimulating alternative to a detailed phenomenological description (Moustakis 1994) and is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, which eschews just description. To place it chronologically, Figure 4.2 presents a generalised timeline.

Figure 4.1: A Rich Picture of the Level 1 Student Experience, University of Wessex Business School



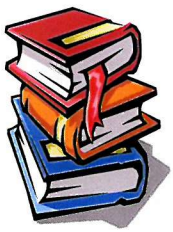
adjustment to studying at a uni / hall / maybe new city [adjusting to being a mature student?]

Long-term goals: degree + career

£

New friends / social life / integration

STUDYING – WORK - SOCIAL LIFE BALANCE [being strategic / motivation]



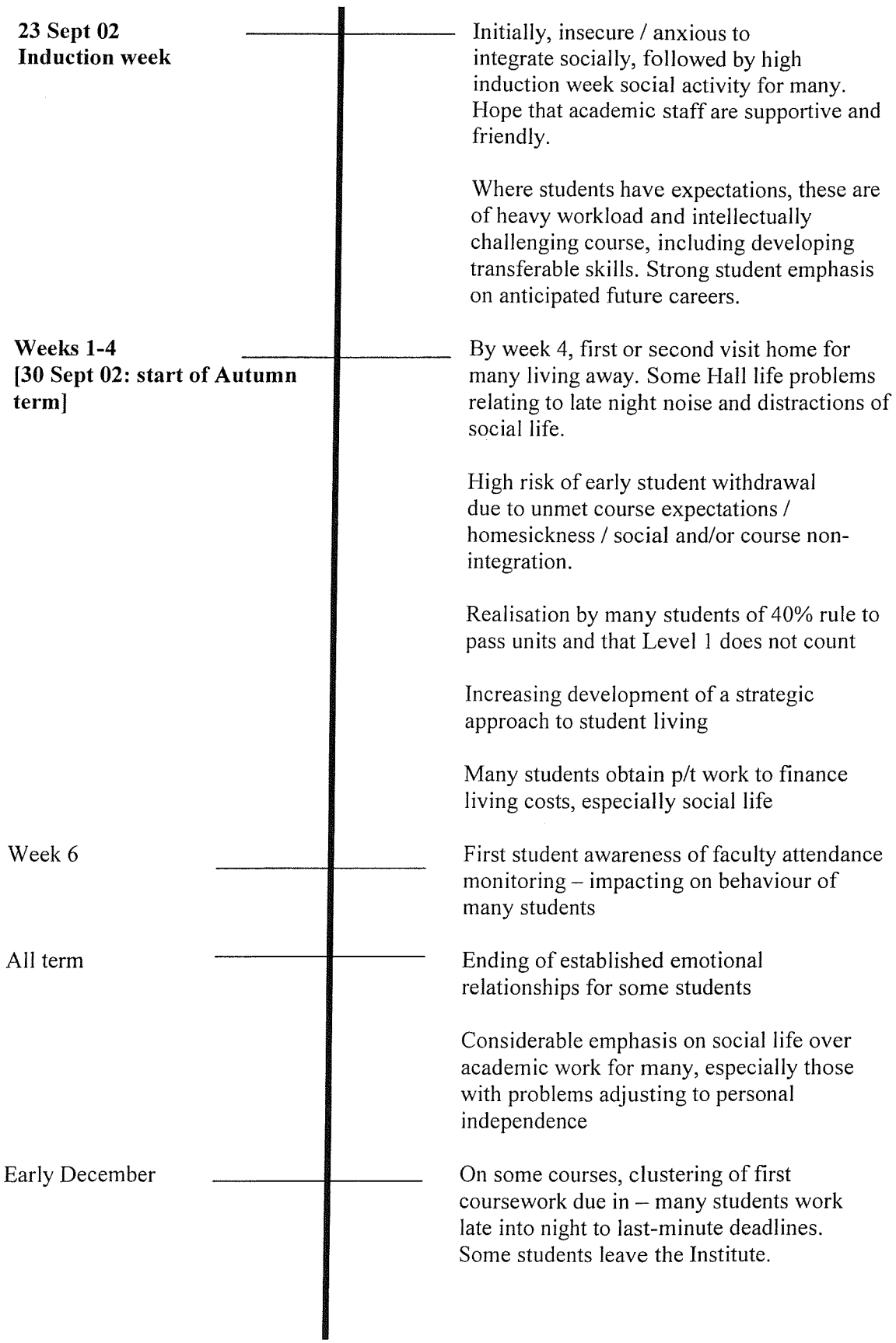
knowledge + skills + vocational focus

Missing family / home at first – retention as an issue for some

Initial expectation of workload and Level 1 intellectual challenge compared with actual experience: students and staff

the 40% rule: why do more than necessary?

Figure 4.2: Generalised student experience timeline 2002-03: selected UWBS courses



Date	Event
13 Dec 02 **End of Autumn term**	Many students finish early to secure seasonal work.
CHRISTMAS VACATION	
6 Jan 03 **Start of Spring Term**	Students return after Christmas. High risk period for further student withdrawal.
Weeks 1-3	More assignments due in, resulting in further late nights. Increasing realisation that more effort needed as workload increases after gentle first term ease-in; however 40% rule still causes mark satisficing rather than maximising behaviour for most students. Limited summative assessment feedback makes student calibration of their progress difficult.
All term	Social life diminishes to some extent but still central to student life. Students now more confident socially and academically – realise workload not as heavy as expected. Subjects studied before are thought easy, new subjects very demanding. General belief that skills development has occurred; further major skills development not thought necessary but some specific ones still need developing. Many students now working significant hours in p/t jobs reinforcing strategic approach to study-work-social life balance. Some students developing large debts. Hall life has settled down although some halls still noisy. Non-local students start thinking of Newtown as home. Student retention issues diminish significantly. Attendance monitoring impacts less on student behaviour due to UWBS administrative problems.

Date	Event
	Students now deciding which fellow students deliver regarding group work – hard workers chosen over friends.
4 April 03 **End of Spring term**	Further assignments due in pre-and post-Easter. Work effort also increases through revision for impending exams.
EASTER VACATION	
28 April 03 **Start of Summer term**	Final coursework due in; students not unduly concerned about lack of summative feedback until post-Exams.
	Some students worrying about lack of work during Level 1 and high debts incurred
Weeks 1-2	Last 2 weeks of class contact; high absenteeism due to revision
	Students have enjoyed Level 1. Now feel very much at home in Newtown and comfortable being students. Also believe they have progressed intellectually and as people during Level 1, especially concerning confidence. Even those who felt isolated socially after Christmas have now made friends; arrangements now being made as to who to rent houses with for next year. Most students looking forward to Level 2.
	Most students believe skills development has continued; those taking Undergraduate Skills unit now see benefits of it.
	Most students who had initial expectations now believe their experiences have matched these; believe that academic staff have got the Level 1 intellectual challenge about right in the context of first term's need to adjust to new life and people
Week 3	Level 1 examinations
Week 4	Most students stay to socialise for one to two weeks and house hunt for Level 2, then leave
14 July 2003	Assessment results published

4.3 Student expectation sources and motives for choosing SI; staff expectations of students' choices

Text box 4.2 explains the terminology used. Figure 4.3 shows the most frequent sources of student expectations for interview-students/questionnaire-respondents, with friends and FE/Sixth-Form College most influential. There are category overlaps e.g. several students stressed the influence of meeting course leaders on Open Days but were also influenced by trivial factors e.g. a sunny day. Marketing and Leisure (M&L) students drew on more information sources than business students, probably reflecting the latter's more focused views. Text box 4.3 provides student and staff quotations.

Key to terminology for student interviewees

Most:	7-10	Several /Some:	3-4
A majority:	6	A few:	1-2
Half:	5		

Text box 4.2 Key to interview terminology

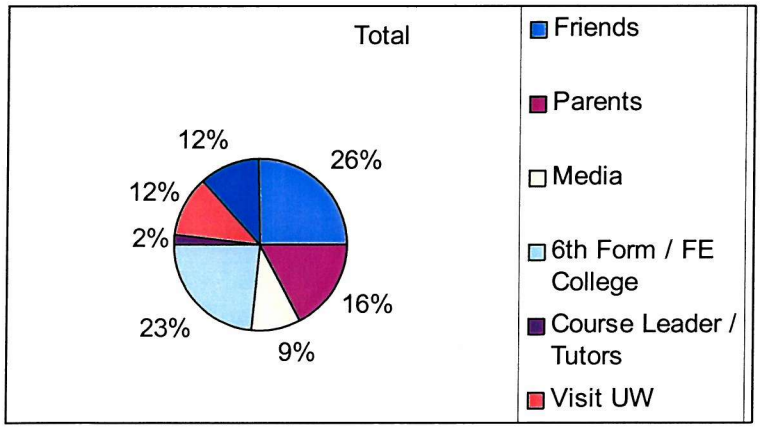


Figure 4.3 Origins of student expectations, all information sources, September 2002

Student expectations of, and motives for choosing, a course are inter-twined. Always wanting to go to university is often linked to a desired career or pursuing an interest into working life (e.g. computers or leisure), while parental shaping of expectations is through a desire for their child to secure a good job, although others stress non-pressurising parental influence. For some mature students, the motive for entering

HE is to escape a restrictive job with the decision sometimes taken a week before induction. For HE returners, the motive is to prove they can succeed having withdrawn from (not failed) previously.

They [my parents] *were actually quite helpful because ...my mum done quite a lot of research and she done all my forms for me...she done everything for me. I've got friends that are older than me, they are in higher education but they're like in the second years...I went to visit a lot of them... I really enjoyed it there.*
Mohammed Hassan, Level 1 Business Analysis student

I think a lot of people probably scoured the UCAS pages etc etc and suddenly saw this course and it's jumped up at them, especially with the mature students. I've got a number of those and they've specifically said that they came to the course, came to Newtown, because of the type of course and they wanted a qualification in that area ...from what I've heard this year, there's a lot of, you know, word and mouth, friend recommendations. But, I think it's primarily the, I think the title of the course excited them, when they come to an Open day I can sell it – end of story!
Paul Naylor, Marketing & Leisure course leader

The range [of subjects to be studied] *I think they're absolutely excellent that's why I chose the course actually. I did definitely expect that wide range... from the Open Day...yes, yes it was very useful.*
Barry Michaels, Level 1 student on Paul's course.

Text box 4.3 Students expectations' sources and staff perceptions of student motivation, September 2002

Table 4.1 compares student and staff perceptions of student expectation sources and motives for choice of course, with many shared. UW takes students with lower entry qualifications than other South Coast HEIs, including mature students without formal qualifications, suggesting this may influence choice. However, students do not identify this, although staff do. For students, motivation to choose UW is often shaped by first impressions e.g. of it being friendly and 'chilled-out', meaning they choose it over other universities. For small courses, M&L staff argue, students want to study their course and gain professional qualifications. However, students drift onto large M&L courses through parental pressure, to avoid work or because they don't know what to do.

STUDENT RESPONDENTS ONLY	SHARED ORIGINS OF EXPECTATIONS / MOTIVES	ACADEMIC STAFF ONLY
• Prospectus • Sixth Form or FE College • Siblings • Always wanted to go to university • The media	• Talking to CL or other staff at Open Day or CL visits to FE Colleges, or student one-off visits to UW • Parents • Desire for career / growth area subject and /or vocational relevance • Comparison with other courses / new course title • Friends / word of mouth • Uncertainty re career so expect course to help / desire to avoid work • Students expect a friendly environment / helpful staff • UW nearness to home	• Students expect to be able to gain a place through UW's willingness to accept students with lower qualifications

Table 4.1 Comparison of student and staff perceptions of student expectation sources, and motives for choice of course

4.4 What students and tutors expect and experience

4.4.1 Match of student expectations and experience: an overview

Students were asked in each interview/questionnaire whether they had had initial expectations and, if so, how their experiences mapped against these. In September, only 42% of questionnaire-respondents had expectations of their course or social life; however in January and May large percentages believed that they had had expectations (Table 4.2). The divergences may be explained by induction experiences shaping still-developing expectations so that, subsequently, they are recalled as initial expectations, or it may be through the power relationship in interviews. It may also be because a questionnaire cannot discriminate variations in levels of expectations in the same way as an interview. So interview-students, in contrast, have a mix of expectations of different areas of their course and of being a student.

Expectation / time period	September 2002 Actual expectations %	January 2003 Recalled expectations %	May 03 Recalled expectations %
Have / did have expectations of being a student	42	90	78
Don't have / didn't have expectations of being a student	58	10	22

Table 4.2 Changing questionnaire student beliefs regarding expectations 2002-03

In January, 86% of questionnaire-respondents said their experiences matched or were better than their expectations increasing, in May, to 91% (Table 4.3). For both times, there were no substantial differences by course, gender or age although, for May, many more mature students claimed initial expectations compared with students <21.

Match of expectation / time period	Jan 03 The same	Jan 03 Better	Jan 03 Worse	May 03 The same	May 03 Better	May 03 Worse
If you did have expectations in Sept 02, to what extent have your experiences matched them?	47	39	14	49	42	9

Table 4.3 Match of questionnaire-respondents' expectations and experiences January & May 2003

4.4.2 Students' course expectations and experiences

- *A lot of individual research; harder than 'A' level but not undauntingly hard*
- *I'm expecting to work hard, involving full measured coursework. I can see it being very time-consuming if I want to do well*
- *Close to 'A' level standard, just in more depth*
- *Very hard work, a lot of work to get done, obviously attendance is vital*

Text box 4.4 Questionnaire-respondents' course expectations, September 2002

Table 4.4 presents students' course expectations and experiences while Text Box 4.4 articulates some questionnaire-respondents' expectations.

In September, students with expectations anticipate a challenging course, using previous studies, or work experience in Jenny's case, as a benchmark; several refer to expected independent learning or Level 1 preparing for Level 2. Those returning to

study after a gap hope, in David's words, that Level 1 will '*not be a big step up from 'A' levels*'. Barry and Ian anticipate the course being exciting and confidence boosting, while Barry believes it will make him a better person. Ominously, Ruth expects a '*quite arduous*' workload.

Time / Issue	Course expectations and experiences: interview-students (IS), questionnaire-respondents (QR) and telephone-interviewees (TI)
Sept02	• 70% of IS have expectations, compared with 42% of QR and 43% of TIs • Only large M&L course has more questionnaire-respondents with expectations than not • Those with expectations cite challenging demanding course with heavy workload – some refer to independent learning • Students calibrate mainly against A levels / FE course
Jan03	• Most students' claim experiences largely as expected, including bad ones • Two IS did not expect volume of work experienced; consequently, some re-evaluation of their capability / effort put-in so far • Some students cite reduced pressure of experiences against expectations through introductory nature of Level 1 • Limited assessment feedback on some courses makes progress hard to judge
May03	• Most experiences continue as expected, although academic work becomes harder post-Christmas • Some still not working as hard as initially expected through 40% rule • Some IS use our discussions to re-evaluate their expectations / experiences

Table 4.4 Course expectations and experiences: all student data sources

Telephone-interviewees' expectations are presented in Figure 4.4, with the greatest emphasis on expecting interesting classes, and the lack of these often used as to justify leaving. The match of questionnaire-respondents' course workload expectations and experiences are in Figures 4.5 and 4.6.

By January 2003, most students argue their experiences are largely as expected although, exceptionally, Dorothy admits poorer class attendance than anticipated, Barry re-evaluates his capability as a student and Ruth confirms that the warned-of horrendous first month did materialise. David and Mohammed are surprised about the workload.

For January and May 2003, approximately 50% of questionnaire-respondents believe their course's intellectual demands are as expected. The small business course has twice as many students finding it harder than expected, compared with other courses, but this is linked to twice as many students admitting they do not work hard. Only

the large M&L course has more students saying they worked hard enough before Christmas compared with those who did not.

By May, an increasing proportion of students find their course harder than expected. In January two-thirds of interview-students acknowledge the need to work more, citing poor time-management, lack of motivation and/or a demanding social life as causes; others cite time pressures through part-time work and sports training. Difficulties may also be due to students having attempted few assignments, bunched around Christmas, although some argue this usefully simulates work-based prioritising problems, or limited summative feedback, making it hard to calibrate progress. By May, impending examinations necessitate concentrated revision. Students understand course aims and learning outcomes and how to meet these in assessments. Several interview-students use our discussions to shape their on-going expectations during Level 1, confirming Berman Brown's (1998) argument of the researcher's impact on student behaviour. There are no significant differences between leisure and business student expectations and experiences.

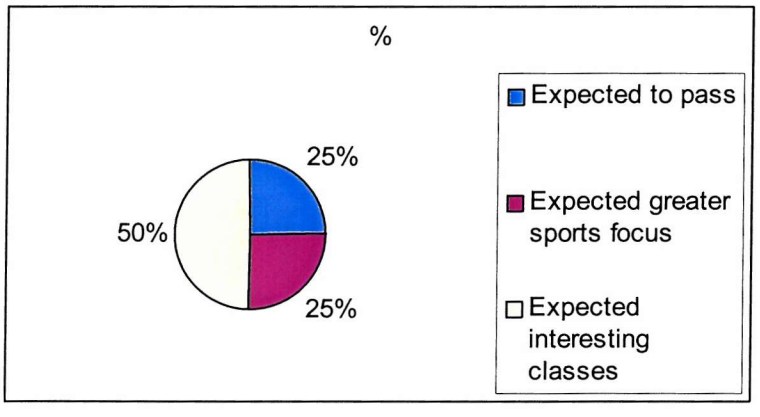


Figure 4.4 Telephone-interviewees' course expectations

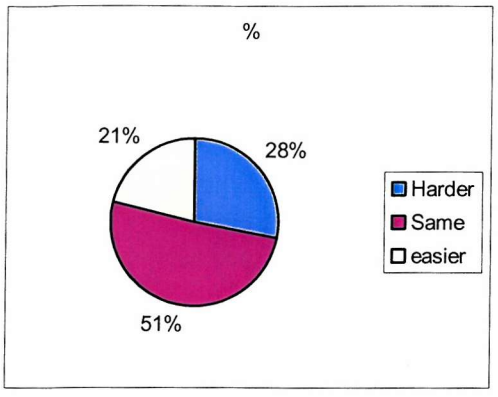


Figure 4.5 Questionnaire-respondents' expectations and experiences of their workload (January 2003)

4.4.3 Students' tutor expectations and experiences

In September, 40% of interview-students had no expectations of their tutors, although most hoped they would be approachable and helpful. Ominously, Jenny talks of expecting less help than at 6th form college and of reluctance to seek it, while Mohammed hopes staff have high expectations to motivate students.

Leisure and Business interview-students expectations diverge here. The former expect tutors to want them to cope with their course and work hard, so will encourage them. For Ian and Barry, both mature, satisfying staff expectations is important. In contract, most Business students have no thoughts about staff expectations or don't think tutors have any, as so many new students will overwhelm

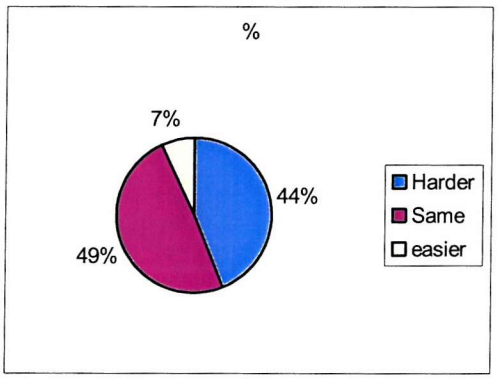


Figure 4.6 Questionnaire-respondents' expectations and experiences of their workload (May 03)

them. David and Jenny, however, think staff will not expect them to work too hard rather viewing Level 1 for adjustment and socialising.

Subsequent experiences largely confirm students' desired expectations although there are problems accessing part-time staff. By January, nearly all students are satisfied or very satisfied with their tutors. Classroom enthusiasm and interest is another issue with several students citing a boring tutor; these issues continue into May. There are no substantial differences between leisure and business students' expectations and experiences.

Time / Issue	Tutor expectations and experiences
Sept02	• 40% of students have no expectations of their tutors • Most want tutors to be approachable / friendly / helpful • JR expects less help / less willing to approach tutors; MH wants motivation
Jan03	• Students generally satisfied with tutors – find them helpful / friendly although not all operate open door policy (but have office hours) • Problems with one p/t member of staff; hard to access p/t staff
May03	• Tutors continue to be helpful / supportive, although one mature student intimidated by a staff member with marital problems; and one student has sympathy for a tutor with class control problems • Problems with accessing p/t tutors • Wish that all staff would use Learnwise

Table 4.5 Interview students' and telephone interviewees' expectations and experience of their tutors

Questionnaire-students were not asked questions about their tutors because of potentially sensitive feedback; two-thirds of telephone-interviewees said their tutors had helped them sufficiently.

4.4.4. The total student experience

In May 2003, almost all students say they would return to UW if starting again, suggesting satisfaction with their experiences, which is reinforced by almost all saying their experiences are the same as, or better than, their expectations.

4.4.5 Staff expectations and experiences

All staff confirm they enjoy teaching e.g. introducing students to new subjects and theories (Matt), stimulating their interest (Suzi), bringing real-life analysis into the classroom (Yong) and bridging the gap between student experiences and staff knowledge of their needs (Peter). They also reflect regularly on their units and respond quickly to student feedback; this is reassuring since students express a need for classroom enthusiasm and interest.

However, Mark argues that students now are more problematic in class, while Paul notes that motivation has declined. In contrast, two tutors perceive lectures as primarily for information dissemination with the tutorial's function to do something interesting; yet students criticised one of these for boring class delivery, prompting them to skip time-isolated classes. Research into student learning has not informed their teaching.

Table 4.6 presents staff expectations in September and is worth comparing with Table 4.4; these largely match and, generally, tutors believe that their expectations of students are correct. Some believe students lack realistic expectations through insufficient early assessment feedback and misunderstanding of the classification system, thinking 65% a poor mark. Others identify problems with students expecting detailed formative feedback before assignment submission, as at FE college.

Some staff believe students expect more hard work at Level 1 than is the case, particularly mature students (Paul). However, Suzi emphasises Level 1 is not encouraging under-achievement; but rather gently developing skills and links between theory and the business world. In contrast, Matt argues students under-estimate the amount of studying, the transition to HE and their own capability to succeed; hence tutors influencing student expectations is important e.g. that courses are broad-based, not narrowly vocational as some expect.

