

**An investigation into computing lecturers' perceptions of  
the impact of changes in the student body on their role**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on perceptions of a group of Computing lecturers at a large post '92 Scottish university of the changes that have occurred in the student body. It also considers whether or not the changes have had any impact on the identity and role of the lecturers and whether the lecturers have adapted their practice to accommodate the needs of the diverse student population.

An empirical approach was used consisting of semi-structured interviews with a targeted random sample of lecturers. The findings indicate that the impact of the changes which have taken place within higher education have not been uniform and have varied depending on the perceived status of the institution as well as the discipline within the Higher Education (HE) hierarchy.

The findings identify a number of areas for consideration by university managers, lecturers and higher education researchers. There appears to be a gap between university policies on widening access and student retention and the implementation of the policies by the lecturers. The findings show that the lecturers are aware of the greater diversity of the student body, but that many of the lecturers share the traditional view of a

university student and therefore expect the students to adapt to fit the existing system rather than considering changing their approaches to suit the students. The lecturers in my study have adopted a number of strategies to cope with the constant changes taking place within higher education. However, many of them are unclear as to what is expected of them and unsure about how they should prioritise the numerous demands on their time.

This study differs from and complements other work because it focuses on the lecturers' perceptions of the changes in their role as well as in the student body. The outcome of my study is a better understanding of the perceptions lecturers have of their role and the students that they teach. Although my study is small scale and specific to a particular academic discipline within a large university, the findings should be of value not only to the particular institution in the study, but the wider academic community as well.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Professor John Field for his constant support and encouragement. He has been extremely patient, guiding me gently forward whenever I've strayed. I have learnt much from him over the last four years which I intend using to inform my own professional practice. I am looking forward to getting my life back; however I will miss our regular chats over coffee!

I would also like to thank the colleagues who so willingly gave of their time to take part in my study. This would not have been possible without their co-operation and openness. I hope I have done all of you justice.

Finally, to my husband Jim and children Euan and Claire, thank you for being there for me. Now it's time to start on all those odd jobs around the house that need done!

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## **Chapter One - Introduction**

My study seeks to understand the extent to which academic staff believe they have seen their role change in the light of the massification of Higher Education (HE), as well as gaining a better understanding of the perception they have of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student.

This study is potentially significant for policy and practice because the success of universities is shaped partly by the attitudes of academic staff. The study also contributes to educational research, shedding new light on academics' perceptions of and attitudes towards their students. I am interested to know how the lecturers perceive the student body to have altered over time, and what, if any, strategies they have adopted to cope with the changing student body. I also want to investigate whether the lecturers have the skills and confidence to be innovative in their curriculum and teaching approaches since these are likely to be required to support a changing student body.

Like many British universities, the case study recruits students from very different backgrounds from the 'traditional' students of the past. The massification of HE which has taken place over the last forty five years

has led to an increase in the numbers entering HE. In particular, the number of school leavers progressing to university has increased from 5% to almost 50% (Barnett et al., 2008). This increase in student numbers has led to a greater diversity in the types and expectations of students entering university, particularly at the newer post '92 universities such as the one in this study and has led to many challenges for universities and their staff (Brennan et al., 2010; Henkel, 2000). Consequently, my study will consider the impact of the massification of HE and resultant diversity of the student body on a group of lecturers in a Scottish post '92 university.

### **Background to study**

I have been interested in the area of widening access to Higher Education together with strategies for improving student retention and achievement for a number of years. My own perspective is that institutions which have measures in place to widen access to HE should also ensure that once the students are enrolled that the content and delivery of the courses meets the expectations and needs of the students, and that there are suitable systems in place to ensure that the students have every opportunity to be successful.

Whilst investigating student retention and achievement I came to realise that most of the research in the area was focussed on the student and their views. Although there was a body of research suggesting that student integration with the university and its staff was important, few researchers had asked lecturers what they thought about the changes which were taking place, and the impact that the changes might be having on their role. Consequently, my case study is focussed on the lecturers, and their perceptions of the changes in the student body and any impact the changes have had on their role.

I chose to concentrate my study on lecturers in one particular disciplinary area, namely computing. Partly, this was for practical reasons. However, it also allowed me to compare and contrast the changes which had taken place in HE nationally with the institutional changes, as well as changes at the level of the discipline. Although there are many changes which are common within the sector, there are also important institutional and disciplinary differences which my choice of approach has helped me to identify.

The changes which have taken place within HE have been international in nature, and all institutions need to operate within the social, political and

economic environment of the time. Consequently, my research will provide a better understanding of what the multiple changes which have taken place have meant for the lecturers.

### **Distinctiveness of the university in the study**

While all universities have faced pressures to change in recent decades, each institution has followed its own distinctive trajectory. The institution in my study initially began life in 1897 as a Technical College and School of Art offering a range of vocational courses. Since then it has expanded considerably and undergone a number of name changes and mergers. It began offering degrees under the auspices of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and was awarded university status under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. In 1993 the institution merged with a College of Education and in August 2007 it merged with another HEI changing its name three months later.

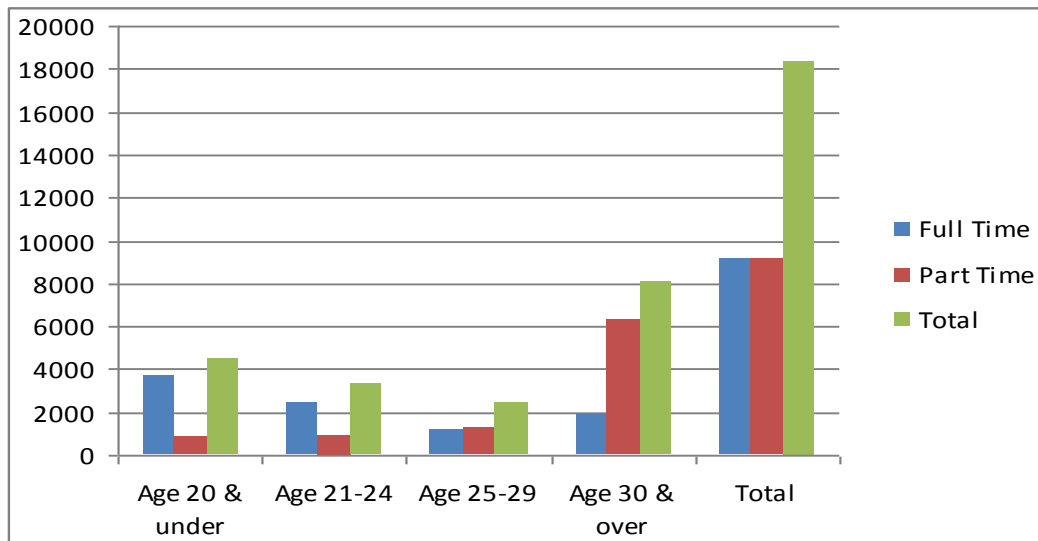
Currently, the institution is a large (approximately 17,500 students) multi-campus post '92 Scottish university which has experienced many of the changes that have affected HEIs generally, including, a substantial

increase in student numbers over the last twenty years. However the university also has a number of features which differentiate it from many other universities. It recruits more students than any other Scottish HEI (23%) from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, as defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)<sup>2</sup>. The index enables the Scottish Government to identify areas of multiple deprivation in order that policies and resources can be targeted at areas of greatest need. In particular, the government would like to widen access to higher education to people in these areas and the University is helping to achieve this aim (Scottish Government, 2011). The University also recruits almost exclusively from state schools (98.4%). Similarly, the University collaborates with a range of Further Education Colleges (FECs) and encourages access to HE by delivering some of its programmes at local FECs. The University also encourages lifelong learning by providing opportunities for part-time learning, and, as can be seen from the diagram below, there is almost a 50:50 split between part-time and full-time students<sup>3</sup>, which itself is unusual in the Scottish context.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://simd.scotland.gov.uk/publication-2012/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>



**Diagram 1 - Age profile and study mode for university**

Like many post '92 universities the institution has placed most of its emphasis on the quality of its teaching. However, in recent years the balance has changed and university managers are now stressing to lecturers the importance of engaging in research<sup>4</sup>, and achieving a successful outcome in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014.

The University is therefore a large complex multi-campus institution with a diverse student population. The university provides opportunities for both part-time and full-time students, with delivery on campus, at local delivery

<sup>4</sup> University Strategic plan 2008-2015

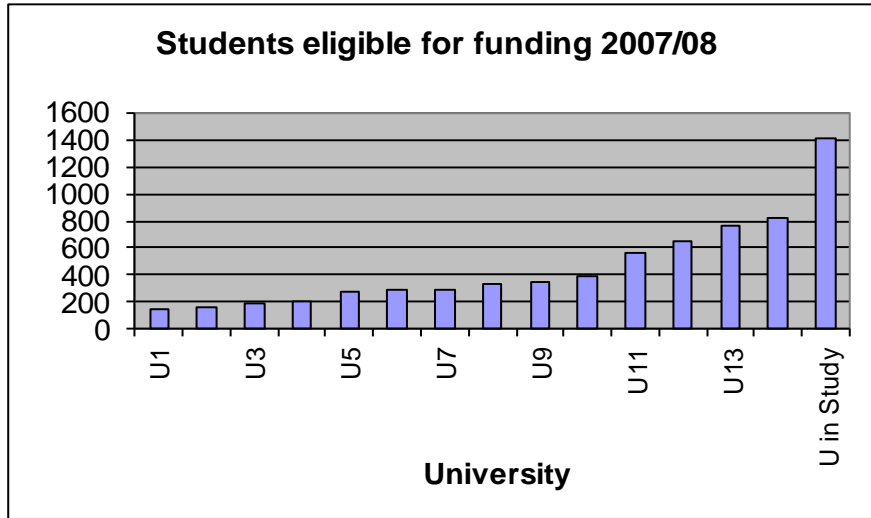
sites, as well as distance learning opportunities. This complexity and diversity presents considerable challenges to the lecturers, who need to try to adapt to the changes around them.

## **Computing discipline**

This study focuses on a group of lecturers in the School of Computing. The School is the largest university provider of computing education in Scotland in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) student numbers. The diagram below shows the breakdown of FTEs for the fifteen HEIs in Scotland that deliver programmes that are classified as *Computing and Information Science* (Scottish Funding Council, 2008<sup>5</sup>). It can be seen from the diagram that of the 6,834 students eligible for funding in this category during session 2007-08, 1,417 were at the university in my study, equivalent to 20% of total funded numbers for the subject in Scotland. The institution with the second highest funded numbers had 816 FTEs, 12% of the total.

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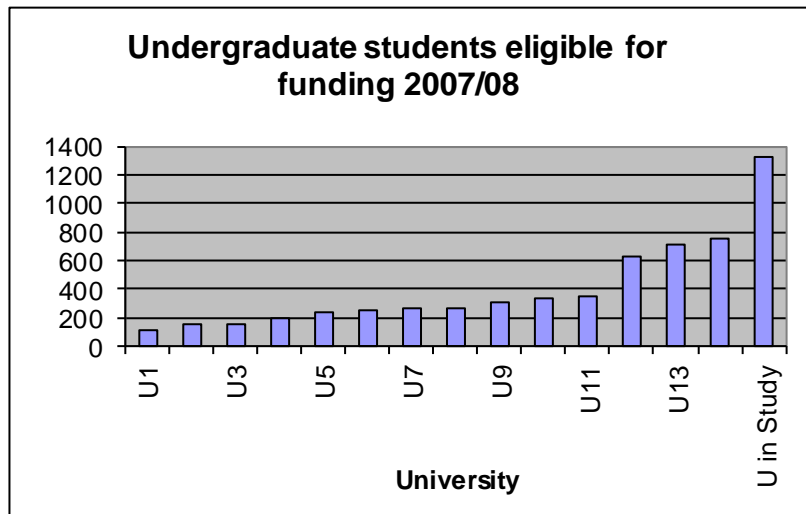
<sup>5</sup>[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Guidance\\_SubmittingInfo\\_HEStatsdata/bulletin\\_2\\_2008.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Guidance_SubmittingInfo_HEStatsdata/bulletin_2_2008.pdf)



**Diagram 2 – Funded students 2007/08**

Undergraduate, full-time equivalents show an even greater contribution. As diagram 3 below indicates, 22% of the students eligible for funding in the discipline are enrolled with the university in the study, 10% more than the second highest provider of undergraduate *'Computing and Information Science'* programmes in Scotland. Thus it can be seen that the institution is the major contributor to *'Computing and Information Science'* education at university level in Scotland.

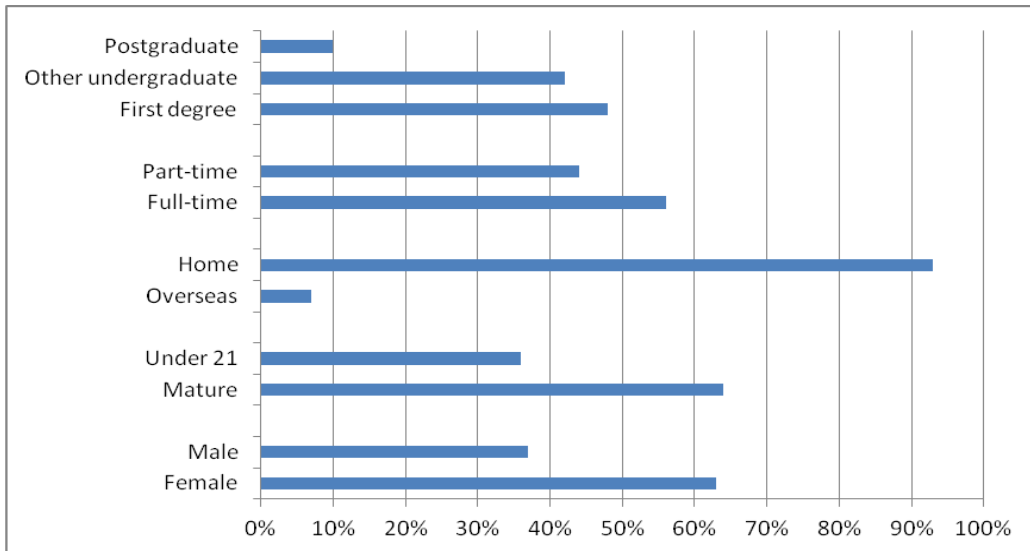




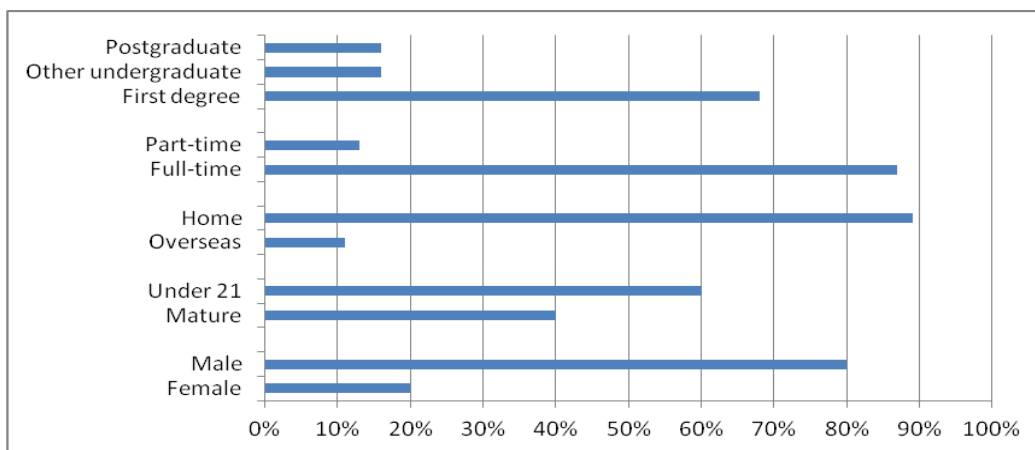
**Diagram 3** – undergraduate funded student numbers 2007/08

It is also worth noting that there are some differences between the overall university student characteristics and those for the School in my study. The diagrams below (4a, 4b) show that the main difference is in the gender ratio. Although 63% of the university's students are female, the figure for computing is only 20%. The School also has a slightly higher percentage of postgraduate and overseas students than the university as a whole. Finally, while the School apparently has lower percentages of part-time and mature students, this is because some part-time students, who are generally mature students, are enrolled on modules rather than

programmes, and are therefore recorded as belonging to the university's Lifelong Learning Academy rather than the School.



**Diagram 4a – University Data**



**Diagram 4b – School Data**

## **Structure of the thesis**

In the next chapter I begin by discussing the changes that have taken place in HE generally over the last 10 years, and then I focus on the specific changes which have impacted on the institution in the survey. In addition, I consider the changes with respect to the discipline, and compare and contrast the ways in which the changes that have taken place within wider HE, and institutionally, have differed from the changes relating to the discipline. In particular, I discuss the changes in student numbers and the increase in females entering HE. I then review the literature on student retention and achievement focussing particularly on the increased diversity of students and institutions. By doing this I seek to determine the influence, or otherwise, that lecturers have on these areas. Chapter four describes the approach I adopted for my study together with the methods used. The following four chapters expand on the changes identified in chapter two. Chapter five examines the ways in which the changes which have taken place in HE, including the greater diversity of the student body, are viewed by the lecturers, together with the impact of the changes on the lecturers. Chapters six and seven focus on widening access to HE and what it means to the lecturers. These chapters also detail the changes in the students as perceived by the lecturers. Chapter eight discusses student integration, focussing particularly on the influence

of staff-student interaction on student retention and achievement. The final chapter reflects on the research process, identifies the key findings from my study and suggests areas for further investigation.

Overall, I show that any understanding of change within HE must recognise the diverse and uneven nature of the process. I will discuss the ways in which the many changes that have taken place in HE generally have impacted on the lecturers in my study, and also consider the specific institutional and disciplinary changes and the influence that they have had on individual lecturers. The changes which have affected HE have not all had a uniform impact; there are differences between, as well as within, institutions.

## **Chapter Two – Changes in Higher Education**

One of the main aims of my study was to examine lecturers' views of their students, and whether they felt that there had been any significant changes in the students during their time working at the university. It soon became clear to me that it was impossible to discuss the changes in the students in isolation, because these were interlinked to a number of other wider changes which were taking place concurrently, both internally and externally to the university. These changes included the massification of HE and the implications for social mobility, as well as the position of the university in the HE hierarchy. The discipline I chose to situate my survey in, namely Computing, was also important, and I needed to take into account its position relative to other disciplines, as well as changes in the subject area. In addition, there had been a rapid expansion and subsequent decline in the numbers of students choosing to study computing, so I needed to consider the impact of these changes on the academics in my survey. Consequently, this chapter will discuss each in turn before expanding further in subsequent chapters.

## **Massification of HE**

Incorporation in the '90s saw the end to the binary system in HE and gave rise to a large range of new universities within the UK, as well as an increase in the size of the existing universities. The massification of the university sector also meant that institutions lost much of their previous autonomy and became more accountable to their internal and external stakeholders, and more subject to market forces, particularly with regard to student numbers (Barnett et al., 2008; Henkel, 2000). In addition, the increase in student numbers was not matched by an equivalent increase in funding. In fact Taylor et al. (2011, p139) state that '*between 1990 and 2002 the sector lost 35 per cent of the unit of resource per student in real terms*', and so universities were expected to operate with lower unit costs per student.

One of the aims of the government at that time was to increase the number of universities, so as to widen access to university and thus improve social mobility. However, the increasing use of league tables has highlighted the differences in the status of institutions in terms of reputation and how they are perceived by those working in the university sector, the funding councils and the general public (Taylor et al., 2011;

Teichler, 2007; Barnett, 2000; Scott, 1995). Therefore a status hierarchy of universities exists in the UK education system, as it does in many other HE systems.

Scott (1995) discusses the dichotomy between the pre and post '92 institutions and argues that rather than a unified equal system of universities having been created, there is very much a divide between the older and newer universities, and so there is a difference in the perceived status between universities. Certainly, there is a view that able working class students are more likely to attend newer post '92 universities than the older universities. Therefore rather than promoting social mobility for able working class students, as was the case with the previous elite system, it could be argued that today's mass education system legitimises and maintains social hierarchies, rather than promoting social mobility (Gallacher, 2006; Leathwood, 2004; Crossan et al., 2003; Field, 2003). Blanden et al. (2007), in a report for the Sutton Trust on intergenerational changes in social mobility, found that social mobility declined for cohorts born between 1958 and 1970. They state that there is no evidence to suggest that this decline in mobility has reversed, or started to improve, for those born between 1970 and 2000. Similarly, there is evidence that more middle class students are entering HE because participation in HE is now seen as the norm for the middle classes (Smith, 2007; Sutton Trust, 2000;

Scott, 1995). Hence it has become even more difficult for working class students to gain places in the older elite universities, thus widening the gap between social groups rather than removing it (Taylor et al., 2011, Taylor, 2005; Scott, 1995).

Consequently, it does not appear that the widening of access to higher education has promoted social mobility for those in the lower socio-economic groups. However, there are more students entering the system as a whole, so participation has increased, if not widened, and more students, including working class students, are being provided with the opportunity of a university education. Therefore there is a greater diversity of students within the system as a whole, although not necessarily within a particular institution.

Iannelli (2007) and Paterson et al. (2007), who carried out a comparison of school leaver data from Scotland, England and Wales, found that Scotland has the highest percentage of working class students entering higher education. However they also found that social inequalities exist more in Scotland, partly because working class students are more likely to access higher education in colleges, whereas middle class students are more likely to enrol on university degree programmes (Parry, 2010; Gallacher,



2006). They also found, as did Reay et al. (2005) that gender and social class differences also persist in the choice of institution and subjects studied. Thus social class inequalities in Scotland continue to shape participation in post-school education.

In order to become socially mobile, students must be able to exercise choice over which university they would like to attend. However Archer (2007) argues that in order to exercise choice, students need to have the appropriate economic, social and cultural capital to be able to make that choice. It is therefore very difficult for working class students to access older institutions because they do not have the necessary social, economic and cultural capital, and so, rather than having an even playing field, the options for working class students are in fact limited (Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2001; Bourdieu et al., 1990; Bourdieu, 1984). This means that working class students are more likely to attend post '92 institutions rather than the older universities, thus reinforcing the existing social hierarchies, rather than encouraging social mobility (Brennan et al., 2010; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2001; Bourdieu et al., 1992).

Nevertheless, although the existing system has made it more difficult for working class students to access the older universities, the massification of HE has meant that many people can be upwardly mobile, at least in terms of educational achievement (Van De Werfhorst et al., 2003). Since the university in my study is a post-92 university that recruits more than 20% of its students from areas of multiple deprivation, it follows that it plays an important part in assisting students from deprived areas to access a university education, and thus improve their prospects of social mobility.

The massification of HE has led to greater diversity in the types of students accessing HE. The traditional view of a university student as being a young middle class school leaver is no longer the case for many universities. For the university in my study, a typical student is more likely to be mature, working class and part-time. Approximately 50% of the students attending the university are part-time and 68%<sup>6</sup> are mature entrants. Thus, in common with many other universities, mature students make up a large part of the student body.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.unistats.direct.gov.uk/>

A theoretical and practical discussion of adults in higher education is provided by Bourgeois et al. (1999), who state that, like the university in my study, many universities now have more mature students than school leavers. However, Bourgeois et al. (1999) and McGivney (1996) question whether universities have recognised this change in the age distribution of the student group, and whether universities have adapted to accommodate the needs of adult returners to education. Bourgeois et al. (1999) conclude that there is a gap between institutional policy and implementation by lecturers. They state that although access to higher education has widened, and many universities appear to encourage applications from mature students, the reality is that not much has actually changed, and few lecturers have altered what they have been doing to meet the needs of the changing student group. In many cases mature students and other non-traditional students are expected to 'fit in' to the traditional view of a university, rather than the university adapting to meet the needs of the students (Leese, 2010; Brennan et al., 2010, 2008; Hockings et al., 2009, 2007; Merrill, 2001). Given that the majority of students attending the university in my study can be classified as mature and/or part-time then I am particularly interested to know whether this has impacted on the lecturers in any way.

The increase in size of many institutions also meant that universities had to adapt to the resulting complexity of the institution, as well as be competitive in the enlarged HE market place. Consequently, the structure of institutions had to change, particularly in the newer post '92 institutions. University managers discovered that they could no longer rely on academics carrying out many of the non-academic roles which had previously been allocated to them and so HEIs increasingly employed specialists to perform these functions (Coaldrake et al., 1999). As a result, there was a move away from the former collegiate approach to university governance, to one with management structures in place. University vice chancellors became chief executives with teams of academic managers, and the increased size of universities meant that human resource managers, and others, had to be recruited to deal with the added complexity (Henkel, 2000). It has therefore been argued that the massification of HE has led to greater accountability and greater marketisation, resulting in a weakening of academic identity (Barnett et al., 2008; Henkel, 2000).

The work of Becher et al. (2001), Barnett (2000, 1990) and Becher (1989) have been influential in describing the changes that have occurred in universities and the impact that they have had on lecturers. They focus on elite institutions and disciplines and have attempted to extrapolate their

theories onto newer post-92 universities. Barnett's (2000) theoretical discussion on the organisation and changes that have taken place in universities, argues that universities are now too large and complex. He states that there is no one idea of the university, but rather there is an increasing diversity of universities and HEIs, since institutions constantly have to change in response to the continuous demands being made on them both internally and externally. In Barnett's view, many academic staff do not identify with the wider university, but rather operate autonomously, and so university management need to try to engage academic staff if the structures are to work. Barnett also claims that while academics are more loyal to their discipline than the institution, some of the structural changes that have taken place have weakened and undermined the disciplines too. The second edition of the book by Becher et al. (2001) differentiates between the changes that have taken place in elite and non-elite institutions, and states that institutional change is more pressurised than disciplinary changes in non-elite universities.

Some researchers have drawn attention to the ways in which the changes in the structure and management of universities are similar to those of larger companies (Deem, 1998). Universities began to operate more like businesses (Kanter, 1996) and many of the changes associated with this have impacted on staff at all levels of the institutions involved. Academics

found themselves having to re-adjust to the changes taking place within the institution, as well as their role within it. One of the most significant changes for many academic staff has probably been the resulting reduction or loss of autonomy. Kanter (1996) likens this to what has happened in some companies, suggesting that it leads to staff building stronger attachments to their own profession/discipline and team, and feeling less attached to the institution, which concurs with the findings of Barnett (2000) and Becher (1989).