The underlying causes of student and staff expectations differ as tutors cite student-centred expectations and attitudes for what they perceive to be, at times, poor student learning e.g. lack of student motivation, rather than University assessment

regulations, influencing student learning; or insufficient academic work through students deluding themselves. Summative assessments are seen as the main driver for student work.

> *...you know, you deal with a lot of students. There is always going to be a percentage, 10 or 15 percent, never really put a figure on it, who feel uncomfortable with that, challenges the orthodoxy if you like, whereas, at the other end of the spectrum, which is 10, 15 maybe 20 percent, who are really up for it because they're really engaged to try and work out how to get the best out of the system. And then there's the middle, who are swayed one way or the other. That's quite interesting because there's a lot of peer pressure in that. If you've got from the 10 percent who are resistant and they're the dominant characters in the group, then that can sway the whole centre of effort. Conversely, if you've got somebody who is really up for it, that can sway it the other way.*

Text box 4.5 Peter Matthews' comments on sub-groupings within classes

Mature students, however, are more likely to expect to undertake independent learning. Since students believe they know how to learn, subjects studied before, or not seen to be relevant e.g. Undergraduate Skills, experience attendance problems while new subjects are found to be challenging.

Time	Tutors' thoughts re student expectations of course demands
September 02	• Students don't have any clear pattern of expectations • Students expect intellectually demanding Level 1 with much work [perhaps more demanding than staff], yet once here underestimate amount of work to be done and difficulty of transition to HE [2 Business tutors] • Some students lack self-motivation / delude themselves they are working hard enough; many students do work hard • School leavers want spoon-feeding as in FE; mature students harder working and expect independent learning • Students expect focused vocationally-relevant units; grumble about broad-based subjects [2 Leisure + 1 business tutor] that staff believe important, and needing to be contextualised • Students don't attend units where subject previously studied; subjects not studied before they find hard. Believe they know how to learn • Staff need to influence student expectations to make them better match their experiences / build up confidence [2 Leisure + 1 Business tutors]

Table 4.6 Tutors' thoughts regarding student expectations of course demands, September 2002

Most interview-tutors believe student expectations matter and they need managing to enable them better to match experiences to help confidence. They also agreed the

need for an expectations audit during induction to identify initial student expectations.

4.5 Mature students

4.5.1 Mature interview-students' perceptions

Like younger students, mature students mostly do not know what to expect although later believing they did. They often join in late September due to work-related issues (IR; BM; JR), and face additional pressures initially concerning social integration, due to most living outside halls; however, Jenny and Ruth, both in halls, left before Easter [Appendix 4.8]. Prioritising study and a perceived age gap further exacerbate adjustment. The initial profile adopted depends on personality; Barry and Nick keep a low profile, the former insisting that he just wants to be a student, not an ex-manager. Ian, in contrast, becomes a class representative but then worries his peers might perceive him too pushy.

Lacking a regular income is another problem. For Barry and Nick, this means working long hours part-time while Ian relies on his credit card and his long-time partner, Liz. Table 4.7 summarises this while Tables 4.8 and 4.9 present the January and May positions.

Date	Issue	Expectation / experience
Sept. 02	Course expectations	(i) No real expectations except that it will be hard work / demanding (ii) Often wishes are expressed as expectations e.g. approachable tutors; chilled environment (iii) 2/4 students very surprised at breadth of course
	Social integration	(i) Concerns about being accepted as a fellow student and not someone old. (ii) Anticipate a more limited social life than younger students as has already 'been there, done that' (iii) Two not in halls of residence.
	Financial	Concerns about ability to cope with lower income
	Motivation	All profess strong motivation yet three only applied for course at last minute through clearing; 2 were surprised at being accepted. Real desire to gain qualification before it is too late and to use it to secure a better job

Table 4.7 Mature interview-student expectations, September 2002 [Ian, Barry, Nick and Jenny]

Autumn is crucial for student retention; by January, Jenny has left and Barry and Ruth are considering it, finding adjustment to HE difficult. Ian has split from Liz, entered a new relationship, and then returned to her. Only Nick is relatively unscathed, although reliant on his Portsmouth friends for social life through minimal integration. They now re-evaluate their learning and realise Level 1 involves hard work. For Ian and Barry, lack of time-management skills, compounded by the latter's job, pose problems (Table 4.8).

Date	Issue	Experience
Jan.03	Course experiences	(i) Ian and Barry both enjoying course, which is starting to widen their intellectual horizons. Nick finds course as expected.
	Social integration	Ian able to integrate socially through his sports activities and being class rep (although initial divisions re this); Barry and Nick both isolated to some extent from class peers. Ian and Barry have both considered changing course.
	Being a student	(i) Ian and Barry forced to re-evaluate their performance over Christmas – realise time-management skills / capability not as good as expected; both realise how demanding the course is. Nick more comfortable with his study efforts. (ii) Also Ian has had major personal relationship problems. (iii) Ian and Barry struggling financially' Nick, living at home, manages OK
	Academic staff	Ian and Barry both experience discord with tutors that unsettles them.

Table 4.8 Mature student experiences January 2003 [Ian, Barry and Nick]

Date	Issue	Experience
May 03	Course experiences	For both, experiences have largely mapped out as expected [although Barry had minimal expectations, Sept. 02]
	Social integration	Both Barry and Nick have integrated much more socially since Jan 03 developing friendships with peers; now aware that, initially, this was a problem. For Barry, class telling him they didn't realise he was mature / was one of them, has boosted confidence substantially.
	Being a student	Barry has undergone a major personal transformation, believing he has developed substantially as a person / intellectually during Level 1 with greater confidence. Both constrained by needing to work long hours in p/t job. Nick very conscious of paying fees, so wants full value for money; Barry more respectful of staff / HE.

Table 4.9 Mature student experiences May 2003 [Barry and Nick]

By May 2003, only two students are available to discuss their experiences. Both are now comfortable as students, socially integrating and confident with Barry, citing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, undergoing an intellectual and confidence rebirth (Table 4.9).

4.5.2 Others' perceptions of mature students

Under-21 students see some mature students as potential natural leaders (DB), to be looked up to (AT), although most just go with the crowd. They are perceived as 'bringing a different angle to things' (AT) although not citing work-based examples in class to illustrate, and much more determined, e.g. background reading before classes, yet don't dominate them. They ask questions when they don't understand things, which younger students appreciate. If mature students realised how their peers respect them, initial adjustment problems would be less. Ann also notes that mature students can, initially, be set in their ways yet loosen up as the year progresses.

For some mature students, fellow-students' expectations are daunting, especially regarding the age gap. Ian [23] doesn't want to be thought of as 'the old boy'. Jenny [21] is concerned at being thought of as 'an older woman or mother figure'. As if to reassure himself, Barry [28] notes that he is 'young at heart'. Nick [21] is concerned with being a 'fish out of water', while Ruth [21], foretelling future problems, comments that the students she has met 'do not look my kind of people'. She also expects her fellow students to be smiling since we are 'all in the same boat' but lots of people have really moody faces causing her to think that her expectations of her fellow students have been 'really wrong'.

Text box 4.6 Mature students' thought regarding student social life, September 2002

Staff perceptions of most mature students remain constant and complementary, with Mark Alexander describing them as 'beacons by which to navigate' using one mature student, respected by the class, as a motivational tool. Staff generally see mature students as hard working, motivated and open to new ideas. Their skills vary, however, depending on their background.

Other mature students, who are self-contained with outside lives, integrate less. Perceiving themselves as customers, they can be very demanding, even aggressive, to staff. James Keaton argues they expect special treatment, especially women with young children, and Paul Naylor confirms they sometimes receive it. These mature students can be opinionated, having seen the world and wanting to tell people what

they know, even if understanding it superficially. Yong Weng notes they often see the world as black-and-white, having problems, and complaining, when theory and assumptions diverge from real life. Initially, they cluster together; however, subsequently, they group with other hard-working students regardless of age and are frustrated by socialisers.

Mature students normally create expectations of hard work within a tutor group, raising standards, but, if over-dominating, this alienates peers and staff e.g. answering every question in class. This third type of mature student is untypical but, occasionally, a class will try to bring such a student to their level through the former's desire to conform, yet then despise him/her. Text box 4.6 illustrates this.

4.6 The level 1 intellectual challenge

4.6.1 Student perceptions

Table 4.10 shows over 90% of questionnaire students would work harder if some/all Level 1 marks counted towards their degree classification while Table 4.11 shows the impact of the 40% pass mark on student work effort.

Question / Student response	Yes (Jan 03) %	No (Jan 03) %	Yes (May 03) %	No (May 03) %
Would you work harder if some / all Level 1 marks counted towards your final degree	90	10	93	7

Table 4.10 Contribution of Level 1 marks to final degree: impact on student work effort

Question / Student response (May 2003)	Yes %	No %
Has the fact that you only need to obtain 40% per unit to pass Level 1, caused you to work less hard than you might have otherwise?	60	40

Table 4.11 Impact of 40% rule on willingness to work hard

Of the post-Easter interview-students, only Nick Barr and Oliver Cooper admitted working hard all year to secure highest possible marks; even well organised

motivated students like Ann Townsend confess to assessment regulations de-motivating her.

In Table 4.12, 41% of students think tutors should push them harder; 52% of males said No compared with 88% of females. 67% of mature students argued that tutors should push harder compared with 32% of students <21.

Question / Student response (January 2003)	Yes %	No %
Do you think Level 1 tutors should push you harder in terms of the academic demands your course places on you?	41	59

Table 4.12 Questionnaire-students' perceptions of whether Level 1 tutors should push them harder January 2003

When asked in May if tutors had pitched course demands correctly, 85% responded positively (Table 4.13) which could be interpreted as reinforcing the January majority response in Table 4.12. Moreover, in May, 44% of questionnaire-respondents said their course was harder than expected (Figure 4.4). This could be viewed as staff challenging students sufficiently. Moreover, most interview-students argue the Level 1 intellectual challenge is pitched about right since new units are difficult, and it is very much an adjustment year with new student challenges of independent learning, managing own workload and adjustment.

Question / Response	Got it about right %	Made it too hard %	Made it too easy %
Regarding the academic demands of Level 1 of your course, do you think your Level 1 tutors have:	85	10	5

Table 4.13 Student perceptions of the appropriateness of Level 1 academic demands, May 2003

However Table 4.14 offers another perspective with 90% of students affirming, in January, that they perceive their peers as treating Level 1 mainly for social life. If

true, students will not want tutors challenging them more academically. By May only 62% argue this suggesting that, motivated by examinations, more students have realised that Level 1 is for studying. However, it could be interpreted as students acquiring more skills to meet course intellectual demands rather than shying away from them. There are no major differences by age, course or gender.

Question / Student response	Yes %	No %
Do you think students treat Level 1 mainly as a year for having fun and socialising rather than studying hard? (Jan 03)	90	10
Since Christmas, do you think students have treated Level 1 mainly for fun / socialising rather than studying hard? (May 03)	62	38

Table 4.14 Student perceptions of Level 1 as mainly social life

4.6.2 Staff perceptions

Staff expectations and experiences of students stay fairly constant over time. They split students into the motivated, who work hard and are challenged intellectually, and those lacking maturity and self-motivation who under-achieve, with poor class attendance and working only to assignments; if staff have problems with the latter they only find out after they leave [Paul]. James Keaton, who has strong opinions, argues laziness is a major factor and, in contrast to Paul's concerns over student retention, argues the wasters need to be cleared out. However, this over-simplifies, with Mark Alexander identifying a third category type of student, lacking confidence and not thinking critically about what s/he reads. These may be mature students; they may leave but hopefully gain confidence and stay.

James Keaton's perception might seem to match many students' understanding of Level 1 as primarily social, except they perceive Level 1 as personal growth rather than laziness. Tutors agree that social life and part-time jobs impact on study, although Mark Alexander and Matt Taylor stress the importance of social life for a well-rounded graduate. Paul Naylor supports this arguing group integration and dynamics are important motivating factors for studying.

In September, Peter Matthews argues staff may have low expectations of students causing them to challenge students less than the latter expect. I discuss this in

Chapter 5 but there appears a mismatch between initial student expectations of being intellectually challenged, and some staff expectations of Level 1 as gentle introduction. Yong Weng acknowledges a possible staff-student expectations mismatch but supports James, arguing some students don't care about studying; he accepts that, as Level 1 doesn't count, students don't work hard, knowing what they can get away with, even though staff remind them to.

We have seventeen hours with everything, but that includes three or four hours of practical. The principle they always set us off with at school, sixth form, was that you should probably spend at least the time you spend in class out of class and to a great extent that you should really be spending like 9 to 5, or equal to that in hours on your studies because where you need to have a bit of fun, but the main reason we're here is to be at a university.
September 2002

About 75% [class attendance, compared with anticipated 90/95% in September]*...it's gone down because...you can get away with not going to lectures if you go to seminars a bit more and things like that...in seminars they do a register, lectures they don't...I'm not doing enough reading or anything like that outside of class but that's something I am hoping to sort of know that I've got to do towards the end of the year...* [I'm not studying] *quite as much as I should, I know I should do more.*
January 2003

Sometimes, I think it's probably because you are told in the first few weeks that the first year doesn't count...I think in a sense you are challenged in the first year, but the main challenge's to find motivation within yourself if you see what I mean...the people who have achieved the best this year are the people who kind of organise themselves better. I hoped I would do more and be more organised but I haven't, really unfortunately I'm very bad at leaving things to the last minute. I know it's a lame excuse but I do find I work better when I've got sort of pressure of it having to be in, so I know I have to do it.
May 2003

Text box 4.7 Dorothy Browne's studying experiences during 2002-03

In contrast to Suzi's gentle introduction model, Mark Alexander argues Level 1 should be intellectually challenging, comparing it to a boot camp to get everyone up to standard. Through cross-marking, he believes students are challenged intellectually, but don't want to be, especially once realising Level 1 marks don't contribute to their degree. However, he argues students are challenged environmentally through part-time work and the SSN replacing personal tutors, so that staff work harder and are less available. He believes poor students have made little progress during Level 1, engaging in rote, and hence surface, learning; however, good ones seek empathy with their subject.

Matt Taylor notes that students time-manage their competing pressures effectively, while Mark observes they switch between classes to which they are not allocated, to give two clear days per week. Students are perceived as very much strategic learners. However, Matt also notes that many students are trailing units after Level 1 June examinations, with many on his course on 80 [out of 120] CATS points suggesting time management or motivation is not good, or that students lack appropriate skills to be effective learners; I return to this in Chapter 5.

4.7 The work-life balance: student and staff perceptions

4.7.1 Expected study hours

Table 4.15 shows 30-39 hours/week as the modal range for student-interviewees compared with 20-29 hours for questionnaire-respondents. The difference may be through the larger percentage of mature interview-students or a desire to present themselves to me in a good light since, when cross-tabulating age against hours of study for questionnaire-respondents, no substantial differences emerged. There are

Hours studied / data source	Interview students %	Questionnaire respondents %
< 20 / week	30	22.5
20-29	20	47.5
30-39	50	20
> 40	0	7.5
Total	100	100

Table 4.15 Interview-students and questionnaire-respondents: expected study hours, September 2002

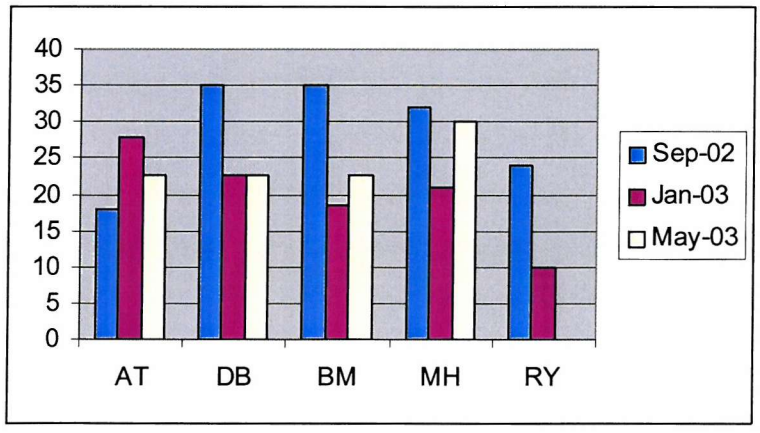
no substantial differences by course or gender for interview-students and no substantial gender differences regarding study-hours and part-time working hours for questionnaire-respondents. Not surprisingly during induction, interview-students find estimating expected hours socialising to be difficult.

These findings are broadly consistent with tutors' expectations of needed study hours of 22-35/week, with most arguing for 30+. However, they accept students will not do this, relying on limited reading and hurried assignments. Peter Matthews cites their life-coping skills as a main reason for this with students multi-tasking study, part-

time work and sports/social life. He believes most students take their studies seriously but pretend they don't.

January and May data show most students' studying per week falls short of initial expectations. For January and May interview-students, only Ann and Nick study significantly longer than expected while Oliver is studying the same; all three also work long hours part-time. Others have no part-time job yet study significantly less than expected. Where students anticipated working part-time in September, many now work longer hours than expected.

Figure 4.7 presents five student-interviewees' experiences during 2002-03 with all studying less than expected. They are chosen since they represent groupings emerging from the data e.g. Ann appears hard working and organised. Mohammed socialises predominantly, while Ruth, from induction, warns that she will leave. Inaccurate students' expectations are either due to initial misconceptions or re-adjusting studying time through subsequent experiences.



Key: AT: Ann Townsend; DB: Dorothy Browne; BM: Barry Michaels; MH: Mohammed Hassan; RY: Ruth Young.

Figure 4.7 Interview-students' study hours: expected [September 2002] and actual [January and May 2003]

Table 4.16 shows questionnaire-respondents' experiences are similar to those of interview-students', with high initial expectations not matched by subsequent experiences. The expected modal value of 20-29 hours/week is replaced by an actual modal value of <20 hours/week as 2002-03 progresses, the latter value also reflecting

what students believe they need to do to pass Level 1. When taken with the non-contribution of Level 1 to degree classifications, the 40% unit pass requirement, and issues, to emerge later, concerning Level 1 intellectual skills development, a picture starts emerging concerning the first research question.

Student response / total hours studying (inside and outside class)	<20 hours / week	20-29 hours / week	30 + hours / week
Percentage of student respondents expecting to study identified amount of time (Sept 02)	23%	48%	29%
Percentage of students actually studying identified amount of time (Jan 03)	53%	45%	2%
Percentage of students actually studying identified amount of time (May 03)	72%	26%	2%
Percentage of students estimating identified amount of study time as necessary to pass Level 1 (May 03)	67%	32.5% *	

Key: * This is the combined total percentage for students estimating a need to work 20-29 hours per week plus those estimating a need to work 30 + hours per week.

Table 4.16 Questionnaire-respondents' expected (September 2002) and actual (January and May 2003) percentages of time devoted to studying

Linked to this is Table 4.17, with 59% of questionnaire-respondents admitting they had not worked hard enough pre-Christmas, although 77% have worked harder since. By gender, 85% of males admit to working harder compared with 58% of females; there are no age differences. There may not be inconsistency with Table 4.16, where total study hours have declined, since students may be working harder in the context of more effective multi-tasking.

Figure 4.8 explains the lack of pre-Christmas studying, with too much sports / socialising, inability to enter a studying routine and noisy halls the main, inter-connected, reasons; 50% of interview-students and 60% of questionnaire-respondents are in halls. There are no significant age or gender differences. This may seem to contradict independent learning yet in fact this is likely to be taking place, albeit in the social context of a new environment, rather than in the classroom. Students do not identify part-time work here but do so elsewhere.

Question / Student response rate	Yes %	No %
Looking back, did you study hard enough before Christmas?	41	59
Have you worked harder since Christmas?	77	23

Table 4.17 Amount of studying pre and post--Christmas 2002

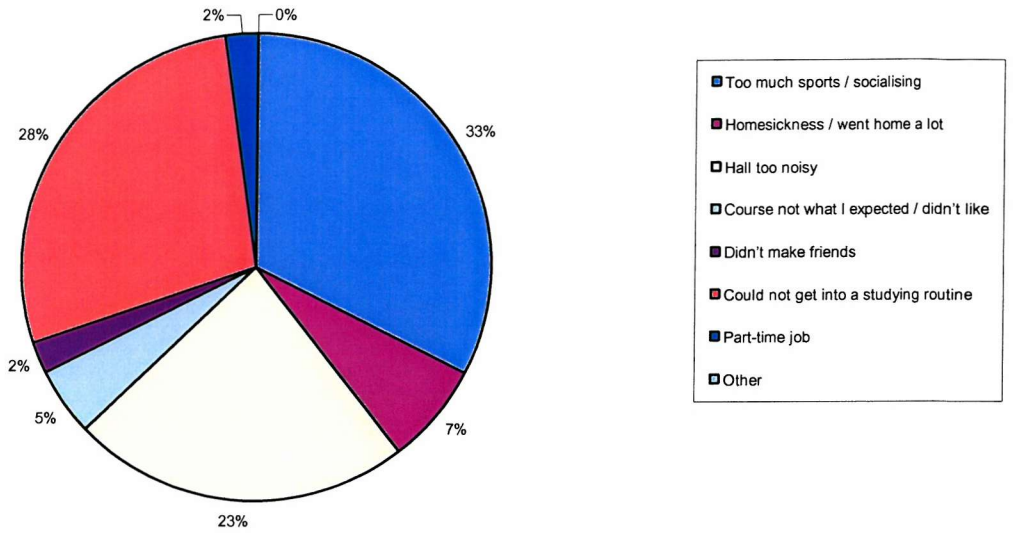


Figure 4.8 Pie chart of reasons why questionnaire-respondents did not work sufficiently hard pre-Christmas 2002

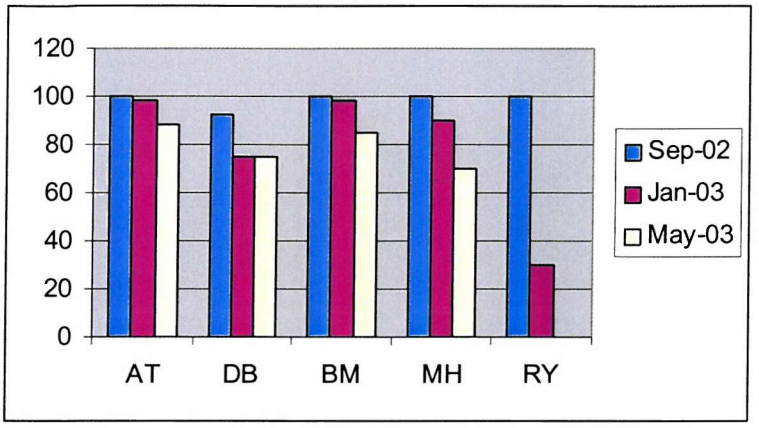
4.7.2 Student attendance feedback

- *'definitely because I also had bad attendance, and I was determined to pass this course and learn to work harder for exams if you want to pass'*
- *'as exams come closer, more revision done'*
- *'because there was (sic) more essays to hand in after Christmas than before'*
- *'because it's got harder with more assignments needing to be handed in'*
- *'because my grades were not good enough before Christmas so I've had to push myself'*
- *'got into more of a study routine – socialised less'*
- *'course easy and boring'*

Text box 4.8 Questionnaire-respondents' comments regarding working harder post-Christmas: May 2003

Linked to the above is class attendance, which diminishes during the year although normally falls no lower than 70%. Figure 4.9 presents data for five interview-

students. Table 4.18 shows no differences for questionnaire-respondents but, for telephone-interviewees, attendance is highest in the <60% band due to these students contemplating withdrawal. Figure 4.10 outlines their non-attendance reasons.



Key: *AT: Ann Townsend; DB: Dorothy Browne; BM: Barry Michaels; MH: Mohammed Hassan; RY: Ruth Young.*

Figure 4.9 Expected [September 02] and actual [January and May 03] classroom attendance, five interview-students, 2002-2003.

Attendance range: Percentage	Expected questionnaire-respondents' attendance %	Actual questionnaire-respondents' attendance Jan03 %	Actual questionnaire-respondents' attendance May 03 %	Telephone-interviewees' attendance Autumn term 2002 %
80-100 per cent	95	**86**	68	58
60-79 percent	5	12	32	21
< 60 per cent	0	2	0	21
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 4.18 Students' anticipated class attendance September 2002

Although, in January, 18% of students had received an attendance-monitoring letter, almost all went to under-21 female students, contradicting expectations that it is mainly males that skip classes. By May, there are again noticeable difference between male and female attendance with 55% of female attendance in the lower range of 60-79% compared with only 21% for males.

In contrast, most staff want 100% class attendance, arguing for a strong correlation between this and academic success/retention, but are happy to get 80%. Main reasons staff identify for poor attendance are assignment hand-in times, Monday mornings, Thursday mornings after Wednesday evening post-sports socialising, large gaps between classes, not liking a particular tutor or, 'a tutor just going through the learning pack'. [Paul Naylor]. Staff argue that when students attend it is often through not wanting to let down classmates in group work.

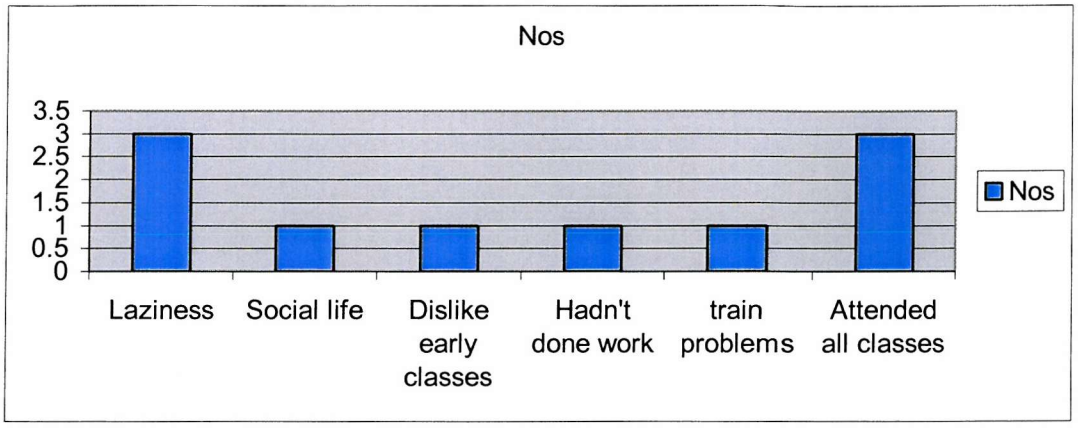


Figure 4.10 Telephone-interviewees' reasons for non-attendance

4.7.3 Part-time work

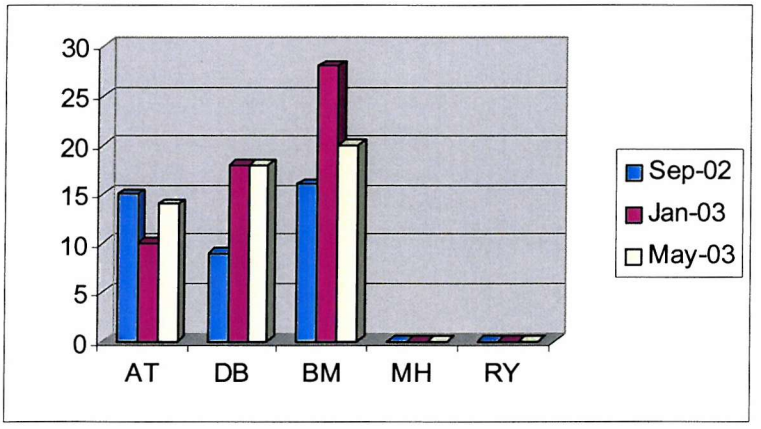


Figure 4.11 Selected interview-students' part-time working hours: expected [September 2002] and actual [January and May 2003]

Figure 4.11 presents the data for five interview-students, with Dorothy and Barry working longer than initially expected, the reverse of their expected studying

patterns, while Ann works less than expected; as she works less her studying increases, and vice versa.

Table 4.19 presents questionnaire-respondents' data. In September, 40% work part-time with 10-19 hours the modal range. Two mature students work 20-29 hours per week. There are no course or gender differences.

By January 62% of questionnaire-respondents work, increasing to 70% by May; in contrast, 57% of telephone-interviewees work part-time. The modal range for questionnaire-respondents is 11-20 hours in January and May, however, by May, 22% work>20 hours/week; 75% of telephone-interviewees also work these hours. There are no significant differences by course, gender or age for the January sample; for the May sample a greater proportion of males work than females and all but one student working >20 hours/week is male. There are no notable differences by course. Approximately one-third of questionnaire-respondents say working affects their studies, including class contact.

Date / hours worked	**No job** %	**<10 hours** %	**11-20 hours** %	**> 20 hours** %	**Total students** %	**% of students working p/t whose studies affected**	**% of total student sample whose studies affected by sports / social life**
Total (Sept 03)	60	7	25	8	100	N/A	N/A
Total (Jan 03)	38	17	43	2	100	36%	48%
Total (May 03)	30	18	30	22	100	32%	94%

Table 4.19 Student p/t working hours and extent of impact on studies

4.7.4 Social life

This has been discussed already with staff wanting well-rounded students and student perceptions of Level 1 as mainly socialising (Table 4.14 and 4.19; Figures 4.6 and 4.8). In September, over 50% of interview-students had no social life expectations with Dorothy cautiously commenting 'best not to expect too much'; yet, between January-May, the percentage of questionnaire-respondents admitting social life /sports had affected studying increased from 48% (January), with more females than

males admitting this, to 94% (May). When asked how often, 50% said 1-5 times, while another 37.5% said 6-10 times (Appendix 4.9). Many of these were taking M&L courses, mature students were mainly in the 6-10 range and there were no major gender differences.

For September interview-students, social integration is vital for David and Mohammed and returner Dorothy, whereas mature students Ian, Barry and Jenny prioritise studying. For Ann, Nick and Oliver, social life is outside UW, due to not living in halls. Only 38% of questionnaire-respondents had social life expectations; these are identified in Text Box 4.9.

- *busy, gaining friends, staying up late*
- *to make close friends socially to live with in the second year*
- *getting mullered (sic)*
- *a lot of social life, meeting new people*
- *have fun, meet new people and party*

Text box 4.9 **Social life expectations of questionnaire-respondents, September 2002**

By January, social life has seriously impacted on socialisers' studying while mature students are beginning to integrate, often through course group-work. In May, Dorothy admits 'Level 1 has been a lot of fun' while David and Mohammed confess social life has dominated. Ann remains focused, with little change in her studying-working-socialising pattern, although half-admitting her training, and living at home, have inhibited close friendships.

There appears little difference between M&L and business students in terms of work-studying-social life characteristics with patterns emerging across groups rather than between them. Table 4.20 summarises this for interview-students.

Students	Sept. 02 Expected social life	Students	Jan. 03 Actual social life	Students	May 03 Actual social life
AT; IR; BM; NB;	Sports a large part of leisure time	**DB; DA; MH**	Social life dominates	**DB; DA; MH**	Social life continues to dominate over studying
IR; BM; RY; JR	Social life not a key them of student life; RY doesn't like look of students	**IR; BM; RY; JR**	Limited social life; BM and RY socially isolated: JR has left; RY getting ready to leave	**BM; NB; OC**	BM, NB and OC now integrating more socially; latter two still studying much more than socialising
JR; MH	Regular weekend visits home	**AT; NB; OC**	Social life outside UW [not in halls]; some social integration during the day	**AT; RY**	AT unable to find anyone with whom to share L.2 house although socialising with peers between classes; RY has left

Table 4.20 Emerging social themes during Level 1

The halls-social life linkage, and its impact on studying is presented in Table 4.21 for questionnaire-respondents. In January, there is a substantial difference between the impact of social life on studying if in hall compared with if not. However, by May, social life is equally disruptive regardless of accommodation; for non-hall students, this is a proxy for effective social integration.

Domicile / Percentage of student respondents affected	Jan 03 %	May 03 %
In hall: social life affects studying	54	94
In hall: social life does not affect studying	46	6
Not in hall: social life affects studying	38	94
Not in hall: social life does not affect studying	62	6

Table 4.21 Relationship between domicile and impact of social life on studies [questionnaire-respondents]

Percentage of students undertaking identified activity / % of time devoted to that activity	60-79%	40-59%	40-59%	20-39%	<20%
Socialising	0%	57%	43%	0%	0%
Studying	14%	43%	29%	14%	0%
Working p/t	0	0	0	33%	66%
Doing nothing	0	0	0	50%	50%

Table 4.22 Percentage of telephone-interviewees allocating percentages of their time to each activity

Telephone-interviewee data, relating to withdrawees, [Table 4.22] further confirms the impact of social life on Level 1, with 57% spending 40%-59% of their time socialising.

4.8 Skills

4.8.1 Student and staff skills expectations, September 2002

During induction, new students were asked what skills they expected to need and which they had; interview-students' and questionnaire-respondents' expectations largely align. Tutors were also asked which skills they expected students to have. Appendix 4.10 presents this data for key skills as illustration and Appendix 4.11 and Figure 4.12 for transferable skills.

> *'But maths, you know, I find that with age, and through work I've got more adept because I have had to. In Debenhams, I was cashing off millions of pounds a week, every night at the hotels I was cashing off all the tills, balancing that with what we what we should have on the systems and that sort of thing ...I found, with age, my skills with mathematics, that sort of thing has come on quite a bit'.*
> **Ian Roach, September 2002**
>
> *I think I'm not bad at communicating...you know. I get my ideas across...if you're a manager, you've got people under your control, you've got to be able to communicate with those people otherwise you're going to be a bit of a nervous manager'.*
> **David Andrews, September 2002**

Text box 4.10 Interview student quotations, September 2002

Most students expect to need all key skills during Level 1 and believe they possess IT and communication skills; however, 45% believe they lack maths/stats skills. There are no substantial differences between courses examined by gender or age. Tutors expect students to have weak key skills and agree with their perceptions.

Most students expect to need all transferable skills and more believe they possess them than don't. Several are identified that many questionnaire-respondents believe are important yet they lack i.e. library skills (including information searching), presentations, critical reading, putting forward thoughts in class, time-management

and assertiveness. Time-management was acknowledged to be very important, with some interview-students [BM; RY; IR; DA] admitting the need for improvement while others [AT; NB] believed their skills were good.

Students see independent learning as important, and linked to assertiveness (although being too assertive can alienate fellow-students), confidence, needing to make presentations, and expressing views in class. Although not asked, interview-students are aware of inter-personal skills; however, several emphasise 'everyone pulling their weight' in group-work. What emerges from questionnaire-respondents is the large percentage who either believe they lack a skill or don't know if they possess it. This suggests an effective skills audit is needed.

There are no substantial differences between interview-students and questionnaire-respondents. The latter perceive themselves strongest with group-work and independent learning. Structured essay writing is more problematic to interview-students, perhaps as more are mature and longer away from education; assertiveness is of concern to them through some being over-assertive. Some interview-students believe they can transfer time-management skills from previous work to UW.

I did group-working during the Gateway [Access course] as well. I found I started to take over which is something that I've got to keep an eye on, that's one thing I don't want to do. I don't take over aggressively, I just tend to force my ideas and say look this is a good way, what do you think? But it's a good quality in one way because it's encouraging people but, you know, I have to keep it to a level because I know; but I can't foresee a problem because it's under control.
Barry Michaels, September 2002

I would expect that we would actually have to put our thoughts forward [in class] just to kind of spice it up a bit. Because, from a tutor's point of view as well, they'll probably quite like to hear what you think on matters and also, if we've got an opinion, then other people in the class probably have. So, I mean, one person putting their thoughts usually kind of leads to other people speaking up about what they're thinking.
Dorothy Browne, September 2002

Text box 4.11 Student-interview quotations, September 2002

A few M&L interview-students know of the US unit while some business interview-students know of 'Business Methods'. Half know of skills development in the Spiral

Induction, three talk of skills development within units and several speak favourably of 'Study Assistance'. Most worrying is Jenny's heartfelt cry 'what does the University of Wessex expect of me?'

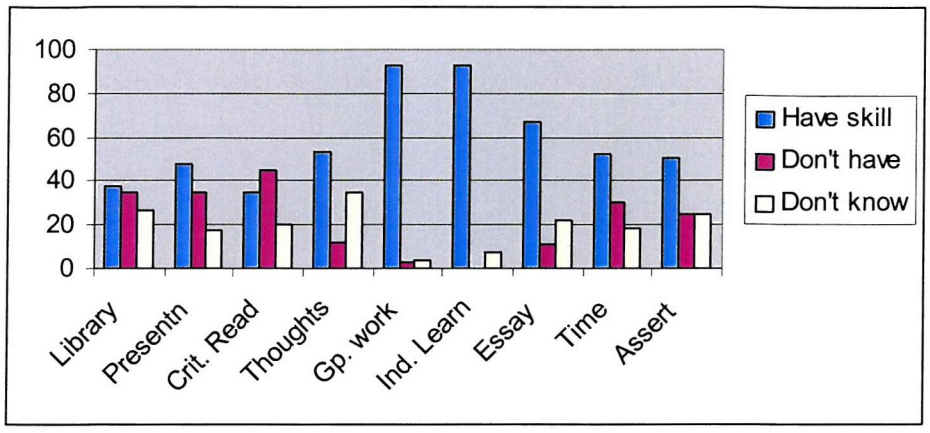


Figure 4.12 Questionnaire-respondents' perceptions of their transferable skills: September 2002

Tutors expect students to be weak in many transferable skills, although not group-work. Their expectations differ markedly from students' over assertiveness, where several do not think this to be important, structured essay writing where they argue students believe they possess the skill (which is correct) but actually don't, and independent learning, where there is a major divergence.

Mature students' skills are alluded to in the text boxes above. Some believe they transfer skills from work to learning e.g. teamwork and organisational but, like school leavers, not all possess time management skills. Due to long absences from formal education, or leaving school with minimal qualifications, they are also often weak in key/transferable skills such as IT, library usage, essay writing and critical thinking, which tutors also acknowledge.

4.8.2 Student and staff key skills experiences

In January and May, students were asked to identify how far key skills had developed. Appendix 4.12 presents January data and Appendix 4.13 May data.

By January, communication skills have developed. Maths/stats have developed but mainly for business students, with US not yet covering this. M&L students reinforce this, arguing they do not need these skills; also 20% of questionnaire-respondents still need this developing compared with 10% for other key skills. IT skills have declined, since pre-Christmas is merely an introduction, with the difference between interview-students and questionnaire-respondents perhaps explained by more mature interview-students. More females need maths/stats development but believe they have developed communication skills. Much smaller percentages of telephone-interviewees believed their IT and maths/stats skills had progressed, although all cited improved communication skills. Staff experiences largely confirm student ones.

By May a different picture emerges. Students believe maths/stats and communication skills have developed significantly, although some M&L students still believe the latter need developing. Most questionnaire-respondents and interview-students believe IT skills have improved, but a large minority of the latter do not; due to the small interview sample this is probably not significant. Staff experiences largely confirm student ones.

Table 4.23 summarises questionnaire-respondents' perceptions of key skills development.

Skill / development	Percentage of respondents having skill September 02	Percentage of respondents believing skill development January 2003	Percentage of respondents believing skill development May 2003
IT	70	51	77
Maths / Stats	55	57	83
Communications	70	76	89

Table 4.23 Questionnaire students' perceived Level 1 key skills development January and May 2003

Computers and software packages, because I use it like every day I am at university. I can just click on stuff now that I was like wow! This is great...so I can use other stuff like PowerPoint, Excel and that, and I can merge all the different things on the computer and software and all that, whereas before there was no way I would have been able to do that.
Oliver Cooper, May 2003

I think I've got better in every presentation that I've done...I've got more confident in sort of like speaking...I've learnt to slow down a lot more.
Nick Barr, May 2003

Text box 4.12 Interview student quotations, May 2003

4.8.3 Student and staff transferable skills experiences

Appendices 4.14 and 4.15 present student and staff transferable skills experiences for January and May. In January, students believe all skills are developing but critical reading and time-management have the lowest percentages perceiving development. Many still need help with these and structured essay/report writing. Library skills, presentations, group-work and independent learning are the skills students believe have developed most. Some telephone-interviewees' lack of skills development is linked to early departures; M&L students acknowledge only qualified support for the US unit. There are no substantial age, gender or course differences.

Staff perceptions differ, partially, from students', suggesting possible mismatches. They agree students are weak at critical reading (developed mainly at Levels 2&3), structured essay writing and time-management, but also identify research skills, putting forward thoughts in class and independent learning as weak. They support student assertions concerning improvements in library usage, presentations, and group-work.

By May, students believe their skills have further developed with library, presentations, group-work, time-management, assertiveness and inter-personal skills all having high proportions identifying improvements. Lower percentages perceive skills development in critical reading and independent learning. Skills most identified as needing further help are critical reading, independent learning, structured essay writing and time-management. There are no substantial course, gender or age differences.

Comparing January and May, critical reading remains an issue for students but they believe their time-management skills have developed. Most skills identified as needing further development in January remain so with only essay writing improving, probably through more submissions and feedback by May. The skills in which students thought they were strongest in January remain so in May.

Figure 4.13 compares questionnaire-respondents' perceived skills September, with subsequent perceived developments, January and May. Students believe there are developments in almost all skills except group work, where the percentage thinking this skill has developed declines by January but increases by May, and independent learning skills where a January decline is followed by a May increase, which still is lower than the initial percentage believing they have this skill.

By May, staff identify presentation skills, putting forward thoughts in class, group-work, assertiveness and inter-personal skills as main development areas. These largely coincide with January perceptions but differ in several areas from student perceptions, namely library skills and time-management, where staff think students are still weak, and assertiveness, where they think students are better than do the students. In other areas, staff still identify student weaknesses that, at times, coincide with skills where students believe they need more help.

I'm not sure they are effective users of the library; they can make a presentation. Read an article critically, not sure about it; put forward your thoughts, yes, your or their thoughts, yes they are better, they do but I would like to. I believe they can do more but I am not convinced a skills unit would do it.
Matt Taylor, May 2003

Work effectively in a group or individually: again we try to encourage them to work in groups but it's not formally assessed so it's difficult to say whether they have improved in that respect or not. Write a well structured essay or report, the two units that I run at Level 1, the first unit has a written component, the second one doesn't, so or not in terms of an essay so it's hard to say whether that's improved. Independent learner, like I said at Level 1 again you hope without actually giving them perhaps the skills to do at this time. In terms of have I encouraged them to use it probably not, you just assume and hope that they will develop it, you are too concerned with teaching them the subjects.
Paul Naylor, May 2003

Text box 4.13 Staff perceptions of students' skills development

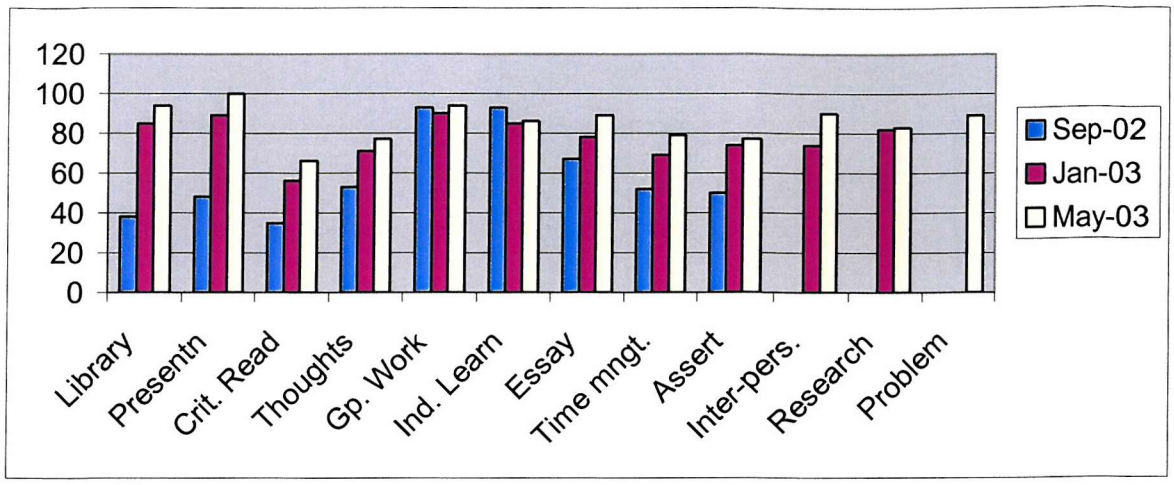


Figure 4.13 Comparison of perceived initial skills (September 2002) and developed skills (January and May 2003), percentages of questionnaire-respondents

4.8.4 Competing skills development models

For M&L students, US is the vehicle for skills development with other unit leaders assuming skills are developed in this and, at times, seeing skills as low priority compared with subject knowledge. There is limited contact between the US and other unit leaders, partly through unitisation; hence students are left to transfer skills between units, suggesting minimal staff emphasis on developing transfer skills. The US unit also suffers poor student attendance, many thinking they possess these skills, and 20%, claims Peter, seeing it as a waste of time. Only in May do students admit it has been useful. James and Suzi, who teach on M&L and business units, argue M&L students need US since they are less academically-minded and committed, and have less skills. Suzi argues skills development within other units is hard; hence a separate US unit is needed.