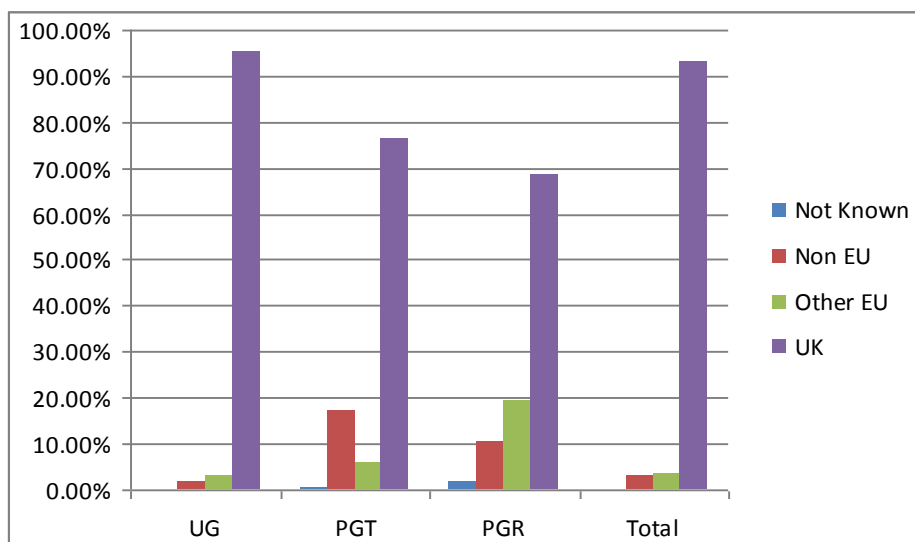
As universities have moved from elite to mass systems the range of disciplines has also increased, for example new disciplines such as nursing and tourism have emerged (Clark, 1996). Similarly, the distinctiveness of many disciplines has been eroded, since some institutions have grouped a range of disciplines together into faculty structures such as '*Science and Technology*', rather than the single disciplinary groups which existed previously (Scott, 1995). Thus there are differences in the way that disciplines are perceived both internally and externally, and as a result the status of disciplines varies within and between institutions.

As has already been stated, the university in this study is a large multi-campus post '92 university which could be considered to be situated on the border between the university and college sectors where most change takes place (Scott, 1995). The University demonstrates many of the features attributable to post '92 institutions in terms of management structure, support services and range of disciplines. Similarly, in common with many institutions the University has restructured a number of times during its existence, the most recent being in session 2008/09. At that time the University moved from a seven School structure to a three Faculty structure with eight Schools shared between the Faculties.

### **Internationalisation of HE**

Internationalisation has become very important for many universities since it has allowed them to expand their student numbers, and thus generate additional income over and above the limits placed on student numbers by the Funding Councils (Sursock et al., 2010; De Wit et al., 2009; 1999). However, as can be seen from the diagram below (Diagram 5), the university in my survey depends heavily on 'home' students in terms of student numbers and has not attracted large numbers of overseas students. The data for session 2008-09 shows that more than 90% of the

undergraduate student population of the university in the study were domiciled in the UK before studying at the university. Less than 2% of the students accounted for in this figure were from outwith Scotland. More than 90% were domiciled in Scotland and the majority of these, 84% were from the immediate region, defined in terms of specific local authority areas. There were larger proportions of other EU and Non-EU students at postgraduate and research levels.



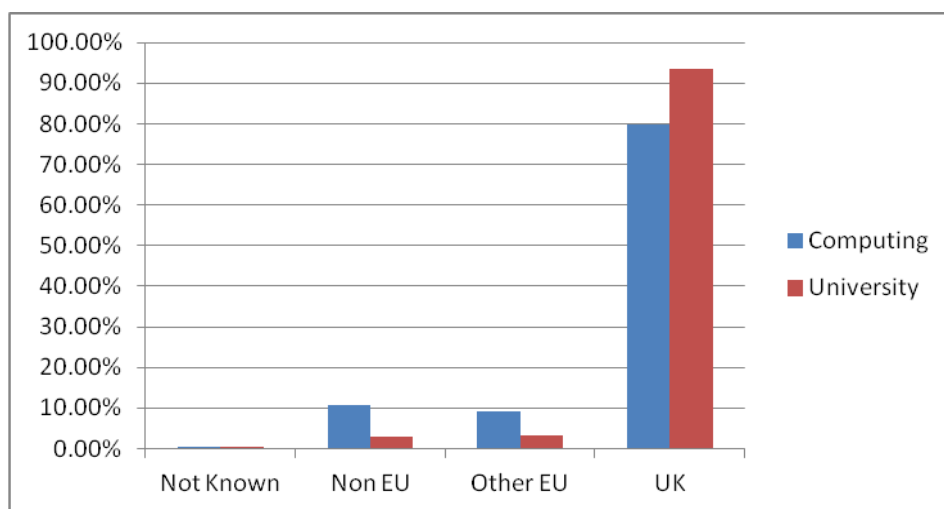
**Diagram 5** - Distribution of student numbers session 2008/09<sup>7</sup>

The School of Computing is second only to the School of Business in terms of the proportion of non-UK students that it recruits and the School

<sup>7</sup> University figures



has a higher percentage of non-UK students than the university overall. However this figure is still just over 20% of the total student numbers and is due to a significant number of non-UK post-graduate students (Diagram 6).



**Diagram 6** - Comparison of the distribution of student numbers<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, although the increasing number of overseas students has had a major impact on many universities in terms of the curriculum and presenting university staff with many new challenges (Luxon et al., 2009), it has been less significant for the institution in my study. We will, however,

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<sup>8</sup> University figures

see that although there has been little effect at the under-graduate level the increase in overseas students at the post-graduate level has presented the lecturers concerned with some interesting experiences.

### **Academic identities and disciplines**

As stated previously the massification of HE has led to many changes in the structures of institutions. The increase in student numbers has caused the expansion of universities into larger more complex institutions (Barnett, 2000; Scott, 1995). There has also been an increase in disciplines as well as changes to the existing disciplines, all of which have had an impact on the identity of the lecturers.

The influential book "*Academic Tribes and Territories*" provides a theoretical and systematic study of the cultures of disciplines and their importance (Becher et al., 2001). The study involved asking academics to share their ideas, perceptions and experiences of being an academic. The first edition of the book focussed on elite institutions but the second edition was expanded to cover the newer institutions and disciplines, and is thus more pertinent to my study.

Similarly, Locke (2010) citing the work of Clark (2008, 1987) discusses the differences in academic life both between and within institutions. Although Clark's study (1987) focussed on academic life in the US, the two key factors identified as defining academics, namely institutional type and discipline are still relevant to UK institutions. Locke (2010, p253) citing Clark (1987) states that "*if you knew the institution and discipline of an academic you could tell much about the circumstances, career history and academic life of that individual*".

Becher et al. (2001) and others (Barnett et al., 2008; Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 1999) have found that academics generally have more loyalty to their discipline rather than the institution. However, researchers such as Scott (1995) have commented that massification and the resulting organisational changes have led to a weakening of the disciplines. In some cases there has been a decline in the importance placed on disciplinary knowledge and therefore there has been an equivalent erosion of identity to discipline.

The expansion of Higher Education has been accompanied by changes in the demand for some disciplines and the creation of new disciplines. Therefore hierarchies between the disciplines, as well as between the same disciplines in different institutions now exist. The status given to disciplines is linked to how the discipline is regarded both internally and externally, as well as the status of the institution. Since the importance placed on a discipline by senior management is often linked to the attractiveness of the discipline to students, then there is often a constant struggle for power and status between the disciplines (Becher et al., 2001; Henkel, 1987). Similarly, the status of an institution is often based on the significance placed on research output and therefore the decline in disciplinary knowledge is likely to be less in the older institutions, most of which give more priority to research.

The changes in the importance placed on disciplines have had an impact on the identity of academics. Similarly, the creation of new disciplines and the integration of traditionally separate subject areas has caused a blurring of disciplinary boundaries, thus causing a loss of professional identity for some of the academics concerned (Henkel, 2000). Lecturers are expected to engage in teaching, research and administrative duties and the balance of time spent on each of these activities can vary substantially. The study by Becher et al. (2001) showed that role ambiguity increases as one

moves down the institutional hierarchy. Becher et al. (2001) state that many lecturers are unsure about how they should prioritise their time and efforts, and Henkel's (2000) British study reached similar conclusions, though focusing more on issues of ambiguities in the construction of professional identities. For many academics the core of their work is teaching and research, whilst other tasks, even those such as course coordination or managing a department or School, are relegated to the status of distractions (Deem et al., 2007; Shattock, 1999; Trow, 1993).

The complexity of institutions and the adoption in many universities of a more managerial approach has meant that some academics feel that they have lost much of their previous autonomy. However, although some academics feel a loss of control over what they do, for others, this has created new opportunities which did not exist previously (Delanty, 2007). The challenge for universities has been to manage the change that is required in such a way that academics do not become alienated or disenfranchised, but rather that everyone in the institution moves in the same strategic direction (Coaldrake et al., 1999).

Although universities have become more professional in their operation and outlook, and there has been an expansion of support departments,

many academics believe their workloads have increased rather than decreased. The increase in student numbers has not always led to an equivalent increase in staffing numbers, so academics have found themselves having to deal with more and more students. There has also been an extension in the roles that academics are expected to take on, and many academics have found that they have to perform specialised roles, such as student support and guidance, for which they have received little or no training (Coaldrake et al., 1999). This was a theme identified in my study where several of the lecturers expressed a sense of frustration that tasks that they had previously performed well had been taken away from them and given to administrative and support staff and replaced by roles such as marketing for which they did not feel suitably qualified for.

Similarly, the management literature discusses other aspects of organisational change which do not sit comfortably with the current work practices within universities, such as the move away from permanent full-time contracts to more flexible contracts (Harley et al., 2004; Handy, 1998; Kanter, 1996). The advantages of employing staff on more flexible contracts are attractive to university managers since it means that they can react quickly to changes in demand for courses and therefore do not find themselves with groups of academics who no longer have any students to teach. However, it also has many disadvantages, including the

fact that staff on temporary contracts are less likely to feel any loyalty to the institution and it often means that additional duties, particularly course management and administrative roles, are allocated to the full-time permanent staff, thus increasing their workloads. This is less of an issue for the lecturers in my study since only 3% of the overall university workforce is on fixed term contracts.

The increased accountability both internally and externally means that many academics consider themselves to have less autonomy than they once had (Becher et al., 2001). However, some researchers disagree with this view, and although they would accept that there has been some loss of autonomy, they also think that academics still have a considerable amount of control over their own identity (Delanty, 2007; Henkel, 1987).

Thus the massification of HE and the creation of new universities in 1992 have led to changes in the traditional view of what it is to be an academic, and Barnett et al. (2008, p91) question whether there is such a thing as an '*academic identity*'. They state that identities are '*changing and widening and becoming fuzzy*' (Barnett et al., 2008, p91) and that there should be acknowledgement of the fact that individuals have multiple identities. Just as there is no one view of the university, there is no one academic identity.

Academics are now as diverse as the institutions they work in and the students who attend them.

### **Distinctiveness of the Computing discipline**

The social mobility of students can be linked to the subject area they choose to study, as well as the institution at which they study. Disciplines such as Medicine and Law have remained the preserve of the older institutions, whilst the newer post '92 universities have opted to diversify into other areas rather than compete for student numbers in these disciplines. Therefore there has been a broadening of the subjects available for students to study at degree level. However working class students do not necessarily have the social and cultural capital to allow them to compete for places on the most competitive courses in the older universities and therefore their choice of course is often restricted to those areas which are available in the post '92 institutions. Similarly, it has been found that working class students are also likely to restrict their choices further, by choosing to study technical subjects which reflect their parents' manual job experiences and which they perceive to lead to securer career prospects (Reay et al., 2005; Van De Werfhorst et al., 2003; Kelsall et al., 1972).



Consequently, the discipline that my study is situated in, namely computing, is important with regards to my results. Computing or Computer Science only became recognised as a discipline in its own right, separate from mathematics, in the late 1960s (Mitchell, 2003) and it was not until the 1970s that full degree programmes in Computer Science began to be offered in universities. It is therefore relatively new when compared to other disciplines such as medicine and law (Smith, 2006).

Similarly, Computer Science is classified as a hard applied discipline which means that computing is more highly considered by some than soft knowledge domains such as Economics, and less highly regarded than pure hard domains such as Mathematics (Biglan, 1973). However it can be argued that for many universities the discipline is much broader than this classification suggests. Computer Science has been criticised by some for being too theoretical, and by others for being too market driven, thus highlighting the wide range of provision which can come under this category, as well as the differences in the subject that exist between institutions. The older universities have tended to continue to deliver Computer Science courses, whereas in the newer post '92 universities there has been a move away from the more traditional computer science programmes to other areas such as Computer Games, Animation,

Multimedia and Music Technology. Therefore the status of the discipline, and in turn that of the lecturers, is difficult to classify.

In addition, the discipline of computing has come a long way in the last thirty years, moving from being the preserve of a few to common usage. At the beginning of the 1980s punch cards and paper tape were being used, whereas now we can access the internet via our mobile phones and millions of people have access to social networking sites such as Facebook and virtual worlds, such as Second Life. Likewise the common usage of computers and the ability to access the internet, whether via a PC, gaming device or mobile phone could be seen as devaluing the discipline, since the underlying technical expertise is hidden from the user. Therefore the changes which have taken place in HE, and computing in particular, have not been able to occur without affecting the lecturers involved. Academic staff have been expected to react to the demand for the new programmes with little or no formal training and not all lecturers have embraced these changes. The relative newness of the discipline means that many of the more experienced lecturers do not have a first degree in the discipline but rather have converted from other areas such as mathematics and engineering. For the School in this study, less than 10% of the lecturers have first degrees in Computer Science. In most instances this can be seen as an advantage, since it means that the

lecturers have already experienced a change of expertise, and are therefore more open to disciplinary changes.

### **Changes in computing student numbers**

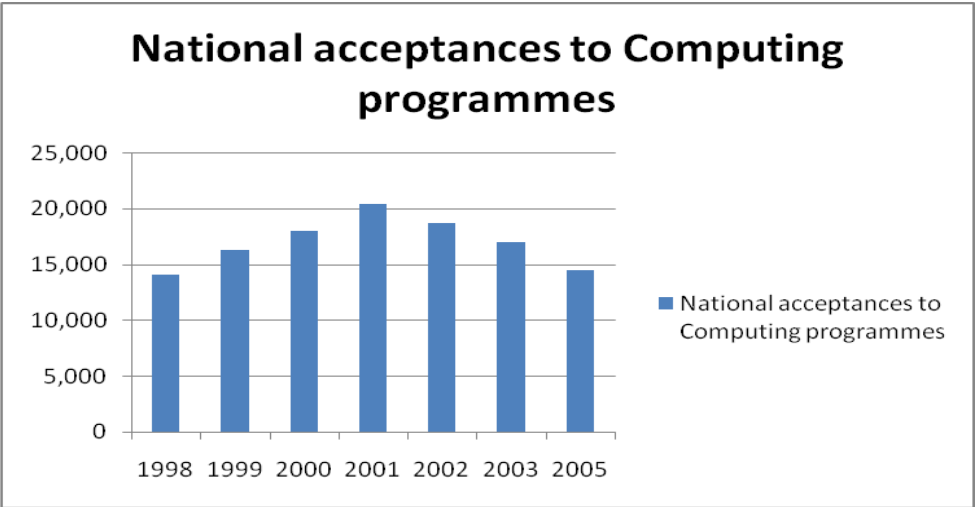
One of the uncertainties that HE faces is the unpredictability of student recruitment in specific disciplines from year to year, especially in the newer post '92 institutions and less specialised subject areas. Institutions may meet their overall target student numbers, however long term planning can be difficult, since it is not easy to predict which courses are going to see a decline in numbers and which are going to attract more students.

Likewise, the status granted to a particular discipline, and by default, the lecturers who teach it, is partly linked to the strength of the discipline at attracting students. The demand for a specific course can vary significantly from year to year and just because a programme is currently popular does not guarantee that it will remain so in the future. Since HEIs are dependent on student numbers for financial viability, they are susceptible to the whims of students who choose programmes for a wide variety of reasons, not always linked to future employment opportunities (Brennan et al.,

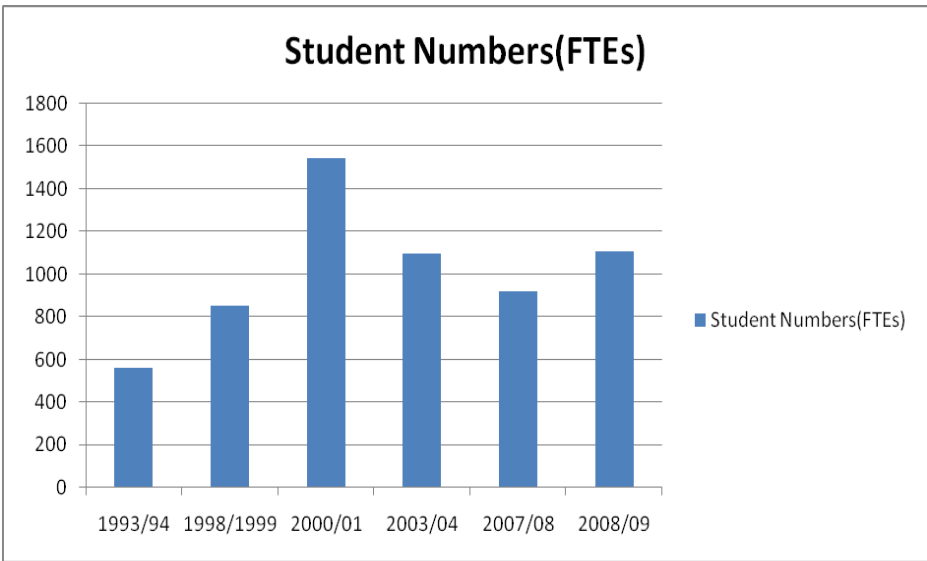
2010; Becher et al., 2001; Barnett, 2000). Institutions are therefore competing with each other for student numbers; however there is competition within universities for students as well.

Universities and/or disciplines which 'recruit' rather than 'select' students are particularly dependent on student numbers in order to survive, and this has meant that some disciplines have found it necessary to re-invent themselves so as to attract more students. For example some Chemistry departments rebadged their courses as Forensic Science in order to widen their appeal to students and some Computer Science departments, including the one in my study, have expanded their portfolio into new areas such as Computer Games, in order to increase student numbers.

During the late 1980s and 1990s the number of students choosing to study computing followed the growth generally of the numbers entering HE. However after the much publicised dot com bubble burst in 2000, the numbers began to decline (Diagrams 7 & 8). One of the reasons for this was that the public were led to believe that all the work had moved overseas, and that there was no longer any demand for computing graduates in the UK.



**Diagram 7<sup>9</sup>** - UK Computing student numbers



**Diagram 8** - Computing student numbers for institution in survey

Other factors which have been attributed to the downturn in student numbers include the fact that some students no longer consider studying computer science as necessary to being good at computing. One reason

<sup>9</sup> Compiled from HESA data

for this is the fact that computers are now in common usage. Similarly, the amount of mathematics and programming in traditional computer science courses is off-putting to many potential students since they perceive these as difficult.

Thus the reduction in computing student numbers has caused much debate and resistance within the academic computer science community<sup>10,11</sup> (CPHC (Council of Professors and Heads of Computing), 2010, 2008, 2006). Computer Science departments have had to decide whether they should continue to run the same programmes as they have done for many years, although they might not be attracting as many students, or whether they should react to the changes in the market and develop programmes which are more attractive to students, but not necessarily considered as academically rigorous by some of the lecturers (Hoganson, 2005). There are academics who think that universities should produce courses which attract students and others who are of the opinion that they know best with regards to what the students should study and therefore are not prepared to change their programmes in line with student demand.

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<sup>10</sup> Council of Professors and Heads of Computing - <http://www.cphc.ac.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmsctech/335/335we54.htm>

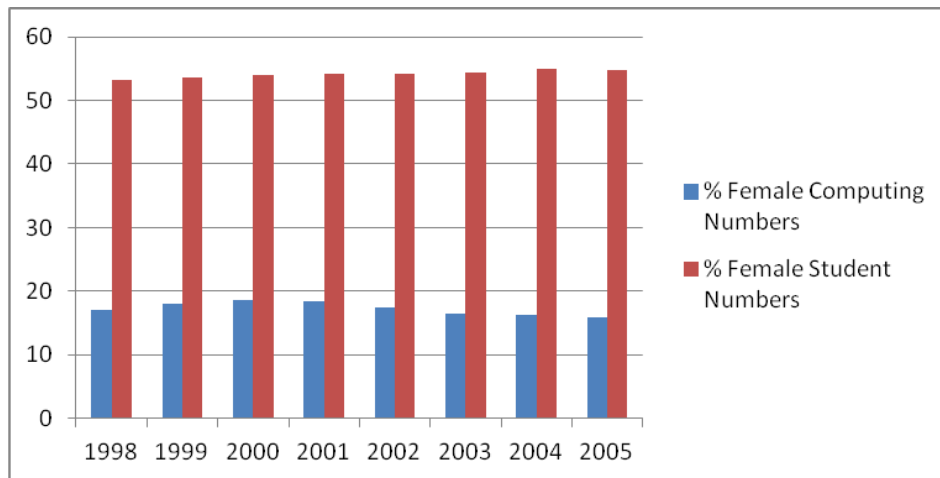
The decline in the number of students applying to study computing means that many institutions have found themselves having to compete with each other in order to attract students. One consequence has been that the older universities have tended to recruit the students with the stronger mathematics ability and thus more able to cope with the demands of computer science programmes. This has meant that the newer universities have tended to move away from the more theoretical aspects of the discipline and diversified into areas, although not exclusively, where a strong mathematics background is less important.

One argument used by some lecturers against offering the students the courses they want is that these newer and more specialised programmes will not be recognised by employers. However this does not appear to be a concern for today's students, since programmes such as Computer Games and Animation attract large student numbers. Therefore the more pragmatic academics take the view that if they do not move some way to producing the types of courses that the students are looking for then they might find themselves with no students to teach at all. This view is shared by Becher et al. (2001), who concur with the view that disciplines need to attract students to ensure their long term viability, because university

management will not support disciplines which are not successful at generating income.

Any discussion on the increase in student numbers in HE would not be complete without commenting on the large increase in females now attending university (Scott, 1995). Diagram 9 shows that more than 50% of the students attending UK universities are female. Therefore the relative decline in computing student numbers can be partially attributed to the fact that the subject area is failing to attract this new increased student market. The percentage of females applying for computing programmes has remained largely unchanged at less than 20% (Diagram 9), and therefore the discipline has not benefited from the increase in female student numbers that other disciplines have witnessed. The reasons why females are not attracted to computing courses are multiple and outwith the scope of my study; however, research indicates that female applicants tend to be more interested in the 'soft' disciplines and are therefore under-represented in the 'hard' disciplines such as computing (Becher et al., 2001; Clegg, 2001).





**Diagram 9 – UK female student numbers<sup>12</sup>**

## Summary of the changes in HE

In this chapter we have seen that there is no one view of what constitutes a university but rather there are a wide range of universities each with their own diverse student body. Universities are constantly changing and both they and the staff who work in them have to adapt to external and internal demands (Delanty, 2007; Locke, 2007; Scott, 1995). The multiple changes which have occurred in HE have arisen as much from the culture within institutions as from external forces such as political and socio-economic (Scott, 1995).

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<sup>12</sup> Compiled from HESA data

The massification of HE has led to larger more complex institutions, more managerialism within institutions, together with increased competition within and between institutions, as well as a loss of autonomy for some academic staff. Many HEIs now have a more diverse range of students and offer a wider range of subjects. New disciplines have been developed and older disciplines have sometimes had to reinvent themselves in order to remain attractive to students. Thus the change in popularity of particular disciplines reflects the “*complex relationship between academia and its wider environment*” (Becher et al., 2001, p175).

The perceived status of the institution and discipline, as well as wider economic issues, can influence the popularity of a subject and hence student numbers. Therefore I will also go into more detail of the relative newness of computing as a discipline together with the position of the university and the discipline within the sector as a whole. Linked to this is the increase in computing numbers in the 1980s followed by a decline in computing student numbers nationally, despite an overall increase in student numbers attending HE. Similarly, the increase in the number of females now entering HE has not been replicated in the computing area. Consequently, the changes which have taken place have not been uniform over the HE sector or even within institutions.

The institution in this survey is a post '92 university which attracts a large number of students from lower socio-economic groups thus helping to promote social mobility for its students by providing them with the opportunity to attend a university where they feel comfortable, rather than attending an institution which reinforces middle class values and where the students might feel out of place (Reay et al., 2010; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2005; Bourdieu, 1986).

The changes that have occurred in HE have led to a greater diversity of students in terms of social background, ethnicity, gender and age. In addition, the massification of HE means that students have a wider range of abilities and preparedness for HE than was the case under the previous elite system. This in turn has led to an increased focus on student drop-out rates. Therefore in the next chapter I review the literature on student retention and achievement in order to identify whether a student's decision to leave or remain on a programme is influenced in any way by lecturers.

## **Chapter 3 – Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter sets out to summarise and evaluate existing research relevant to the topic of lecturers' perceptions of the changing student population. Relatively little research exists that is directly connected to my area of study, namely the views of the lecturers as to their perception of the influence they have on student retention and achievement. My study therefore differs from and complements other work, since I am investigating the lecturers' perspective on these issues, and seeking to evaluate whether the views of the lecturers in my survey match those of the students, and whether, and to what extent, lecturers have adapted their teaching and assessment approaches to cater for a diverse student population. I have therefore chosen to base this review on the literature around the changing student population, and particularly on student retention and achievement, much of which is based on the students' rather than the lecturers' perspective.

The chapter provides a historical overview of research into student retention, and then focuses on some of the changes which have taken

place in recent years in terms of changes in HE, specifically the massification of HE and the consequent increase in the diversity of students participating in HE. I then take up ideas, derived largely from Tinto's work, that emphasise the importance of the integration of students into HE as well as the ability of students to integrate university studies into other aspects of their lives.

The starting point for this review was a previous study of student retention which I had undertaken. During this earlier study I discovered that most existing research focussed on the student and their perceptions of their HE experience. Little, if any, work has investigated lecturers' perspectives. Consequently, I decided that I would like to approach my investigation from the lecturers' perspective.

My earlier study began with two wide ranging literature reviews on student retention by Fitzcharles (2001) and Hall (2001) as well as a Universities United Kingdom (UUK) report on Student Services (2002). The UUK report was based on work undertaken by the Institute for Access Studies (IAS), Staffordshire University<sup>13</sup> which analysed the relationship between student support services and student retention. These papers were then used to identify other articles of interest. In addition, online searches were carried

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<sup>13</sup> IAS report can be found at <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/student-services/>

out using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), British Educational Index (BEI), Ingenta and Emerald to identify other relevant sources. A systematic search was also made of several journals to identify articles both directly and indirectly related to the area of research.

The initial study looked at both the FE and HE sectors. However given that the institution in this particular study is a university, I focussed mainly on the HE sector, only including studies involving FE where they were clearly relevant. Similarly, at the time of the earlier study much of the research on retention had been carried out in the United States (US); however an extensive amount of work has subsequently taken place in the UK, so the decision was made to concentrate on UK research and, where available, work relating to the Scottish HE sector. Scotland has a distinctive education system. In particular students in Scotland are more likely to stay in the family home compared to their counterparts in England. This was particularly relevant to my study since around 90% of the university's students are recorded as living in Scotland immediately prior to beginning their programme, and the overwhelming majority of these, around 84%, are from the immediate regional area and therefore living at home<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> University data for session 2009/10

## **Student retention and achievement**

Much early research on student retention focussed on the students and specifically on trying to find out the reasons why students drop-out from programmes, in order to identify and put in place strategies for improving student retention (Martinez, 2001, 1997, 1995; Martinez et al. 1998; Davies 1999; Tinto 1994, 1987, 1982, 1975). Tinto (1993, 1987, 1982, 1975) who carried out work in the US, was one of the first to provide a framework of why students withdraw from courses. Tinto's model of student retention states that a student must be completely integrated both academically and socially into an institution in order to be committed to the institution and the final goal of achieving the award. Tinto's assertion that if integration and commitment did not occur then the student would be less likely to remain on the course and succeed was confirmed by other studies of the HE sector in the US (Stage 1989; Braxton et al., 1988; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983). The findings of this American research concur with several of the characteristics of non-persisting students identified by Walker (1999) and Kowalski and Cangemi (1983), in particular with the fact that students who withdraw from courses are often unable to identify with or become involved in college/university life and activities. However, Ozga et al. (1998), who looked at reasons for non-completion in British HEIs, question

Tinto's model since it tends to concentrate on the student and does not consider the ways in which the student integrates with the institution. The mainly qualitative work by Ozga et al. (1998) provided a wider focus and investigated the differences between traditional and mature students. Similarly, Walker (1999) extends Tinto's model to include the student's integration with the department they are part of, and more importantly, the student's relationship with the staff. However, the majority of the research in the area is centred on the students' perspective whereas I am interested in the viewpoint of the lecturers.

The results of the largest UK study into retention issues in FE to date, which was carried out by Martinez et al. (1998), largely concurred with the findings of a Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) survey (1998) of research on retention and achievement as well as work by Davies (1999) and similar research in the HE sector by Dodgson and Bolam (2002), Thomas and Yorke (2001) and Yorke (1999, 1997). The most significant finding was that whilst students often withdrew from courses because of external factors, there was no evidence to support the claim, often made by institutions, that poor retention and achievement was outwith their control. The recommendation from these researchers was that further and higher education institutions could do more to improve retention by putting more emphasis into pre-course guidance as well as on



going guidance and support. Therefore I will be interested to know what the lecturers in my study think are the reasons for student withdrawal and whether they think that it is something which they can influence directly.

Following on from this, evidence from the literature on student retention, and confirmed by research by Action on Access (2002) indicates that student retention has become more prominent in the agenda of colleges and universities, and that many HEIs are now keen to adopt strategies to address attendance problems and support students such as those suggested by Fitzcharles (2001), Barwuah et al. (1997), Martinez (1997) and others (Caleb, 2004; Ker, 2004; Hall, 2001; Martinez, 2001; McDougall, 2001; Davies, 1999; Ozga et al., 1998; Rabb, 1998; Hayes, 1996;). Similarly, a number of studies have focussed on the first year student experience in order to gain a better understanding of why students stay or drop out of courses and what strategies can be put in place to improve the student experience (Brinkworth et al., 2008; Yorke et al., 2008; McInnis et al., 2000).

In addition to trying to improve the support provided by academic staff, and in recognition of the needs of the wider client group, many HE institutions have enlarged their Student Support Service departments in

the belief that this will lower drop-out rates (Universities UK, 2002). Universities UK (2002) identifies a student lifecycle model, which it recommends that HEIs adopt to ensure that all students, not only those at risk of withdrawal, are given consistent support, from pre-entry guidance, induction, on course guidance as well as pre and post-exit advice on employment, further study or training.

The Universities UK report (2002) recognises that it is important that the student lifecycle model is not left to Student Support Service departments to implement in isolation, and recommends that the model is integrated into the complete student experience. One of the main reasons given for this is that student services tend to be reactive rather than pro-active and it is important that students at risk of withdrawal are identified and given support as quickly as possible. Research in the FE sector (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Thomas and Yorke, 2001; Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), 1998) also states that a pro-active guidance system, which monitors attendance and follows through with appropriate support and guidance for the students, can help retention, and the academic guidance tutor is identified as usually being best placed to do this. Therefore lecturers are again being identified as important in helping student retention, so I want to know if the lecturers in my study share this view.

A conclusion drawn in a paper by Quinn (2004) was that although the universities in her study had developed institutional strategies to support students, the students were not necessarily aware of the services available to them, and therefore there were issues around institutional change and communication strategies. This finding concurs with those of Christie et al. (2004) and therefore, although many institutions have greatly expanded the support provided for students, particularly in the area of increasing Student Service provision, the message to institutions is that it is not merely enough to increase the support available to students, but that it is also essential that strategies are put in place to ensure that students are aware of the services on offer and encouraged to make use of them. One of the ways in which this improved communication could be achieved is through the academic guidance system, but for this to be effective the lecturers themselves need to be aware of the full range of services available to students.

The extent to which institutions have introduced measures to try to improve student retention has varied considerably and evidence from the literature (Beggs et al., 2003; Gibbs, 2003; Johnston, 1997) confirms the view of Read et al. (2003) that the post '92 institutions, such as the one in my study, are more active in this area than the older universities. A

number of reasons for this are identified, including the fact that the post '92 universities have a greater diversity of students and that the institutions and the staff operate in a culture, which is more aware of the differing needs of the students. Similarly, the post '92 universities tend to have higher drop-out rates than their pre '92 counterparts (HESA, 2009<sup>15</sup>) so there is a greater requirement for them to improve student attrition rates.

As stated above, many of the measures adopted by institutions to improve retention rates have concentrated on expanding the support services available to students. These initiatives have therefore focussed on support staff rather than lecturing staff. Therefore I am interested to know whether the lecturers in my study are aware of the range of services available and whether they communicate these to the students.

### **Socio-economic influences on retention and achievement**

Research on retention has moved away from the general factors influencing student retention and focussed more specifically on the socio-economic backgrounds of the students in order to see what, if any, bearing

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_contentandtask=viewandid=2064andItemid=141](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=viewandid=2064andItemid=141)

it has on student persistence. Yorke (2004) and HEFCE data (2001) show that student retention correlates inversely with social class. This has particular significance for Scottish HEIs, especially the institution in my study. Currently, 44.3% of school leavers in Scotland enter HE, including 26.2% from deprived areas (2009/10)<sup>16</sup>. This means that many of the students are very different from the 'traditional' students of the past, and therefore institutions need to reassess the support they provide for all students and investigate whether they are doing enough to support the 'non-traditional' students.

Research by Quinn et al. (2005) conducted on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, explores the issues surrounding working-class drop-out from both national (UK wide) and local perspectives, and therefore differs from previous research which had concentrated on one or other of these areas, rather than investigated the similarities and contrasts between them. Quinn et al. (2005) used a participative methodology involving a wide range of contributors, not only students who had dropped out of university, to gather the data, thus providing the researchers with a wide range of views and opinions. Their work focussed on students who were working class, under twenty-five, and had dropped out of university. Therefore it does not provide comparisons between students who had

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/API0809>

withdrawn and those who had remained, nor does it allow conclusions to be reached on whether mature students drop-out of courses for the same reasons as younger students. However, when the findings are considered together with other work, which looked mainly at continuers, then there is broad agreement.

The work by Quinn et al. (2005) is of specific interest to me because the institutions investigated had similar characteristics to the university in my study. Quinn et al. (2005) looked at four institutions, one of them Scottish, that had high participation rates from students from lower class backgrounds and which were considered to be 'local', with the majority of the students living near the university rather than moving away from home. Similarly, the universities had all adopted strategies to tackle student withdrawals and the study wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of these. Quinn et al. (2005) discovered that despite the efforts of these institutions to introduce measures to retain students, high drop-out rates still persisted. Therefore it can be concluded that student retention is complex, and simply putting strategies in place is not in itself sufficient to improve attrition rates.

Although Yorke et al. (2003) and HEFCE (2001) link retention rates and social class, Quinn et al. (2005), together with other studies (Thomas et al., 2006; National Audit Office<sup>17</sup>, 2002; HEFCE, 2001; Johnston, 1997) question the assumption that students from working class backgrounds are more likely to drop-out of programmes due to academic failure, and state that social class does not necessarily correlate to academic ability. This finding also concurs with that of Christie et al. (2004) who found that students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds were likely to withdraw from courses for much the same reasons, and so they warn against making broad generalisations based on social and cultural background. Therefore the evidence suggests that if appropriately qualified students are enrolled on programmes, then there is no reason why students from poorer backgrounds should be less successful, and so other explanations for high attrition rates are required.

Quinn et al. (2005) present a useful comparison of student drop-out in both Scottish and English contexts, which is again something not covered by previous work. Their comparison confirmed the differences in culture between the two education systems, and in particular it identified that in Scotland students from working class backgrounds were more likely to believe that a university education would enhance their career prospects

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nao.org.uk/home.htm>

than their English counterparts. The researchers also found that although Scottish students were more likely to stay at home, there was greater mobility between institutions with students changing universities in order to find the course which best suited their requirements. Thus high withdrawal rates do not necessarily indicate that a student has withdrawn from HE. It may be that the students have chosen to enrol on a programme at another institution because their current course and/or institution does not meet their needs or expectations. These findings are extremely important for the university in my study since there are three other universities situated nearby, providing students with the opportunity to change institutions if they so wish.

### **Widening of the socio-economic gap**

Empirical research comparing two groups of people, one set born in 1958 and the other in 1970, with a follow up analysis of a third cohort who grew up in the 1980s, was carried out by Machin et al. (2004) in order to investigate the link between educational achievement and social class in the UK. This study looked at the UK system as a whole and did not look at all of the factors relating to student achievement. However, the findings are consistent with those of Quinn (2004) and others (Taylor et al., 2011;



Brennan et al., 2010; Crozier et al., 2008; Archer, 2007; Iannelli, 2007; Thomas et al., 2006; Reay et al., 2005; Read et al., 2003; Archer et al., 2000; Sutton Trust, 2000), in that although the government at that times agenda of increasing the number of school leavers entering HE was on target, closer inspection of the statistics showed that the socio-economic gap in terms of students entering HE was in fact widening and that the aim of equality of opportunity for all was not necessarily being achieved. Machin et al. (2004, p126) show that the government's aim of increasing access to HE in order to lessen the socio-economic gap in society has actually had the opposite effect, and the expansion of the education system has *'disproportionately benefited students from wealthier backgrounds, rather than the most able'*. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2011, p145) state that *'there has been only a marginal increase in the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering universities'*. Machin et al. (2004) also found that parental social class and income are more closely linked to a graduate's success or otherwise at gaining suitable employment than previously thought, and that academic ability can no longer be used to predict educational achievement. Machin et al. (2004) conclude that the widening socio-economic gap has wide implications for government policy, and therefore for the institution in my study, given the socio-economic background of the majority of students that it attracts.

## **Institutional culture and 'non-traditional' students**

A small-scale quantitative study contrasting the reasons why students continued or withdrew from two Scottish Universities was carried out by Christie et al. (2004) during session 2001/02. This study involved two very different types of institutions as well as both continuing and non-continuing students, thus differing from many previous studies which have only looked at the reasons why students have withdrawn from courses rather than considering why others have continued on their chosen course. The number of questionnaires completed by students from each institution was roughly the same that is, 81 and 88 respectively, comprising 106 continuers and 63 non-continuers. Christie et al. (2004) acknowledge the limitations of the small sample size and accept that withdrawers were underrepresented in the sample, which could affect the soundness of the assumptions drawn. Similarly, in order to fully test the validity of the findings, it would have been useful to know more about the students surveyed, for example were the students at one of the institutions older and more likely to have family and other commitments. However, the results of the study show that continuing and non-continuing students often had broadly the same experiences and issues and that it was the way in which the individuals reacted to the pressures, irrespective of socio-economic background, which led to their decision to withdraw or not.

Christie et al. (2004) conclude that it is impossible to predict which particular pressures on a specific student are likely to cause them to withdraw, and they warn against making broad generalisations based on social and cultural background.

One way in which the two institutions in the survey carried out by Christie et al. (2004) varied from other surveys, was that they allowed for direct comparison between one where the majority of the students stayed on campus, whereas the opposite was the case for the other institution. Christie et al. (2004) identified the concept of a 'day student' and stated that further investigation of the experiences of these types of students whilst at university was required. They subsequently went on to investigate this, in a small-scale survey which involved interviewing students who had attended a widening access course prior to starting university (Christie et al., 2005). Although limited by the fact that a specific group of students were interviewed, namely access students who subsequently enrolled at the university and succeeded on their chosen course, this later study provides a useful insight into the experiences of non-traditional students at two different types of neighbouring Scottish universities.

Christie et al. (2005, p7) categorise 'day students' as '*absorbed students*', '*pragmatists*' and '*separate world students*' depending on the way in which their personal circumstances impact on their life as a student. The study showed that the students recognised that they were '*different*' from the traditional view of students, and although the access programme had been provided to assist integration into university life, in most cases this did not happen to any great extent. This work concurs with Kember (1995) who also discusses the ability of the 'day student' to be able to integrate university studies with other aspects of their lives, which is an expansion of the concept of 'social integration' as identified by Tinto (1993). The majority of the students attending the university in my survey can be classified as 'day students' who live at home. There are therefore questions around their integration with the wider university. In a later chapter I will discuss the university's modular block delivery mode, and the ways in which it impacts on a student's integration or otherwise with the university as a whole.

Christie et al. (2005) extend their concept of a 'day student' and the integration of students with an institution to include the 'fit' of the 'non-traditional' student to the institution. A similar theme occurs in other studies (Wilcox et al., 2005), including Read et al. (2003, p274), who state that the stereotypical student is '*young, white, middle-class and male*', as

are the staff teaching them. Therefore the culture and ethos of many institutions is centred on the requirements and expectations of this particular group of students to the detriment of others. Similarly, Read et al. (2003, p275) who carried out a study involving students at a post '92 university, discuss the *'cultural and economic hierarchy that exists between institutions'* and how they perpetuate the stereotypes. They state that the culture of some universities is such that staff expect students to conform to their expectations rather than consider that students may have other priorities in their lives that the institution should bear in mind. Similarly, Christie et al. (2005) recommend that many university staff need to change their view of the stereotypical student in order to accommodate the diverse range of students now entering HE, and that institutions could do more to support students from lower social-economic backgrounds.

The Read et al. (2003) paper concludes by suggesting that institutions should look at their culture, as well as consider introducing a staff profile that reflects the student body. The authors accept that the issues are sector wide rather than solely institutional and that if the best interests of non-traditional students are to be served, then the hierarchy that exists between institutions needs to be addressed too. However this is something which will be difficult to achieve. The institution in my survey is a post '92 institution and therefore could be considered to be positioned

below two of its neighbouring universities in terms of the hierarchy that exists between universities. In addition, it would seem that the culture of an institution as well as the views and attitudes of staff are extremely important and therefore formed a focus for my research.

A survey by MacDonald et al. (2001) deals directly with staff attitudes to students. This study of student perceptions of staff attitudes to non-traditional students in an HEI with a well-established access policy, found that academic staff concentrated on helping students to adjust to the existing undergraduate provision, rather than considering alternative approaches appropriate to a more diverse population. Similarly, Quinn (2004) found that Scottish students were more resistant to change and felt that the university should adapt to their needs rather than they should change to 'fit' the university. Many of the students in her study considered some of the academic staff to be inflexible, and consequently the students did not feel that they were fully integrated within the institution. This finding is therefore important to my study and I want to investigate whether the lecturers consider themselves and their colleagues to be flexible or not.

Similarly, two Australian studies by Lahteenoja et al. (2005) and Taylor et al. (2004), conclude that staff tend to believe that the reasons that

students are not successful on their chosen course is due directly to the student, rather than issues such as teaching methods which staff could address themselves. Studies of students' views (Wilcox et al., 2005; Walker, 1999; Martinez, 1997; Hughes, 1996; Cullen, 1994) show that one key to improving retention rates is good staff-student interaction and that it is important that all staff are committed to the institution and providing the best possible service for the students. If staff do not show loyalty and commitment to the institution themselves then it is difficult to expect students to, whereas if all staff portray a positive image of the institution and are always seen to do their best for the student, then this will lead to building "*trust*" and "*commitment*" on the part of the student, which Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue are critical in relationship development and therefore to retaining students. Consequently, I am interested to know where the lecturers in my study are positioned with respect to this and their views of the students.

Thomas (2002) and Reay et al. (2001) use Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus' to examine the effect of university cultures on student retention. Thomas's empirical work (2002, p423) is based on "*a case study of a modern university in England that has good performance indicators of both widening participation and student retention*". Poor retention rates are often cited as a side effect of widening access to higher education;

however the university in Thomas's study (2002) is successful at both widening access and retaining students. Therefore the findings in Thomas's paper are particularly valuable for my study, since the university in my study has a diverse student population and relatively high attrition rates.

Thomas (2002, p439) identifies the following characteristics as being important from a student's perspective, namely:

- *Staff attitudes and relationships with students*
- *Inclusive teaching and learning strategies*
- *Collaborative or socially-orientated teaching and learning*
- *Range of assessment practices that give all students, irrespective of their preferred method of assessment, the opportunities to succeed*
- *Choice, flexibility and support with regard to accommodation*
- *Diversity of social spaces*
- *Students are allowed to be themselves, and not expected to change to fit in with institutional expectations which are very different to their own habitus.*



Thomas (2002) found that the students considered their complete experience at university, both socially and academically to be important to their success. The students interviewed in Thomas's survey stated that the teaching and learning experience, and their interaction with lecturers, all influenced their decision on whether to remain on a course or not. Therefore, Thomas (2002) states that from a student perspective there are many things that institutions can do to increase student retention and achievement rates, and that rather than HEIs blaming the students for poor retention rates, HEIs should ask themselves if they could do more to support the students, especially students from non-traditional backgrounds.

I am particularly interested in Thomas's finding that students view lecturer attitudes as important and that they can make a difference to their experience. Therefore I would like to know if the lecturers in my study share this view and/or whether they appreciate the influence that they can have on the student experience. My study is therefore going to investigate lecturers' perspectives of some of the characteristics identified by the students in Thomas's study (2002) to try to determine whether the individual lecturer and the institution are providing the support required by the students in order to maximise student achievement.

Following on from this, a four year study by Brennan et al. (2010, p41) explored the similarities and differences of students in three different subject areas in a range of UK universities. This work is helpful to me because it identifies three contexts for student learning, as well as a typology of eight student orientations which are useful for gaining a better understanding of the range of students and the different types of university experiences that they can have. From these classifications, I consider most of the students in my case study university to have a type C experience, that is, an *“individualised rather than shared experience”* (Brennan et al., 2010, p41). The students have many demands on their time, and their university studies are only a small part of their life. Many students can be thought of as ‘part-time’ although they are enrolled on a full-time course. For these students *“university is about study and credentials rather than the larger socialisation claims made traditionally for the university experience”* (Brennan et al., 2010, p41). Therefore, although there is evidence to suggest that the integration of students with the wider university is important for student retention and achievement, we should also acknowledge that not all students have the same expectations and requirements from a university education.

Brennan et al. (2010), Christie et al. (2005) and Henkel (2001) all suggest that lecturers should educate the students they have, not the students they think they have, or the students they would like to have. Therefore I will be interested to know whether the lecturers are aware of the different backgrounds of their students and whether their teaching approaches are inclusive of this diversity. Given that the institution in my survey is successful at widening access to higher education to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, then an institutional culture which encompasses this diversity of the student body should promote an environment which maximises student retention and achievement.

### **Summary of review of the literature**

I am starting from the viewpoint that staff attitudes are important and can make a difference to the student experience. Therefore I intend investigating what the views of the lecturers in my survey are, and whether they have adopted teaching, learning and assessment techniques which promote student integration.

The literature shows that much early research into student retention issues concentrated on the reasons why students withdrew from courses rather

than the factors which encouraged them to stay (Tinto, 1993, 1987, 1982, 1975). Initially, the reasons given for students withdrawing from courses were attributed to external factors and institutions could do little to address the issues. However, Davies (1999) and Martinez (1997) identified that this was not necessarily the case and that students leave courses for a multitude of reasons and although it is impossible to have 100% retention, there are initiatives that institutions can undertake to increase student retention.

More recent research into student withdrawal rates has been extended to include an exploration of the wider influences on students, including the culture of the institution, the integration of the student with the institution and the socio-economic background of the students. With a decreasing number of school leavers, and government policy of attracting more students into HE, then the challenge for the future is how to widen participation in HE, whilst still achieving high levels of retention and achievement.

Limited research has been carried out on the views of academic staff on student retention/achievement, but the studies which have taken place show that the opinions of the staff contradict the evidence from students, namely, that academic staff can make a difference as to whether students

remain on a course or not. Therefore, as part of my study I intend considering the lecturers' concept of the 'non-traditional student'. The institution in the study states that student retention and flexibility in education are important, especially since it recruits a substantial number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and it also has large numbers of students withdrawing from courses. Similarly, the institution enrolls a sizeable numbers of part-time students (approximately 8500) and states that this will be an area of growth and strength for the university and that the institution will provide a flexible curriculum for students, incorporating new modes of delivery including online and blended learning, which will therefore present major challenges for all lecturers.

Clearly lecturers need to feel empowered if they are to be expected to both form and review institutional policy. If lecturers do not feel empowered and the culture of the institution is overly collegiate then nobody will ever make a decision, nor will lecturers ever accept responsibility for their own actions. Therefore as part of my research I want to test the extent to which lecturers are engaged with university policy. I also realise that the institution should put appropriate staff development opportunities in place to assist lecturers in developing new approaches and therefore I am interested to see what advice and training

is provided for lecturers so that they can develop the innovative curriculum the University desires.

Encouraging wider access and increasing participation rates is outwith the focus of this study, since my study is interested in the lecturers' perceptions and experiences of the students once they are enrolled on a programme. My study is based on a post '92 university with a diverse student population and I am interested in determining the extent to which lecturers are aware of the needs of the students. As a student wrote on an annual student experience questionnaire for session 2006-2007, '*Some lecturers are better than others; some show total apathy towards students, class experience is greatly affected by how good the lecturer is (or how much they care)*'.

Consequently, my study involves investigating what academic staff think about the diverse student body by asking the lecturers whether they consider the students to have changed over time, together with whether they have seen their own role change, and if so, in what ways. The outcome of my study will be a better understanding of the perceptions lecturers have of their role and the students that they teach, and whether

the diversity of students has led to changes in their approaches to teaching and learning.

I consider the lecturers' views to be important because, as the review of the literature shows, a student's decision to remain or withdraw from a programme can be greatly influenced by staff attitudes and whether they feel 'cared for' by the institution. In order to gain a greater appreciation of the lecturers' perceptions of the students, I will need to get a better understanding of the impact of the changes that have taken place in HE such as massification of HE, and the resultant diversity in the study body have had on the identities of the lecturers. Consequently, I will discuss each of these in more detail in later chapters.

My study is small scale and although specific to a particular academic discipline within a large university, the findings should be of value not only to the particular School and institution in the study, but the wider academic community as well. The outcome of this study will be a better understanding of the views of a group of computing lecturers at a modern Scottish university as to the ways in which their role has, or has not changed over time, including their perceptions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century students, and whether they have changed their teaching and learning approaches to

accommodate the diversity of the student population. The outcomes should be of use to the institution and wider FE and HE communities, since it will provide a greater understanding of the perceptions lecturers have of their students, highlight areas of good practice and identify areas for improvement in current practice.



## **Chapter 4 - Methodology**

Prior to carrying out my study I had to make a number of decisions about the methodological approach, methods and research instruments I was going to use. This chapter gives the details and reasons for the choices I made. I begin by stating the aims of my research and my research questions, then I provide background information on the site of my study, before discussing the research methodology I decided to use. An explanation of the methods I used to collect my data is given, as well as the ways in which I approached the analysis and interpretation of the data. I also discuss my use of mind maps, which was an integral part of the research process, before concluding with a discussion of ethical considerations.

### **Aims of the research**

The expansion in student numbers in recent years has seen 44.3% of school leavers in Scotland entering HE (2009/10) and therefore the massification in HE has led to a diverse student population<sup>18</sup>. Lecturers' perceptions of massification and diversity matter because research

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/API0809>

indicates that a student's success or otherwise on a course can be influenced by the standard of the teaching and learning experience, as well as the quality of the interaction or otherwise students have with their lecturers. Of course, the responsibility for student retention and achievement does not rest solely with the individual lecturer, and therefore my study will also consider if, and what, support academic staff require from the institution to allow them to achieve this goal.

My two main objectives were therefore:

- To determine the extent to which academic staff have seen their role change in light of the massification of HE.
- To gain an understanding of the perception academic staff have of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century student.

The main aim of my research is a better understanding of the ways in which the massification of HE have impacted on the role of the lecturer in order to gain a better understanding of what, if any, influence lecturers think they have on student achievement.

## **Research questions**

Following on from these objectives I identified the following research questions:

1. How do lecturers perceive and understand the massification of HE?
2. In what ways, if any, have massification and increasing student diversity impacted on the role of lecturers?
3. In what ways, if any, have lecturers adapted their professional practice to accommodate the changing student body?