Matt, however, says a discrete skills unit does not work and skills are best developed within units. In business courses, Business Methods develops key skills with other Level 1 units reinforcing these and developing transferable skills. Because unitisation causes unit leaders to work separately, Matt uses his Level 1 unit to sweep up skills not covered elsewhere.

Staff perceive skills development on M&L and Business courses as essential to Level 1 survival but students disagree often believing, by Christmas, they possess most skills to survive. Mark argues skills development is a Level 1 intervention strategy to help new entrants learn how to be students, with feedback to students and course adjustments to match their expectations, the means to achieve this.

Level 1 tutors do not prioritise analytical skills, which are seen as for Level 2; this is consistent with the gentle introduction model. Staff also argue assessment is counter-productive, including that for skills, since students leave assignments until the last minute, then panic, neglect all else and adopt surface learning approaches.

I think mature students are coming to year 1 with a higher level of skills and they develop them more, to a higher level, they actually on a spectrum progress even further.....but the students who are not mature come in at a lower level and they don't progress as far out either.
Mark Alexander, May 2003

The business ...groups are much higher skills developed than the sports groups, they work harder...probably came in with better skills. They are much more varied and they look at their assessment and they see what's required and work at it. The M&L students have a lower level of skills and quite often don't see the benefits to themselves of developing themselves and resist unless it's a test in class or something they resist being helped; it has to be really, really course specific. That's quite difficult for them, they're very different so I would think they need their skills unit running alongside, definitely to pick up on those areas but very difficult to do it in seminars with them.
Suzi Bowyer, January 2003

Yes a big development in just general skills everyday, yes but they keep on developing, they are developing every day...I keep learning new things that I think back, I think back next week, and I think oh God I didn't realise I could do that you know, it doesn't quite sink in until you really think about it
Barry Michaels, May 2003

Text box 4.14 Staff and student quotations, January and May 2003

Figure 4.14 presents the main sources of questionnaire-respondents' skill development with fellow-students the most important influence, suggesting that independent learning does take place.

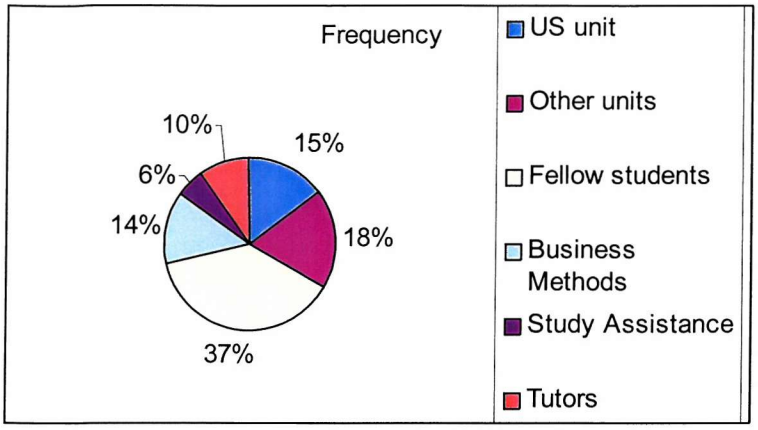


Figure 4.14 Skills development sources May 2003

4.9 Retention

4.9.1 Student perceptions and experiences

During induction, 95% of questionnaire-respondents are comfortable with their course, their tutors and UWBS; only three students are thinking of leaving citing experiences not conforming with expectations, course concerns and homesickness. Social integration is linked to retention; when asked if they have made friends, 75% say yes. By January, however, 100% enjoy being a student on their course decreasing to 93% by May 97% say they would still enrol on their course.

- *Missing the routine of home and old school but once settled in I should be fine*
- *Never lived away before from home or been on my own before*

Text box 4.15 Questionnaire-respondents' thoughts about leaving their course September 2002

Of the interview-students, by January Jenny has left and Ruth Young soon will. For others, thoughts of leaving are musings soon put aside e.g. Oliver, financially struggling, considers returning to his gap-year factory but decides he does not want a low income all his life. However, Dorothy comments that 'if you don't feel right you should get out of the course and start again'; for her, the second time around, the course does feel right.

Table 4.24 presents questionnaire-respondents' thoughts on which parts of being a student they enjoyed. Social life / student friendships are most important, followed by the course, living in a new city and independence from home. There are no gender or age differences for either time period. There are some declines in enjoyment of course and tutor.

Aspects of being a student enjoyed / percentage of respondents	Jan 03 Enjoyed %	Jan 03 Not enjoyed %	Jan 03 Not Applicable %	May 03 Enjoyed %	May 03 Not enjoyed %	May 03 Not Applicable %
Social life	100	0	0	100	0	0
New city	78	0	22	95	5	0
Fellow students' friendship	100	0	0	94	6	0
Hall of residence	65	2	33	92	8	0
Independence from home	82	0	18	96	4	0
Course	100	0	0	93	7	0
Tutors	100	0	0	86	14	0

Table 4.24 Aspects of being a student enjoyed January and May 2003

- *I am in Walditch (Hall) and £72 per week is your whole loan cheque. So I have to work and I'm still skint even though I work more than 35 hours per week*
- *Miss London life*
- *Financial hardship is main reason for problems*

Text box 4.16 Questionnaire-respondents' thoughts about leaving their course, January 2003

Text box 4.16 provides student thoughts about leaving.

Frequency of students going home / time period	Jan 03 Questionnaire-respondents %	May 03 Questionnaire-respondents %	Jan 03 Telephone-interviewees %
Every week	18	31	33.3
Every two weeks	25	10	33.3
Once a month	14	28	0
Less than one a month	43	31	33.3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 4.25 Frequency of going home January and May: questionnaire-respondents and telephone-interviewees.

Students were asked how often they go home as an indicator of social integration (Table 4.25). For January and May, on average, nearly 40% go home every week or fortnight confirming interview-students comments about weekend migrations. In contrast approximately 35% of students go home, on average, less than once per month.

In both periods, males are likely to go home more frequently than females, especially every week; however, by May they are also more likely than females to go home once per month or less, suggesting some confidence in breaking with home. There are no noticeable course or age differences, nor any differences between students living inside or outside a hall.

Those not enjoying being at UW were asked why. Some, happy here, nonetheless identified aspects of student life about which they had concerns (Table 4.26).

Aspect not liked / No of students per time period identifying issue	Jan 03 frequency	May 03 Frequency
Course content not what expected	4	2
Hard to manage financially	9	9
Don't like hall of residence	1	1
Tutors not helpful	0	3
Academic work too hard	3	3
Miss family / friends	0	2
Haven't made friends	0	1
Don't like Newtown	1	2
Other	1	0
Total	**19**	**23**

Table 4.26 Issues questionnaire-respondents don't like, January 2003 and May 2003

Finances are the major issue, which links to a previous picture of part-time working impacting on studying. Other factors are relatively insignificant e.g. course content not being as expected, reducing as students become more familiar with their course. Tutors appear slightly less helpful but this may be through staff promoting independent learning by encouraging students to take more responsibility. Many May negatives are from one student.

Students were asked whether they had thought of changing their course or leaving the University and, if so, what had stopped them (Table 4.27).

Question / response per time period	Jan 03 Yes %	Jan 03 No %	May 03 Yes %	May 03 No %
Have you seriously thought of changing your course within UW?	18	82	10	90
Have you seriously thought of leaving UW?	23	77	10	90

Table 4.27 Percentage of questionnaire-respondents considering changing course / leaving UW, January and May 2003

There are no major course, gender or age differences for either question for January or May. When asked what had stopped them undertaking either action, the dominant response in both periods is motivational i.e. a desire to prove to him/herself that s/he can compete the course.

- *support from friends and girl friend*
- *myself – I want to complete the course*
- *tried to persevere and continue*
- *not wanting to work*
- *parents and having nothing else better to do*

Text box 4.17 Reasons why questionnaire students did not leave, January 2003

Finally, students were asked to whom they would go if they had problems. In order of priority, these are as in Table 4.28 below:

Priority	Source of help
1	Parents
2	Fellow students
3	Course leader
4	Unit tutors
5	Student Services
6	SSN tutor

Table 4.28 Sources of student perceived help by order of priority, January 2003

For telephone-interviewees, over half left around Christmas time; however any time between induction and just after Christmas appears high-risk (Table 4.29).

Timing	Percentage of students leaving
3-4 weeks	29
5-8 weeks	14
Around Christmas	57
Total	**100**

Table 4.29 Timing of telephone-interviewees' withdrawal

The main reason for leaving is finding the course boring or not challenging (Figure 4.15).

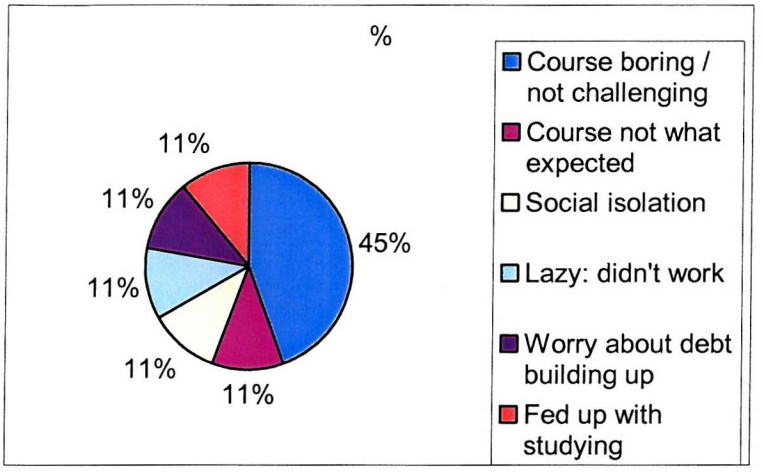


Figure 4.15 Reasons for student withdrawal

When asked if they would return to UW, 29% of telephone-interviewees said yes; however, 57% would consider returning to HE elsewhere and 43% had done so. 57% of students also viewed their experience at UW as positive. 71% of telephone-interviewees said they had made friends at UW and the same figures apply when asked if they felt part of UW and their course. For students answering affirmatively, the main reasons were helpful, receptive staff and good social life. Those answering negatively, cited an insufficiently challenging course.

- *Student life is over-rated*
- *No – it is great. Well done!*
- *The criteria for assignments are vague and tutors are little help so achieving a good mark is very much up to guess work in the first year and the tutors' reply is – 'well the first year doesn't count*
- *It's excellent*
- *been close to quitting numerous times due to other problems mainly money*

Text box 4.18 Questionnaire-respondents' final thoughts

4.9.2 Retention: tutors' perceptions

Tutors believe that student social integration is vital to retention with Mark perceiving attrition to be a consequence of social isolation and difficult academic work. However, for those transferring to another course, or leaving through deciding HE is not for them, some staff see this as a correct, brave decision. The latter decisions, they argue, may be linked to financial pressures through working long hours and/or because of poor personal financial management skills. Course leaders, especially Paul Naylor, feel under pressure through faculty requirements that attrition be minimised. In contrast, James argues that, if we offer people a chance to get more qualifications, rather than striving to achieve government targets and maximise funding, the faculty should be commended for keeping most Level 1 students.

Course size is often seen as linked to social integration with small courses offering better opportunities than large ones; however this is not always so, as shown by Paul Naylor's experiences with this year's cohort splitting into disparate small groups. Paul believes that, in spite of running open days, students' course expectations are often minimal and has decided he will discuss these, during induction week, with students who did not attend open days.

CHAPTER 5 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

Here, I analyse Chapter 4's data drawing on Stevenson et al's (1996, 1997, 1998) and Sander et al's (2000) work on expectations, my modified version of Biggs' (1999) Presage-Process-Product model, reproduced for convenience as Figure 5.1, and Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993, 1997) work on student retention. I use cluster analysis to group students who have similar characteristics and behaviour patterns to identify structures from the data generalities (Miles & Huberman 1994); this is consistent with Husserl's eidetic and transcendental reductions. I also develop thick description consistent with my hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and my ontological and epistemological positions. I then link my analysis to the national policy debate relating to widening access and the student learning experience, particularly transferable skills development and retention, to trace the connections between the policy debate, at the macro level, and my findings, at the micro level. In so doing I answer research questions 2 and 3. Appendices 5.1 to 5.9 provide evidence of my use of cluster analysis to group data while 5.10 provides evidence of QSR's N6 tree structure (Anon 2002b) that I had developed but subsequently abandoned; this was due to being swamped with excessive data generated by coding and recoding the nodes I had established.

Research Question 2

What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for their [students and staff] expectations and experiences?

Research Question 3

What are the implications, for the quality of first year student learning, of staff and student expectations and experiences, specifically of skills demands, and any divergences between them?

Text box 5.1 Research questions 2 and 3

5.2 The match of student and staff expectations and experiences and the implications of mismatches

> *Most teachers also acknowledge that the approaches students adopt are all too often more like surface approaches than deep approaches to learning.*
>
> Prosser and Trigwell (1994, 97)

Text box 5.2 Prosser and Trigwell (1994, 97)

Confirming Ramsden's (1992, p.126) findings that '*students often only have the slightest idea of what to expect*', many questionnaire-respondents enter UW claiming no predictive course or tutor expectations, although some expect a heavy, intellectually-demanding workload. James (2003) endorses the lack of expectations while James Keaton argues that since many UWBS students are first-generation in

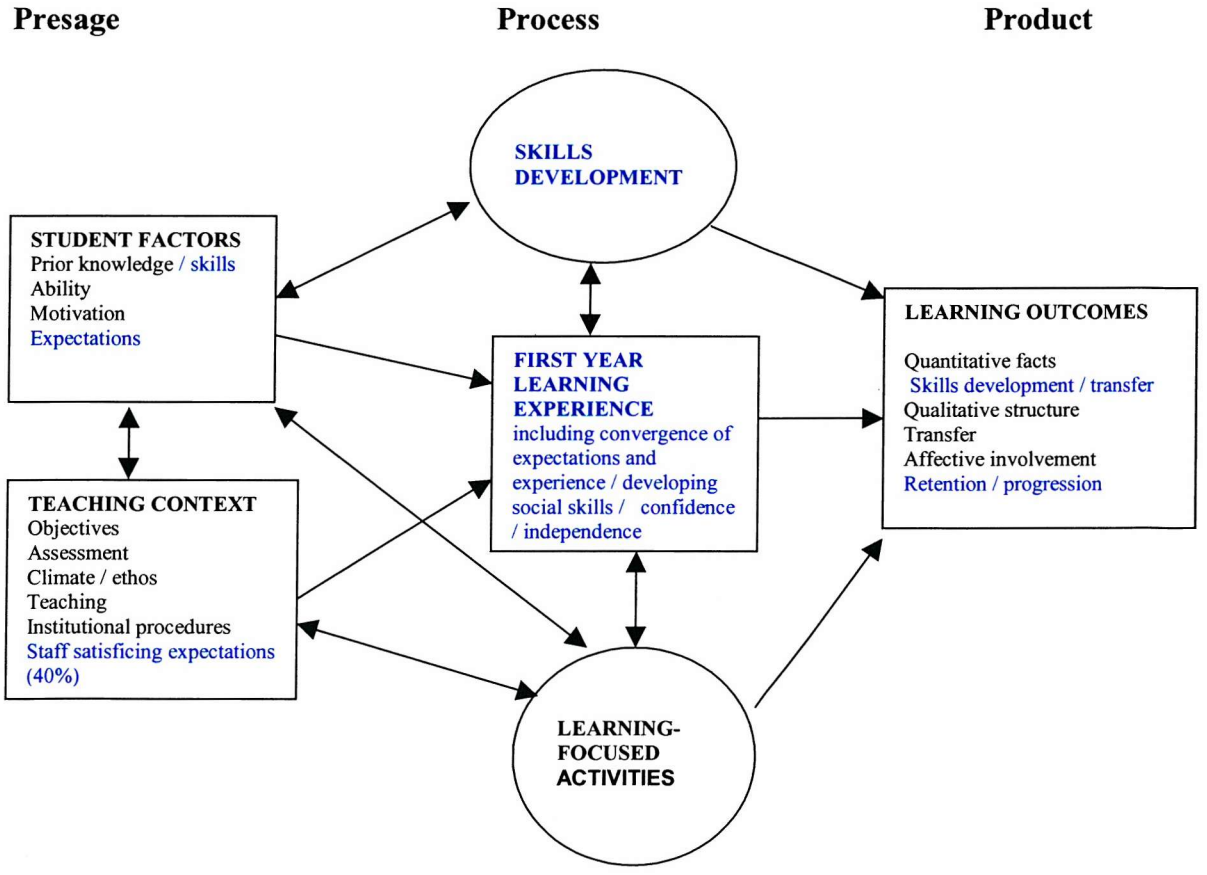


Figure 5.1 My version of Biggs' Presage-Process-Product Model (1999) (repeating Figure 2.4)

HE, they have little expectations of what it involves. However, it has been argued that the power relationship in administering questionnaires and interviewing means UWBS students may have been reluctant to reveal their true thoughts to me rather than lacking expectations (Foskett 2004); I have explained how I sought to redress this power imbalance in Chapter 3.7.

For students with expectations, most sources, and the resultant motives for choosing their course, are shared equally with staff. The major difference is that some staff think students choose UW because they cannot gain acceptance elsewhere, hence underestimating their abilities; in reality, students want to study at UW because of the courses it offers. Some tutors might argue that, as A-level points / Curriculum 2000 scores are believed to be effective indicators of final degree classifications, low A-level entrants are likely to be low degree-achievers (Bekhradnia 2002). However, a counter-argument is that widening participation, part of UW's 2004-08 strategy, which was specifically written to align with government policy articulated in *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003), is about affording opportunities for engagement with HE and adding value; so entry qualifications should, therefore, be less relevant. If the presage stage of the 3Ps model shows expectations divergences between Student Factors and Teaching Context, Level 1 tutors may, unwittingly, implement level one or two teaching strategies promoting surface learning, rather than a level three strategy promoting deep learning.

Although, initially, many students have no expectations of course or social life, subsequently most think they did have. For interviewees, our induction discussions probably helped shape these; for questionnaire-respondents, experiences in the first few weeks appear to have shaped expectations and, retrospectively, be perceived as induction-week expectations; this is consistent with Berman Brown (1998), Cook and Leckey (1999) and James (2003). This reinforces the need for an induction-week expectations audit as argued by Stevenson et al (ibid) since it would focus student minds on their new courses.

Coaldrake (2003) cites student expectations of professional academic staff while Alder, Milne and Stringer (2000) cite tutors as having perceptions of students possessing rigid expectations of the proper role of tutors and students, which

translates as didactic teaching and passive learning. With learning expectations, UWBS students emphasise the importance of enthusiastic knowledgeable tutors while UWBS tutor enthusiasm for helping students learn confirms this important expectations match. Tutors also adapt their units to meet student feedback and expectations as far as possible, subject to the constraints of validated courses. This adaptive-expectations model is a mix of tutors sharing students' predictive / normative / counter-normative expectations and then adjusting unit delivery as necessary during the year. It may partly explain why most students subsequently believe experiences match initial expectations. This confirms Universities UK (2001) research, even where initial expectations do not exist or are incorrect, as Booth (1997), Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) and May and Bousted (2003) have found.

Tutors believe their expectations of students are largely correct and my data confirms this through Tables 4.4 and 4.6, which is in contradiction of Martinez's (1995) findings for FE probably through the different cultures of the two sectors. For example, UWBS tutors confirm that students initially expect an intellectually challenging Level 1 with high workload yet subsequently underestimate the amount of work needed to succeed, confirming the THES/ICM 2003 poll regarding lack of student preparedness for HE (Jobbins and Leon 2003). This lack of preparedness is evidenced by student perceptions that Level 1 is dominated, at least pre-Christmas, by social integration; however, as Chapter 4.7 notes, it can also lead to staff underestimating students and hence reducing the Level 1 intellectual challenge, counteracting Bosker and Scheerens' (1997) emphasis on the importance of teachers having high student expectations.

Other UWBS tutor expectations are a lack of student motivation, which confirms Killen (1994), a desire to be spoon-fed information (Coaldrake 2003; Jobbins and Lipsett 2004) and poor class attendance, particularly of subjects studied previously, as other expectations. They argue that subsequent Level 1 experiences normally confirm these expectations.

There is a broad match between student and staff perceptions of lectures, both generally supporting these as appropriate and effective means to transmit knowledge. This suggests Biggs' level two tutor-centred teaching rather than level three student-

centred learning, to which several staff implicitly refer when contemplating using a problem-based learning (PBL) project immediately after induction. The perception of level two teaching is reinforced by some tutors' beliefs that Level 1 is for bringing students 'up to speed' in knowledge and skills acquisition so there is a common Level 2 starting point. However, if Level 1 is about developing independent learning skills then student-centred learning should be central to it, although Johnson (2001) argues a Year 1 reproducing orientation resulting in surface learning approaches is more likely. Student feedback suggests this engagement occurs more in seminars which provide reinforcing and discursive functions; however, the fact that perhaps one-third of lectures are essentially information-transmission rather than engaging students as Gibbs (1992) argues, indicates Level 1 independent-learning skills will not develop widely.

Ironically, staff acknowledge that students lack these skills while, by May, 35 percent of students assert they need more help. Hence an ambiguity exists between tutors telling students to read around their subjects, expecting them to demonstrate independent learning skills and, says Dorothy Browne, telling them '*you are on a degree course now*' and yet, simultaneously, acknowledging students lack these skills, and saying that Level 1 doesn't count and they only need 40% to pass.