## **Context of study**

This study is a small scale case study involving computing lecturers at a large Scottish multi-campus post '92 university. I chose this approach because I wanted to investigate the perceptions of a small group of lecturers in a particular disciplinary area. I decided to focus my research on one particular academic discipline within the university, namely computing, rather than a range of disciplines, since I felt that it would give me a more detailed understanding of how the changes in HE were being

experienced by a particular group of academic staff. My study could have been extended to include a larger group of lecturers from a range of disciplines, thus providing greater breadth to the study. However, I felt it was better to have an in depth understanding of my area of investigation. Consequently, my findings will not necessarily be able to be generalised and extrapolated, which is often a criticism of case study research. However, I do think that my results are relevant and valid for the institution in the study and that some of the findings will be relevant to other institutions (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008; Hodkinson et al., 2001; Stake, 1995) and the wider academic community.

### **Insider / Outsider in the research process**

The research which I undertook required me to be researching in my own profession. Therefore, since the study was based in my own institution, one of the main dilemmas I had was that of being an insider in the research process. However, I was a relatively new insider to most of the participants and since I was based on a different campus from the majority of the lecturers interviewed, I considered myself to be both an insider and an outsider in the research process.

As a new insider I did not have the detailed knowledge of the institution and its micropolitics that I might have done, which meant that I had fewer preconceptions and biases. It also meant that since I was not known to most of the participants they may not have been as willing to participate in my investigation as I would wish, making the gathering of information more difficult to organise. However, this was not the case and no one declined to be interviewed. Similarly being an insider was an advantage since I was able to access any additional information which I required, from for example institutional documents, relatively easily, and it also meant that as my study progressed I was able to gain a better understanding of the way in which the institution was structured and operated.

Platt (1981) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of academics as interview subjects and in particular the concept of interviewing one's peers, including peers in other institutions, as well as in own institution and subject discipline. My situation was slightly different again from both these roles, since, although I was interviewing my colleagues, I was based on a different campus from most of them, and therefore I had less direct contact with the interviewees. Similarly, my area of research was in a different cognate area, that is, I was carrying out educational research with colleagues in the computing discipline, so some of the possible issues that could have arisen around power were less of a problem.

Platt (1981, p75) states that one of the advantages of being a complete outsider is that the interview is completely anonymous and the interviewer and interviewee do not need to be concerned about any loss of anonymity, since *“the relationship has no past and no future”*. Similarly, it is sometimes the case that the interviewer is not the person responsible for the research and therefore it is easier for them to distance themselves from the research. This was not the case for me because I was conducting the interviews with my peers; however I do not consider this to have been a disadvantage.

A possible difficulty of being an insider and interviewing my peers was that as interviewer and interviewee we were known to each other and therefore likely to have preconceptions of each other. Likewise, we were going to have to work together long after the interview had taken place and therefore there could be hesitancy on the part of the interviewees as to what exactly to reveal, especially if it was not going to look positively on them. This was an area of possible concern, however I found, as did Platt (1981, p81) that *‘people freely revealed many things that fell short of recognised practice’*, although in my case the analysis will show that the interviewees tended to portray themselves in a positive light and were

critical of their colleagues rather than themselves. This is not unsurprising, since as Taylor (2008, p29) states *“remembering and sharing aspects of personal experience and perspective are themselves creative, rather than objective acts – they tend to portray respondents as they want ‘others to see them’ (Errante, 2000, p21)”*.

I was also aware that if the interviewer and interviewee are both know to each other then there could be a tendency to engage in conversation and gossip. Since I was a new insider then the latter was less of an issue, however some interviewees were interested to know what my view, as someone who was new to the institution, was on some areas. It was sometimes difficult not to engage in conversation when asked for my opinion. However I resisted the temptation as much as possible, and tried to move the interview on.

Similarly Platt (1981) suggests that once word starts circulating about interviews taking place and the questions that are being asked, then it is possible that those people still to be interviewed will be influenced, albeit indirectly (Platt, 1981). However, no one asked me who else I was going to be speaking to, and since, as my research shows, there is little

opportunity for lecturers to get together to discuss issues formally or informally, I am reasonably confident that this did not happen.

## **Research approach**

The use of mind maps has been central to my research process, from the initial decision to embark on this journey onwards. At each and every step of the way I have used mind maps to guide me. For me, the main advantages of using mind maps are their ability to represent data in a non-linear fashion, as well as the flexibility that they provide, since they are easy to change and update, and large amounts of information can be condensed onto one page (Reason, 2010; Wheeldon et al., 2009).

At the beginning of the process I used mind maps to list my ideas about what areas I could research and then once I had decided on a general area I used mind maps to help generate my aims and research questions. The use of software to produce my mind maps further enhanced the process, since it meant that I was able to move information around and consider the different ways that the information could be linked together quickly and easily.



I continued to use mind maps throughout the rest of my research. For example, when I was carrying out my literature review I produced a mind map for each of the relevant articles I read. I also used them to assist me in linking the key areas of interest together by providing mind maps for each of the areas, with details of relevant sub-areas and links to the relevant articles of interest. This therefore helped me to see how everything was related, as well as allowing me to reference points of interest quickly, if required. I also used a mind map as an aide memoire when conducting my interviews as well as using them to develop my thoughts on the initial themes and sub-themes arising from my data (Appendix 1).

I decided not to use one particular paradigm for my empirical study but rather to allow my own approach to develop, because as Horton Mertz (2002, p150) recommends, *“by developing one’s own voice, the researcher can begin to go beyond the limits imposed by another’s way of doing things in order to develop a more in-depth way of understanding and reporting experience.”*

Given that my research involved investigating the perceptions of lecturers and attributing meaning to, and interpreting the phenomena they experienced I needed to be constantly mindful of the fact that people can experience the same phenomena but perceive it in different ways (Denzin and Lincoln, 2007). Consequently, I adopted an interpretive approach in order to allow me to try to understand the perceptions of the lecturers and interpret the meaning that the lecturers gave to their reality (Crotty, 1998; Scott and Usher, 1996). I was aware of the fact that the lecturers in my study were not necessarily behaving independently, but rather they were influenced by the internal and external forces around them such as the institution, colleagues and students (Crotty, 1998). I also used an iterative approach where I repeated the analysis processes of immersing myself in the data, reflecting on the data and taking the data apart and analysing it further until I could make sense of the data (Silverman 2000; Wellington 2000).

### **Data collection**

Since I was interested in the lecturers' perceptions then it made sense to gather data from the lecturers directly, as well as from supporting documents such as university papers and HESA data, in order to produce

the evidence that I required to be able to answer my research questions and provide the support for my claims. I therefore considered using questionnaires and/or interviews as my main research instrument(s). The advantages of questionnaires are that they are economical in terms of cost and time for both the interviewer and interviewee (Cohen et al., 2000). However, questionnaires require large sample sets to be statistically significant and the return rates tend to be low. Similarly, although questionnaires allow large amounts of data to be collected, they do not allow for wider discussion and exchange of views. Hence, since my research was small scale and specific to a particular subject area within one university and I wanted to know what the lecturers' views were, I chose semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face with the lecturers and digitally recorded as my main research instrument. Thus avoiding the issues listed above, and providing a rich source of data. I considered the semi-structured interviews to be more appropriate than structured interviews because it is only through dialogue that you can *'become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent'* (Crotty, 1998, p75). Similarly, *"interviews 'flesh out meanings that often remain ambiguous or hidden in the statistical results of surveys where, on broad issues, individuals have only the chance to offer hypothetical responses to prescribed answers'"* (Clark, 1987, xxvi in Locke, 2010, p252). A possible disadvantage of this

method was that the interviews could be time consuming and analysis of the data difficult (Cohen et al., 2000), however due to careful planning of the questions and structure of the interview, I did not find this to be the case.

Similarly, I considered that a semi-structured interview was a suitable choice because it would give the interviewees the chance to talk about their experiences, whilst giving me a reasonable amount of control over the situation, and also providing me with a degree of flexibility to follow other lines of enquiry that arose. I had a set of questions and areas which I wanted to discuss with the interviewees, however adopting this more flexible approach meant that I was able to change the order of the questions and introduce new questions depending on the responses which I received. It also meant that I did not miss out on important data because I had not previously considered the additional questions which arose as relevant, and therefore had not included them on my initial list. I consider this opportunity to adjust to each individual situation an advantage of conducting the interviews myself as opposed to someone else doing it for me, as is sometimes the case in large projects.

I thought about video recording the interviews, however I decided that there was nothing extra to be gained from doing that and I was mindful of the fact that I should not gather unnecessary data. However I did record the interviews using a digital voice recorder, which allowed me to concentrate on what was being said and thus to change the order of my questions and follow through with additional questions as appropriate. I feel that if I were to have taken notes then it would have acted as a distraction both to myself, since I might have missed other salient points as I was writing things down, as well as off-putting for the interviewee, since they might have been concerned about what I was writing. Similarly, since the '*process of recording is not neutral*' (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p102) then by electronically recording the interviews and transcribing them later, then I was eliminating a possible area of misrepresentation by only recording what I felt was important at that time. It also allowed me to replay the interviews as often as I needed, thus enabling me to study the data in different ways, as suggested by Silverman (2000).

I carried out a pilot study to determine the extent to which the interview questions and data collection methods would allow my research questions to be answered. I used a mind map as an aide-memoire and I recorded my pilot interview. I then transcribed the recording of the interview and carried out an initial analysis creating a mind map to note the main themes

emerging from the data. Some small changes were made to the questions following the pilot study and my decision to use a mind map was confirmed, since I found that it was a useful prompt during the interview.

I considered adopting a conversational approach where I would engage with the discussion rather than simply ask questions, however I decided against this technique because I felt that a structure was needed so that I could ensure that my research questions were answered and to prevent my own personal views from influencing the research. I tried to be as neutral as possible, which was sometimes difficult, especially when I was specifically asked for my opinion, however I did my best to move the interview on, sometimes by telling my interviewees that they had raised an interesting point or question which we could pursue further outwith the interview, and in several cases I did follow up items raised which were not directly related to my research over a coffee afterwards.

My original intention was to book a suitable room for the interviews because I felt that it was more appropriate to conduct the interviews in neutral territory, such as a meeting room, rather than the interviewees own office. I did appreciate that being interviewed in their own room would help the participants to relax and be more open (Fontana et al., 1994). However I felt that it would be better to try to avoid external interruptions,

which could affect the flow of the interview. This approach worked well for the interviews at the smaller campus, however, apart from one exception, all the interviewees based at the main campus offered the use of their own staffroom for the interviews and so after being persuaded that the interviews would not be interrupted, I decided to go ahead with this suggestion. It is worth noting that none of the interviews were interrupted, especially since the majority of them took place in the period immediately prior to or during the May exam diet when I would have expected students to be contacting lecturers.

In order to put the interviewees at their ease, I started each interview with a general question asking the lecturers to describe their background, although most of what they said I either knew already or could have found elsewhere, such as from CVs. I did not limit myself to a specific length of time for the interviews. If interviewees asked me when I was setting up the interviews how long it was likely to take, then I told them approximately an hour, which turned out to be a reasonable estimate with the actual interviews ranging from just over half an hour to over an hour in length.

Some researchers (Henkel, 2000; Scott, 1995) suggest adopting the approach of giving interviewees prior knowledge of the types of issues that are likely to be discussed during the interview. However I decided not to

give my participants any details of my research in advance of the interview because I wanted spontaneous responses rather than pre-prepared replies. My reason for this was that I felt that giving the interviewees too much information of the areas to be discussed would allow them to prepare the types of responses they might think that I wanted to hear and/or responses which reflected well on them, rather than to tell me what they actually perceived to be the case (Barnett et al., 2008). The downside of this strategy could have resulted in short superficial answers to my questions; however, I do not feel that this was the case. The fact that the interviewees were all experienced university lecturers meant that they were excellent communicators and thus they provided me with a rich source of data.



## **Choosing the lecturers**

My research was based on a sample of the School of Computing academic staff, in the university in this study. At the time of the study the School had sixty academic staff divided between three campuses, with the majority of the staff (approximately fifty) based at the main campus. The School was also divided into three subject groupings namely, '*Computing Science*', '*Business Computing*' and '*Networking and Multimedia*'. Academic staff were assigned to the group which best matched their subject specialism(s). Each of the subject groups had a number of programmes and modules associated with it. Therefore, since, I wanted to get as broad a range of views as possible I decided to interview lecturers from each of the groups.

I wanted to get an understanding of the changes that computing lecturers had seen over the years, so initially I only intended including lecturers who had been working in the university or another institution for a number of years, since I felt that new lecturers would not be able to identify significant changes in the student population. However, due to a decline in student numbers, I discovered that there had been few new appointments in recent years and those that had taken place were either of experienced lecturers to promoted posts or of new staff to teaching fellow posts.

Consequently, I did not need to rule anyone out of my selected sample in terms of lack of experience.

Initially I considered restricting my study to staff from the main campus since part of my study would involve investigating the changes that lecturers had seen with the introduction of modularisation and the block structure and these had not been implemented at the other campus to the same extent prior to the interviews. Furthermore, I was not known to most of the lecturers on the main campus at the time of the interviews, and therefore although I was an insider researcher I felt that the lecturers would be more at ease when talking to me than perhaps lecturers from the other campus who I had everyday contact with and had previously line managed. However, after careful consideration I decided to include lecturers from all campuses in my selection process since I felt it was important to get as wide a range of views as possible.

Consequently, my sample contained a cross-section of lecturers from two campuses. The one full time lecturer based at a third campus did not appear in my selection. My sample included academic staff at a range of levels from lecturer to professor. However, in order to preserve anonymity I will refer to them all as lecturers. The table below gives details of the number of lecturers I interviewed from each of the subject groups. The

Business Computing area was only represented on one campus and had fewer members than the other two areas, which is why fewer people were interviewed from that group. I feel that my sample size was appropriate for the size of the School and that interviewing more Computing lecturers would not have identified any additional significant themes. If I had interviewed lecturers from other Schools/disciplines I would have been able to compare how the changes that had taken place had impacted on lecturers in other subject areas. However the aim of my study was to determine the impact of the changes on a specific group, namely lecturers in the School of Computing.

<b>Subject Group</b>	<b>Number of lecturers 2007/08</b>	<b>Number interviewed</b>	<b>% interviewed</b>
Business Computing	13	2	15%
Computing Science	25.5	5	20%
Networking and Multimedia	21.5	4	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18%</b>

**Table 1**

There was only one female in my sample. However it was not my intention to produce a statistically representative sample in terms of males and females. Therefore given that 87% of the lecturers in the School were male I consider this figure to be representative. If I had interviewed more females I may have identified gender differences in the responses, since research shows that female academics tend to take on or be allocated the more 'nurturing' roles such as academic guidance (Haynes et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2000). For example, it is worth noting that at the start of my study, the School did have a female '*Student Liaison Officer*' (SLO) whose role it was to act as the first point of contact for students with any difficulties, and to chase up students with poor attendance. Thus the SLO performed many of the tasks often delegated to female academics. My analysis identifies that everyone interviewed was greatly appreciative of the work of the SLO, but the SLO subsequently left to take up a position at another university and was not replaced.

My study was about the ways in which massification has impacted on a particular group of computing lecturers, irrespective of gender. Therefore, I did not focus on gender specific issues. The subject area is male dominated with more than 80% of students being male (Diagram 9) and the distribution of lecturers I interviewed reflects this. My findings give the perceptions of the lecturers in this particular subject area. Their views may

differ in some respects from lecturers in areas where the balance of students and/or lecturers is more female focussed.

During the analysis process I began to question whether my sample had been biased towards 'teaching' rather than 'research' staff since many of the responses were focused on the teaching side of the lecturer role rather than research. Consequently, I considered the number of staff entered for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). There were five staff submitted, 8% of the total number of lecturers in the School. Therefore I feel that my sample is representative of the lecturers in the School and is not unduly biased towards teaching rather than research focussed staff.

A profile of each of the participants is provided in appendix 2. I have tried to provide as much relevant information as possible, whilst still trying to preserve the anonymity of the individuals. The pseudonyms that I have used are Bill, Bob, Des, Ed, Joe, Ken, Leo, Les, Luc, Phil and Tony. I have chosen to use male/unisex names and refer to all my participants as male so that the one female participant in my survey cannot be identified.

## **Data analysis and interpretation**

Analysis was an integral part of my research and occurred at a number of different levels including whilst the interviews were taking place, during transcription, and later when I read and listened to my data in more detail (Burgess et al., 2006).

My scientific background means that I have previously been attracted to quantitative data analysis techniques, and although these can be used to support qualitative analysis (Silverman, 2000) I deemed this type of approach to be unsuitable for this study. In this case study, my sample size was too small to produce statistically sound generalisations and conclusions, and moreover my data collection was based on finding out what the lecturers' opinions and perspectives were and using the data to support and explain my findings.

Throughout the period of my study I was aware of my own position with respect to my research, since otherwise *'it is impossible to claim consciousness and impossible to interpret one's data fully'* (Janesick, 2011, p62). For example, my previous positivist stance meant that I

needed to constantly remind myself that I was not trying to prove things, but rather wanting to achieve a better understanding of where staff within the School of Computing were situated so that the School could move forward constructively and in the best interests of all concerned, especially the students (Janesick, 2011). Similarly, I tried to be aware of my own views and biases and I was careful that I did not let these directly or indirectly influence the analysis of the data (Robson, 2002; Bauer et al., 2000). I was very conscious of the fact that everyone has their own perception of reality and that I needed to understand and represent the reality of the world that the lecturers found themselves in, rather than my own interpretation of that reality.

I began the analysis process at the interview stage. Immediately after each interview I constructed and/or added key themes which I had identified from the interview to mind maps. I then transcribed each interview as soon as possible after it had taken place and whilst I was carrying out the transcriptions I added any themes which came to the fore to my mind maps. Transcribing was an extremely time consuming process, however, since this involved me having to listen to the interviews in great detail over and over again I feel that it helped me to get to know my data better than if I had employed someone else to do it (Silverman, 2006).

As the collection of my data progressed, my mind maps expanded, and more themes and sub themes were identified, which resulted in more maps being created. In addition, after I had completed each transcription I listened to the whole interview once more in order to double check the accuracy of my transcription. Initially I started off with one diagram, and then I expanded it to further diagrams as each interview took place and the number of themes grew. When I created the new diagrams I tried to create one for each of the major themes that I felt were emerging from the data. The transcripts also allowed me to dissect the text and print fragments and gather pieces together in order to make sense of the data, and visualise what the data were saying, more easily than if I just grouped them electronically (Silverman, 2000). Likewise, since I recorded the interviews, I was able to play them as often as required and thus adopt the approach suggested by Janesick (1998, p64) of not only looking for themes within the data but also '*ideas, issues, conflict, and tension*' and generally trying to understand what the data were saying. Similarly, I interwove the collection of the data, analysis and theorising rather than performing them sequentially, and following a more rigid grounded theory approach (Silverman, 2000).



As well as producing themed mind maps I also created mind maps for each of the interviews, where I noted the key themes emerging from the interview, as well as references to the time on the recording where the theme was discussed, so that I could access the relevant parts of the interview on the digital recording directly if required, rather than having to listen to the whole recording again.

Once all the interviews had been completed and transcribed I read through the transcripts again, and added to the diagrams as I felt appropriate. I was always conscious of the fact that I should allow the themes to emerge from the data rather than impose my own themes. I then spent some time studying the mind maps, and the versatility of the mind mapping software which I used allowed me to rearrange and reclassify the themes as I felt appropriate. I was also able to play about with the data by moving small segments around to see if any points were related and generally looking for meaning in my data. Consequently, I feel that the use of mind maps helped my themes to emerge.

I therefore adopted a top-down approach to my analysis starting with main themes, and then burrowing further and further down into the data in order to deepen my analysis and help me make links and connections between

the data (Silverman, 2000). Thus the analysis of the data allowed the answers to my research questions to be reached and conclusions drawn. I used mind maps to help organise my thoughts when preparing to write up my chapters, and I have presented my findings in narrative form. My analysis discusses the themes which were identified, and provides evidence, both from the literature and from my work, which corroborate my deductions and provide support for my findings (Flick, 2009; Janesick, 1998).

Subjectivity as interviewer and interpreter of data were areas of possible concern, however, the use of semi-structured questions helped the validity of the former. When it came to analysis and reporting of the data, I was mindful that Watt (1998, p2) warns researchers about bias and states that it can be '*unconscious as well as deliberate*'. I was also aware that as an insider I had my own understanding of the perspectives being given by the interviewees (Green et al., 1990). Therefore these were issues which I was aware of at all times and tried to ensure that my own views and opinions on the areas under consideration did not unduly influence my analysis.

Throughout my analysis I was also aware that the choices I was making could be construed as my own interpretation of what participants had said, rather than what they had actually meant, and therefore I was careful to ensure that I was not misinterpreting the data (Strauss and Corbin, 2007; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). I felt it was acceptable to have conflicting constructs of reality from the lecturers since I wanted to know what they as individuals perceived to be the case, rather than looking for them to agree with each other or the students all the time (Silverman, 2000). Therefore I have tried to accurately reflect any contradictory cases which appeared in my data and do not perceive these as undermining my findings but rather as complementing my interpretation of the data, and helping to ensure the validity and reliability of my analysis and conclusions.

I also used secondary, usually quantitative data, as required, to substantiate my claims. For example, I gathered data on the socio-economic background of students and the changes in the numbers of students both nationally and for the institution, so that I could make a judgement as to whether the changes which were taking place were unique to the university in the study or occurring more widely. I also linked my findings wherever possible to the findings of others, in order to substantiate my interpretation of the data (Wolcott, 2009).

## **Ethical considerations**

I gave careful consideration to the ethical issues likely to arise prior to commencing the study, and I reassessed them constantly as the study continued. In doing this, I gave due cognisance to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011)<sup>19</sup>. I also did my best to adopt a realist, dispassionate perspective and tried to keep a degree of distance from the interviewees.

Bell (1999) stresses that it is impossible to undertake research without the permission and help of others and so it was important that before starting on my research study that careful thought was given to the scope of the task and the people it was likely to involve. Therefore prior to undertaking my study I considered the purpose of the proposed research (Watt, 1998), and questioned whether it was solely for my own interests, or whether it served a wider function. Clearly the project to be carried out was for my benefit since it formed a major part of a doctorate, however, that was not my sole reason for undertaking the study. I consider my research to be important because the findings and recommendations arising from my work will be able to be used within the School and University to improve the student experience.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/08/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf>

Once I had identified that I would use semi-structured interviews to gather my qualitative data I had to consider the three main ethical implications of interviewing, namely informed consent, confidentiality and consideration of the consequences of the interview for the participants (Cohen et al., 2000). Since I intended interviewing colleagues I needed to reassure them that agreeing to take part in the research would be as useful for them as myself (Bell, 1999). The question of confidentiality was extremely important since as Bell (1999) warns, the lecturers I interviewed might be very careful about what they said in case it was relayed to their managers and used against them. Therefore I ensured that the purpose of the research was explained to all interviewees and that they were given the opportunity to decline to take part. I also assured the participants that everything they said would be treated confidentially and anonymised, and I asked their permission to record the interview. Similarly, I considered the consequences of the interview for the interviewee and ensured that it was in no way detrimental to the individual. The information viewed and collected was treated sensitively, and I have tried to phrase what I have written in such a way that no lecturer can be identified (Busher, 2002).

## **Summary of methodology**

I believe the approach I adopted was the most suitable to allow me to meet my specified aims and objectives, and to answer my research questions. Central to the process was the use of mind maps which I used at every stage of my research. Mind maps helped me to gather together my thoughts and ideas and they proved to be a valuable tool throughout my study.

Deciding to undertake a case study was appropriate since my study was small and focussed on the perceptions of lecturers in a single discipline at a university (Yin, 2008; Hodkinson et al., 2001). The sample of lecturers that I chose provided me with the views of a range of lecturers at different grades with a wide variety of responsibilities and experience in a particular subject area.

In the following chapters I focus on the main themes which were identified from my semi-structured interviews with the lecturers. I also draw on theoretical work and policy documents, both internal and external to the

university, as appropriate. I begin by looking at the academic identity of the lecturers.

## **Chapter 5 – Impact of changes in role on lecturer identity**

In chapter two I discussed the major changes that have been taking place in HE, and in this chapter I will discuss the impact of some of these changes on the role of the lecturers in my study. While I am interested in the lecturers' perceptions of the students, it was clear from my interview responses that it was necessary to try to gain some understanding of the lecturers' own identities before considering their views of the student population. Consequently, in this chapter I am going to discuss the influence the type of institution and discipline have on lecturer identity, the main changes in the role of a lecturer as perceived by the lecturers interviewed, as well as the engagement of the lecturers with the wider university. I will also discuss the lecturers' opinions on the prominence given to teaching and research within the institution. I will conclude with a discussion of the views of the lecturers on the support that they provide to the students, as well as the support requirements and provision for the lecturers themselves.



## **Changes in the role of the lecturers**

As stated in chapter two, HE is subject to constant externally driven change, as well as being an actor in change in its own right. Further, these changes are often international in character, and not limited to the UK. It is therefore common to observe that the role of the academic is also undergoing constant change (Smith et al., 2012; Tight, 2010; Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Enders et al., 2008; Barnett, 2007; Becher et al., 2001; Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 1999; Scott, 1995). The volume and type of changes that have taken place can be linked to the type of institution, as well as the discipline. Blackmore et al. (2011) state that the influence of the discipline on academic identity is greatest where there is a strong research culture. Hence, the lower the position of an institution, and a discipline, in the HE hierarchy, the more likely that the professional standing of the lecturer will have been eroded over time (Becher et al., 2001).

The institution in this survey is a post '92 university which is positioned below its pre '92 counterparts in league tables. The discipline under consideration is Computer Science/Computing which is a relatively young discipline, compared to disciplines such as Law and Medicine, having only

been accepted as an academic discipline in the early 1960s. Similarly, Computer Science's classification as a hard applied discipline also has an influence on the status of lecturers within institutions, and according to some, puts them above lecturers in the soft applied disciplines (Clark, 2003; Biglan, 1973). In addition, the ever changing advances in technology and the widespread use of computers in everyday life, means that the academics in this survey, like many of their colleagues in other disciplines, have experienced a decline in their disciplinary knowledge, whilst, as we shall see, there has also been an increase in the many other demands on their time. Similarly, we shall also see that the numerous changes that have taken place in terms of the types of institution and disciplinary knowledge has meant that for those lecturers who have been in post for a significant number of years, research has become a small part of their overall role (Becher et al., 2001).

A number of researchers concur with the view that the role of academics has become much more demanding, and that academics are expected to carry out a range of duties in addition to the traditional roles of teaching and research (Tight, 2010; Enders et al., 2008; Becher et al., 2001; Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 1999; McInnis, 1996; Scott, 1995). Academics are expected to be knowledgeable in a wide variety of other areas including recruitment, marketing and finance. The extent to which

this widening of skills has impacted on individual lecturers varies considerably, depending on the institution, discipline and the individual themselves. For example, for the lecturers in my study, the decline in student numbers which took place after the dot com bubble burst, meant that there was more pressure on the individual lecturers to become involved in marketing and recruitment activities than there had been when the student numbers were healthy. I found, as did Whitchurch (2008b), who carried out a study of fifty four professional managers in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, that there was a '*blurring of boundaries*', however my study shows that the lecturers had clear views on the tasks they thought should be part of their academic role, and which tasks should be carried out by others.

Due to the relative newness of the discipline, many Computing lecturers do not have first degrees in the subject, but rather in other allied areas such as mathematics or engineering. The majority of the lecturers I interviewed were in this category, and therefore had experienced a change of discipline. Likewise, Computing lecturers have to cope with continuous changes in technology. They therefore need to adapt to change, on a daily basis, not only in terms of the subject area but also with respect to the positioning of the subject within the academic institution and the sector as a whole. Therefore it could be argued that computing

lecturers experience and need to adapt to change more readily than some of their colleagues in other disciplines.

All of the lecturers interviewed were asked how they thought their role had changed over time. The lecturers had all taken on additional roles such as Personal Tutor and/or Programme Leader as their careers had developed. The majority of lecturers considered their roles to have expanded over the years and several of them acknowledged this to be a positive change, since it enabled them to get to know the students better, which in turn made their job more interesting. However, we will also see that some of the lecturers felt that their academic roles had diminished.

Most of the lecturers had clear boundaries in their minds as to what responsibilities they considered they should undertake and those that should be carried out by administrative or support staff. There was general agreement amongst the lecturers that academic staff should get involved in wider roles but with the appropriate support. The lecturers stated that dealing with administration had always been part of their role, however many of them, in common with lecturers elsewhere, felt that administrative duties had increased substantially over time (Deem et al., 2007; Deem, 2004; Shattock, 1999; Trow, 1993).

There was also a general feeling amongst the lecturers that the university had increased the number of administrative and support staff over the years, but that they were not always available to carry out duties which would support the lecturing staff, and thus reduce their work load. The responses from the lecturers indicated that they thought that they should be involved in activities such as recruitment and Staff Student Liaison Committees because they felt that they had the appropriate expertise to advise the students, rather than staff from other support areas of the university. However several lecturers said that they were not consulted on what their views were on the tasks and duties that they should have, and that their responsibilities were sometimes changed without any prior consultation. For many of the lecturers, the expansion of support departments such as Marketing had eroded their involvement in these types of activities. For example, Joe stated:

*“At one point, my year leadership job, I noticed it getting eroded away as they brought on more admin staff, and to be honest, I didn’t really put up my hand to complain, because it was things they were doing better than me. Had they taken it away and it was leaving me with a mess or with work, I might have felt this is worthless, but there have been some good*

*moves. Some jobs have shrunk without any discussion, so I'm called the Year Leader but I do almost nothing, whereas before I used to do everything. I used to run it. I used to do timetables, I used to do everything and it just got taken away, so you are left with a title, which means really nothing. Once we had S (Student Liaison Officer), counselling was taken away from us as well, yet you were still, eroded, kind of, if that was a part of the job you really loved then it was kind of eroded, without us really noticing, maybe we've done that to admin staff in a way, you know, typing up our own exam papers and stuff. It happens and no one's really meaning to do that."*

Whilst Ken said:

*"Well recruitment visits. I think, if it's not my role then I'm not sure who would be the best person to do it because if you're talking to students about the X degree then you need to know the actual content of it, where they are coming from, what things they might have done already, what things are likely to interest them, what their options are if they decide later on not to do it, what they can do. Someone who is not familiar with the degree can do some of these things, but they can't talk about all of them. They can say you need so many "B's" and "C's" or you need an HND that*

*kind of thing, but if a student comes up with something not within that area then they can't really give an answer right away. So I think I'm saying, I don't know if it is my job, but that I'm better placed to do it than other people would be."*

Also:

*"Admissions, an awful lot of the admissions stuff that comes to me could be done by a trained monkey and it seems to come at the time of year when you are busy doing other things because it comes about kind of February when you have Panels and the new term starts and a big bundle of UCAS stuff starts to come in. I think some of it gets intercepted at admissions with standard offers, but a lot of it, because an awful lot of Colleges are doing HNDs which are not standard HNDs, anything which is not a standard one is passed to me."*

And:

*“Staff student liaison meetings that kind of thing, I think that’s my job to do. If I’m the Programme Leader then I should know what’s going on with the Programme. Not just from an academic point of view, but what the students are seeing day to day. Development of the programme, then again that’s something I think I should be doing.”*

Therefore lecturers such as Joe and Ken thought that their academic role, particularly their programme leader role, had been eroded whilst they had been expected to take on new responsibilities. Others also agreed with Ken that there was not enough administrative support, although the university appeared to employ lots of administrators and had specialised staff in areas such as marketing. Les, talking about Open Days and College visits, said:

*“I think it should be part of your job, but it should be part of your job with the proper infrastructure and support, in other words it doesn’t have to be a huge task necessarily. Your role in that job is a role relating to the programmes, a subject area, you’re bringing in the specialist knowledge that you can. Not in arranging, in doing all of it, and that’s where the difference lies, and it seems often that if you want to make something successful, which we do, then you have to accept to take on the complete*



*task, and that doesn't seem right at times, and that's not meant to be a reflection on other colleagues .... they are working hard, they are doing their best, but there is a complexity of systems in place, bureaucratic systems that seem to be sucking all colleagues off, away from their primary tasks."*

Similarly, the response from Des, when he was asked if he saw getting involved in activities such as Information sessions, recruitment visits and so on as being part of his role, was initially:

*"Oh yes, it's part of the role of the Programme Leader to do that."*

However, he then went on to say that there were a number of roles which he was expected to carry out for which he did not feel suitably qualified:

*"Well no, well actually no. I've had this discussion at times with the people above. .... I don't consider myself as a salesman. I don't consider myself to be able to go out and tell 17 and 18 years olds what's attractive about the University of X's courses, because I'm not a 17 or 18 year old, and I*

*feel that within the scope of what a Programme Leader does they are expected to take on these kind of marketing activities without having any kind of marketing background and I feel that we are floundering when we do that. .... I think what we really need there is input from people who know the market, here's what you should be doing, here's what you should be saying to them. There should be pointers about the University, pointers about the School and pointers about the programme you should be sending people away with, but I feel you are very much left. There's an expectation that you'll take on this marketing role without any marketing experience."*

Des also said that that he was expected to get involved in specialist activities, such as producing promotional material which he was not experienced in, and which would be better suited to someone in the university's marketing department:

*"One of the things I was asked to do was .... to produce an A4 leaflet .... and so I produced one .... then the following year we were asked to do it again and I said to the Head of Department at the time that I'd done one the previous year, and he said 'Oh yes, but that wasn't what marketing wanted' .... and that's what happens. We do things and you're never quite*

*sure whether you're on the right lines, and it just seems to me that there's a lack of support from other groups within the university, and it's the same with other things like admissions and those kind of things, you kind of do your own thing and hope that you're doing the right thing."*

The lecturers therefore felt that their academic role had been diminished since they were being expected to take on tasks that they were not appropriately qualified for, whilst other responsibilities, of which they had experience, had been taken from them and given to support staff. The views of the lecturers therefore reflect those discussed in Whitchurch (2008a), who draws on an empirical study based on the narratives of 24 individuals. Whitchurch (2008a) considers the boundaries between academic and support roles to be less clear, with both sides straying onto the side of the other and having to redefine their professional identities. The lecturers in my study had clear opinions as to what responsibilities they thought they should be involved in, and which should be carried out by administrative and support staff. The lecturers considered duties, which, in their opinion, involved specialised subject knowledge, to be part of their role. Whereas routine tasks which did not require specialised knowledge, such as making standard admissions decisions, were seen as something which distracted them from doing the things which they thought were more important. The lecturers were prepared to take on additional

tasks which they considered to be directly related to their academic role, however as some of the comments above show, many of the lecturers did feel that they were expected to assume new roles which they were not suitably qualified for, and/or which they were not provided with the correct support or appropriate training for, which consequently caused them to have feelings of insecurity and frustration. Likewise, lecturers such as Joe had found that their Programme Leadership role had diminished, which meant that they no longer felt the same ownership of the programme as they once did. Therefore there was a feeling amongst some lecturers that they were being de-professionalised.

Similarly, many of the lecturers were reluctant to let administrative and support staff take on tasks which they considered to be their duty, even if it would have meant a reduction in their workload. This corresponds with the findings of Henkel (2000), whose survey of academics in eleven UK universities, found that despite academics complaining of heavier workloads, many of them continued to perform duties which they considered to be important. Likewise, Blackmore et al. (2011) identified that a wide range of factors influence academic motivation, not simply financial rewards, and Fredman et al. (2012, p1) state that "*academics seem happy to be more productive if they have control over their work and develop in their jobs*".

Overall, the lecturers did not appear to feel that the increase in administrative staff had in any way lightened the administrative load on themselves, as academics, and in fact they stated that their administrative load had increased. In addition, many of the lecturers also supported the view stated in Henkel (2000) that a significant proportion of their time was spent complying with quality assurance procedures, rather than teaching the students. University management would argue that many of the quality assurance and enhancement processes are designed to encourage ownership of teaching and learning at the lecturer level. However, the lecturers' views agreed with the findings of Henkel (2000) and also Coaldrake et al. (1999), who reviewed empirical evidence from Australia and the UK on the changes in higher education policies and practices. Namely, the lecturers perceived the quality processes as a way of university managers having more control over what they did, and eroding the time they had available to interface directly with students and thus improve the student experience.

Another change identified by several lecturers was the nature of their teaching role. As we will see in chapter eight, the adoption of a trimester system meant that the lecturer workload was stretched over a longer

period of time. Although the lecturers stated that there was little time for reflection, and many of them seemed to be disengaged with the wider university, there was some evidence of the lecturers reviewing what they did in the classroom. Several of the lecturers were critical of their own 'chalk and talk' experiences whilst at university and stated that they were keen to provide more variety for their students. There was also a recognition amongst those interviewed that lecturers needed to be more imaginative and collaborative, and the responses indicated that most of the lecturers have changed their lecturing style over the years.

Several of the lecturers also commented on the fact that they considered themselves to have become better lecturers, as they gained experience. Many of them said that they had been a bit nervous at first, but had become more confident as time passed. Likewise, as their experience increased, then they had become better at measuring what students could do, and consequently adapt more readily to the needs of a particular group of students. Phil said:

*"I think there are a number of things that change the way I've done things. One is as you do it more, you become more confident, as you become more confident, you become more relaxed, and as you become more*

*relaxed I suspect that you do things in a different way, there's not the same kind of reliance on a menu of things that have got to be done. You're more happy to go down a side street to cover things because you think it's either interesting, or useful, or it may prepare them more for next year."*

And Joe stated:

*"Certainly when I was starting as a lecturer I was very nervous, so I probably spoke more than I should have. I don't think I consciously did this, but I'm now aware that I did this 'going into lecture' style, even if it was a tutorial. If I got a question, I'd often rattle on, whereas with confidence and experience, if somebody brings up anything at any point in a lecture I tend not to be as thrown as I would have in the past, and if it is a new topic, then I'm more confident to admit that this is something new, and that all comes from being established."*

Both of these lecturers have become more confident in their teaching role with experience. However, as we saw earlier, the lecturers did not seem to feel comfortable with some of the other roles that they had been expected

to take on, including tasks like producing course promotional material such as programme leaflets and prospectus entries.

We will see later in this chapter that many of the lecturers felt that the students required more support, and that there should be more emphasis on teaching, although this was slightly in conflict with the importance being placed on carrying out research by managers. Likewise the lecturers were not all convinced that they were, or should be, “*lecturers*”. Bob said:

*“I see myself as a mentor or a tutor. I wouldn’t call myself a lecturer because I don’t lecture.”*

Thus some of the lecturers commented on the fact that their role had changed from the traditional idea of a lecturer to more of a mentor or facilitator. Others said that they would like to adopt new approaches, but that the physical environment in terms of, for example, lab space was not conducive to this. Likewise, as we shall see later, some of the lecturers said that they had found the students were resistant to new approaches. Similarly, Coaldrake et al. (1999) and Henkel (2000) have both identified that the lecturer role has moved away from the traditional idea of a lecturer



being someone who transmits knowledge to students, to more of a management role, where the lecturer is someone who manages the students learning experience.

Therefore for some lecturers, teaching was not simply about transferring information but rather it was about helping students to understand, and to encourage and motivate the students to become more responsible for their own learning. Leo said:

*“The job of the lecturer is to explain why the subject is interesting, so it’s motivational in that sense, but the idea of motivating students can be made to sound totally impossible. In terms of explaining what the subject is that you are teaching and what it is useful for, that kind of enthusiasm can be motivational and then you give some idea about what’s new, what’s exciting and what’s different about the thing and set it in some kind of context, because students can be very misled. You tell them about one set of technologies and then they will go out into industry or their first job on graduation and see something which is superficially different and it is quite important for them to understand how what they’ve been taught relates to what they see. What they see might just be a different product, just as up to date.”*

Leo sees his role as one which encourages the students to become more involved with their own learning, and to make connections between the different technologies that they encounter. However, we will see in a later chapter that some lecturers felt that the students did not want to take responsibility for their own learning, but rather that many of the students wanted to be spoon fed information, and were only interested in finding out what they needed to know in order to pass the assessments for modules.

We saw above that Bob does not consider himself to be a *'lecturer'*. However although there has been a decline in computing student numbers, many lecturers are constrained by the timetabling and room allocation scheduling to giving long lectures to students in a lecture theatre, rather than being able to structure their deliveries more flexibly. Several of the lecturers also commented on the fact that although they were timetabled for a two hour lecture, followed by a one hour tutorial, then a two hour lab, they rarely followed this format. Those that did maintain this structure indicated that they would prefer to adopt a more flexible approach. But the room allocations did not always allow this, since the lecturers were often assigned a classroom without PCs for lectures

and tutorials, and a lab which was shared by different groups for practical sessions, which constrained what they could do. Des said:

*“I think the teaching facilities here don’t lend themselves to what we do, so you have to try and work around them.”*

Therefore, as we shall see later in this chapter, some of the lecturers on the main campus would have liked to have adopted a more flexible ‘lectorial’ approach to their teaching; however timetabling constraints restricted them from doing so.

Another significant change for some lecturers is that their role is less autonomous than it once was, and they are finding themselves having to work with others more (Coaldrake et al., 1999). This is particularly true for the lecturers in my study since the university is a multi-campus institution, and several of the School’s programmes are also delivered in FE Colleges. Consequently, this has meant considerable change for module co-ordinators, since, instead of their modules only being delivered by themselves, the modules are now being delivered by other lecturers. Therefore the module co-ordinators need to be well prepared so that they

can provide the other lecturers with the teaching and assessment materials well in advance of the classes. In addition, students can take individual modules and/or join programmes at different levels. This complicates issues further because lecturers cannot assume that all the students have the same pre-requisite knowledge. Consequently, lecturers need to be able to adapt quickly to the needs of the different cohorts. As Bob, who already had experience of teaching a module to students on different delivery sites, said:

*“Whatever happens, if one has to go and deliver something in X .... then it will be a new life experience for whoever has to do it, and they will have to rely on their knowledge and wisdom and reflections and reflective practice as a good teacher to make it actually work.”*

Therefore many module co-ordinators have to prepare materials for a diverse group of students, with a wide range of abilities and prior knowledge, and which might also be delivered by someone other than themselves. This can be challenging for both the module co-ordinator and the lecturer delivering the module. As Joe’s comments below indicate, it is a difficult balance trying to get all the students to the same level of prior knowledge without alienating some.

*“Yeah, I guess what has happened is you have a much more heterogeneous mix now. For example in front of you, you could have people who’ve entered in 1<sup>st</sup> year, students who’ve entered in 2<sup>nd</sup> year, students who’ve come into 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Those students in 3<sup>rd</sup> year, you could have people who have entered from different colleges, different experiences, so what I like to do is connect with what they’ve done in previous years. I used to talk about what they’ve heard and learnt etc. in 1<sup>st</sup> year and the students used to get quite annoyed with this. I used to do it a lot, I always pulled on a pre-requisite module, and then I realised that although I was connecting with a few, others were feeling really undermined by that, by what I was saying, because I kept talking about a module they hadn’t done. So I started to say ‘your experience’ or ‘equivalent’ or I’d do revision. They hadn’t actually been taught it, so it’s become very varied and more mixed, it’s becoming quite difficult. It’s become much more difficult to give a clear sort of single statement that everyone understands, or to be fair to everyone. It’s got much more difficult.”*

Thus the university’s widening access agenda means that lecturers such as Joe have to cope with a wide variety of students in terms of

preparedness for university study, as well as expectations. Students can join programmes at any level; therefore no assumptions can be made about their prior knowledge. The lecturers' comments indicated that they had not received any formal training on how to cope with the diverse range of students, although most felt that they were able to change their teaching approach and style to meet the demands of the situation. As was stated earlier this was something which the lecturers considered came with experience.

The role of lecturers is a lot wider than just teaching and they are expected to carry out research, develop new programmes, liaise with industry and so on. Consequently, the lecturers, in common with many academics elsewhere, felt that their workloads had increased (Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 1999; McInnis, 1996). Likewise the constant demands on their time meant that it was difficult to keep up to date with the changes around them, thus leading to the situation where the lecturers were becoming increasingly disengaged with the wider university.

Although the massification of higher education has led to greater student numbers, and thus a feeling of increased workload for many academics, individual class contact hours may not necessarily have increased. Tight

(2010), who carried out a review of the literature on academic workloads since 1945, concludes that although academic workloads increased up until the 1960s, there is little evidence that they have changed significantly since that date. The staff student ratios for the School in my survey are shown below (Table 2). It can be seen that although the student numbers fell after session 2000/01, there was not an equivalent reduction in staffing levels. This means that at the time of my interviews the lecturers should have experienced a reduction in their workload. However, although several of the lecturers commented on the decrease in student numbers during the period 2001-2008, none of them commented on a resultant diminution of duties. This is possibly because, as suggested by Tight (2010), academics perceive their workloads to have increased because of the additional administrative tasks required of them, which lecturers view as diverting them from their teaching and research (Tight, 2010; Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake, 1999).

	<b>93/94</b>	<b>98/99</b>	<b>2000/01</b>	<b>03/04</b>	<b>07/08</b>	<b>08/09</b>	<b>11/12</b>
<b>Full-time Academic Staffing</b>	38	44	77	71	62	58	58
<b>Students (FTEs)</b>	561	853	1547	1100	922	1107	1176
<b>Student Staff Ratio (SSR)</b>	14.5:1	19:1	20:1	15.5:1	15:1	19:1	20:1

**Table 2**

## **Lecturers' integration with the University**

In common with other universities, the University is subject to constant change. In the last decade departments have been rebadged as Schools with Deans and Associate Deans in charge, and then during the period of my study, Faculties were created which were made up of Schools and which were led by Executive Deans and Heads of School. The Executive Deans were then re-titled Executive Deans and Vice Principals and their remit expanded accordingly. However these structural changes had little or no impact on the day to day work of most of the lecturers and therefore many lecturers did not appear to be keeping up to date with the changes around them. It is difficult to know whether this was because there was too much change for them to cope with, or whether they were just not interested in what was happening in the wider university, since it did not impact directly on their day to day role.

I formed the impression that many of the lecturers cared about the students and wanted to do their best for them, but that they were operating as individuals and were not engaged with the School or wider university and its policies and procedures. Some of the responses highlighted the fact that many of the lecturers had a general lack of understanding of



university structures, committees and policies and therefore were not engaged with the wider university. For example, Bob said, *“EQU or UEQ or ... I don’t know, I’ve been to a number of sessions run by, what are they called now? Are they still called CLT?”*. Thus it can be seen that some of the lecturers could not remember the names of university departments or groups. Similarly, I found that the lecturers were not aware of university policies, particularly those relating to widening access and improving student retention and achievement. As Ed said:

*“You do your absolute best to get people through the exams, you do everything you can to teach them, every trick in the book you throw at it. It is very important, if they come here, then you’ve got to do your best for them, but as for policies, I haven’t a clue!”*

It could be that the lecturers found it difficult to keep up with the constant changes and rebranding of departments. However, it can also be seen from Ed’s comment that although he, as an individual lecturer, might not be aware of specific institutional policies and procedures, it did not necessarily mean that he did not care about the students and the quality of the student experience, but rather that he and many of the other lecturers operated autonomously and were not engaged with the wider university.

This concurs with Delanty (2007, p124) who states that academics have a considerable amount of autonomy; however they also “*feel that they have little control over the institutions in which they work*”. Thus many of the lecturers were operating independently of the university.

There were contradictory statements from the lecturers about the amount of control university managers should, and did have over academic staff. Several of the lecturers stated that University management had tried to gain more control over them in recent years, but that they felt that they still had a considerable amount of independence, especially when compared with the experiences of friends and acquaintances who worked in other institutions, particularly the Further Education (FE) sector. For example, Ed said:

*“There is more control. You’ve got a very free hand in here which is one of the good things of course, but I can sense that the dead hand of bureaucracy is descending on it in the way it is descending on FE colleges, where you can barely do anything at all without someone waving a rule book at you. That’s why the industrial relations are so appalling and everyone that I know of who is in it wants to get out. This is not the way it*

*is in universities at the moment, but you can see that that's the way it is going."*

Similarly, Bob compared the university positively with the institution where he had worked previously:

*"The University is very good at not chasing you every five minutes of the day. At my last university they wanted to know where you were every fifteen minutes of the day. It was much more prison camp-ish. Here there is a lot more freedom."*

Therefore, although new managerialism and the demands of accountability on lecturers are considered by some to be key changes in academic identity, the lecturers in my study did not mention these changes, but rather indicated that they tended to operate autonomously. This could be due to the size and complexity of the institution, or it might be more to do with the culture of the School, or a combination of both.

Although some of the lecturers welcomed the fact that they were not monitored constantly by managers, others said that management did not know what was going on, on the ground. Joe said of his manager *“he’s detached from what I’m doing day in and day out”*, whilst Bob said *“The University doesn’t know half of what actually goes on in reality”*. Thus showing that the down side of this relative freedom to do what they wanted was the feeling of being ignored and not seen as valued by the institution. This impression of lack of support from senior managers was common to the lecturers on both campuses, although the lecturers on the smaller campus were under the assumption that the lecturers on the larger, main campus were better informed, than perhaps they actually were. There was therefore a sense of isolation amongst the lecturers, irrespective of which campus they were based on. Some lecturers seemed discouraged by the fact that they were not given the opportunity to contribute their views to the running of the School and the wider university, and many seemed resigned and distant from management. Bob said:

*“Things happen and nobody tells you why they’ve happened, and nobody tells you what they mean, and nobody tells you what to do about it, so you don’t know what’s going on and things just happen. Things happen and there is an awful lot of shifting of deck chairs going on and you find that these things get in the road of your job. I would like to know why people do*

*things in the university, what it means and why I should be interested, and what I need to know which would help me understand what this means. I find the university is like playing a game where you only know a little bit of the rules. I mean you're playing football and you discover everyone else is playing rugby because the rules change part way through, and then when you are just getting the hang of playing rugby it becomes field hockey, someone hands you a stick and the ball shrinks, and then you find you're not playing top to bottom you're now playing left to right, and you have no idea why these things are happening."*

The fact that the institution is a large complex multi-campus university may partially explain why many of the lecturers held the view that university managers did not know what was happening at the chalk face, and that senior management were distanced from the students and the lecturers. Moreover, at least one lecturer interviewed, opined that senior management only knew what those in middle management wanted them to know, and therefore only good news was passed up the line. Thus implying that senior management did not necessarily have an accurate view of what was happening within the university. Similarly, it can be seen from the comments above that several of the lecturers claimed to be confused by the constant change that was going on around them and were therefore unable, or unwilling to keep track of what was happening

on a day to day basis, unless it had a direct impact on them. For lecturers, such as Bob, much of the change seemed to be about change for the sake of change, rather than for specific reasons and improving the student experience.

### **Lecturers' views of the status given to teaching and research**

The role of a lecturer can be thought of as comprising of teaching, research and administration (Tight, 2010; Garratt et al., 2009; Enders et al., 2008; Houston et al., 2006; Coaldrake 1999). However the importance placed on each of these activities by both institutions and lecturers varies. Tight (2010) and Henkel (2000) both acknowledge that the position of the institution and the discipline, within their associated hierarchies has an effect on the amount of time allocated to each activity by lecturers. For example, Tight (2010) found that academics spend about 30% of their time on research in the older universities, whereas the figure is nearer 10% in the newer post '92 universities, such as the one in this study. Thus showing the difference in emphasis placed on research in different categories of universities, and reflecting the hierarchy in the UK higher education system. Similarly, the importance placed on research varies by discipline. Therefore, applied vocationally oriented disciplines, such as

computing, place less weight on research, than some of the other more theoretical disciplines (Becher et al., 2001).

For the university in my study, the majority of academic staff prioritise teaching over research. This is evidenced by the fact that the university submitted a lower proportion of lecturers, 70 FTE staff equating to 15% of the academic staff numbers, than any other Scottish university for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). However the University's Senior Management team want to build on this figure, for a number of reasons, not least of which is to allow the university to pull down additional funding from the Scottish Funding Council. The session 2010/11 General Funding letter (Scottish Funding Council, 2010<sup>20</sup>) allocated £872,529 of Research Excellence Grant to the university and £33,640 to the School, out of total allocations to each of these groupings of £213,027,000 and £13,734,705 respectively. Hence the university received less than half of one percent of the available research funding. Consequently, senior management would like to increase the university's research standing in order to gain a greater percentage of this funding. Therefore the University's Strategic Plan (2008-2015) identifies building the institutions research profile as a main priority, and it sets ambitious targets for

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/general\\_fund/](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/general_fund/)

increasing research output before the next UK research measurement exercise.