As noted in Chapter 4.4, by May, nearly all students state they would come to UW if starting again, suggesting satisfactory experiences, while almost all confirm their experiences are the same as, or better than, their expectations. This is confirmed at the Product stage of the 3Ps model, by end-of-Level 1 students perceiving affective engagement, knowledge and skills acquisition and the positive outcomes of retention and progression.

5.3 The mature student learning experience

Mature students' experiences are not enormously different from those of students under 21 years. However, they are sufficient different to justify being treated as a separate group – *Mature* - for my analysis. This decision is reinforced by Dearing's (1997) argument that it is important to encourage their participation in HE, and the 2003 White Paper's argument (DfES 2003, 67) of the need for 'good-quality and

accessible second-chance routes into HE for those who missed out when they were younger'.

> *In contrast, non-traditional students, who are fiercely proud of their second chance to get a higher education, are enthusiastic and a delight to teach. They sometimes come close to threatening their younger and more frivolous comrades. The non-traditional student is often the teacher's best ally when it comes to keeping a stable and active learning environment.*
>
> Clements (2004, 23)

Text box 5.3 Experiences of non-traditional [mature] students

One would expect mature students, having more life-experience than school-leavers, to be confident in their new HE environment and adapt quickly. In reality, their fear that younger students will think them old creates a significant psychological barrier making initial integration difficult for many, confirming Wilson (1997). It also reinforces Osbourne et al (2001) and Bamber and Tett's (2001) argument concerning mature students' self-perceived right to participate in HE. Much has been written of the need for early integration to aid retention but little has been written on mature students' initial adjustment problems. Added to this is that mature students believe they are at UW to study, often having left a well-paid job, albeit seeing it as a dead-end long-term. Having previously been socially active, they do not see this as the essential part of being a student and often have a social life outside the University, with some also in a long-term relationship. Most do not live in halls and also work part-time, often through financial pressures (PUSH 1994, Osbourne 2001) reducing potential socialising time even further (McGivney 1996). The replacement of student grants by tuition fees, as part of the means to fund an expansion of HE in England and Wales, has further contributed to the financial pressures mature students and school leavers find themselves under even when they are exempted fees. This is a direct consequence of the 36 percent reduction in funding per student in HE between 1989-1997 (DfES 2003).

However, the mature students' views of university social life poses integration problems, since a majority of students live in halls and perceive social life as a fundamental part of Level 1. Tracing the development of mature student integration, it is only after Christmas, when student group-work becomes an important part of the

learning process, that mature students such as Barry Michaels and Nick Barr really engage with their younger peers (Wilson 1997). This suggests the induction week, and the five-week spiral induction, are less effective in promoting integration than they could be, and that group-work needs to be used sooner as an integrating, as well as a learning, mechanism; Braxton et al (2000) concur with this. For mature students with sports interests e.g. Ian Roach and Ann Townsend, this is a major compensation and, in Ian's case, since his sport is team-based, aids integration. The worst-case scenario, exemplified by Jenny Rivers and Ruth Young, is of mature students becoming so isolated that, for whatever reasons, they leave, becoming part of the *Leavers* group in my emerging taxonomy [the Learning Outcomes Stage of the 3Ps model]. Appendix 4.8 presents their case studies.

It is ironical that while, generally, mature students worry about integrating, younger students respect them for their maturity, their willingness to question tutors if they don't understand anything, their hard work and their preparedness in tutorials. Communicating this to mature students would help them integrate more quickly. However, this respect is qualified because of peer-student and staff perceptions that mature students can initially be stuck in their ways, seeing only one way of doing things, normally learned at work, and perceiving little value in theories. Most mature students do not show off their previous knowledge or give examples from work in class, rather wishing to blend in [Student Factors in the Presage Stage]. This is a pity since such experiences can reinforce the vocationalism that students want in a course, and put more emphasis on student-centred learning. However, when mature students go off at a tangent, then other students resent this suggesting that the tutor needs to be an effective classroom / learning manager as part of promoting level three learning.

Mark Alexander specifically uses mature students in this way [the Teaching Context in the 3Ps model]. Although at times over-enthusing about their capability as 'beacons by which to navigate' he echoes Clements (2004) above, using the best ones to influence the class's expectations and behaviour and set standards for the work to be undertaken; Ann Townsend confirms that this happens. In Chapter 4, I classified mature students under three main categories, potential natural leaders or 'beacons', self-contained with outside lives, and over-dominating, although

accepting these categories may overlap. The first and the third categories present the challenges for tutors since the second category will work and seek strategic alliances with non-mature workers. Managing the potential natural leader can be very effective as Mark indicates in his May interview, using the ex-professional cricketer to motivate the rest of the class and also changing the ex-pro from unmotivated to enthusiastic second-in-command. Potentially, this could be a dangerous strategy but seems to have worked in Mark's case.

Confirming Wilson's (1997) argument that mature students are not a homogenous group, the converse side of this is mature students who have had considerable work responsibility. For example, Barry was an area manager, and so could fill this role, yet deliberately chooses to put aside his experiences and become a back-of-the-classroom ordinary student. Barry talks of putting on a managerial public persona at work that he laid aside when not working, which he has also chosen to do as a student. Bringing such mature students into the learning experience as fully participating members poses challenges for a tutor in giving them confidence to speak out and show their input is valued. Barry may be over-sensitive at times but his reaction to being put down by a stressed tutor with marital problems, by boycotting the class for a month, shows even mature students have fragile confidences and are easily discouraged. This reinforces McGivney (1996) who cites dissatisfaction with the classroom experience as a reason for withdrawal.

The hardest category for tutors to manage is the over-dominating, who throw their weight about, since they may bully peers and tutors. In the former case, a clash between Gerry, the former market-trader, and Mohammed Hassan appears to have been a conflict developing not from racial issues, but from Gerry trying to be the natural leader of the group, boasting of his skills and experiences and, in so-doing, alienating students and Matt Taylor, the course leader. Interpreting this in the context of the 3Ps model, and my own experiences in HE, suggests a lack of prior knowledge of HE and false expectations by Gerry, a lack of inter-personal skills not helped by a previous career based on verbally assaulting potential customers, yet a desire to integrate, albeit as leader, over-confidence in his own ability and probably insecurity in what he perceives as the threatening environment of HE, which the former seeks to compensate for. Certainly, these students make the tutors' lives difficult, often

requiring them to ask such students not to answer every question or to speak all the time. They are also potential *Leavers* since, once the initial HE enthusiasm bubble has burst, they lose interest and start missing classes and work, as in Gerry's case.

The other type of over-dominating mature student bullies the tutor and is an extreme example of those Wright and O'Neill (2002) cite. Both James Keaton and Paul Naylor suffer this from a mature female student with young children who wanted specialist treatment to the extent of her own class test fitted in around a pre-booked holiday and her own specially written assignment separate from other students' (c.f. May and Bousted 2003); she also used aggressive e-mails as a bullying weapon. Managing such an adult is difficult, especially as students, paying fees, increasingly perceive themselves as customers, while mature students are likely to judge their learning experience against their previous work experiences. Since many mature students' decisions to join HE are taken just before the new academic year starts, and because they have been away from education for some time, expectations are often incorrect. In seeing themselves as 'special' with additional rights arising from maturity, such students make the learning experience more demanding for tutors, difficult and stressful than is necessary. Tutors try to manage the student's expectations either by standing firm to show her who is in charge, in the case of James, or by addressing her concerns e.g. Paul baby-sitting her children while she took her test. In these cases, the tutor's role is as much short-term damage-limitation as it is managing an effective learning experience. Such mature students tend also to keep to themselves mainly with most of their lives lived away from the course.

Mature students are aware of their ability to transfer skills from their previous work to their new learning environment, such as teamwork, communications, maths (in fact arithmetic), time-management and inter-personal skills. This is important since the skills literature and government policy focus on transferring graduate skills from the learning environment into the workplace (Bridges 1994, Assiter 1995, Shepherd 2000). Only very limitedly does it consider mature students transferring skills from the workplace into HE e.g. Sewell (2000), yet my research has found that mature students believe this happens. Also, interestingly, mature students sometime suppress these skills to integrate with their younger peers. Apart from some mature students having better time-management skills than younger students, there is no evidence

that mature students adopt different approaches to learning than younger students, although I had thought they might generally have deeper approaches to learning.

N.	*So as a mature student, with lots of work experience, is there anything that you have brought from your [previous work] experience into your being a student this year?*
Barry	*Diplomacy*
N.	*Biting your lip when people rub you up the wrong way?*
Barry	*Yes, in group-work being diplomatic*
N.	*Right*
Barry	*Knowing when to open your mouth and keeping it closed (laughing) between bickering females maybe or that, nineteen year old girls arguing between themselves but also I yes, I think being helpful and also just generally bonding people together just lately during group work and things.*

Text box 5.4 Transferring previously acquired skills from the workplace to the classroom. Interview with Barry Michaels, May 2003

The National Audit Office has argued however, that taking more mature students without formal qualifications might lead to skills gaps by these students; this parallels Sir Howard Newby's argument that new modular A levels are creating gaps in students' knowledge when they arrive at university (Swain 2002).

A mixed picture emerges, therefore, from the above. The majority of mature students are anxious to integrate with their peers. It may well take them longer to do this than younger students but by Easter most have integrated well, overcoming their own self-perceived age barriers; as Barry argued '*the issue, yes it is an issue, the issue was with me'!* He finds that HE has had a major transformative effect on him, confirming Walters (2000). In the extreme cases (Miles and Huberman 1994), some have alienated their peers and their attendance drops away, as with Gerry, or in the worst cases they leave, as with Jenny and Ruth (Bamber and Tett 2001, Lewis 2003). For tutors the challenge is to integrate mature students, who may have quite fragile egos, and to draw on their experiences and skills transferred into HE, while recognising that non-mature students have equal rights.

5.4 Motivation

> *Good behaviour is on the decline in lectures. Students are less punctual and more of them eat in class, to give but two examples. Large classes can be noisy as the air fills with chatter – which comes almost exclusively from students who have arrived directly from school. ...Tutorials provide another forum for bad behaviour; indeed, this is where most of the negative elements of a student's behaviour become apparent. ... I asked a student why he and his colleagues were so lackadaisical. He said 'it's not cool to work'.*
>
> Clements (2004, 23)

Text box 5.5 One academic's perceptions of student motivation

Here, staff expectations differ particularly from those of students with tutors perceiving students as often lacking motivation to learn; this is part of the Student Factors of the 3Ps model. It suggests Biggs' level one teaching with tutors seeing motivation as an innate concept of varying ability in different students, rather than developing from level three learning. To be motivational, learning needs to be of value to the learner with an expectation of success. However, as discussed below, the UW assessment regime only partially satisfies the former requirement. So, students perceive Level 1 to be of limited value, while aspects of Level 1 teaching, promoting surface approaches to learning, may inhibit expectations of success. Additionally, many students come from a 6th Form/FE college background, i.e. the Presage stage where, through the need for high student pass-rates, tutor-driven spoon-feeding and hence surface learning, is the norm. Hence, to the extent that level one or two teaching occurs in UWBS, it reinforces surface approaches to learning that students bring with them. This supports Cook and Leckey (1999) who found that students retain previous study habits into their first year at university.

Allied to this is the issue of many students gaining almost total freedom for the first time. As with the school-children in Golding's *The Lord of the Flies,* for some, such freedom can dominate all else, resulting in staying up all night, regularly partying and getting drunk, studying limitedly and setting one's own agenda; this may or may not include class attendance that is, itself, a good test of student motivation. Indeed, Johnson (1996) has argued that social integration takes priority over academic integration at Year 1. In extremis, I have identified this group as the *Socialisers.* Following Biggs (ibid), failure to attend classes is a consequence of level one

teaching and there is some evidence of this at Level 1. Students admit that they are not working hard enough, including using the library between classes, rather often returning to halls to catch up on sleep due to regular very late nights, or shopping. However, as Suzi Bowyer argues, students are given reading but don't have assignments to do for the first eight weeks so '*they've already got them disillusioned, right when it matters*' because they are not independent learners.

Nonetheless, without denying students' total rights to intellectually stimulating learning and teaching, this over-simplifies since the other side of the equation is that students also have obligations. A lack of student motivation may arise from studying not being seen as cool, but some students bringing wrong or no expectations of HE with them, or perceiving themselves as lacking the necessary skills to succeed in HE, may also be easily de-motivated. This is particularly the risk with first generation HE students, many of whom attend UW in part as a consequence of the Government's commitment to widening participation and the resultant increase in access opportunities. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, motivation is also linked to expectations of future success. If students come to HE having not achieved high grades in FE this will colour their subsequent expectations.

Biggs (1999) talks of coursework deadlines and attendance monitoring as evidence of a level one learning environment, both of which UWBS employs. Indeed it sees both as indicative of obligations facing students both in HE and at subsequent work, as well as being the only pragmatic way to manage 4000 students p.a. Matt Taylor argued in January, citing student feedback to a colleague, that students don't attend because no one tells them off, although this is incorrect. Clearly, the student mindset is still school, rather than HE-based, forcing the faculty to use attendance monitoring and follow-up letters, which, in turn, may indeed reinforce level one learning. Hence students face a dilemma between accepting the need to study on the one hand, since that is why they are at university i.e. motivation yet, on the other hand, enjoying the freedom to do as they want, particularly integrating socially. Holman (1995), discussing skills development, talks of the need for learning contracts to make explicit to each party their rights and obligations. Some HEIs use these widely partly because of their motivational impact, albeit in a regulatory framework rather than an inspirational fashion.

By the end of Level 1, students believe they have gained key and many transferable skills, knowledge and personal confidence, and look forward to Level 2 challenges, which relate to the expectations side of motivation (Feather 1982). In part, this may be attributable to the use of unit learning outcomes, and the alignment of assessments to these, which faculty students state they are aware of and which happen. This move to criterion-referenced assessments is probably a significant factor promoting students' intrinsic motivation. On the extrinsic motivation side, by the end of Level 1, students know that Level 2 contributes to their degree classification and, although Biggs argues this encourages surface learning, I believe end-of-Level 1 student beliefs, identified above, more than compensate for this.

What is also clear during Level 1 is that a group of students – the *Workers* - such as Oliver Cooper and Nick Barr, are extrinsically driven by achievement motivation, but also there is intrinsic motivation in enjoying learning for its own sake (Deci and Ryan 1991). However, some staff believe other students are in denial, deluding themselves that they are working hard enough; certainly the evidence from David Andrews and Mohammed Hassan, both socialisers, supports this.

At Levels 2 and 3, external examiner feedback, QAA subject reviews / developmental engagements, student feedback etc clearly suggest that level three learning takes place with the student at the centre of the process. However, at Level 1, this seems to be occurring in pockets but not fully across the courses considered. Indeed, Paul Naylor wonders if, in their anxiety to help students pass, staff spoon-feed them too much, which is also demotivating. Tutors also believe students under-estimate transition-to-HE difficulties, which combines with the lack of independent learning skills that are the means of translating motivation into practice. This suggests that staff should build expectations- and skills-bridges to permit a smoother transition and to develop student confidence, which they also perceive to be lacking. Better-prepared students are then likely to be better-motivated students.

5.5 The Level 1 intellectual challenge

As discussed above, where students do have initial expectations, they are for an intellectually challenging course with a heavy workload. Since they calibrate their

The overall pass mark on all units of study to which these Regulations apply shall be 40%. The pass mark in each mode of assessment shall be 35%, but variations may be approved by validation panels.

University of Wessex (2002c, M3)

Text box 5.6 University of Wessex Assessment Regulations

expectations against previous studies, especially A levels, it is not surprising that, on joining UW, they anticipate the next level of their intellectual development to be more demanding. However, in October, they soon encounter factors that, for many, change their expectations. These factors are UW assessment regulations and the fact that only Levels 2 and 3 contribute to degree classifications.

The innocuous sentences in Text box 5.6 have proved a factor undermining the motivation of a majority of Level 1 students. They are further reinforced by definitive course documents, and by implicit UW assumptions, based on sector-wide practice, which exclude Level 1 results from contributing to degree classifications. Students cite staff as soon telling them '*Level 1 doesn't count*'. Add to this that some units have been studied previously so, in student eyes, do not merit further serious study, and the assessment regulations allowing failed units to be attempted twice more, and we find high initial expectations soon become downgraded to less demanding studying experiences. In the light of Ramsden's (1992, p99) argument that intellectual challenge is a key characteristic of effective teaching and learning, while another is 'independence, control and active engagement' i.e. independent learning then, unless level three learning occurs, UW regulations will reinforce surface approaches to learning. This does not mean, however, that all students will always adopt surface approaches to learning.

Also, in the period until Christmas, most students have very few assessments to complete which reinforces their new perceptions that Level 1 doesn't matter. Students who leave during Level 1 – the *Leavers* – cite the lack of total engagement with their course as contributing to it being boring or not as expected. I return to this below. For students who do not leave, a key defence of their position, apart from discouraging regulations, is that the Level 1 challenge is not just intellectual but also

establishing themselves in a new environment with new peers and perhaps part-time work. This echoes Tinto and is, as discussed previously, reinforced by some tutors' perceptions of Level 1 as gentle introduction.

By Christmas, on some courses, assignment hand-in bunching means students find themselves facing a heavy, stressful and concentrated workload not previously anticipated fully, which challenges them intellectually and organisationally. Chapter 2.3 discussed reflection as a key part of level three learning yet the tendency of many students to leave assignments until the last minute means there is no time for reflection. For some, lack of motivation to work or poor time-management skills are undoubtedly causes of the ensuing stress but others argue such stress is a useful simulation of the work environment, or that they work better under extreme pressure e.g. Dorothy Browne, in effect becoming strategic learners.

Also by Christmas, units not previously studied, students admit, now cause them significant and demanding workloads. This step-up continues post-Christmas and is confirmed by the declining number of students thinking their peers treat Level 1 as mainly fun/social life. However, while some – the Workers - seek to achieve the best results they can, for substantial numbers the 40% pass-mark, and non-contribution of Level 1 lead to the adoption of a minimalist studying strategy, driven by summative assessments which confirms Biggs (1999), and mark-satisficing rather than mark-maximising. Hence, even though students confirm that assessments are aligned with learning outcomes [Biggs' positive backwash], which helps offset surface approaches to learning, studying driven mainly by bunched assessments is not motivating (Maclallan 2001), promotes surface learning and when the assessment is driven by mark-satisficing the tendency to surface learning is even stronger (Ramsden 1992).

Students receive formative assessment feedback and UW's Academic Framework emphasises the importance of this. However, as school-leaver entrants' comments about mature students undertaking these indicate, many students disregard formative assessments, concentrating only on summative. It is interesting that, even in May, nearly all students admit that they would have worked harder had some Level 1

marks contributed to their degree classification, with many supporting the best two carrying forward.

As already discussed, staff believe lack of student motivation is a real issue inhibiting intellectual challenge. As one academic noted, tutors challenge students but the latter often don't wish to take up the challenge as demonstrated by unwillingness to read round the subject, poor class attendance or even disinterest; however, not all staff think this, nor about all students. Moreover, intellectual skills that students may lack, limiting their ability to take up the challenge, are discussed below. Tutors accept the impacts of part-time work and social life on the time for student learning, and accept the importance of the former, if not taken to excess, in developing well-rounded graduates. They also argue that group-dynamics plays a key role in intellectual development, especially if mature students are members.

What emerges from my research, therefore, are competing models of Level 1 challenge for which, in the case of the first and third models, assessment regulations reduce the effectiveness. I have alluded to these in Chapter 4.6, *Staff expectations and experiences*, but now develop them further.

> *Given this [less restrictive social and educational environment of university; having to work part-time] students may be more likely to do what is necessary to pass, but not to extend themselves in their first year at university. The new freedom factor could encourage a surface approach to learning'.*
>
> Johnston 2001,180.

Text box 5.7 Johnson (2001)

The first model is that Level 1 is essentially about intellectual challenge with demanding workload and a step-up from FE work, possibly reinforced by long class-contact hours, which mature students expect, mirroring the normal working week, although this could not be resourced. This model emerges from those students who have course expectations and appears mainly with interview students, probably through the limitations of questionnaires. It also encompasses developing existing, and acquiring new, key/transferable skills. Some staff e.g. Mark Alexander and Peter Matthews, endorse variations of this model arguing for an early challenging PBL

assignment although not maintained throughout Level 1, while Matt Taylor says it would also address students' perceptions that Level 1 is fragmented, which he denies. The intellectual challenge model emerges particularly from the group I have identified as the *Workers* and also from mature students – the *Mature*. Other tutors and students thought this approach would increase attrition. This model should, if developed properly, promote Biggs' level three learning and motivation.

At the other extreme is the socialising model. This emerges essentially from the *Socialisers* group e.g. David Andrews, Dorothy Browne, Mohammed Hassan, and some students who fail to complete Level 1 – the *Leavers*. David and Mohammed argue that adjusting to living away from home, and having to make new friends, are major challenges in their own right. In the extreme case of Mohammed, Level 1 is seen just as a year for '*relaxing and doing new things*'; I believe Mohammed to be a classic case of a student deluding himself rather than just having wrong expectations. Although David and Dorothy acknowledge the dominance of social life at least they feel guilty about not working as hard as they know they should. No staff support this model, which would only promote level one or two learning, although they do acknowledge the importance of a moderate social/sports life and of developing well-rounded graduates; where it operates it is self-imposed by individual students with erroneous expectations and subsequent perceptions.

Between the first two models is the first-year experience model; this argues that the Level 1 challenge lies not just in studying, although this is important and exists when students encounter new units, but also in the non-academic areas of developing independent living and learning skills, utilising time-management skills, developing appropriate course expectations, especially regarding assignments, working part-time and integrating socially; what Mark Alexander calls '*learning how to be students almost*'. Ann Townsend argues that Level 1 sets standards for students so that they know what to expect at Level 2, when marks do contribute to their degree whereas, when they first joined their course, they had no ideas what their tutors expected of them. In this sense, the Level 1 challenge is one of developing realistic expectations for future levels of the course so that one can contribute effectively to one's degree classification. It promotes mainly level two learning with some level three learning.

Level 1 also poses real challenges of social integration, something that worries many students during induction. Several argue that this adjustment process is a very real one and that if one had to concentrate on securing good grades for one's degree, more students would probably drop out. The fact that Level 1 does not count to the final degree classification gives students a margin of comfort as well as de-motivating them.

Hence, a large majority of students argue that tutors have got Level 1 about right and any more vigorous intellectual challenge, or heavier workload, might encourage higher student attrition than currently exists; hence tutors should not push them harder intellectually. This is consistent with Suzi Bowyer's and Matt Taylor's argument that Level 1 is a gentle lead-in year or catch-up year in which entrants learn how to become students, acquire relevant skills for Levels 2 and 3 and where practical links between subjects and the business world are built up in units. However, if taken too far, it could reinforce UW staff perceptions of its students as academically weak (Collins and Lim 2002), making Level 1 too undemanding. James Keaton supports the catch-up year model arguing that, as part of widening participation, UWBS takes students who, previously, would never have thought of going to university; hence we need to encourage them to stay i.e. a gentle approach, rather than giving them reasons why they might leave i.e. a harsh approach such as a big PBL project at beginning of Level 1.

The first-year experience model is the one that most accurately portrays the Level 1 experience at UWBS during 2002-03. The emergence from my research of the first-year experience model explains why, in my modified 3Ps model, the First Year Learning Experience emerges as a new box in the process section.

5.6 The student work-life balance

As noted above, students at UWBS, and elsewhere, have a difficult balancing act between the varying academic demands of their course, the desire for an active social/sports life, possibly a part-time job that may be full-time in all but name, relationships and all the other competing demands of life. Most students therefore live strategically as a coping mechanism but lack the time-management and

independent learning skills necessary to do this effectively; as discussed previously, some academic staff also think they lack the motivation. This links Student Factors with Learning-focused Activities in Biggs' original 3Ps model and also with the First-year Learning Experience in my version of Biggs' model.

Because Level 1 students' time-management skills are often weak this suggests a skewing, rather than a balancing of time allocation, may be the reality for many. They think strategically regarding group-work members while Nick Barr will not travel from Portsmouth for just one class in a day nor for classes where the tutor relies too heavily on the learning pack in class (Chapter 4.7.2). Matt Taylor argues that students must, in reality, be effective strategic learners to cope with the competing demands they face at Level 1.

For comparison, Maguire (2001) argues, for Liverpool Hope University College, that students become more confident, adopting a more strategic approach as they progress through Year 1. They also experience a reduced desire to achieve, which they say is hard to explain – perhaps 'Level 1 doesn't count' applies to Liverpool Hope as well. Matt Taylor reinforces this arguing that, if students are given work to do for a tutorial the next week, they don't turn up. He argues that if one looks at summer exam board spreadsheets for his course, most marks are 40s and 50s indicating '*it's obvious they know what to do to pass*'. This reinforces Maguire with many Level 1 UWBS students seemingly following the Liverpool Hope route to strategic learning. Indeed, this may be a coping mechanism enabling students to manage the multiplicity of studying / socialising / working activities at Level 1 and a half-way house to coping with still developing independent learning skills and deep learning approaches, since strategic learning can include both these when appropriate.

However, there is a tendency for many students to drift from being potential hard workers with good-intentioned expectations to prioritising socialising and/or devoting too much time to part-time jobs or, due to inertia, just wasting time. In such cases, academic study slips to the bottom of the list with no time devoted to reflection (Kolb 1984; Schon 1987), a key aspect of deep approaches to learning. To illustrate this, at induction, the modal range for expected student studying hours is 20-29 hours for questionnaire-respondents and 30-39 for interview-students; most

academic staff interviewed support the latter. However, subsequent experiences show studying declines as students progress through Level 1, picking up again at assignment peaks around Christmas and Easter, and for revision. In other words, students soon learn that they don't have to work continuously to pass Level 1 and, if they fail, can re-sit twice more; so, they adopt a sufficing rather than a maximising studying strategy for Level 1. Indeed, it may be argued that this is entirely sensible since Level 1 'does not count'. Perhaps most indicative of this is that students now talk of studying for a degree rather than reading for one.

However, the balance appears to have tilted too far away from studying so that, by May, over half of students admit to insufficient studying, although three-quarters of these have worked harder since Christmas. In parallel, classroom attendance also diminishes during the year while the percentage of students in part-time employment for 20+ hours per week increases, even though the modal part-time work range is still 11-20 hours. So, there is a trade-off between less studying and more part-time work as Level 1 progresses. Additionally, students admit that social life impacts on their studying and class attendance, with females citing these more than males; for hall residents, insufficient studying and social life are inter-meshed. Social life is the only aspect of being a student that all questionnaire-respondents identify in both January and May as impacting on their studying. Of course, the categories identified in this section are not clean cut; rather there are overlaps and a blurring of boundaries.

Generalising conceals richness of data, an issue throughout this limited-scale research; so not all students socialise too much. Students who successfully manage to live strategically, balancing competing pressures, tend to be motivated hard workers committed to doing well in their studies, regardless of Level 1 not contributing to their degree. Rather, they want to prove to themselves that they can get the best possible marks and meet the intellectual challenge of university life. These students often work long hours in part-time employment and, where they have social lives, importantly, these are time-constrained and mainly outside the University; they do not live in halls therefore. Of the interview-students, Ann Townsend, Nick Barr and Oliver Cooper fit this category. However, even here, Ann admits by Easter that she has not worked as hard as she should have because of the need only to pass Level 1.

Although social life for its own enjoyment is a major reason, living strategically also means achieving effective social integration, often with an eye on with whom to share a house in Level 2. Ann Townsend's living at home means she misses out on this forcing her, unwillingly, to continue living at home during Level 2. For other students, there is a fear, built on insecurity, that refusing social invitations may mean the loss of new friends, perhaps acquired with difficulty. Hence David Andrews' hectic social life is partly motivated by this, with him admitting that without his social life he might have left, while Ruth Young's most definitely is; moreover the expense is both financial and time-wise.

I find if I stay up late at night, I find I just sit there and I beaver away and there's no distractions because everyone's gone to bed and, I don't know, I just work because I know it has to be done, it has to be in tomorrow...When the things have had to be in at like 9.00 o'clock in the morning I've worked to sort of half seven/eight [a.m.],*taken it straight in and come back and went to bed it's because I've done it and then you sleep peacefully because you're not worrying about it.*

Dorothy Browne, May 2003

Text Box 5.8 One Level 1 student's perceptions of strategic time-management

A consequence of strategic studying and living is that assignments are often left to the last minute before completion, again inhibiting reflection. Dorothy Browne illustrates this in Text Box 5.8. What makes Dorothy and others interesting is that, although it could appear she is just lazy, she firmly believes that she works best under pressure although also admitting that she leaves everything to the last minute. Her behaviour may just be a continuation of a personality characteristic but it can equally be argued that her assertion of working best under pressure is a valid one, based on previous experience.

Of course, what students say, and what they do, may not be the same thing. Socialisers often feel guilty about insufficient studying and, as with Ruth, find reassurance from other students who also prioritise socialising over studying. Worst, in Ruth's case, is her suspicion that students are secretly studying but pretending not to. Peter Matthews, echoing Professor Smithers in text box 5.5, confirms this scenario arguing that students perceive it not to be cool to be seen studying.

Ironically, socialisers may not just allocate their time to socialising; rather considerable time is frittered away doing nothing between classes, shopping, sleeping, playing computer games and generally relaxing, as with Mohammed Hassan or some telephone-interviewee Leavers. The mindset of such students soon becomes one not of being at university to study but rather to enjoy oneself, even though initial expectations and intentions may have been well-meaning and motivated. This is not just due to Level 1 not counting; it is also about increased personal freedom with no parents or teachers telling them what to do, the loss of familiar home-based routines for many and a developing mindset experienced often by holiday-makers that removes normal behaviour-patterns.

The final major part of students living strategically is their juggling part-time work. Not all do but the modal range of 11-20 hours is equivalent to 1 ½ - 2 ½ days a week. In May, over twenty percent of questionnaire-respondents work more than 20 hours/week, and a third of those say it has affected their studies. Often this is work in bars or restaurants, meaning a working day finishing at midnight or later. It is therefore not surprising that, for some, a 9 a.m. or 10a.m. lecture is very hard to achieve, particularly if the teaching is less than motivational. The availability of support materials on Learnwise, or in a learning pack, forces students to make judgements at the margin as to the utility to be derived from class attendance as opposed to sleeping in.

The past replacement of student grants by tuition fees has clearly had a significant impact on students, often requiring them to work long hours in term time whereas 10 years or more ago paid work was normally undertaken only during vacations. Additionally, government commitment to widening access (Dearing 1997; DfES 2003) means that most students no longer come from middle income, middle class backgrounds. For example, in the case of Oliver Cooper, an unemployed father and divorced parents mean that what he does not earn himself he will not get; he therefore regularly works 30 hours per week in term time. During Level 1 this alone has caused him, several times, to review whether to stay in HE.

Some of the money students earn is for socialising with students citing the need for £50-£100 spending money a week as necessary for enjoyment. However, other

feedback suggests many students work merely to survive with tight financial margins creating considerable stress, especially as hall fees are high, confirming the findings of the Sodexho/THES (2004) university lifestyle survey. With some students working 20-35 hours per week, the latter equivalent to a full-time job, the time-displacement from studying creates still further stress, supporting Johnston (2001) and Metcalfe (2001). As such, strategic living reinforces the assessment regulations message that Level 1 doesn't count promoting student strategic approaches to learning which are likely to be skewed to surface approaches in many cases due to time pressures; at times this will also include including deep learning approaches. Laurilliard (1979) and Hartley (2002) confirm this regarding reading strategies and study skills respectively. Developing skills may partly offset surface learning tendencies but cannot do so fully.

Other issues to emerge relate to gender and age where there are differences. There are gender issue between males and females with the latter being poorer class attenders, missing more classes through socialising, working less hard post-Christmas, and less willing for tutors to challenge them more intellectually. This compares with Maguire et al (2001, p. 99) who suggest that females adopt a more strategic approach to learning. This is an issue that merits further consideration but again the constraints of small-scale research prevent this. In terms of age, I have already discussed differences with mature students compared to school leaver entrants. However, it is worth noting that more mature students as a proportion want to be pushed hard intellectually compared with <21 year-olds.

5.7 Skills development

> *'The key skills method [either developed as a discrete module or integrated into other modules] can conflict with students' expectations. Many are put off by anything labelled 'skills'. They regard themselves as already having demonstrated successful command of skills. To them, learning of 'skills' is the antithesis of exciting and challenging degree-level work'.*
>
> Hopkins (2001, 22).

Text box 5.9 First-year students' perceptions of skills

Skills development is an essential part of all UWBS courses confirming Barnett (1994), Assiter (1995), Bennett et al (2000) and Wolf (2002) among others, albeit using different models for such development (Holman 1995; Drummond et al 1997). It is also a deficit model, confirming Bolton 2001, albeit tutor-centred that may inhibit skills development (Kember 1998; McKenzie 1998). Skills development in UWBS courses is also consistent with Government thought as articulated, for example in Dearing (1997) and DfES (2003) and previously, in a range of other government, employers' and other stakeholders' publications (Appendix 1.1).

Student and staff expectations of skills demands are, in most cases, fairly close regarding what the former will need. However, there is an underlying divergence throughout the year with tutors thinking students are weaker in some skills than students perceive themselves to be [Skills Development in the Process stage of Figure 5.1]. By the end of Level 1, students believe they have acquired most skills although a number are identified, particularly linked to critical thinking, where help is still needed; staff are less convinced of student perceptions. Skills development is also linked to motivation (Biggs 1999; Hopkins 2001) and to student centred independent learning (Wolf 1991; Assiter 1995) so staff perceptions are likely to have some validity here.

With the IT key skill, the belief by students and staff that the former now possess this [Student Factors in the Presage stage of the 3Ps model], unlike five years ago, is consistent due to CIT teaching in schools and widespread home ownership of computers.

Both groups believe students have spoken communication skills and perceive further significant development during Level 1. This also applies to the transferable skills of presentations, group-work, putting forward thoughts in class and inter-personal skills. All have been called 'soft' skills and, as students gain confidence, particularly getting to know their peers, these appear areas where development can relatively easily be achieved. It is also enhanced by out-of-class interaction including part-time work, often in bars, restaurants and shops. Appendix 1.7 summarises the contribution of Hogarth et al (2001) and Blaskó (2002) to the national debate on skills

development, the latter emphasising the importance of these 'soft' skills to employers.

Almost half of students, and staff, initially acknowledge a student weakness with maths/statistics, although M&L students doubt whether they need these skills perceiving them to be irrelevant to their people-based courses. However, by year's end, they acknowledge their expectations were mistaken and that they have subsequently acquired and use these skills. For M&L courses, the US unit, initially considered of limited use, is now recognised as valuable in developing skills, including mathematics/statistics, post-Christmas; for business students, this skill is developed through the Business Methods unit.

Regarding transferable skills, in September students expect to need all those I identified but acknowledge significant weaknesses in library/information-searching skills, presentations, critical reading, expressing thoughts in class, time- management and assertiveness, or don't know if they possess these. Staff agree that student transferable skills are weak with lack of confidence and lack of full engagement with HE e.g. not undertaking work set for seminars, contributing to these.

One way to help students discover if they have the skills they need, and to reconcile student and staff skills perceptions is an induction skills audit (Stevenson et al ibid), perhaps linked to personal development planning (PDP), so students can recognise current skills levels, communicate deficiencies to tutors and take ownership of any necessary skills development. It would also enable Level 1 to be more explicitly focused on specific skills development in identified units and promote more fully within UWBS an ELPO model to design learning and teaching programmes. This would link tutor actions closer to student expectations than the current adaptive expectations model.

M&L courses do have a focal point for skills development through US although even this unit does not conduct an audit. In business courses, skills development is dependent on what validation documents assert will occur; however, tutors acknowledge that, during the year, subject content may take precedence over skills development. There seems, therefore, to be a lack of accurate information about the

skills with which students enter and a lack of an effective skills development process ensuring all skills are developed to the extent needed. Athiyaman (2001) found similar problems at the University of Western Sydney but across all levels of business courses.

When asked if they supported a skills audit there was a mixed reaction. Some students and staff supported it in principle while other students e.g. David Andrews thought it might be intimidating. Some staff e.g. Suzi Bowyer had doubts as to how it might be taken forward effectively.

Student evidence during the remainder of the year confirms that some skills gaps remain [Learning Outcomes in the Product stage of the 3Ps model]. For example, in January and May, nearly half of students still identify critical reading as a deficiency while up to a quarter identify independent learning, structured essay writing, time management and assertiveness as areas where they need help. Certainly, the first three of these are what might be called hard/intellectual skills [or what Ramsden (1992, p.18) calls 'very general abilities and personal qualities'], as opposed to soft or inter-personal skills, and are essential to effective intellectual development at Levels 2 and 3. Certainly, as far back as 1985, Powell (in Ramsden 1992, p.27) concludes that 'students attached most importance to the acquisition of general intellectual skills, attitudes and values' while Cowan (1998, p.47) argues that 'the highest cognitive learning is about the *development* of cognitive skills rather than the incidental exercise of them in mastering particular content within individual subject contexts'.

Time-management is also a vital skill to be an effective student since, as my research shows, its lack is often linked to last-minute assignment writing which is likely to produce poorer quality work and surface learning approaches. Assertiveness skills are linked to confidence, which develops during Level 1, but students are concerned that over-assertiveness will alienate their peers, as evidenced by some mature students' experiences. However, although students say they need more assertiveness development particularly in relation to group-work, they increasingly look during Level 1 at who works hard and delivers in group-work; they then try to work with these peers in Level 2 rather than with students who don't pull their weight. In a

sense, students are using this strategic planning as a proxy for assertiveness without the risk of confrontation.

Staff feedback seems, partially, to confirm the above picture with staff expecting students to acquire and use transferable skills such as critical reading yet both students and staff agree that these are not developed very much. Staff admit that independent learning and time-management skills are also essential and some staff berate students for not using them; but Paul Naylor admits that these are not being fully developed nor assessed, although the latter is equally as important as the former (Biggs and Moore 1993; Gubbay 1994; Tolley and Murphy 1998).

If we combine this with the false negative perceptions some staff have e.g. James Keaton arguing that students only read *The Sun,* and the fact that staff do not talk to each other about skills development, then it is not surprising that students do not develop some skills as much as they should. It is certainly true that students need to take ownership for using and developing the skills to be effective learners but this becomes harder if some skills are developed in a piecemeal fashion. Unit leaders on M&L and business courses admit this with the former echoing Alder, Milne and Stringer (2000) and relying on the US unit to cover all skills development and assessment; unit leaders on the latter confess that they never liase regarding skills development. With the smaller business course Matt Taylor uses his unit as a catch-all to develop and assess skills not covered on other units.

Lest the above picture appears too negative, most students believe, by the year's end, that most skills have been developed, although staff have lower perceptions. Objective testing would be useful to give empirical measurement but if we accept that students should know their own minds and be able to make realistic judgements of their own development, which is consistent with my hermeneutic phenomenology methodology and my epistemological position, then the overall picture is that significant skills development does occur during Level 1; however, there is still room for improvement. It should also be noted that the above does not suggest any dumbing-down; rather that these skills are not being developed fully. The contrast is with some BABS courses (MacFarlane 1997, p.47) in new universities where student

difficulties with numeracy have resulted in ' a subtle shift towards "softer" BABA degrees with less emphasis on mathematical and statistical aspects'.

What is very important with student perceptions of their skills development is that this perception is shared equally both by M&L students, who have the skills-specific US unit, and by Business students who rely on transferable skills development within individual units. In other words, both models appear to be effective, when judged by student perceptions with no real differences between both groups of courses. This is directly relevant to my fourth research question relating to a skills-based intervention strategy and contradicts my implicit assumption when starting this research that the former would be more effective. This links to Maguire (2001,p.105) who discusses two different sets of findings regarding the relationship between introducing a skills-development package and approaches to learning; my research did not specifically focus on this. I return to the issue of intervention strategies in Chapter 6.

The other area of importance is transfer skills; in Chapter 2, I discussed the literature relating to this e.g. Bridges 1994, Shepherd 2000. I concluded that skills are normally situation-located and that there is considerable doubt as to whether transferable skills do transfer between different contexts (Oates 1992, Clark and Higgett 1997, Hyland and Johnson 1998, Bolton 2001). From my research there is no specific evidence that transfer skills are being developed either in the US unit or in other units on M&L or business courses. Rather, students are left to make transfers and develop these skills themselves although as Drew and Bingham (1996) note this requires a number of conditions to be met. Student feedback suggests that they do transfer these between units and, for mature students, from previous work into their learning. Inter-personal skills, specifically identified by interview students, also transfer from their halls/social life to group-work both inside and outside the classroom.

So, there is a need for considerably more emphasis on the development of 'hard'/intellectual skills such as critical reading and essay writing (Boyce et al 2001), on other skills where students perceive themselves to be weak, such as time-management and financial management, and on transfer skills to enable students effectively to use these in different units and contexts. Staff also need to work together to ensure that coherent skills development, identified in validation

documents, is actually achieved; currently students are left to make the connections themselves. This will provide the means to translate into practice government policy that HE should meet rising skill needs, including by expanding student numbers. Universities developing stronger links with business and HEFCE rewarding teaching excellence, which includes high quality skills development by students, are other government mechanisms to which UW is responding.

5.8 Retention

5.8.1 Factors identified by my research for student withdrawal

Leaving UW is an issue many Level 1 students contemplate; by January, a quarter of them have considered it while, even between January and May, the figure is still ten percent. These are broadly comparable with the figures for considering changing courses within UW.

There are many reasons why Level 1students might leave and finances are the most frequently cited reason with over forty percent on average identifying this, echoing Bargh et al (1994), PUSH (1995) and the Sodexho/THES university lifestyle survey (2004). In the light of the Government's admission that HE funding per student has fallen by 36% between 1989-1997 (DfES 2003), and its commitment to widening access to HE for socially and economically disadvantaged groups, this is not a surprising finding. Moreover, the funding issue is further reinforced by the admission that there is an £8 billion investment backlog in teaching and research facilities (DfES ibid). Level 1 UWBS students also lack effective personal financial management skills confirming Scott at al (2001). Other reasons for leaving include course content not being what was expected; academic work being too hard, which also relates to course expectations and to skills development; missing family and friends; unhelpful tutors, which may be linked to lack of independent learning skills; and not liking Newtown.

When cross-referencing this against the parts of being a student not enjoyed, halls are the most commonly cited reason followed, by the course, fellow students and Newtown; in each case percentages range between 5-10 percent of questionnaire-

respondents. These responses were from students who stayed but the borderline between staying and leaving is quite narrow for some so common factors apply to both groups. For those who did leave [telephone-interviewees], two-thirds found their course / studying boring or not what they had expected. Debt, self-confessed laziness and social isolation were the other main reasons.

As noted above, the emergence of financial pressures is perhaps not surprising in modern HE but it does dominate over the findings of Tinto (1975; 1993) and of Ozga and Sukhnandan (1997, 1998). With over half of Level 1 students in halls, among the most expensive in the UK, Level 1 social pressures, well over one-third of students going home every week or fortnight and Newtown being a relatively expensive city it is not surprising that financial pressures are so heavy. In separate focus groups, students from another faculty said that UW should consider providing additional advice on how to budget.

Linked to this is that many students are now independent for the first time so, not surprisingly, being careful financially is soon abandoned. Some students do not regard student loans as real debt since they have so long to repay them, at low interest rates, so rely on credit and store cards to enable them to live to the level to which they aspire. Others, such as David Andrews and Mohammed Hassan, rely on parents to pay their debts; in David's case, by the end of Level 1, this is well over £5K. Nonetheless, spiralling debt is clearly a major issue in influencing student withdrawal and, when top-up fees are introduced, as part of the government's policy to fund its achievement of a 50% participation rate for 18-30 year-olds by 2010, students will encounter much higher debt levels that will impact significantly on whether they enter HE at all and, if they do, whether they stay long enough to complete their courses.

5.8.2 Student expectations

Where my findings link with those of Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), Yorke (1997, 1999, 2000), Aldridge and Rowley (2001) and May and Bousted (2003) is in incorrect student expectations [Student Factors in the 3Ps model], which I have discussed in 5.2. Ozga and Sukhnandan (ibid) identify as major causes of student

withdrawal the lack of preparedness for a course, which is often linked to unrealistic expectations or entry through clearing, and a mismatch of expectations and reality for student and HEI; often the two combine together. They also identify early withdrawal from a course as potentially academically advantageous and positive to the leaver, which I have noted previously. These align closely with my research which confirms their arguments.