The percentage of staff in the School who were entered for the 2008 RAE was about 8% which is lower than the university figure, indicating that teaching rather than research is the main focus for the majority of the lecturers in the School. Consequently, the lecturers interviewed had mainly teaching rather than research oriented roles. Although they all seemed satisfied with their roles, there did seem to be a sense of dissatisfaction that teaching was not particularly valued. For all of the lecturers excellence in teaching was extremely important to the long term success of the students and therefore the university. However the most recent restructuring, and the subsequent appointments, indicated that research was being given much greater prominence than teaching, and therefore a number of those interviewed felt devalued by the institution. Some of the lecturers stated that they would like to get involved with research; however they were receiving mixed messages from senior managers. They were being expected to teach a wide range of students with diverse abilities, as well as having additional demands on their time to carry out academic support and administrative duties, whilst also engaging in research.



The lecturers also commented on the fact that Senior Management expected everyone to have a doctorate, whereas in disciplines such as computing, which are more vocationally focussed, the lecturers are more likely to have industrial and professional experience than a research background. The lecturers did not think that the University accorded the same status to professional qualifications and building and maintaining links with industrial partners as academic qualifications, which agrees with the findings of Becher et al. (2001). Similarly, Henkel (2000) identified one of the key changes in the role of lecturers in the post '92 institutions as an increased emphasis on research. She states that many lecturers in these institutions, like the lecturers in my study, considered themselves to be first and foremost teachers and therefore the increased emphasis on research made many of them feel undervalued. The lecturers also found that their lack of research focus hindered their promotion prospects.

Young (2006), who surveyed forty six social policy lecturers working in twenty HEIs, both old and new, across the four countries of the UK, stated that one of the few areas of consensus within the literature is the low status given to teaching compared with research. Young argues that although it might be expected that teaching is given more status in the

post '92 universities, she found that this was not the case, and that the rewards for excellence in teaching were low in both old and new universities compared to those for research.

The comments from the lecturers also agree with those of Thomas (2002) who carried out a case study in a modern English university with a good reputation for widening student participation. Thomas (2002) highlights the dilemma which institutions similar to the one in this study find themselves with, namely trying to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between research and teaching. Post '92 institutions have tended to prioritise teaching over research. However external pressures such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) have led to the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction.

Consequently, lecturers who have concentrated on teaching rather than research often find that the traditional promotion paths are no longer available to them, since being an excellent teacher or manager, either of students or colleagues or both, no longer lead to advancement (Skelton, 2012; Sursock et al., 2010; Tight, 2010; Young, 2006; Becher et al., 2001; Boice, 1992). This devaluing of the teaching and student support roles

performed by the lecturers was demoralising and several of them were resigned to the fact that they had to carry most of the teaching load whilst others were able to build their research profile and gain promotion.

Similarly the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the language used to classify academics as '*research active*' or '*inactive*' has also caused a divide between teaching and research staff and only served to undermine teaching oriented staff further (Barnett et al., 2007; Becher et al., 2001). The importance of research in gaining promotion means that lecturers are faced with the dilemma of where to concentrate their time and efforts, and the lecturers in my study expressed the view, similar to Delanty (2007) and Becher et al. (2001), that colleagues appointed to research oriented roles and who were given minimum teaching responsibilities and the associated administrative duties, were more likely to get promoted based on their research output. Whereas lecturers like themselves, who interfaced with the students and tried to make sure that the students stayed on course and passed, were overlooked when it came to promotion.

Les felt that some people made a deliberate decision to avoid teaching students, not only to gain promotion, but because they could not

necessarily cope with the demands of the diverse student population that they were faced with. He said:

*“... how that would relate to your own career, where your aspirations might be to avoid teaching completely, avoid students completely and immerse yourself in research and seek to develop a career on that ladder .... . I do think there are many people making personal decisions not necessarily for the right reasons. Not many, there are a few, there are certainly a few not engaged in the demands of that kind of student audience.”*

Several of the lecturers said that they would like to carry out research but the additional administrative and support tasks that they had taken on meant that they had less time for primary research, and that it was difficult to build and maintain a research network when their time was being taken up by other demands. Bob said:

*“I just don't have the time to maintain the networks and that worries me because I'd have thought that at this stage of my career I'd be able to be much more of the field expert and look back at twenty years of academic experience, but it's become twenty years of administrative experience in*

*dealing with the sheer horror of the growth of bureaucracy and the sheer stupidity of university structures which seem to be more to slow you down rather than in improving things, and I think it is more about controlling, de-professionalizing academics. .... It's become much more difficult to carve your furrow as an academic than it used to be."*

Luc commented on the difficulties he had faced trying to do a PhD. He said:

*"Every year I've been in Computer Science, so that's since '96, I've had the intention of .... going on to do a PhD. I started a PhD on three occasions and on three occasions you get part way through the year and think there isn't any way I'm going to finish this. I don't resent doing the work in my own time that's never been a problem, but when your own time spills into the stuff to get your marking done, and your classes prepared and get all the admin for the students, and all of the rest of it done, there's very little left to do a PhD and the thing that I know .... is it's not something you can just pick up and put down, you've got to set aside regular time and go at it continuously. So how my role has changed in the job, hardly very much, but in the personal aspect my whole intention of going on and completing a PhD has evaporated away, largely because of the way the*

*university makes it fairly plain and up front how they consider their academic staff. I don't think we are entirely high regarded by the university."*

Luc did not think that academic staff, who concentrated on teaching, were viewed particularly well by the University, nor well supported. Similarly, both Bob and Luc suggest that acquiring the skills to be a competent researcher takes time which they just do not have due to their many other responsibilities. They also think that their day to day tasks are so subject to interruption that carrying out research is just not possible. Therefore, although some of the lecturers appeared discouraged that teaching did not have as high a priority within the institution as research, it was apparent that most of the lecturers interviewed had opted for teaching roles because they considered teaching to be extremely important, not only for the diverse range of students, but also for the long term success and viability of the institution.

Another comment from Luc about the university's research aspirations was:

*"I don't think this is a research establishment. I don't think it should have ever aspired to be one. I don't think we should never have had anything to do with research. I'm not anti-research, but I think trying to take in a body of students who haven't made it to X, who haven't made it to Y and probably never even got the place at Z that they were looking for, and they end up coming here, and we are going to induct them into a research culture is cloud cuckoo land quite honestly, but that's an attitude which is at the top and I think by the time you reach realistic people further down, they start to see things quite differently."*

Luc highlights the differences in opinion between many lecturers and university managers. In a series of staff meetings during November 2008 the University Principal made it clear that his vision for the institution was that it would not be a teaching only university, and his comments were supported by the inclusion of eight research targets in the 2008-2015 Strategic Plan. None of the lecturers interviewed saw their main role as being a researcher, so their views of their role differed from that suggested by Senior Management. Similarly, the results of a 2011 staff survey show that 89% of the lecturers in the School who took part disagreed with the statement that *"Those who focus on teaching have as much opportunity to progress as those who focus on research"*, and in an earlier 2008 survey the majority of respondents in the School disagreed that *"Learning and*

*teaching is valued and effectively supported*". In addition, there were conflicting messages in that the lecturers were being expected to build a research profile from a relatively low starting point without necessarily receiving the support and reduction in teaching load to make it achievable, whilst at the same time they were also being expected to provide as much support as possible for the students in order to ensure that student retention and achievement rates were improved. Thus there were differing demands on the lecturers.

One of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education enhancement themes during the period 2006-2008 was research-teaching linkages (QAA, 2008). Lecturers were therefore encouraged by management to identify and develop links between their research and teaching. The view expounded was that linking research and teaching would improve the student experience. However a study by Coaldrake et al. (1999), who reviewed empirical evidence from Australia and the UK on the changes in higher education policies and practices, found that the importance placed on research by students varied by discipline and year of study. Therefore, since computing, certainly at the university where this study is based, is very much an applied rather than a theoretical discipline, then research underpinning the teaching is not likely to be as important to the students as it might be elsewhere. In fact the students are more likely



to be displeased if they feel a particular lecturer's research is detracting them from their teaching commitments. Programmes that incorporate the latest advances in technology and meet the needs of employers are more likely to be valued by students. Therefore it is important that lecturers keep up to date with what is happening in industry and building and maintaining links with employers. The School tries to do this by having an Industrial Advisory Board which has members from a wide range of employers including representatives from multinational organisations such as Apple, Cisco, IBM, Microsoft, Oracle and Sony. In addition, most of the programmes are available as 'sandwich' degrees which means that students can include a years industrial experience as part of their programme. There are also industrial placement modules available which the students can use to enhance their employability skills, whilst also gaining credit towards their degree. Given that many of the university's students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and employability is a major driver for these students attending university, then industrially relevant programmes are likely to be more important to the students than research. Therefore the increased emphasis on research is management rather than student driven.

Although the lecturers stated that teaching rather than research was their priority, we will see in a later chapter that the evidence from their

responses shows that, for whatever reason, whether through lack of time, or support, or encouragement, or too much change to cope with, the lecturers spent very little, if any, time actually discussing and/or exchanging ideas on best practice in teaching. Therefore the challenge for the University, and others like it, is to get the balance between research and teaching right, so that both activities are valued equally, and the University provides a learning environment which meets the needs of its students, staff and other external stakeholders (Coaldrake et al., 1999; Elton, 1986).

### **Lecturer support for the students**

The literature discusses the role of a lecturer as comprising of the triumvirate of research, teaching and administration. However student support is also an integral part of the role. As well as distinguishing between the academic and administrative / support roles that they thought they should be involved in, the lecturers also differentiated between the academic and pastoral support that they considered that they should provide for students. Most of the lecturers appeared to feel comfortable with giving academic advice and academic support to the students, however, there were mixed views on whose responsibility more general

pastoral support for the students should be. There was acceptance that there was a need to be more interested in the 'whole' student, although the lecturers did not necessarily see this as being their role, but rather an institutional one.

The School had a Student Liaison Officer (SLO) who was based on the main campus. However, the SLO accepted a post at another university during the period that my interviews took place and has not been replaced to date. Less than 10% of the academics employed by the School were female. Therefore it is perhaps not surprising to find that the lecturers interviewed, all but one of whom were male, were supportive of the SLO pastoral support role, which was carried out by a female. This finding concurs with the findings of other researchers who have found that female academics are often expected to carry out the pastoral and administrative tasks rather than their male colleagues (Deem et al., 2007; Acker et al., 2004; Arreman, et al., 2003; Currie et al., 2000; Harris et al., 1998). Most of the lecturers commented on the usefulness of the SLO post and saw it as complementing their own role. The SLO provided a framework for the lecturers and students, and the SLO had the overall picture of each student, rather than just the particular student's attendance at one module, as the lecturers had. The lecturers also stated that the SLO knew who best to refer students to if problems such as the student being thrown out

of their flat arose. Dealing with issues such as this was a significant part of her role, whereas this type of specialised knowledge was a small part of the lecturers' role. For example, Luc said:

*"I do think that one of the best things they did in this School, rather than in this university, in recent years, was when they appointed S, as somebody who takes a lot away from a lecturer. The fact that there is somebody keeping tabs on not just your module, but everybody else's module and collating them all, and thinking, well this person is in a bit of trouble, and trying to deal with it in an informal way, and not being dragged up in front of the 'beak', so to speak. I think that's a great thing, and I know, not a large number of students, but I know certainly a non-trivial number of students who have benefited big from it."*

Therefore on the main campus the pastoral role had been largely subsumed by the SLO and the comments from the lecturers on this were largely favourable, as shown above. However, on the other campuses, where the students did not have direct access to the SLO, the staff generally viewed giving pastoral support as an integral part of their job. It was also identified that the smaller class sizes and student numbers on the other campuses meant that the staff were in more direct contact with

the students, and therefore got to know the students better and vice versa. This therefore meant that the lecturers were able to build a rapport with the students and thus help to develop a feeling of belonging within the students which, as we will see in chapter eight, helps improve student retention and progression.

The lecturers were aware that support was available for students centrally, but there was a general lack of knowledge about exactly what type of support was available, and from whom, irrespective of the campus on which the lecturers were based. The responses showed that many of the lecturers depended on the School Student Liaison Officer (SLO) to provide the appropriate advice, and therefore the existence of the SLO had removed the need for academic staff to have specialised knowledge of the support available to students. Phil stated:

*"I know that they (Student Services) do things for the student e.g. at the Induction week various members of staff will have spoken to students, and staff can sit in on that, but the fact is that I've never needed to do that so I've never done it, but it's there. I suppose the thing really is that I know that there is a department there, and if I need to find out something, I know I need to contact them, it might take me a couple of phone calls to get*

*what I need, rather than knowing off the top of my head, but the important thing is I don't know the information, but I know where to get it, and I think from their (student services) point of view that is all they really can do, because if they try to tell me these sort of things at the start of the year when it really isn't of any interest to me, then it's kind of 'water off a duck's back', but later on, if it kind of becomes important, then I just need to know that they are there, which must be really frustrating for them."*

Therefore, for lecturers such as Phil, the important thing was that they knew where to find the relevant information for students, or who to refer them to, rather than to retain the information themselves. Similarly the SLO had previously performed this role and the lecturers had become used to referring students to her rather than dealing with issues themselves. Likewise, the lecturers also indicated that Student Services had expanded over time, and therefore they did not see it as part of their role to provide detailed pastoral support to students when there was specialist support available.

Les said *"there are a lot of support services, but there isn't support for academic support"*. So although the lecturers saw providing academic support as part of their remit, there was also a feeling amongst many of

the lecturers that that they were expected to carry out the role without any training and/or recognition. As Bill said when talking about having to give academic guidance to students for the first time:

*“When things like guidance were introduced ... I just think you were basically told here’s a form, see the students, any issues and so on and get on with it. I don’t think there was much support for anyone; I think it was just something you had to help the students with. I don’t think the staff really got much apart from basically whatever the form was.”*

The lecturers were expected to act as personal tutors and carry out progress review meetings with the students. In addition, Personal Development Planning (PDP) had been introduced and personal tutors were expected to provide students with advice on this too. The lecturers indicated that they were not allocated enough time to support the students and that they did not feel that the support they provided was valued by Senior Managers who the lecturers felt would prefer them to be spending the time on research activities. Thus the amount of time and effort allocated to these activities depended very much on the individual.

Although most of the lecturers saw academic support as an integral part of their role, we will see in a later chapter that many of the lecturers also felt that the students expected a lot more academic support from them than had previously been the case. Similarly, the increase in the diversity of the students also meant that many students required more individualised support, which was more time consuming.

### **Support for the lecturers**

Most of the lecturers acknowledged that their role was constantly changing, and a number of them stated that due to the constant demands on their time, there was little time for reflection and sharing of good practice. I asked the lecturers about the type and level of support that they received and whether it met their needs. All of the lecturers stated that they were confident of being able to cope with their own subject knowledge updating, but some of them felt that there was a lack of support for other responsibilities such as module leadership and the personal tutor role. Des said:



*“From an academic role I don’t think there is anything lacking, either in my own knowledge, or my ability to find something out in response to any student queries. But in a kind of leadership role, programme leader role or personal tutor role, then ..... if someone has been told to come and see me because I can solve a problem for them, then I hope to be able to solve the problem for them. But if I’m acting in a sort of pastoral role and they’re asking questions which I’ve absolutely no remit for, then I have to pass them on to someone else, and I don’t like doing that, and again programme leaders or year leaders by default are expected to take on this kind of role without any training or advice or whatever.”*

The lecturers stated that they had been given staff development, however many of them perceived the staff development which they had received as being management driven, rather than lecturer driven. For example, Ken said:

*“There are events that are intended to be Staff Development, things like for example days on PDP, lectures on Blackboard or the Learning and Teaching conference or Disability awareness sessions. But I don’t think any of these are driven by what the staff want, or even to some degree, what the staff need. They seem to be driven from what the managers of*

*the University, or possibly the School think staff need, and I suppose to some extent there is some overlap. But I think if you ask staff what kind of development do you need, I don't necessarily think they'll say I need an introduction to dyslexia or I need to know how Blackboard works or whatever."*

The University has a Centre for Academic and Professional Development (CAPD) which provides many of the staff development courses mentioned above. Much of the training provided by CAPD is on the use of technology such as the University's Virtual Learning Environment and since the lecturers were computing lecturers they did not think that they needed this type of training. The lecturers indicated that courses on areas such as different teaching approaches would be more useful to them. As Des said:

*"CAPD, yes. It tends to be more about the technology, it's about Blackboard rather than the use of Blackboard which just happens to be a tool to support distance learning. The technology of Blackboard, rather than how the students engage in distance learning. .... so I don't feel that there is a great deal of support, both at School level or even at Institutional level. These sessions that I go to, I don't really feel that they've helped me to be honest."*

Des also said:

*“I think that the management of distance learning hasn’t been handled very well. There hasn’t been a great deal of support within the department, it’s a kind of general point, but you are very much left to your own devices, you do your own thing, and you just hope that things work out. But I don’t think it’s worked particularly brilliantly so far.”*

Therefore lecturers could be given more focussed support on areas such as how to produce distance learning materials and managing distance learning cohorts.

Several of the lecturers said that their main support came from colleagues, and they did not think that they were particularly well supported by senior managers. Bob said, *“Support - I think some would help”*. And Joe said:

*“Support for me has only ever come from my colleagues, I usually mean my peers. I don’t mean higher up and I don’t mean lower down even. It’s*

*just that I really rely an awful lot on my friends and colleagues that I work with to sort of support me if I've got a new idea, or make me feel better if I'm feeling insecure, or if I want to learn something they will help me. So it is all very informal and I'm very grateful. I've very aware of who I can ask, who I can approach, but has it come through official training courses - no, attendance at conferences - no, nothing official. It feels very much free fall, and because I work with good people I'm able to feel I can do the job."*

Des and Les also commented on the lack of opportunity to reflect as a group:

*"I think it is up to the School to initiate some kind of dialogue with staff to find out what we want. I find that at the end of the year, then - it's good - that year's finished let's move on to the next, and we never really sit down and think about what worked, or what didn't work. How can we improve things? What do we need to improve in terms of our teaching provision? So you feel isolated and all you can try and do is to do things as an individual rather than any School based approach. .... As I say you're left on your own, things don't change."*

Whilst Les said:

*“You could do an awful lot to support that, the Annual Monitoring Event, you could have a workshop three times a semester. You could have an away day three times a semester. Try to get the environment correct so that people are away from their workplace, the demands of the workplace, able to think about what is the major thing that you are struggling with. .... Reflection often tends to be done at a very personal level.”*

Therefore although some lecturers said that they got support from their peers, there did seem to be a feeling of isolation amongst many of the lecturers. For example Les said:

*“It seems to me that the minute you try to centralise any generalised support then it doesn't hit what is required. There has to be a case for some centralised development, support should help, but that's tricky, because it tends to end up being generalised support and it's not appropriate or relevant or seen to be as relevant or helpful as it can be. But until such times as workload is managed more capably there isn't much room for support because people are just too busy. .... It would be*

*good if there was a much more realistic forum that you could work with on a local basis for example. Taking away the staffroom didn't help, that's one plank gone. Taking away the coffee machine downstairs doesn't help, another plank gone where you can share experiences with your colleagues, as one does, in any profession, try to aggregate experiences and learn from each other, not so the informal basis, an awful lot of that has been knocked out in the last couple of years and that's an awful shame because that doesn't cost very much. In a formal basis, formalising is hard."*

Les considers collegial support and associated opportunities to have declined. The causes for this are numerous. Les suggests that one explanation is the lack of a social space for staff to get together informally and share ideas. Other reasons could be the time pressures on lecturers, as well as the culture of the organisation, and the fact that the university is a large multi-campus organisation. Des also comments on the lack of interaction with his peers:

*"I don't feel that the support is there. I've likened this to Braehead. There's forty people who happen to be sharing the same physical space, but with no interaction and they are almost in competition with each other. To me,*

*our main task, if you like, is teaching and yet there is very little time spent ... talking about teaching. How we teach, and what difficulties we have, ... you basically do your own thing because there's nothing to fall back on."*

Therefore several lecturers talked about feeling isolated and unsupported, and the lack of social contact with colleagues did nothing to help this. The provision of a common space where lecturers could meet up and chat informally with each other would be useful. This would help the lecturers to engage with each other, discuss ideas and exchange good practice, without the necessity for formalised committee structures. The university does have several cafes on each campus where lecturers can meet up with colleagues for a tea or coffee, however these are public spaces which can be noisy. They are also used by students and therefore are not always appropriate.

Some of the lecturers on the larger campus were critical of the physical environment and cited this as one of the things they would most like to see enhanced. In particular, they mentioned the classroom and lab accommodation and IT equipment as areas which could be improved to support their teaching. Les said:

*The disparity or the diversity, if you like, of the physical, learning environment across the university is extraordinary; there is no set threshold standard. Sometimes some of our facilities are well below standard, quite honestly, they should not be used, sometimes they shouldn't be used and other times they are absolutely excellent."*

And Ed stated:

*"The basic simple support in teaching people, for instance overhead projectors. If an overhead projector doesn't work then you've got to have someone fix it pronto. There's no point of having interactive white boards at two grand a shot if you can't get a bulb for an overhead projector, or for instance if your teaching in a room with no air conditioning or you switch the air conditioning on and it's so loud that nobody can hear what you're saying, or the windows won't open, or you can't prop the windows open except with an old coke bottle. You know how much money we spend here on technological piffle when we should stick with the basics to make sure people get what they need for the basics."*



The lecturers on the main campus were also critical of the IT support they received. Technician support had been centralised which meant that the School no longer had a dedicated team of technicians, and this had often led to delays in getting issues resolved. The lecturers did not feel that the University understood the importance of a School of Computing having a greater level of support than other areas where computers were used to supplement teaching, rather than being the main focus of the teaching and learning experience.

The criticism of IT support also included the fact that lecturers had to set up data projectors and so on themselves, which ate into valuable teaching time. It also made them look incompetent in front of students if they had difficulty getting it connected and working, not to mention the fact that the students were being disadvantaged by the time it could take for a lecture to get started. Joe stated:

*“Where do I begin, where do I begin! Yes, again the support could come from the teaching equipment, that would be great ..... Yeah, so teaching support would be fabulous.”*

Consequently, the lecturers stated that the support they felt they required was more to do with the physical environment and technology being available and working when it was required, rather than support for teaching methods and subject knowledge. Today's students are used to constantly changing technology such as mobile phones, games consoles and PCs and expect the equipment they use at university to be at least as good, if not better, than what they have at home.

The lecturers on the main campus were also critical of the constraints imposed on them with respect to teaching and lab allocation. There was an acknowledgement amongst many of the lecturers that the lecturer - student relationship was more important in retaining students and helping them to be successful than the classroom environment, and that the lecturers were getting students through courses in spite of the environment. A multipurpose room would allow the lecturers more flexibility with their teaching and to adopt a less formal '*lectorial*' approach. This type of approach is used on the other campuses and allows the lecturer the opportunity to adapt to the needs of the specific group of students by giving a lecture, tutorial or lab in the same room, as appropriate. It was considered that this type of approach suited the subject area better, since computing is a practical subject. Lecturers such as Bob and Des thought that the students should get as much 'hands on'

experience as possible, since this more accurately reflected the work environment. Des said:

*“Well I would like to have teaching facilities which would allow me to teach the modules the way I’d want to teach them. .... I don’t think the teaching facilities provided by the University support what I want to do, so I’d love to see them improved.”*

And Bob said:

*“I’ve changed my teaching totally. I used to stand and lecture at students for an hour, two hours, even three hours ..... What I do now is, I give them tasks..... In a way, I suppose they are coming closer to what they need to do as a programmer. As a programmer they need to do something and then become better at doing it, and so it fits what happens professionally in computing.”*

The lecturers gave some other examples of small changes which could be made to provide them with the support they would like. For example, one

suggestion given by Ken, as to how his role could be made easier was by having:

*“Someone in the School whose job it is to archive materials, not just for panels or External Examiners, but to archive materials that have got to be kept for a period of time, because at the moment it sits in my office until I have a tidy out .....and then I take it over to the admin office. Nobody takes responsibility for what happens to it. .... So that would be a big improvement. Or even just a room where you could put stuff and someone went and shredded it every so often, because there’s nothing like that just now, you just keep it until it gets too much for you and then shred it yourself.”*

Therefore relatively small improvements, particularly in the administrative support functions provided for lecturers, could considerably boost lecturers’ morale without the university having to spend large amounts of money. Similarly, replacing the SLO (Student Liaison Officer) post described earlier, would free up lecturer time, thus allowing lecturers to spend more time on other tasks, such as updating their subject knowledge and undertaking research.

Thus, from the comments above, it seems that the lecturers in my study agree with the findings of Taylor (2008) that they have no time for reflection and little time for forward planning due to the multiple demands on their time. The lecturers also stated that they never got the opportunity to have their views heard or taken on board. The School seemed to operate reactively, and there was a lack of engagement from academic staff, as evidenced by the attendance at School meetings and the School's Annual Monitoring event, where the majority of staff who attended were part of the School management group. Therefore some minor changes could be made to improve lecturer engagement.

## **Summary of changes in the role of the lecturers**

In this chapter we have seen that the identity of an academic is influenced by the institution and discipline, and the position of both of these within their associated hierarchies. Henkel (2005, p164) states that “*the institution has more power to affect academic working lives but it may be a weaker source of identification*”. Thus, although the importance of the discipline in shaping academic identities has declined for some, academics tend to have more loyalty to their discipline than the institution. However I did not detect a strong disciplinary identity amongst the lecturers I spoke to. We also saw that teaching, research and administration are all “*expected to be part of the repertoire of each academic*” (Coaldrake et al., 1999, p13) (Tight, 2010; Enders et al., 2008). However the lecturers in my study prioritised teaching over research.

The massification of HE has led to greater diversity in the student population, and therefore more lecturer time appears to be being spent on providing additional support for the wide range of students, particularly in the post '92 universities, such as the one in this study. A major change for many of the lecturers was the delivery of their modules and/or programmes on other campuses, and at local colleges by other lecturers.

The lecturers had previously only needed to be concerned with delivering their own modules and had not had to think about preparing materials for other people to use, nor for students with a wide range of prior knowledge. The lecturers had received very little advice and guidance in how to cope with these changes. They therefore considered this part of their role to have increased and to have become more complicated. However the lecturers did not think that university managers appreciated the amount of time that they spent on providing support for students, nor valued student support activities.