My research suggests that incorrect expectations are an important reason for student withdrawal, actual or considered. This could suggest that UWBS is not explaining the content of its courses, and the demands of being a student, clearly enough. Certainly, Paul Naylor's argument that he can sell his course to any students who attend Open Days indicates pressures on course leaders to hit recruitment targets; but pressures to meet targets are common across non-Russell Group HEIs. Also, there is no evidence from students that a false picture of course content or course demands is being given to them; in fact students speak highly of the help and guidance given at Open Days.

Additionally, less than half of questionnaire-respondents had predictive expectations of their course, even though they subsequently believe they have, so it cannot be argued that these are mistaken. However, returning to my Chapter 4 argument, expectations formed from experiences in the early weeks of their course, may subsequently be perceived as initial experiences. Also, the concept of expectations may be used loosely. For example, evidence from students who left suggests that subsequent dislike of a course is rationalised as not meeting initial expectations, even if these didn't exist. A M&L course with too much business and insufficient sport/leisure, or a course not perceived to be challenging enough or as boring, are cited as evidence of unmet expectations even though there are different issues identified here.

Another possibility is that students do have initial expectations but that these are more vague feelings or beliefs that they have not been explicitly articulated to themselves, let alone to me. Hence one student explained as his reason for leaving 'it [the course] didn't feel right'. By the same logic other *Leavers* cite the course being boring, or them being bored with studying as other evidence of the course not being

what they wanted. In other words, unmet expectations are used as a cover for a more fundamental issue actually relating to experiences i.e. not enjoying further studying. This has implications for an expectations audit seeking to identify predictive expectations suggesting that it might not prove as useful as I anticipated above. In contrast, a normative expectations audit, based on what students currently know, would still be feasible.

I noted previously Foskett's (2004) comments on power relationships in interviews or questionnaires inhibiting students from revealing their expectations to me and accept that there is some validity in this. However, I am not convinced that this is the main explanatory variable. Clearly, more research is needed in this area.

5.8.3 Social integration

Regarding Tinto's work on student attrition, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998, p.317) argue, 'his approach suggests that students' persona, attributes and background characteristics such as pre-entry ability, gender and class produce varying levels of commitment to course and institution'; this is particularly important in the light of the government's commitment to extending the opportunities for access to HE to economically and socially disadvantaged groups (DfES 2003). As noted previously, this suggests considerable similarities with the Presage section of the 3Ps model. Ozga and Sukhnandan continue 'these commitments intersect with the characteristics of the HEI to produce different degrees of integration that, in turn, determine decisions about withdrawal or persistence'.

From my research, what is most surprising is that social isolation and not feeling a part of one's course are not major factors explaining withdrawal from UW, or contemplation of withdrawal although, initially, I expected this to be so. The fact that almost all students enjoy their social life is very positive, and the reasons for this have already been discussed. However, it does have implications for studying. For staff however, social and academic integration are seen as important and much time is devoted to induction week, spiral induction and subsequent group dynamics within courses.

5.8.4 Other issues

Two other issues also emerge from my research. Firstly, confirming Medway and Pennay (1994), Rickinson and Rutherford (1995), Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), Pitkeithly and Prosser (2001) and Peelo and Wareham 2002) among others, withdrawing students do not consider themselves failures; all who left spoke very positively of UW and their experiences there, arguing that the fault lay with them, whether through lack of application, or being forced into HE by parents, peer pressure or their FE college. Most leavers said they had gained confidence and grown as people acquiring new skills. Some returned regularly to Newtown to liase with friends they had made. Although no withdrawn students regarded themselves as failures, parents I spoke to, when trying to contact them, offered alternative views. This is interesting since the students regard themselves as having achieved many of the Learning Outcomes in the 3Ps model, even though not finishing Level 1. The major factor distinguishing withdrawing students from those who stayed on, having considered withdrawing, was self-determination of the latter to prove to themselves that they could succeed in HE and leave with a good degree. For those who left, small factors could easily tip the scales and make them quit.

The other issue is that nearly half of leavers return to HE, either at UW or another HEI, usually also to a different course in the belief that this will meet their expectations – effectively they become *Returners* – the last group I identify in my taxonomy (Yorke 1997) – what Baxter and Hutt (2000) call 'recycled' students. HEFCE would not regard these as lost to HE although they are lost to UW. Dorothy Browne's argument that *'if you don't feel right you should get out and start again with something that you do enjoy because you got to do it for three years'* appears to be one that fellow students would endorse. This is important in the light of the government's commitment to 'bearing down on drop-out rates' (DfES 2003, p.76), echoing David Blunkett's 2000 letter to Sir Michael Strickland (Chapter 1.4).

5.9 Conclusions

What has emerged from my research is five different student categories, presented as a model in Figure 5.2; this is located conceptually within the First Year Learning

Experience box, in my revised version of Biggs' (1999) 3Ps model. As the black arrows show, the categories are not mutually exclusive and students can, and do, migrate between them. For example, there is a danger that socialisers migrate to the category of leavers but again leavers can become returners and hence workers, having learned from experiences; however, some returners again become leavers at they conclude that three more years of studying is untenable. Mature students may also be workers but can easily become leavers as they struggle to adjust to a new environment. Mature students rarely tend to be socialisers.

Prosser and Trigwell (1994, p.98) argue that 'the same student will adopt qualitatively different approaches [to learning] in different contexts', which is reinforced by Laurillard (1979); Eley (1982); Gibbs (1992); and Laurilliard (1987). So, in Figure 5.1, where I have identified the learning style of each group this is a broad overview and may differ in different contexts, as just noted. However, strategic learning, or aspects of it, dominate.

In answering my second research question, as Chapter 4 showed, there are many underlying themes and contexts accounting for student and staff expectations and experiences. I have summarised the most important in Table 5.1. I bring these into my model, presented as Figure 5,1, in Chapter 6 so developing further the answer to my second question.

In terms of my third research question, the implications of student and staff expectations and experiences, and any divergences between them, the essential conclusion to emerge is that the greater the convergence of student and staff expectations and experiences, the better should be the quality of the student learning experience (Berman Brown 1998). Where this does not occur there is a lack of constructive alignment within the 3Ps model resulting in a poorer quality Level 1 experience. To give an example from Figure 5.1 as illustration, where some staff perceptions are that motivation is inherent within students, and that students only come to UW because they can't get elsewhere, there is a danger that, in their anxiety to help what they perceive as unmotivated students succeed, tutors adopt level one or more likely level two teaching theories which reinforce the surface approaches to learning students bring to HE from FE. As Level 1 progresses, students adopt

strategic approaches, but the deep approaches to learning, that both students and staff should want, only occur partially.

Linked to this, students have insufficiently developed critical thinking and other intellectual skills by the end of Level 1 and identify the need for further help. However, although skills development occurs in both types of course there are no formal mechanisms for integrating skills development across different units. Hence, although all key and some transferable skills are developed, not all are fully developed; and this includes transfer skills. If this issue were fully remedied, the quality of the student learning experience would improve.

Theme / context	Student perception	Staff perception
Choice of UW / course	Perception of UW as a good university; courses are chosen because they look interesting	Students choose UWBS because they can't get accepted elsewhere
Existence of expectations	Many students don't have expectations; but later think they do based on induction experiences.	Staff expectations are based on long experience – want students to work hard and attend classes but expect less than this in reality
Course expectations	Those with expectations expect an intellectually challenging heavy workload course	A variety of staff models exist from a gentle introduction to an intellectually challenging PBL approach
Lectures	These are an effective way to transmit information	These are one effective way to transmit information
Support	Students expect friendly helpful tutors – yet perceptions diminish at end of year (lack of independent learning skills)	Staff want to help students learn; sometimes a danger of over helping them? Staff concerns over increased teaching loads
Motivation	Most students arrive highly motivated yet soon receive message that Level 1 doesn't count + anti-motivational effects of UW assessment regulations	Staff see some students as lacking motivation which they believe is part of one's characteristics – some level one/ two teaching reinforces this
Approaches to learning	Students retain inherited learning approaches during Level 1 – probable move from surface to strategic approaches to learning – reinforced by assignment bunching on some courses and students driven by summative assessments	Belief that students live strategically, including adopting strategic approaches to studying, albeit with a bias to surface approaches – some level one / two teaching reinforces this
Skills	Initially students believe they have a wide range of skills; subsequently believe much skills development occurs whether studying US unit or not, but some skills still lacking – especially intellectual, independent learning, time-management and financial skills. Mixed response re use of skills audit. Mature students believe they transfer skills from workplace to UWBS learning environment	Staff less convinced that students have all the skills that students believe they have; berate students for not learning independently yet some acknowledge that these are not fully developed at Level 1. Mixed response re use of skills audit. Transfer skills not explicitly developed
Work-life balance	Students juggle studying / socialising / part-time job. At Level 1, balance tilts to social life, partly through insecurity; as Level progresses part-time work becomes more important through financial pressures	Staff believe that students are adept balancers; dominance of social life acknowledged but staff want to see well-rounded graduates. Also links to perceptions of which model of Level 1 learning should dominate.
Mature students	Mature students initially insecure through age. Emergence of several types of mature student – some supportive and promote group learning, others alienate peers and/or bully staff	Staff generally perceive mature students positively and use them to motivate other students – but they can be pedantic and reject theories believing only one way to do things i.e. their way. Risk of drifting away after a while
Retention	Finances are the major factor causing attrition, followed by courses not matching expectations / being boring. Social integration not a major issue	Staff accept that not all students will be retained. Much emphasis placed on social integration, especially early-on, and group dynamics.

Table 5.1 Underlying themes/contexts of student/staff expectations and experiences

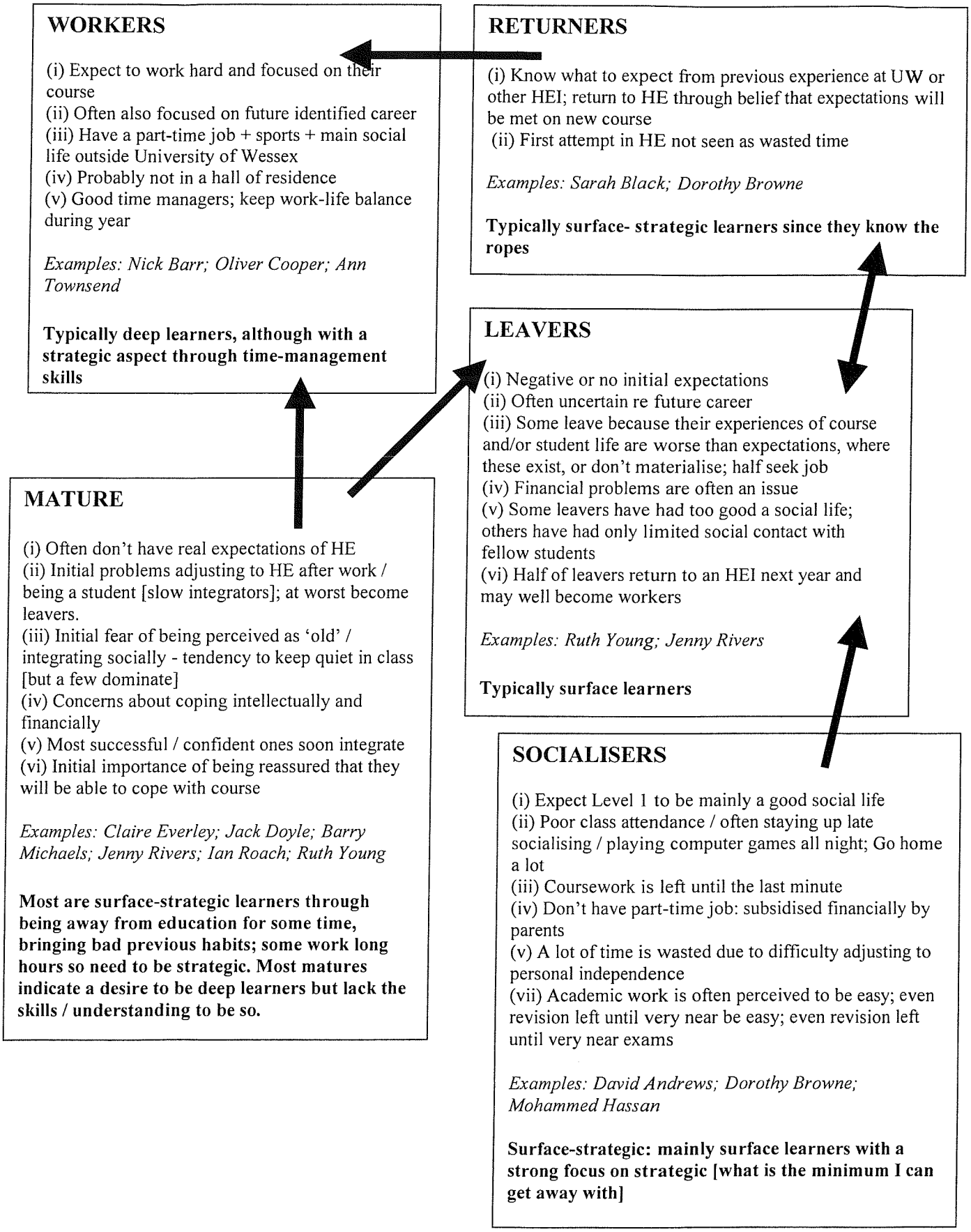


Figure 5.1 Dominant student types: Level 1 respondents

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction: my research questions

This chapter presents my research conclusions, painting a picture, generally, of a quality student learning experience, where quality is defined as fitness for purpose, but with some areas needing reviewing by the faculty and/or the University of Wessex. My research presents a complex and diverse range of expectations and Level 1 experiences so that, from one perspective, each student and tutor has his/her own story to tell. However, since phenomenology is concerned with identifying structures, and underlying themes and contexts, I have used multi-view tables and cluster analysis to develop the essences i.e. the overall description, of the student learning experience including the inter-connected skills development and retention.

Inevitably this has lost some rich data, which is a consequence of small-scale research, but I have used my experience, the literature and my modified 3Ps model to identify the most important structures. The last two have provided most of the framework for my analysis and where I have drawn on my own experiences, I have tried to make my subjectivity explicit e.g. in defining my evaluation of UWBS Level 1 student learning against the 3Ps model as being level one, two or three learning and teaching. Similarly I have articulated three competing models of the Level 1 student experience, according to my interpretation of student and staff perceptions, identifying the high workload / intellectual challenge model, the social integration / personal growth model and the first year experience / gentle introduction model.

From Chapter 1, my aim has been to answer my four research questions considering, particularly, student and staff expectations and experiences and any divergences between them. Using hermeneutic phenomenology and triangulation, part of my research has focused on the structures of these expectations and experiences i.e. how students and staff experience what I have asked them about and other issues identified by them [Research Question 1]. This data is presented fully in Chapter 4.

From this, I have identified the main themes that explain these expectations and experiences and the contexts in which they occur e.g. social life, work or classroom

[Research Question 2]. The main themes that have emerged, and which link Chapters 2, 4, 5 and this chapter, are summarised in Table 5.1. They are expectations; mature students; skills development, including using this as an intervention strategy to improve the quality of student learning and retention; the Level 1 intellectual challenge; the student work-life balance, including living strategically; and retention. Within the latter, finances and an expectations-experiences mismatch are major themes. Interwoven within all these themes are the issues of student and staff expectations and any divergences between them, which I have addressed in Chapters 4 and 5 [Research Question 3]. Inevitably, because of the small-scale nature of my research, there are minor themes that would have been explored more fully had word limits permitted e.g. life in halls, gender differences, assessment and relationships with parents or partners.

Finally, I have explored whether an intervention strategy, based on the Undergraduate Skills unit, can influence student expectations as to the skills they need to develop, and hence the quality of their Level 1 learning experience, which includes retention [Research Question 4]. I answer this question in this chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 5, my modifications to Biggs' 3Ps model make it more fully encompassing than the original version of Biggs (1999) or of Prosser & Trigwell (1994). However, my research instruments have only partially identified the extent of constructive alignment between different parts of the modified 3Ps model since this was not a focus of my original research questions.

6.2 The dominant student-types model of Level 1 learning

What has also emerged from my research is a model of five dominant student types – Workers; Socialisers; Mature; Leavers; and Returners [Figure 5.1]. With the conclusions to my research questions above, this has implications for whether a skills-based intervention strategy is sufficient to influence student expectations and hence the quality of the Level 1 learning experience, which includes student retention.

'This is, after all, the purpose of theory – to distil from a complicated reality those important elements that explain a large part of the observed phenomena.'

Walters (1967), 14.

Text box 6.1 The role of theory

These student types overlap and it can be argued that most students are, at times, a mix of a number of these or move from one group to another. Nonetheless, to develop meaningful conclusions to my research, I take these as my broad categories with identified characteristics and provide examples of each from my interview-students in Figure 5.1.

The arrows in Figure 5.1 show that, migration can occur from one group to another, either naturally or through some form of intervention strategy. However, this is not a closed system and, although Leavers may become Returners e.g. Dorothy Browne, they may not return e.g. Jenny Rivers. In an ideal world we would want all to be workers e.g. Oliver Cooper, but with sociable characteristics; as Mark Alexander argued, UW wants well-rounded graduates not workaholics.

Ramsden (1992) has argued that most students are, in realty, strategic learners, and certainly my research suggests that the need to balance a demanding studying-working-socialising life style pushes students to strategic learning with an emphasis on surface learning. So, to give more flexibility and accuracy to my categorisation of approaches to learning, in Figure 5.1, I have employed a spectrum of approaches rather than three discrete groupings of deep, surface and strategic.

6.3 Student-staff expectations and experiences

The relationships between student and staff expectations and experiences have been an essential theme of this thesis. As discussed, many students arriving at UWBS claim not to have predictive expectations about their course or social life. Those without predictive expectations subsequently think they did have these, suggesting they were formed during induction and subsequently assumed to have existed before

joining UWBS. This raises the question of whether the faculty should amend its courses to meet student expectations, particularly normative ones where these exist, or whether it should be shaping student expectations to match course demands.

The conclusion is that both need to occur. Tutors already monitor student feedback during the year and, where realistic, seek quickly to adapt unit delivery to meet emerging student expectations e.g. more guest lecturers; what I have called the adaptive expectations model. Unit content and assessment can only be amended through formal UWBS programme specification changes. However, course leaders and tutors do not audit students as to what they expect when they join Level 1 in order to shape newly emerging expectations, as Stevenson et al (1996, 1997, 1998) and Sander et al (2000) argue. This would certainly be one way of addressing the Level 1 intellectual challenge and the academic balance within student strategic living. It would also form part of an intervention strategy to move students between different dominant types categories in Figure 5.1. Staff development would also be necessary since some staff and students expressed reservations about using an expectations audit.

When comparing experiences, in spite of the critique above, by the end of Level 1 students believe that they have had a quality learning experience with generally supportive, encouraging tutors, and would return to UW if starting over again. Staff experiences are generally seen to confirm previous years' although there are annual variations in terms of group dynamics within courses. Largely, however, student and staff experiences are broadly similar, differing mainly in skills development and motivation, both discussed below. This also extends to mature students.

6.4 Mature students

Mature students are the basis of a thesis in their own right. Often plagued by initial insecurity about their age, with its implications for course integration, it takes some months for many to realise this is not their peers' perception; rather they are respected for their hard work and motivation. In turn, having gained confidence, many link with Workers, particularly as they move to Level 2. In this sense both Matures and Workers think strategically, wishing to avoid peers who don't deliver in

group-work, so affecting marks. To these students, living strategically is about effectively balancing work, social life and studying to achieve maximum benefits, rather than letting the balance tilt toward social life. Staff are delighted with this type of mature student, seeing them as a learning ally and even using them to motivate the rest of the class.

In contrast, other mature students have major integration problems causing some to leave, writing off HE as a bad experience. Still others, used to wielding power in their work environment, may become classroom bullies, either against student Socialisers who don't deliver, or against staff. This can cause tutors to devote much time to this minority group. Managing their expectations is an important part of the damage limitation particularly where mature students find theory or alternative ways of doing things to be difficult to come to terms with, while skills development is another potential problem area, since mature students can lack certain skills, particularly intellectual ones such as essay writing and critical thinking. Greater transfer into the classroom of the skills these students do possess would aid the group and their individual learning. It is also likely to improve student retention that is a consequence of a quality student learning experience.

6.5 The Level 1 intellectual challenge

I discussed this fully in Chapter 5.5. I concluded that, for a variety of reasons, students might not always be challenged as fully as they could be across all Level 1 units. The main reason for this is UW assessment regulations regarding the non-contribution of Level 1 to the degree classification, and the 40% pass rate. When staff, quite rightly, communicate assessment regulations to students, the outcome can be de-motivation for those other than in the Workers category, although not all other students are de-motivated. Add to this the bunching of coursework on some courses, so that students do not submit summatively assessed assignments until Christmas, nor receive feedback until even later, and it is clear why a significant number of students see the Autumn term as primarily for social integration and learning to live independently. For some telephone-interview students the lack of a challenging course is cited as a reason why they withdraw, usually by Christmas.

A second factor impacting on the Level 1 intellectual challenge is that some staff believe students join UW because they cannot gain acceptance elsewhere, although students express positive reasons for choosing their course. For those tutors, the mismatch can mean a perception that students are weaker or, in some cases, lack motivation. Hence, as Peter Naylor argues, there is a danger that some tutors provide too much support, spoon-feeding students to help them succeed. If so, this is likely to lead to level one or, more likely level two, teaching and learning and hence surface approaches to learning that reinforce the surface approaches many students have brought with them from FE. It also explains why students see skills development as of limited value since it, especially of hard/intellectual skills, is particularly associated with deep approaches to learning; also some students do not have a full picture of the skills they possess, including initially believing they already possess most skills they will need. This in turn casts doubt on the effectiveness of an intervention strategy that is solely skills-based. It also has implications for motivation, discussed below.