The lecturers considered the emphasis to have moved from teaching to research in recent years. This has caused a certain amount of unease amongst most of the lecturers I interviewed, since many of them think of themselves as teachers rather than researchers. Many lecturers also feel that their role is not valued and that previous promotion opportunities are now no longer available to them. The lecturers said that they would like to spend more time talking about teaching and exchanging ideas. However the lack of both formal and informal opportunities to do this, as well as the many competing demands on their time prevents this from happening.

There was a general feeling amongst the lecturers that they did not need support for their subject knowledge updating. However they did think that they could receive more training and support for the many other duties they were expected to take on. On the one hand lecturers felt that they were being deskilled, whilst on the other hand, some lecturers were not comfortable with producing things like marketing materials when the university already employed staff with these specialised skills. Hence there appeared to be a lack of clarity in the actual role of a lecturer, and changes in the role meant that lecturers had conflicting demands on their time, and they were not always sure how they should prioritise tasks. Similarly, some of the lecturers appeared to be operating separately from the School and University and therefore did not necessarily know the direction in which the institution was moving, which may have helped them see how they fitted in to the bigger picture.

Since my research was primarily concerned with the lecturers' views on the students, and the ways in which their role had changed in line with the diversity of the student population, there is little discussion about changes in administrative loads. However my study did identify that the boundaries between the roles of lecturers and support staff appear to be poorly defined. The lecturers had firm views of what roles they should and should not perform, however several said that their administrative and support



responsibilities were sometimes changed without any consultation as to whether they actually wanted the changes. In particular, some lecturers said that tasks had been removed from them which they would have preferred to have retained. Therefore the lecturers had little or no control over many of the tasks associated with their role.

To conclude, I have discussed the academic identity of the lecturers, since I feel that it is important to consider this before discussing the lecturers' perceptions on the other areas of my study. I found that the lecturers did not have a strong attachment to either the discipline or the institution. However they did have a strong teaching identity. Their role had become more complex, particularly because of the diversity of the student body and the multi-campus nature of the institution. In the following chapters I will consider the lecturers' views of the impact of the changes in the student body on their role. I begin by examining the lecturers' views on widening access to higher education, and the ways in which they perceive the widening access agenda to have impacted on the student body.

## **Chapter 6 – Lecturers’ views on widening access to HE**

In this chapter I will consider what the term ‘Widening Access’ means to the lecturers that I interviewed, as well as their understandings of the policies and procedures that the University has in place to encourage widening access. I will also discuss whether widening access to higher education and the resultant changes in the numbers of, and diversity of students, has had any influence on the awareness and behaviour of the lecturers in my survey.

### **Widening access policy**

The United Kingdom (UK) Labour government (1997-2010) sought to create a Knowledge Economy by widening access to further and higher education. By doing so they claimed that increasing access to higher education would create a more educated and skilled workforce as well as increase social mobility and economic prosperity (Taylor et al., 2011; Bocock et al., 2003; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003a,b). This objective led to a number of government policies, which

were implemented via the Funding Councils<sup>21</sup> of enabling greater equality of opportunity for all and widening participation in Further and Higher Education, whilst at the same time trying to reduce the overall costs of HE.

Institutions have become more accountable to their stakeholders and need to show improvement in their annual Performance Indicators (PIs) which include retention data. Therefore institutions such as the university in this study are obliged to demonstrate to both the Funding Council and the public, that they are taking steps to improve student retention and achievement figures, and thus doing their best for students as well as making good use of public funds.

However despite Labour government rhetoric on improving skills and social mobility for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds by increasing participation in higher education, inequalities still exist. The UK university sector can be considered to have both vertical, in terms of perceived status of institutions, and horizontal differences in terms of the perceived status of disciplines (Taylor et al., 2011; Brennan et al., 2008; Archer, 2007; Teichler, 2004). Rather than facilitating an increase in access to students from working and lower class backgrounds, the

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<sup>21</sup> Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

increase in students entering HE has resulted in more students from middle class backgrounds attending university, particularly pre-92 universities. On the other hand, students from lower socio-economic classes who do access HE, are more likely to attend a post '92 university, or enrol on an HE programme at a Further Education College (FEC) and subsequently articulate to a post '92 university, rather than entering one of the older universities (Reay et al., 2010; Brennan et al., 2008; Archer, 2007; Iannelli, 2007; Field, 2003; Forsyth, 2000; Van de Werfhorst et al., 2000). Therefore, although widening access policies have facilitated the inclusion of a greater diversity of students in the HE system as a whole, the range of social backgrounds within individual institutions tends to be more homogeneous. The greatest diversity of students, in terms of socio-economic background and ability tends to be in the post '92 universities, rather than the older universities which continue to draw the majority of students from middle class backgrounds. As such, inequalities still exist in the HE system (Brennan et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2010; Crozier et al., 2008; Archer, 2007; Iannelli, 2007; Reay et al., 2005; Osborne, 2003; Power et al., 2003; Read et al., 2003; Archer et al., 2000; Sutton Trust, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986).

Similarly, as stated earlier, the perceived relative status of disciplines varies and the post '92 institutions are less likely to offer courses in

disciplines such as medicine, which are considered to be higher in status than some of the newer disciplines offered by post '92 institutions. Additionally, the range of subjects delivered to degree level has increased, with a greater number of jobs which did not previously require degree level qualifications now requiring one (Brennan et al., 2003). Similarly, the increase in the number of people with degrees also means that a degree qualification no longer guarantees a graduate career, and professions such as law and medicine are no longer seen as commanding the level of respect that they once did. The perceived erosion of the status of graduate professions is confirmed by one lecturer, Phil, who commented that:

*"I remember that when I went to uni in the mid-eighties reading something that said that at that time it was only about the top 5% of people who went to university. The government is now trying to get 50% of people into uni and that can't, no matter what you say about the standards, it doesn't make it so appealing to have a degree. If you think back, two or three generations back, people who were educated were, revered is a bit strong, but certainly respected, doctors, lawyers, this was really something, but now ..... I think there is definitely an erosion in the position of a degree because more and more people are getting one."*

Although access to HE has increased with the creation of a mass HE system in the UK, it has not necessarily widened. Although students from the lower socio-economic classes are more likely to access HE than previously, they tend to study less prestigious subjects at newer institutions, leading to a continuance of stratified outcomes in employment and earning power (Brennan et al., 2008; Archer, 2007; Paterson et al., 2007; Field, 2003).

Crozier et al. (2008) carried out a mainly qualitative study of the differential experiences of middle class and working class students in four different types of UK HEIs (an elite university, pre '92 civic university, post '92 university and FEC offering HN programmes). They found that working class students often have little or no real choice other than to study at a local university due to pre-existing commitments and/or financial constraints. Mature students often have family commitments which restrict geographical mobility, and many younger students' mobility is limited due to a lack of family and financial support. Similarly, many working class students are likely to have part-time jobs, which for some may be almost as many hours as a full-time job, so the students have to juggle a whole range of different demands on their time. Therefore, for these students obtaining a degree is something which they fit in around their other commitments, rather than being the central aspect of their life.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also more likely to attend post '92 universities as they are more likely to feel at ease mixing with other students from a similar background (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2001; Bourdieu et al., 1990). If an institution's students are predominantly working class, then the extent to which they can improve their social and cultural capital, and hence their social mobility, is questionable (Crozier et al., 2008). If students continue to mix with other students who have the same social background as themselves then they are unlikely to form networks with people in other social groups, and thus it is difficult for them to climb the social ladder.

One consequence of widening access to HE is a greater range of expectations from the students. Many students entering university, particularly the post '92 universities, are the first generation of their family to have attended a university, and therefore their expectations and understanding of a university education can often vary from that of the lecturers and those students who have a family history of university education (Archer, 2007; Reay et al., 2005; Henkel, 2000). Studying for a degree is challenging for all students, however it is even more difficult for students who do not have a family background that understands the requirements of degree level study. Therefore universities need to provide

ongoing support for these types of students in order to help them adjust to university life (Crozier et al., 2008; Thomas, 2002; Henkel, 2000).

### **Lecturers' views on widening access**

Widening access can mean different things to different people so I asked the lecturers what the term meant to them. I discovered from their responses that the lecturers differentiated between what they thought the term should mean, and what they thought it actually meant in practice. For example, Joe said:

*"It means getting people into education. For me, it means getting people into higher education who cannot either socially or economically access higher education."*

Whilst Ken said:

*"Basically giving equality of opportunity for studying, irrelevant of what the background of the student is. That's how I would define it."*



And Bill said:

*“It means encouraging students from various backgrounds to come on courses. To make it easier for them to come on a course. Taking their past into consideration. Basically you want people from different backgrounds, and so on, to be able to participate.”*

And Ed said:

*“I suppose you might say different classes of people, different educational backgrounds, different countries, different languages, different abilities. Well not different abilities, well to some extent different abilities, I suppose. It can't be widely differing abilities because if they can't do it, they can't do it.”*

Thus it can be seen that the initial responses from the lecturers indicated that they thought that widening access to HE in its broadest sense should mean making HE accessible to people from different social and economic backgrounds. However further elaboration of their replies showed that

many of the lecturers saw widening access, as implemented by the university, as equating to a lowering of entry qualifications and allowing students onto courses who did not necessarily meet the published entry requirements. Des said:

*“If I was being absolutely cynical about it, then I would say it’s dropping entrance requirements. I think what it’s meant to be, what it should be, is about enabling potential students from a non-academic background to come into university, .... that would tend to be people, not just school leavers, but people who have perhaps been away from education for a number of years, but I feel it’s about dropping entrance requirements, that’s the practical way it’s implemented here. I think it should be aimed at non-traditional people. People from non-traditional backgrounds coming into Higher Education, but then there has to be a way of assessing their suitability. The whole point of saying you have to have, say, two Highers, is because it’s some kind of academic hurdle that potential students can show that they have achieved, so that they can say that they are capable of handling the course and I think we don’t do the students any favours if we lower that.”*

Similarly, Leo said:

*“It means that for example we’ve always been very flexible about our entry requirements when it comes to mature students. .... so widening access in that sense means not being too fussy about the entry requirements for mature students. I think for school leavers I wouldn’t want to widen the access too much, we’re already using the minimum standard that we are allowed to in most cases where school leavers are concerned, so widening access for me means more part-time, more mature students, more woman returners, various categories of people that you can widen access to.”*

And Bob said:

*“Widening Access. It could mean, dumbing down your entry qualifications, to take in people who are less capable which of course causes higher failure rates because they come along and they are less capable unless you do something else about it. It could mean almost anything. I suppose by definition it means not taking people in who’ve got three Highers straight out of school, that’s the obvious one. .... Does widening access really come in to action during clearing when we drop into the ‘he’s breathing, I’ll take him’, mode.”*

All of the lecturers appeared to consider widening access to HE to be a good thing in principle. However there were conflicting views about what widening access should mean and how it is actually interpreted and implemented by the University. Several of the lecturers thought that the entry requirements for school leavers were already relatively low and therefore should not be lowered any further. For example, Bob states that widening access is something which comes into action at clearing. His opinion is that it is a term which the university uses to justify enrolling school leavers, who do not meet the minimum entry requirements onto a course, in order to increase student numbers. This view is similar to that expressed by Morgan-Klein et al. (2002), who found that for some institutions widening access to higher education is more about increasing student numbers rather than for social justice reasons.

The responses also show that the lecturers differentiated between the way in which they thought widening access should be interpreted for mature students (over 21) and school leavers. Most of the lecturers appeared to consider it acceptable to waive the published entry requirements for mature students, thus allowing the students to be accepted onto a course without the qualifications required of school leavers. However none of the lecturers explained why they thought students without the required qualifications, should be allowed onto a degree programme, just because

they had reached their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Several lecturers did, however, say that they thought there should be some way of assessing a student's suitability or otherwise for a course, prior to offering them a place. For example, Des said:

*"If we are bringing in students with a non-academic background then we have to have some confidence that they will be able to handle the academic rigours required of the course, and again, I can't say I've seen any evidence of that within the institution."*

He also said:

*"I was told just to interview the person and make a decision based on that. So I did that and the person seemed reasonable enough, and I let them on the course. But what happens if that person does really badly and comes back and complains I shouldn't have let them on the course. I've got nothing to say I went through this process, because there was no process. So, in something like that, I feel that while we say yes students can come in from a non-traditional background, I don't feel there is the support, so it's a kind of judgement call."*

This comment from Des, who is an Admissions tutor, shows that lecturers are often left to decide for themselves on an applicant's suitability for a course. Although several lecturers gave examples of success stories, such as the one below, there was a general concern, both for the students and the lecturers themselves, over the lack of a formal system to try to ensure that students without the required qualifications were going to be capable of the academic rigours of the course. On the one hand, there was the feeling that mature students should be given the opportunity to study for a degree, and on the other, there was the question of having to justify your decision to allow the student a place, if they should then go on to fail. Des felt that the decision was very much left to him to make, and so he felt unsupported and uncomfortable with the responsibility. However Luc gave an example of a success story:

*“Widening access is providing the means by which people can come on to a degree course who may not initially be in the position to come on to a degree course. Other universities, X, Y, Z, and all the rest of them, are very late at getting on to that band wagon, but they’ve seen it now and they’re starting. We’ve been doing it for a long while and we’re probably better at it for that reason, but I don’t know if that means we will stay better at it. But yeah, I could give you a number of examples of it. One example is of a person .... who came along while I was the admissions person. She*

*came along as a potential student for BA BIT and what she had done was apply to ask to talk to admissions officers from every university in the area, so we are talking four, and she came in to talk to me about BA BIT and after about 15 minutes with her I passed her on to a colleague, because I could see that she had exactly what it would take to be a good Computer Science student, and she turned out to be one of the best ones we'd seen, and the only disappointment was that she took a job .... rather than go on and do an Honours year."*

Luc discusses an informal admissions system, where he was able to decide on a mature student's suitability for a place on a course. Unlike Des, Luc seems comfortable with making his own decision, rather than following a more formal process. However, he then went on to say:

*"If you look at X, her job has always been about APEL and bringing the idea of APEL to more lecturers and also to more potential students, either as ways for them to come on to the course in the first place, or to hasten their way through. I reckon we're pretty good at that."*

Therefore, although Luc's initial comments indicate that he tended to use his own discretion when admitting mature students, his later comments show that he is aware that formal systems such as APL/APEL (Accreditation of Prior Learning / Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning) can be used to allow mature students, who do not have the necessary qualifications, but who might have relevant work experience, to join a course. Therefore there are procedures available for lecturers to use, although it seems that some lecturers are not aware of them and/or do not necessarily use them. It could be that the lecturers do not have time during clearing to use the formal system since they are under pressure to make a prompt decision on a potential student's suitability or otherwise for a course.

### **Lecturers' perspectives on teaching diverse student groups**

Following on from the lecturers' views on widening access, I was interested to know what the lecturers thought about the students, and whether they had taken any steps to adapt what they did to suit the greater diversity of students. The lecturers shared a similar view to that stated in Barnett (1990) namely, that widening access to HE was about



allowing students entry on to degree programmes and it did not require any radical change on their part or the institutions.

The lecturers indicated that they thought students were different and had more external influences on their lives than previously. However, several also stated that they had no understanding of all the other things that were going on in a student's life, and several questioned whether they should actually know, and give consideration to all the other external influences on a student's life. The lecturers' views were that the students led two separate lives, and the students should manage their own learning. Most of the lecturers did not think that they should do anything differently to cope with the different abilities of the students, nor the range of additional responsibilities that the students might have. As far as the lecturers were concerned, if a student was on a full-time course, then the lecturers' expectations were that the students should devote a significant proportion of their time to their studies. There was little evidence from the lecturers' responses that they had even considered taking small steps, such as attempting to spread the assessment load more evenly throughout the trimester, rather than end loading all assessment deadlines, to assist the students. However the reality, as viewed from a student perspective, is very different. For many students, their university studies need to be

integrated with all the other commitments in their life (Brennan et al., 2010, 2008; Archer, 2007; Field, 2003; Thomas, 2002).

The attitude of the lecturers confirms the findings of Macdonald et al. (1998) who give an account of staff 'attitude' as described by students, as well as MacDonald et al. (2001) who carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with a group of tutors at an institution which had a well-established access policy. These researchers found that although the institution in the survey had policies in place to encourage access from non-traditional students, the lecturers expected the students to adapt to the existing system, rather than that the system should change to suit the students. Similarly, the non-standard students in the earlier study said that the lecturers did not treat them as a distinct group, and the students felt that they were a 'problem' as far as the majority of the lecturers were concerned. This did not correspond to what the students had expected prior to starting university, since it did not match the institutions promotional material which encouraged applications from non-standard students. The lecturers in my study also thought that they should treat all students equally, and therefore it was not appropriate for them to treat 'non-traditional' students any differently. Thus there is a conflict in expectations between lecturers and students.

When the lecturers were asked how widening access policies and student retention and/or achievement policies had influenced what they did in the classroom, their initial reactions were along the lines of “*Not very much*” and “*No*” they had not influenced what they did in class. For example, Des said:

*“I’ve kind of viewed widening access as meaning if I’m teaching someone a 2<sup>nd</sup> year course, for example, and they’ve been accepted onto 2<sup>nd</sup> year, then I assume that they have the same capabilities as the traditional students. So rather than saying here’s a group who have come in through this way, I don’t think I’ve actually taken it into account, to think that I might need to do something different with students from a non-traditional background. No I haven’t done anything.”*

Similarly, several of the other lecturers echoed Des’s comments that it had not crossed their mind to consider changing what they intended to do in a class, and therefore widening access policies had not influenced what they did in the classroom. Likewise the lecturers’ responses showed that if they were given a class to take, then they assumed that the students in the class had the appropriate pre-requisite knowledge for the module.

The fact that many of the lecturers had not considered changing their teaching methods and approaches to cope with the wider diversity of students concurs with the findings of MacDonald et al. (2001). MacDonald et al. (2001) also identified that universities often have procedures in place to help the students to adjust to university life. However, they suggest that rather than universities adopting approaches to help students to adapt to the current system, universities should actually be developing new ways of doing things that suit the needs of their student body. Therefore this is something which the institution in my study, which attracts a large number of non-traditional students, should consider.

Only one lecturer, Les, suggested that the curriculum could possibly be adapted to meet the needs of the students. However, he acknowledged that neither he, nor his colleagues, have thought about changing their approach. Les said:

*“Try to change the curriculum to make it wider access, so that it is available to people of different backgrounds, interests, age groups capabilities, I don’t think we’ve grasped that yet, I don’t think so.”*

Although the lecturers' initial responses indicated that they had not made a conscious decision to adjust their teaching and delivery approaches to suit the students in their classes, there was evidence which indicated that some of them did adapt their approaches to suit the group of students they were presented with. Several lecturers stated that more often than not, they had little prior knowledge of the composition and numbers of students in the classes they had to teach, and therefore they had to react to the situation in front of them. For example, Les said:

*"We teach who we get. We don't have any real choice about who turns up, and I find that you can't decide in detail how you are going to teach, until you get a smell of what the class is like."*

Les also said:

*"We just turn up and see who's there in the classroom, that's ultimately what we tend to do. Or suddenly find 40% of your audience is Chinese and nobody's told you they were coming, and how then do you cope, it's too late. .... I haven't seen .... or been part of any forum which has actively sought to talk about coping with audiences of significantly mixed*

*ability, ethnicity, background, attitudes, expectations, there's never been one."*

Therefore the lecturers often used the experience they had gained over the years to adjust to different classroom situations. Similarly, as Les indicates, the lecturers thought it would be useful if they could have prior knowledge of the numbers and background of the students they were having to teach, so that they could plan their modules accordingly, rather than make changes 'on the hoof'. Several lecturers also thought that this was particularly important if you were being given a class of overseas students, because as Ed stated:

*"You've got to be careful, what terms you use when explaining things, that when explaining things that you don't use slang terms or non-standard English terms, or if you do, to explain what you are going on about. That's one obvious point. Examples can be difficult to grab hold of as well. For example, I tried to explain something by referring to the seven dwarves, you know, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and I realised that nobody in the class had ever heard of them."*

Although over 90% of the students attending the university (Chapter 2, diagram 6) are UK students, 20% of the post-graduate students in the School are overseas students, so some lecturers can find themselves teaching large groups of non-UK students. As the quotes above show, the lecturers have to cope with the different cultural, language and power differences which can arise when interacting with overseas students (Fallon et al., 1999).

### **Academic qualifications and widening access students**

As we saw above, for many of the lecturers, widening access equated to lowering entry qualifications. This echoes the findings of Crozier et al. (2008) who found that some students often hold academic qualifications and achievements which are tenuous in relation to the demands of their degree courses. It is therefore not surprising to note that universities, such as the one in my study, which have been successful at widening student participation also have the highest drop-out rates (Reay et al., 2010; National Audit Office, 2007; Thomas, 2002).

A few lecturers implied that they felt that they had little input to the admissions process, and that the institution was responsible for accepting students onto the courses who were not always appropriately qualified. However those same lecturers also said that they had to take part in a range of recruitment events, market the courses, make admissions decisions and so on, which would suggest that they do have some say in which students are recruited.

Several of the lecturers held the view that if the university accepted students onto a course, then the students should be able to cope with the academic level of the course. If a student was not up to the demands of the course, then the lecturers considered that to be the student's responsibility rather than theirs. Therefore if appropriate steps are not taken by universities to assist students with a deficit in academic qualifications when they start a course, then it is to be expected that students will struggle with the programme, which can often lead to their withdrawal. Luc said:

*“Wider access is, it's never meant like that, but in some ways it could almost be an insult, because what you are saying is, wider access is to let people come in and try harder, because that is how it usually works out.”*



Thus, although the published entry requirements may be waived for some students, once the student has been accepted onto a course then they are generally expected to fit in. The same applies to direct entry students who may not have the necessary pre-requisite knowledge for some modules. Little, if any, additional support is provided to help these students reach a minimum acceptable level for every module that they take. However Joe did say that the students should be supported, in order to help them succeed:

*“Once you’ve let them on a programme, I feel very much once you’ve cajoled, tricked, promised, whatever, to get them on a programme, you shouldn’t let them down. You cannot suddenly, you know, let you in the back door and fail you in year 1, or, you’re a direct entry student and you’re not up for it, so bang, bye. I feel morally we should try our best, but also that the students should meet us half way. I don’t mean that we should give them the answers to the exam questions, but we should give them everything in front of them so that they, given their background, should pass, but if they don’t meet us half way then I accept we will lose those students. So the responsibility is the University, the School and obviously individual lecturers, to do their bit and support weak ones in particular.”*

Similarly, Joe and several other lecturers, including Des, identified ensuring that the students are provided with all the notes they require to help them study for a module, as the main means of assisting the students. Thus the lecturers see providing extensive notes as the main way of providing additional support to the students. Des said:

*“You are providing them with almost text books. I effectively, for each module I teach, write my own text book.”*

Joe also said that sometimes he and his colleagues make life more difficult for the students, and themselves, by over compensating for the fact that the University is not considered to be amongst the elite universities in the country, and thus set exams and coursework at a higher level than necessary:

*“Well, I’ve kind of tried to adjust .... some of the external examiners have said that we set standards for our students away beyond what you might expect at an equivalent university like X, and I try to be mindful of that. Just because they got to Y and just because their grades were lower, or maybe they came through a route with very few Highers, HNC, HND, that*

*we make them prove themselves again and again, that you really deserve this degree, and I heard it once maybe two or three years ago, and ever since I heard that, I've become very well aware of just how hard I can be, how I ask them for just a bit more, how I can make them jump that bit higher."*

As far as some of the lecturers were concerned, they saw themselves as having to maintain standards and therefore were not prepared to change what they did to meet the needs of the students. Similarly the lecturers expected the students to take responsibility for ensuring that they did whatever was necessary to get themselves to the right level for their modules.

### **Lecturers' awareness of institutional widening access policies**

Most of the lecturers indicated from their responses that they approved, in principle, with widening access to HE. However there seemed to be a general lack of knowledge amongst the lecturers about any specific policies or measures that the University might have in place to encourage widening access. The majority of those interviewed said they had little or

no knowledge of what was being done at an institutional level to widen access to the university. Although, as we saw above, Luc did say that widening access was something that the university was successful at, and had been doing for a number of years. Tony said:

*“From time to time you see initiatives, but they tend to be just temporary measures, that’s the impression you get, it’s kind of flavour of the month kind of thing. There’s not a real structure to try to open access for people.”*

And:

*“I wouldn’t say so, since I’ve been here for example. We used to at my last college. We used to have special courses for certain people. For example, we offered a course ..... which was specifically designed for woman to get back into business after years out raising a family, that sort of thing .... but I can’t think of anything in recent years that’s as specific as that.”*

Therefore although we saw earlier that Luc thinks that the university is good at widening participation in HE, both he and his colleagues seem to

perceive it as being the responsibility of '*the University*' rather than something which concerns them directly.

One lecturer, Ken gave the introduction of the block timetable as a good example of a specific action he considered the University to have taken to help widen access, particularly for part-time students. The block delivery approach means that modules are taught on one specific day each week, rather than the teaching for the module being spread throughout the week, hence its suitability for part-time students. Ken said:

*"I think one of the things that helps widening access is the block timetable, which an awful lot of people don't like. But I think it's quite a good thing because it means that students know they can just come for that half day, or two half days and they can do it part-time, and it means they only need to take two half days away from wherever else they need to be."*

However, as acknowledged by Ken, we will see in a later chapter that most of the other lecturers were critical of the block timetable, since they thought that it discouraged student integration with the university. The way modularisation and block delivery structures have been implemented by

the university means that students do not have any 'free' or study time between classes. Likewise changes in technology mean that most students, particularly computing students, can access most of the resources they require from home; therefore they do not have a specific reason to stay on campus when not in class. We will look at the impact of this on cohort cohesion and integration with the wider university in chapter eight.

Although the lecturers considered widening access to the university to be a good thing in principle, there was a gap between the university's policies on widening access and the lecturers' understanding and implementation of them. This is a common issue in large institutions which adopt a top-down approach to policy implementation.

### **Direct entrants to HE**

As stated earlier, many students from lower socio-economic groups access HE by way of FECs before progressing to university. Therefore one of the ways that the University seeks to widen access is by actively encouraging applications into later years of the programmes from entrants from FECs. In session 2009-2010 over 1000 students articulated from

FECs. Similarly, several of the computing degree programmes offered by the University are delivered in collaboration with a number of FECs at the college sites. The delivery of degree programmes at college sites, and the numbers of students articulating into later years of degree programmes, raises questions in terms of comparable experience and the wider purpose of a university education, which I will discuss in chapter eight.