A third factor influencing the Level 1 intellectual challenge is that, where students have predictive course expectations, these are of a heavy-workload and an intellectually demanding Level 1. However, I identified three models that might apply to Level 1 of which the first year experience / gentle introduction model was perceived by staff to be the most appropriate. The question is whether the gentle introduction is too gentle; if some tutors are spoon-feeding students due to expected weaknesses then the answer is yes, it is too gentle. Certainly some staff support what I have called the intellectual challenge model involving early PBL although others, argue that this will deter students entering HE through widening participation, who need a gentle introduction. Students identify new units studied as intellectually challenging, subjects studied previously they partially discount. I discuss one possible way of addressing this in Chapter 7, Recommendations and Evaluation.

Having said that, all UWBS courses' Level 1 learning outcomes are mapped to the certificate level of the QAA's Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Also, three QAA visits to UWBS and three to UW since 2000 and external examiner and student end-of-Level 1 feedback acknowledge that unit intellectual demands are appropriate. This suggests that although influencing initial student

expectations might be an effective way to align them more closely with subsequent experiences, the fundamental problem lies with the de-motivational effects of the assessment regulations and, to a lesser extent, staff expectations of students.

6.6 Motivation

This is a theme that has emerged from my research that I did not consider initially. Biggs' 3Ps model has proved valuable in delineating some staff perceptions that motivation is an inherent characteristic of the student and his/her attitudes, which some have and others lack. Hence, lack of student motivation (cause) reduces the quality of the Level 1 experience and retention (effects). In contrast is the 3Ps' model, linked to the work of McGregor (1960), Feather (1982) and Ramsden (1992), that argues motivation, and hence retention, (effects) are consequences of intellectually challenging level three student-centred learning (cause), fostering deep approaches to learning. I believe the truth lies between the two, although leaning heavily towards the 3Ps model approach, because of non-learning factors that also affect motivation e.g. a student culture that studying is not cool, or the time-competition of part-time work needed to remain a student.

Biggs (1999) identifies skills development as part of motivation. He argues that part of creating an expectation of success, and hence a theory Y learning environment, is students needing to be shown that factors that have influenced previous success or failure, such as a lack of appropriate skills, can be changed. Student feedback indicates that UWBS has achieved a considerable amount in this respect and focusing more on developing the hard/intellectual skills, time-management and financial skills students still need would complete this picture. However, as I discussed in Chapter 6.5, skills development as an intervention strategy is insufficient, by itself, to influence Level 1 student expectations and so develop a quality learning experience and improved retention, including deep approaches to learning, and hence motivation. I therefore identify a holistic intervention strategy as my part of my recommendations in Chapter 7.

In terms of climate / ethos, Biggs cites McGregor's (1960) theory X, which matches his level 1 learning, as an example of a learning climate where students are not

trusted. Examples he cites apply to UWBS courses e.g. monitoring seminar attendance, some invigilated examinations and penalties for not meeting assignment deadlines unless mitigation evidence is submitted. However, the faculty has 4 000 students' learning experiences to manage efficiently each session. I do not believe that appropriate administrative processes, by themselves, create a surface-learning environment, although they may contribute to it in part, depending in how they are used. Over time, the tendency in UWBS has been to lean towards McGregor's theory Y rather than theory X particularly in terms of unit and course assessment strategies. It should also be noted that students approve attendance monitoring as a means to reinforce good habits and support it rather than perceiving this as a stick with which they are beaten. This may be seen as students extending their FE perceptions into HE but I don't think this is so; rather it is a means to remind them of responsibilities and, if used in a learning contract, would not be identified as negative or promoting surface learning.

The other aspect of level 3 learning that was lacking when I undertook my research was sufficient scope built into Level 1 for student reflection. Since then personal development planning (PDP) has been trialed on three UWBS courses, including the large business course examined in my research. To make it resource-effective, it has also been incorporated in assessment cover-sheets to give students an additional vehicle to promote reflection at the end of each assessment.

6.7 The student work-life balance

This was discussed in Chapter 5.6 and also related to living strategically. It links to the above in that many students arrive at 'uni' apprehensive about social integration yet believing an active social life is central to being a student. Being told that 'Level 1 doesn't count' reinforces their belief that academic life can be downgraded and that social life and part-time work can take priority, especially if the latter funds the former. This impacts on reading around the subjects, class attendance and time-management, reinforcing surface-strategic approaches to learning and living. By Christmas, when many students realise that they actually do need to prioritise academic work, a mindset making studying a lower priority has already been established.

The above is a generalisation since many students need to work to pay hall fees, buy books and just live. Consequently, they will use their time as efficiently as possible, even if, for those living at home, this means skipping classes to study at home. As my model of dominant student types shows Workers, many Matures and some Returners do not fit into the category of social life dominating; rather it is particularly the Socialisers and the Leavers. However, parts of the other groups may acquire some of these characteristics e.g. Ann Townsend and Nick Barr, both Workers who, later in the year, ease up academically and work more hours part-time because of a changing perception of assessment requirements.

Also, emerging from students' lack of skills is the issue of poor time-management, already referred to, that besets many. Students from all categories leave coursework until the last minute, fail to reflect on what they have written and, consequently, adopt surface-strategic approaches to learning. This is reinforced, as Level 1 progresses, by the growing percentage of students working more than 20 hours per week. In reality, many allegedly full-time students are part-time.

6.8 Using a skills-based intervention strategy to influence student expectations

At the beginning of my research I thought that, based on my work in the late-1990s, a skills-based intervention strategy would provide students with the tools to be effective learners, then mould their expectations so they expect to use these, and hence learn better and not leave their course before completion. In reality that was a simplistic expectation on two accounts. Firstly, my research suggests that an intervention strategy needs to be more holistic, which I discuss below, and secondly it does not take account of student approaches to learning. Text box 6.2 repeats a quotation from Chapter 2 to remind the reader of this linkage.

M&L students experiencing the Undergraduate Skills (US) unit show no differences in their perceptions of skills development, particularly key and soft skills or, in some areas, their lack of it, compared with business students whose transferable skills development is within units. This approach is consistent with my ontological and epistemological positions.

'The successful teaching, and acquisition, of generic skills must depend, in part, on the attitudes and motivation of students, yet to date there have been few research attempts to explicate the student experience in this area. Nor have existing studies investigated student responses to the acquisition of individual skills through differing modes of course provision. Answers to such questions are needed not only to identify successful practice in higher education, but also to be able to respond to what some see as the inflated demands of employers'.

Bennett et al (2000), 21.

Text box 6.2 Research into skills acquisition and teaching

For both types, there was no evidence of transfer skills being taught or of co-ordination between Level 1 tutors to develop skills. Moreover, in areas of hard/intellectual skills development relating to critical reading, essay writing, independent learning and time management, significant minorities of students on both types of course identify throughout the year that they need further help, while tutors acknowledge that students lack these skills. Students also identify financial-management skills as an area where help is needed which is important since debt is the most frequently cited student cause regarding withdrawal.

This suggests the need for an effective skills audit to enable students to identify the skills they have and to map these against the skills they will need to have and employ to complete Level 1 successfully, and communicate deficiencies to tutors. Since commencing this research, a spiral induction programme has been introduced across UW that, at the beginning of the academic year 2003-04, in part, attempted to promote student self-evaluation of their skills. However, it still fails to provide effective communication of such deficiencies from students to tutors.

For my research during 2002-03, although some students and staff were supportive of a skills audit, others felt it might discourage students before they started. Also, many students believe they already possess most skills so perceive further effort to acquire these as irrelevant to their new course e.g. initial resentment of the Undergraduate Skills unit. It is only from the middle of Level 1 that students appreciate the US unit and admit to still-existing skills deficiencies.

6.9 Retention

The findings of my research on retention identify finances as the most commonly cited factor impacting on students withdrawing or considering withdrawing. When tied to the need to work increasing part-time hours, my findings support the Sodexho/THES survey (2004) and the work of Metcalfe (2001) and Johnston (2001). When the lack of personal financial management skills is added to this, it is clear that this is a major factor that can push any student group into the Leavers category in Figure 5.1. Although the faculty cannot help financially, it can at least help students to manage their existing money better through providing financial management skills development.

The second most common factor students identify is a mismatch of expectations and experiences as evidenced by lack of course preparedness; this reinforces the work of Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) and ties in with Tinto regarding the need for students to integrate academically. Students say that UWBS Open Days, and the staff at them, are very helpful but not all students attend these, some entering through clearing including at the last minute. As Geall (2000) suggests, HEIs need to ensure that all recruitment literature presents a true picture of the student experience rather than an exaggerated one to boost numbers, although there is no evidence that UW does this. (Ramsden (1992) agrees, arguing the importance of making course aims and objectives clear to students. It also reinforces the need for an expectations audit as soon as students arrive at UW, reinforced by immediate feedback, to mould student expectations during induction week. Where students do leave, they see this as a strategically sound move that limits further time and money costs, rather than failure, again supporting Ozga and Sukhnandan (ibid).

I had expected Tinto's work to link to closely to mine but this did not prove to be totally the case. Recent research (HEFCE 2000; Yorke 2001a; Lewis 2003) suggests that mature students and working class students are more likely to withdraw than others. Of my interview students, the ones withdrawing were both mature but the ones I spoke to by telephone who had withdrawn, were not. Although failure to integrate socially did influence both mature interview-students, it did not for most telephone-interview students. For questionnaire-respondents, it could be argued that

the ones for whom it was an issue had left. What was surprising was how frequently many students went home at weekends, every week or two weeks being the norm, presenting almost a commuter culture. Perhaps this offsets any lack of social integration that students may experience.

6.10 Conclusions

Research Question 4

How might the quality of first-year student learning, and retention, be improved through a skills-based intervention strategy to influence student expectations?

Text box 6.3 Research question 4

The answer to my last research question [4] is, therefore, that a skills-based intervention strategy is part, but not the whole answer, to influencing student expectations and hence the quality of Level 1 student learning and retention. What is needed is a holistic intervention strategy encompassing a range of issues. I discuss these in Chapter 7.

I am aware that I need to be cautious about the generalisability of my research findings, which are location-specific. As I noted in Chapter 3.9.2, although there are similarities between my findings and those of other researchers, mine relates to particular students at a particular time and place.

CHAPTER 7 RECOMMENDATIONS AND EVALUATION

7.1 Introduction

Based on my conclusions in Chapter 6, this chapter presents recommendations to be implemented mainly by UWBS but also by the University of Wessex. They are presented as an integrated or holistic intervention strategy, rather than one based solely on skills development. Their aim is to influence dominant student types in Figure 5.1 by addressing the characteristics likely to inhibit quality learning or, at worst, cause withdrawal. Ideally, it will shift some students to the Workers category but will, at least, give other groups sufficient tools to become more effective learners; this links to my research question 4.

7.2 Recommendations

1. Implementation of an expectations audit during induction week to gauge student expectations and, where appropriate, mould these closer to subsequent experiences. It also recognises that, although tutors can make some unit adjustments during the year, they are largely constrained by what has been validated. This is in contrast to the current policy of merely telling students what their course is about.

2. Implementation of a skills audit during induction so students and staff recognise the skills the former have and those they need to develop. It is consistent with O'Brien's (2000 p.40) discussion of Alverno College's use of an assessment before the start of classes as 'a diagnostic communication placement assessment [that] elicits performances in analytic reading, writing, quantitative literacy and computer literacy'.

3. More emphasis on developing hard/intellectual skills e.g. information-gathering/researching; critical reading; essay writing; and independent learning. These are essential tools students need to be effective learners yet a significant minority require extra help in these.

4. Level tutors for each course should adopt a more pro-active role to ensure that skills development is co-ordinated across Level 1 to ensure that all key/transferable skills are fully developed .

5. There is very limited evidence of transfer skills development; rather these are left for students to develop individually, between units and between work and study, in each direction. Sheppard (2000) has argued that transfer skills need to be practiced; they are not acquired automatically by default. Hence transfer skills development needs to be integrated into each Level 1 unit with opportunities for practice.

6. Many students live strategically yet lack the skills to do so, particularly time-management. Hence a more comprehensive development of time-management skills is needed.

7. Students need more support regarding how to manage their affairs financially. This should be a part of the induction week and also of the Spiral Induction that follows it. Students First (the new name for Student Support) must provide more specific help to students including how not to incur large debts on credit and store cards, and avoiding the costs of a demanding social life. Level 2 students, who could talk about their experiences of accumulating debts, should be involved.

8. Staff need to change their message to students from the current Level 1 doesn't count to a new one that it does. Although students can be referred twice in failed units they need to be aware of the time and money costs of these.

9. The University of Wessex's Assessment Regulations Working Group needs to recommend to Academic Board that Level 1 assessment regulations be changed. Two possible models are:

a. Students' best two marks at Level 1 are carried forward to the Level 3 course examination board to contribute to the final degree classification. However, lest it be thought that this would only encourage students to work hard in two units model 2 addresses this.

b. The average of students' Level 1 marks be carried forward to Level 2, which does contribute one-third of degree classification marks, and substitute this mark for the worst Level 2 mark.

This may, then necessitate involving external examiners in Level 1 permanently rather than just in the first year that a new course runs. Which ever model is chosen, the aim is to influence student perceptions so that Level 1 is perceived to be an important year in which marks count to degree classification, rather than being perceived as significantly for socialising.

10. The use of streaming to offset student boredom with units already studied. Some universities e.g. Leeds, Birmingham, UMIST (maths) and Southampton (languages) have introduced streaming or setting at Level 1 whereby students who have already studied a subject are given a more advanced version of it, taking them beyond the level they have already reached (Swain 2002). This would need still to align with the Certificate level of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ); however, it would move away from the sometimes-limiting belief that Level 1 is for all to catch up, and restore the concept that Level 1 is a year where all students are challenged equally but in different ways. There may be resource implications with streaming that would impose constraints on this model. The alternative is to require students with, say A level Economics, to substitute another option for the economics unit, which should have less impact on resource allocation.

11. Linked to the above is revisiting the theoretical framework to which staff work for Level 1. There appear to be several competing models of what Level 1 is and, although most staff adhere to what I have called the first-year experience model, there is a realistic alternative that is the intellectual challenge model. A faculty working group should be set up to promote a debate in the faculty about this and other issues identified above.

12. Arising from this there may well be the need for staff development (Ballantyne et al 2000) to ensure a greater consistency of approach to the issue of what is Level 1. This also needs to focus on student approaches to learning and how the faculty can ensure, over and above the recommendations above, that actions are

taken to fully foster student deep approaches to learning. Part of it is through encouraging reflection via the newly introduced PDP but also to make it part of the culture of being a student in UWBS on Level 1. In turn this will also help skills development.

13. To achieve this will require staff to revisit the own teaching and assessment strategies and for course leaders to evaluate their courses in the context of the 3Ps model. This is to ensure that there is constructive alignment between all stages of the 3Ps model as it applies to their course, and that level three learning is promoted. Many staff have moved away from the use of didactic lectures but this trend needs to be continued.

14. Careful monitoring of assignment hand-in dates to avoid bunching.

15. More support for mature students, especially in induction, to help them realise that younger peers value them rather than looking down on them as old. However, mature student expectations also need to be moulded in terms of the minority with attitude problems to peers and staff.

16. UWBS also needs to use more widely learning contracts to tie it in with attendance monitoring. This would help students move from an FE to a HE mindset.

As noted in Chapter 7.1, the aim of this holistic strategy is to achieve what, originally, I thought a skills-based strategy alone could do. For example, with Leavers, the above recommendations would provide positive initial expectations aligned closely with the reality of what they will experience; provide guidance as to how to manage financially which might reduce creeping part-time hours worked as Level 1 progresses; and hence maximise retention. Even Workers, who seem to have a balanced life, would benefit from perhaps working less hours and maintaining motivation that flags as Level 1 progresses since it does not count currently. Further, the more students that can be shifted into the Workers category, the better this will be for Level 2, and it will reinforce the first-year experience model of intellectual challenge over the gentle introduction model.

7.3 A critique of my research

I began this doctorate intending to use an action research methodology and investigate student attrition. However, I soon realised that my real interest was student expectations and the student experience, including skills, rather than a subset, retention. Hence my research questions were modified to provide this wider perspective. At first, I intended basing my research on Parasuraman et al's (1985) SERVQUAL and SERVPREF models, as measures of students' perceptions of the quality of their learning experience. However, as my research led me into other aspects of the first-year student experience, I moved away from these initial ideas to a more general exploration of expectations in UWBS using the work of Stevenson et al (1996, 1997, 1998) and Sander et al (2000) with their work on the use of expectations audits. In effect, I moved from a measurement of customer satisfaction with the quality of the student learning experience through expectations and experiences, to a non-quantified exploration of these that is more consistent with a qualitative methodology.

I also moved away from an action research methodology to phenomenology, partly because I found the latter to be intellectually stimulating but primarily because, as my job had changed and I was more remote from student learning in the classroom, I believed action research was no longer appropriate. I also chose phenomenology because I wanted to locate my research within the qualitative methodology that is appropriate to my interest in student expectations and experiences, which involve a descriptive element.

However, I realised that description alone is not appropriate to doctoral studies so moved to hermeneutic phenomenology, which offers scope for interpretation. I also decided to use triangulation to provide greater validity to my data, although this contradicts transcendental phenomenology. To provide greater rigour to my interpretation than merely personal experience, my original intention, I chose to use Biggs' 3Ps model, modified to suit my needs, as the theoretical framework. With reflection, I would have made the extent of constructive alignment even more explicit in my student and staff interviews; I have covered this very limitedly but this is not a key feature of my findings.

Also, over time, I moved from the positivist idea of control and sample groups to a wider perspective of students on different courses developing skills in different ways, although I have still found it hard to modify the thinking approaches I developed as an economist over most of my working life. Some might argue that a grounded theory methodology would have been more appropriate, particularly as I have developed a model from my research, which is inconsistent with phenomenology. However, my Year 1 and 2 tutors and supervisor have argued for eclecticism in research methodologies and I am still comfortable with what I have done albeit accepting the potential for alternative approaches.

In my research into student expectations I focused primarily on predictive expectations and to a lesser extent with Returners, normative expectations. With hindsight I would also have structured my interview schedules and questionnaires to include ideal and counter-ideal expectations. I don't think my research suffered because of my focus on predictive expectations since the others did emerge; however by focusing on all four types across all students I would have gained an even wider spectrum of student expectations.

My research questions were couched in phenomenological terminology to ensure consistency with my methodology but have generated so much data that, for a long time, I felt swamped. As the appendices to Chapter 4 demonstrate, I reduced my data by using summary matrices in the form of multi-view tables and cluster analysis, and identifying main phenomenological themes and contexts, rather than coding, and also used frequency analysis for the questionnaire data. With reflection, I still believe this to be rigorous. Where I spent months, however, was in my learning and use of QSR's N6 (Anon 2002b) that I had intended to use to analyse my data. The volume of my data and the multiplicity of nodes, which then proliferated as I coded and re-coded, meant that I was unable to see the wood for the trees. As I had really wanted to use this tool as the basis of my analysis I found this to be very disappointing. Once I reverted to Miles and Huberman's (1994) manual systems I was quickly able to get going again. However, I accept that this is part of the nature of research.

I now realise that I should have analysed the questionnaire responses each time a batch came in; instead, through work pressures, I did them all in October 2003 over a

week's leave. I appreciate that this was not the best approach in terms of evolution of the questionnaires and their linkages to interviews. I am also now aware that I need to have been tighter regarding categories used across different questionnaires to assist in making temporal comparisons e.g. with class attendance I used different time categorisations for September 2002 compared with January 2003 and May 2003. Further, I have since debated whether I might have used Likert scales to gauge the strength of students' responses, especially regarding expectations. I chose not to because of consistency with phenomenology but would consider doing so next time.

Presenting my data has posed problems for me in terms of the thesis word constraints in relation to data generated. I wanted to write Chapter 4 as a hermeneutic description but that posed problems for the valuable data collected from questionnaires and telephone-interviews. Graphs, charts and tables may not fit with phenomenological description but are effective data summarisers. I have also used text boxes to give insightful quotations, and then have sought to develop my rich description in Chapter 5, my analysis and discussion chapter.

7.4 My contribution to knowledge

Criteria for the EdD thesis

1(b) [The thesis shall] provide a clear, original perspective towards a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject by the discovery of new facts and/or the exercise of independent critical power.
1(d) give a critical assessment of the relevant literature and describe adequately and justify the method of research and its findings, and include a discussion on those findings, and indicate in what respects they appear to the candidate to advance the study of the subject.

University of Southampton (2003), 67.

Text box 7.1 Criteria for the EdD thesis

I believe my contribution to knowledge to be the following:

1. The development of a model of dominant student types and their characteristics and approaches to learning, not currently presented in the literature. It demonstrates how students may migrate naturally between groups

2. Linked to this, the development of a holistic intervention strategy incorporating skills, and with expectations central to this, to move students to the Worker category, or to move students to deep approaches to learning, or to inhibit movement to the Leaver category, hence improving student retention.

3. An explicit articulation of the adverse impact of University of Wessex assessment regulations on Level 1 student motivation, learning (process) and achievement (product). This involves a combination of the non-contribution of Level 1 to degree classifications and the 40% unit pass mark, providing a major de-motivating influence on many students.

4. Linked to 3 above, is the identification that many students enter UWBS with no predictive expectations but that these are subsequently formed during induction and then perceived to be pre-entry expectations. Subsequent to this finding, James in Coaldrake (2003) has published similar findings. However, linking this to my holistic intervention strategy and my dominant student types model, takes my work beyond James'.

5. Research conventionally argues that stand-alone skills development modules are not effective in developing skills. However, my research suggests that students on courses where there is a skills-based unit, and those on courses without such a unit, both suggest equivalent development, both identifying similarly skills which they believe they have developed, and also identifying where skills development is still needed.

6. Meeting the criteria identified in Text Box 7.1, especially 'the exercise of independent critical power'.

7.5 Further research in this area

Areas offering further scope for research include the following:

1. A fuller investigation of students' normative and other expectations, rather than mainly predictive, and across all UWBS undergraduate students

2. Testing my model of dominant student types on more students, including in other HEIs such as Southampton University. This would enable me to test its robustness across a wider range of students.

3. Testing further my modified version of Biggs' 3Ps model to assess its wider applicability.

4. Testing my range of Level 1 student learning models to see how widely these apply to other HEIs, or even in other faculties within UW.

5. Extending my research to other faculties within UW.

6. Exploring more fully gender differences relating to my research finding.

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