The drive by the university to recruit students from FECs concurs with the findings of Field (2003) who states that the newer post '92 universities in both Scotland and England are more likely to encourage applications from students with sub-degree level qualifications than the older universities. Similarly, Field (2003), citing work by Gallacher (2002), states that almost two-thirds of those who progress in Scotland from HE in a FEC enter a post-92 university, such as the one in this study, while a further quarter remain within the FEC sector. Thus reinforcing the broader pattern in which students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend less prestigious institutions. In addition, the number of direct entry students joining later stages of programmes, and therefore only studying for one or two years at the university, as well as the delivery of the degree programmes in FECs, raises questions about the ability of a degree to be able to improve the social and cultural capital of the students.

Recruiting direct entrants onto later years of the degree programmes, as well as delivering programmes in local colleges, is important to the University in terms of enabling it to meet its strategic objectives, as well as increasing its student numbers. However there was little evidence from my study that module co-ordinators had tailored the content of their modules in any way to suit the requirements and background knowledge of these particular groups of students. Thus I found once again, that the students were being expected to adapt to fit the existing system, rather than the lecturers adjusting their methods to suit the needs of the students.

In addition, many lecturers have found themselves responsible for modules which are taught, not only on other campus sites, but also in partner colleges. Current university policy states that all students should have an equivalent experience, irrespective of where they are studying a module. However, the lecturers have been left to interpret this in their own way, and it appears to have been misunderstood by some. Several lecturers seemed to think that it meant that the classes had to be on the same days and times, and that identical material had to be used, without any changes to cater for the needs of the specific audience. As a result this has led to a loss of flexibility and a feeling of being de-professionalised



for some lecturers. However, what is actually required is an equivalent experience, not necessarily an identical experience, at every delivery location. Therefore it is possible for the lecturers to tailor the material to suit the particular student audience.

One lecturer, Bob, commented on the variations between different groups of students:

*“Last semester I was teaching on three different campuses and they were three completely different groups of students, and you just can’t go with a set of notes and teach them as if they are the same as the last group, because they just aren’t the same. The X students are not like the Y students, and the Y students are not like the Z students. They have to be taught in different ways. Z students only have two Highers at most. These are not stars in firmament .... You hope that you can get to the end of it all and hope they gain from things. The X students, I feel are quite cohesive, confident, but not very academic, so there is no point in trying to teach them the deep meaning of something. The Y students vary, from some pretty smart cookies, through to some barely alive, barely breathing types in there. I find that the idea of writing a set of lecture notes which you just post on the internet at the start of the year, and you then just go and talk to*

*students isn't going to get the best results. You have to be much more willing to sit at about week three and think, what am I going to do for the next nine weeks, and change your strategy on the hoof, and I've even had to change my strategy on the hoof with two or three weeks to go because I've thought this is not going to work. I've got to make a change now or I'm heading for a car crash with this module, and then trying to retrieve what you can because the students are unpredictable."*

Bob appreciates the need to adapt both module materials and delivery methods to suit the particular student group, and he is able to draw on his own experience and professionalism to do this. However, most of the other lecturers thought that they could deliver identical lectures at every location without regard to the background knowledge and ability of the students in the class. This view reinforces the fact that most of the lecturers expect the students to fit in to the university way of doing things, rather than consider the possibility that perhaps they should change their delivery methods and materials to suit the needs of the students.

The delivery of degree programmes in local colleges means that the students never actually need to attend the university in order to gain a degree, and therefore they are missing out on the university experience.

However, the uptake of the locally delivered degree programmes by students in the colleges, suggests that the students would rather study in an environment which they are familiar with, and with the same peer group, than transfer to university. This finding concurs with that of other researchers who have found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would rather study in surroundings where they feel comfortable, and with students whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Reay et al., 2005; Archer et al., 2003; Bowl, 2003). For many students from lower social and working class backgrounds gaining a degree is a means to an end and they are not interested in, or do not have the time to integrate fully into university life, nor do they perceive any advantages to being more actively involved in university life. Many of these students perceive achieving a degree as a way to gaining employment and they are not interested in the wider benefits to be gained from a university education, such as improving their social capital.

### **Summary of lecturers' views on widening access**

The university attracts a significant number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and therefore can be considered successful in widening participation in HE to students from these social groups. Disciplines such as Medicine have remained the preserve of the older

institutions and the newer post '92 universities have opted to diversify into other areas rather than compete for student numbers in these disciplines. Consequently, other than in a few specialised areas, the perceived status of older institutions means that they are over subscribed for many courses and therefore in the position of being able to select the students they want, whereas newer institutions, such as the one in this survey, rely heavily on students choosing the university, rather than the university choosing the student. Therefore, this student selection process reinforces the hierarchical structure of universities and the social status of their students, and maintains the existing social and cultural capital of the institution, rather than widening access to all and promoting social mobility.

The positioning of the University in the hierarchy of HEIs, in terms of perceived status, means that many of the university's students are in the situation where they are deliberately deciding to opt for the institution. While some would argue that many students from lower socio-economic groups do not have a choice of which university to attend, since their prior qualifications and/or family commitments restrict their choice, as was stated earlier, the University is one university in a relatively small geographical area which has three other universities, including another post '92 university, therefore the students do have other options available to them.

The students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, unlike many of their middle class peers, are making a considered decision to leave school and attend university and often have lots of confidence in their own ability to succeed. However the student's perception of a university education is sometimes very different from their lecturers, particularly in areas such as the amount of work they need to put in, in order to be successful. Also, many of these students are the first in their families to attend university and therefore neither they, nor their relatives, have any experience or understanding of the demands on an individual that a university education can make.

One advantage of students choosing the university, rather than the university choosing the students, is that the students are selecting an institution where they will feel comfortable amongst their peers, and as we will see in chapter eight, a student's integration with an institution is an important factor in determining whether they will be successful on their chosen course or not.

The lecturers acknowledged that the university is successful at recruiting students from lower and working class backgrounds, as well as direct entrants from FECs. However few of them appeared to have any knowledge of the university's widening access policies. The university has a Lifelong Learning Academy (LLA) which is involved in a number of projects to widen participation in HE. Although none of the lecturers specifically stated that they thought that the widening access agenda was the role of the LLA rather than something which should concern them, it would seem from their replies that the lecturers did see widening access as someone else's responsibility rather than theirs. Thus, the lecturers seemed to have compartmentalised the social inclusion and widening access agenda as something carried out by 'the University', rather than part of the main stream university activities.

Although the lecturers considered widening access to HE to be commendable in principle, there seemed to be a conflict between the fact that the lecturers expected the students to have the qualifications for the course, and yet they did not necessarily have an issue with mature students being taken on without the minimum entry qualifications. Students taking a module may have enrolled on the degree programme at year one, or they can be direct entrants to years two, three or four of a programme. Therefore the lecturers have to cope with a diverse range of

students with multiple entry/exit points. All of the lecturers acknowledged and recognised the greater diversity in the student body. However it was difficult to determine to what extent they had adapted their teaching material and approaches to suit the different student groups. Most of the lecturers said that they had not thought about changing anything they did to suit the students. However, as we saw earlier, Bob did explain his experiences of teaching the same first year (level 7) module to groups on different campuses. Similarly, Joe described the difficulties involved with delivering a third year (level 9) module to a large group of students who had all followed different pathways. Joe's module included a significant number of direct entry students and therefore the students taking the module had different levels of pre-requisite knowledge. Joe explained how he found it difficult to decide how much time he should spend ensuring that all the students had the same prior knowledge without alienating some. Thus most of the lecturers taught the students in their classes with little consideration of the background and entry route of the individual student. Most of the lecturers seemed to be reluctant to accept any responsibility for ensuring that any deficit in prior knowledge that a student might have was filled, and it would appear that it is easier for the lecturers to put the onus on the institution and/or the student for any inadequacies a student might have, rather than themselves.

The delivery of modules on different campuses and at FECs presents all of the lecturers, and the module co-ordinators in particular, with a number of challenges. Some lecturers need to teach material which has been produced by someone else, and the module co-ordinators need to prepare materials which can be delivered by a number of different lecturers to a wide range of students. Consequently, the lecturers have little flexibility in the content and delivery of the modules, and therefore there is a feeling of being de-professionalised for some lecturers.

Conversely, the in-college deliveries provide the lecturers involved with the opportunity to tailor the curriculum to suit the particular student group. All the students in the class will have been on the same HND programme, therefore they will have the same prior knowledge and experience, rather than the wide variation that there can be in the university groups. The class size is also likely to be considerably smaller (typically 15 students), thus the students can be provided with a more individualised experience. In addition, the college staff often provide additional support in areas such as mathematics, if required. Therefore, although the same material needs to be covered, there tends to be greater flexibility in the delivery of the modules.



In the next chapter I will describe the changes in the student body and in particular how they have impacted on the lecturers and their identity. I will also explain the strategies that the lecturers have adopted to cope with the changes which they have been experiencing.

## **Chapter 7 – Changes in students as perceived by the lecturers**

In this chapter I will discuss the lecturers' perceptions of the changes in students with particular reference to the changes in student numbers and the greater diversity of students. The massification of HE involves greater numbers of students entering higher education, at a time when funding per student has declined. This in turn has presented lecturers with a number of challenges in coping with larger cohorts, as well as handling a greater diversity in the types of students in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, expectations and ability. The diversity in students is most apparent in the newer universities such as the one in my study, and often the students enrolling on programmes are the first person in their family to enter higher education, therefore their expectations and perceptions of HE, as well as preparedness, can sometimes differ from that of their lecturers (Barnett, 2007; Henkel, 2000). The students attending the university in my study broadly fall into a category C student experience as defined by Brennan et al. (2010, p185). That is, an individualised student experience where the students are usually local and often mature in age (over 21 at entry) with domestic and work commitments. Brennan et al. (2010) state that for this type of student, engagement with the university is typically limited to attending lectures and taking the necessary assessments. Consequently these students are not interested in a wider university experience.

The most striking change to be identified by most of the lecturers interviewed was the change in student numbers. By contrast, changes in the ability, age, motivation and expectations of the students seemed to be less important to the lecturers. Although initially some of the lecturers had said that it was difficult to say whether the students were more or less capable academically than previous students, since the numbers had changed so much, we will see that several lecturers did discuss perceived changes in the ability and attitude of the students.

### **Impact of changes in student numbers on the lecturers**

The expansion in HE over the last forty five years means that many universities are no longer elite institutions. In the early 1960s only 5% of school leavers progressed to university whereas the figure is now almost 50%. Similarly, the increase in the numbers of students attending university has led to a greater diversity in the types of students. There has also been a change in the gender balance of students attending university. Whereas the student body was previously predominantly male, by 1997 more than 50% of students were female (Barnett, 2007; Dearing, 1997).

As was seen in chapter two, the institution in my study is a post '92 university where, in line with the sector as a whole, the student numbers have increased significantly over the last twenty years. Similarly, the percentage of females attending the university has also increased in line with the figures nationally, although as we saw in chapter two, for the discipline in my study, namely computing, the percentage of females applying to study the subject has remained constant over time, which is again matching trends in the discipline nationally (less than 20%).

The majority of the lecturers considered the largest change that they had encountered to be in the number of students choosing to study the discipline of computing, rather than changes in the students themselves. The lecturers all discussed the massive expansion in computing student numbers in the late 90s and the early part of this century. This large increase in student numbers meant that the lecturers, in common with colleagues in other newer HEIs, found themselves having to learn how to cope with large cohorts of diverse students without an equivalent increase in lecturer numbers (Chapter 5, table 2) (Henkel, 2000).

However since 2001 there has been a decline in computing applications, although this appears to have levelled off. This fall in applications coincided with the former Labour government's widening access policy and pressure from the funding councils, measured through their PIs, to retain as many students as possible. Consequently, many United Kingdom (UK) Computer Science departments and their academic staff, have found themselves under considerable pressure from university and college management to try to increase student numbers whilst at the same time maximising student retention.

When I asked the lecturers about the changes in the students the typical response from the lecturers was similar to that from Jo, namely:

*"Well, a lot less. The numbers have fallen drastically. When I came here there was a great big rise, especially with MScs with classes of about 400, and in the corridors you had to say excuse me to get back to my room here, for example. So it has become really sparse which is a bit strange, and a bit worrying, very worrying."*

Similarly, the decline in applications to Computer Science programmes nationally has meant that Schools/Departments are all competing for a

smaller pool of potential students, and institutions such as the one in this study have therefore seen a decrease in the better qualified entrants and an increase in the number of students with the minimum entry qualifications joining the programmes. Hence the competition for student numbers has been particularly challenging for the institution because as Luc said:

*“We are one university in an area where you can throw a rock and hit three other ones.”*

As Luc says, potential students have four universities in a relatively small geographical area to choose from and thus there is strong competition between the universities to attract students. Consequently, the university has found itself having to compete for students for some of the more traditional computing programmes, such as computer science and software engineering. Therefore for some of these broad based computing programmes it is more a case that the students are choosing the university, rather than the university being in the position of being able to select the best qualified students for the programme. Moreover, overall student numbers have declined in these fields.

In response to this increased competition for students, the School developed a number of specialised computing programmes in the areas of computer games, animation and music technology, which did not compete directly with computing programmes at the other local universities. These programmes have been extremely popular at attracting well qualified students to the discipline, thus ensuring that the decline in student numbers in the more traditional computing programmes has been balanced out by an increase in student numbers in these newer more specialised programmes. However the university's competitors, especially another local post '92 institution, have not been slow to identify the attractiveness of these programmes to potential students, and therefore they have also developed programmes in some of these niche areas, thus increasing the competition for students once again.

Recent data show that the decline in computing student numbers nationally, and for the university in this study, have been reversed for the last four sessions, i.e. 2008/09, through to 2011/2012. In addition, the current economic downturn has led to an increase in applications to

universities for session 2012/13 (HESA, 2012<sup>22</sup>), therefore only time will tell whether this signals an upturn in numbers in the longer term.

The downturn in numbers was not seen as completely negative by all of the lecturers in my study, and one of the advantages that the lecturers saw in the decrease in students was the opportunity to give the students better support. For example, Ken stated:

*“I think that I’ve got more time for the students now, basically because there is less of them, because when I started, there were cohorts of 220 students and it just wasn’t realistic to know what they were all doing, how they were all doing, the problems they were having. Whereas now in a class of forty or fifty, that’s quite a big class, but it’s still small enough that I can get to know them all, and if they have problems then they’re in a class where I am, rather than in a class with a tutor or whatever, so they can come and ask me if they want clarification of some things, or if they are struggling with something they can come and sit down with me for five or ten minutes, or come to my office because there’s not a huge queue outside it, which used to be the case with the big module with 150 students. When it came to two days, three days before the assignment*

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>



*was due, there was always a huge queue of students outside my door. It was kind of demoralising, but now with a small number of students, I'm in the class with them, so they can ask me in the class with all of them there, whereas with the big numbers of students I did the lecture with them but the labs, the tutorial, it just depended whether they saw me or not, so I think I've got more personal contact with them now than I had a few years ago, I think it's just the class sizes that has driven that, I don't think it is anything else."*

Similarly, Joe states:

*"I was part-time a little while back ..... and what happened to me was that I ended up doing all the lecturing and actually came away from the labs. .... But I really lost touch with the students because I wasn't talking to them properly the way you do in labs. .... but what's happened since I've come back is that I do all the labs, and all the lectures, and all the tutorials, and I'm now in a better position to judge what is going on. And so I lost a connection for maybe a few years there. .... I would expect to give them much more of me in the labs, not just someone covering for me. That's when I can go back to the topics covered and the theory and I can relate the theory to the practice, rather than I'm doing the theory in a room and*

*someone else is just trying to get them through a lab sheet. It was a bit disconnected.”*

So as a result of diminishing recruitment, the lecturers teach smaller groups of students, and are more likely to meet all the students in smaller tutorial and/or lab groups rather than just some of them. Therefore the lecturers feel that they can get to know the students better, which means that the students receive more direct, focussed tuition and support. Joe's comments also show that the opportunity to interact with the students on a more personal level has led to greater job satisfaction and a better student experience. I will discuss the benefits of improved staff / student interaction in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Lecturers' views on changes in student ability**

Many of the lecturers stated that they found it difficult to compare students over time because there was so much diversity in the student body. The lecturers considered the attitude and ability of school leavers to be different from mature students, postgraduate students different from undergraduate, overseas students different from home students and full-

time students from part-time students. The lecturers also felt that there were differences within each of these groups too. For example, overseas students differed from each other in terms of aptitude and attitude depending on which country they came from, as well as whether they were undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The lecturers also commented on the fact that many of the changes that had taken place had been gradual, and although they had not made a conscious decision to change their methods to suit the students they were sure that they had. Bill said:

*“Things change and you have to change with them. I haven’t really been aware much of having to change.”*

Whilst Tony said:

*“I haven’t really been conscious of that (changes). It’s just evolved over time. You just get to know what students are familiar with now, and just take it from there. I haven’t really thought about it more than that.”*

The views that the lecturers held of the ability of the students was also influenced by where the balance of their teaching lay, and for those lecturers whose teaching was predominantly at undergraduate level it depended on whether they taught in the early or later years of the programme, as well as the modules they taught. For example, lecturers who taught modules in the first year of the undergraduate courses generally found themselves with students with a greater range of abilities than those who taught highly specialised honours level modules. However the responses also show that lecturers who teach modules in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the programmes, which are taken by direct entry students, find themselves with a number of challenges, since they cannot assume that all the students in the class have the same pre-requisite knowledge. Similarly, the regulations on progressing to Honours have also been changed, thus allowing students who would not have previously been able to continue now being able to progress. In terms of changes in the ability of the students Luc said:

*“There’s a differential answer to that because for the undergraduate programmes the students have remained Scottish mostly for the whole time. Generally speaking I would say that their qualifications seem to be*

*fixed at a standard but their ability seems to be reducing in that period, so some basic maths, which is something we could have expected of them four or five years ago, is now something that is a mystery to them. .... Postgraduate wise we used to have an almost exclusively Scottish bunch of students because of the funded nature of it, but over the past four or five years I've seen more and more overseas students paying full fees coming in. Obviously the University makes a good bit more out of that. Again I would say abilities are more variable with the postgraduate IT. Since it is a conversion degree, some of them are very good and have a technology background, they just don't have their IT, whilst others are, let's say, less well prepared coming into that degree."*

The comments above are typical of the other responses given by the lecturers, where they have made a distinction between undergraduates and postgraduates, as well as full-time and part-time students. Within the part-time classification, the students were mainly evening students, rather than students who were studying during the day; however there were also distance learning students in the part-time category too. As was seen earlier, the university's undergraduate students have remained mainly Scottish and local. The qualifications for school leavers have stayed at a fixed level, however there are also students who have been recruited as mature and/or direct entrants. The balance of postgraduate computing

students has changed from mainly 'home' students to a fairly even balance between home and overseas students. One of the main reasons for this change, as alluded to above, has been a change in Funding Council policy. Up until 2007 all postgraduate IT programmes had non-quota student funding and therefore all UK students were funded for taking the course, however this is no longer the case and therefore once the funded places have been allocated other students have to pay their own fees. The programmes are therefore outwith the reach of the less well-off students. As many of the students attending the university are from the lower socio-economic groups this drop in the number of 'home' students at postgraduate level is to be expected, since they are likely to have difficulty paying the fees.

Most of the lecturers stated that they thought that the undergraduate students were less qualified than previously, and although some acknowledged that the students might have the same number of Highers as before, most of the lecturers held the same view as that stated by Bob, that the students were "*more likely to have 'Cs' than 'As'*" and therefore were less able than previous students. Bob also said:

*“Undergraduate students are definitely less well qualified than they used to be, definitely less qualified. It is rare to see undergraduate students with “A’s” in their Highers or A-levels, it is much more common to see “Cs” or the odd “D” “*

And Joe said:

*“Students, as far as intelligence is concerned, I know you maybe didn’t ask there, but it’s very hard to say, because when you were dealing with so many you would get your highs and lows. You’d get these students you were unable to help through the system and those who were always good to recognise. Maybe we still have that same selection but it’s such a small sample now, that when you get a bad lot, if you like, it really seems to be your ‘As’ and ‘B1s’ are missing from that particular class, but when your sample size was bigger you always got there. But sometimes you know, for example I’ve just had a class and there are three ‘A’ students in it, it’s a very small class obviously, with only three, but they happen to be at the very top, so it’s very hard for me to look back intellectually wise and give you, have things changed intellectually wise, or the way students fare in getting through our modules is very difficult because the numbers have really shrunk, and my experience of being with the students has changed.”*

Therefore the changes in student numbers have made it difficult for the lecturers to compare the ability of the students over time. As Joe comments above, there have always been really good students and weak students with the majority in the middle. Fewer students mean that there is a smaller sample and it is therefore difficult to say whether the students are better or weaker than before. However Phil said that the “*good ones are still good, but more and more are less experienced*”, which supports Henkel’s (2000, p215) claim that there is now a “*long tail of weak and poorly motivated students*” in HE. This ‘long tail’ can be linked to the massification of HE together with the widening of access to HE which has led to more students entering HE who would not previously have had the opportunity. In addition, these students tend to be concentrated in the post ’92 universities, such as the one in this study, which means that the drop-out rates for these institutions tend to be higher than those of the older universities. The higher attrition rates also cause these universities to be lower in the league tables, thus reinforcing the perceived lower status of these institutions in the HE hierarchy.

The published entrance qualifications for the programmes offered by the School in my study have not been lowered in the last ten years, although



the requirement of having to have passed Higher mathematics has been changed to 'recommended' for some of the less technical programmes. Therefore the current students are, at least on paper, as well qualified as students have been in the past. The removal of the requirement for students to have passed Higher mathematics led some of the lecturers to comment on the difficulties experienced by some, mainly UK students, with the more numerically based modules, whereas overseas students tended to have excellent mathematics skills. Les thought:

*"It's becoming increasingly clear that students from other countries, from other European countries like Holland, Germany, France can cope, China, can cope with the numerical analysis type work which you would normally associate with a mathematics foundation and are quite happy to work at that. They cope with it far, far better than our students who simply fall out at the first sight of an algorithm, or simple equation, ... it's almost like a complete Berlin wall round their thinking. It's quite scary, and that wall's got bigger. So that perspective of different people, with different country backgrounds, with a different educational system, makes the difference in capabilities of our students more and more stark, and the results show that too."*

Similarly, Phil said:

*"I think perhaps my perception of the students has changed as witnessed by the fact that the programming assessment has got easier, and I do worry that in the early stages I kind of overestimated the students, and things I thought they should possibly do here they maybe couldn't. But I do think it is fair to say that the level of the students at the bottom end has decreased."*

Therefore Phil says that he has changed the assessment for a programming module over time. However it is difficult to know whether that is because the students are not as able as they once were, or whether it is because he overestimated the ability of the students at the start, and then changed the assessment to match the students' ability once he had more experience of gauging the actual level of programming ability that the students had.

Similarly, the general view of the lecturers seemed to be that the value of a degree had been eroded with time, since the achievement of gaining a degree had become the 'norm' within society, rather than having the

exclusivity it once did. There were conflicting perceptions amongst the lecturers of having on the one hand 'dumbed down' standards over time, and on the other of expecting too much of the students. For example Bob said:

*"Oh, a degree is not a degree anymore, oh definitely not. An ordinary degree is probably, yes, I think it is quite comparable to an HND when I started. HND's were tough, they were three years, and I don't think that a student with an ordinary degree in computing has as much practical skills as a student who used to have an HND in computing back 15 years ago. An Honours degree, I'm quite nit-picky that an Honours project has to be an Honours project, and it has to be right."*

Whilst Des stated:

*"I used to be Programme leader for the PG course and we had a bar for the students to get from the Diploma to the MSc, however that bar has now been removed. The bar was that they had to pass seven subjects first time with an average of fifty. Now they get three attempts at each subject and then they can progress to the MSc. The same with progression to the*

*Honours year. It used to be they needed an average of 50%, and now I feel that we keep on lowering the bar and the students keep on going.”*

And Joe said:

*“Where I’m really noticing it, actually, is it’s just frightful, is the Honours year. There used to be really bright kids. And the MSc students are not what they were. .... People thought it was quite pedantic and quite annoying of us wanting a 50% average for Honours year and 50% for an MSc, and I think they thought we were just trying to punish them in some way at the end of a long year. But what a difference it’s made, these two little rules now we’ve withdrawn them. .... now it’s quite different, it’s how you reduce your expectations and adapt them for the weaker student who still wants that Honours degree. You have to give much more help, and you know when the work comes in, it’s not going to get to the level you hoped.”*

Therefore Joe is saying that standards have dropped, however, in the last chapter we saw that Joe thought that he expected more from the students than was necessarily required. So the lecturers expressed mixed opinions

on whether the students were more or less able than previously, and their views also depended on the level at which the balance of their teaching lay. The reasons that the lecturers gave for this uncertainty were due to the many changes which had taken place in HE. For example, as Joe and Phil state above, the number of students has declined and since there is now a smaller group of students, it is difficult to make a statistically sound comparison. However, although the students had always had a range of abilities, the general view expressed by the lecturers was that there were fewer really good students than before.

Likewise, lecturers such as Des and Joe, who taught Honours and Masters level modules, commented on the changes in ability of the students at these levels. The University has changed the progression requirements for these levels and so students no longer need an average of 50% in their earlier modules before being allowed to progress. Consequently, this had led to an increase in the number of students progressing to Honours and Masters level study. The lecturers have therefore found themselves with students with a much wider range of abilities than was previously the case in these classes, and they have had to try to adapt their approach and expectations accordingly.

As stated earlier, several of the lecturers commented on the difficulties involved with dealing with students of mixed abilities in the early years of a programme. However, this was also a particular concern when teaching higher levels of the programmes where there were significant numbers of direct entrants from FE colleges. The increase in direct entrants has led to a number of issues for both the students and the lecturers, including the fact that the lecturers found it difficult to judge what the students had studied previously, and therefore they needed to spend time getting the students up to speed in some modules before they could begin teaching the planned material. The lecturers have adopted a number of coping strategies for dealing with these types of students and situations which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Bob said:

*“It began to get much harder and we also began to get squeezed from below by the FE colleges, taking the kids with 1 or 2 Highers, so the University is becoming a place where people come to in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>d</sup> year, less than in 1st year. They come to complete after college, but they can be fairly weak students and so you find a lot of students leaving at the end of 3<sup>d</sup> year with an Ordinary degree and rarely making it through to the Honours degree level. So certainly there’s a squeeze taking place and a change taking place, but there are a lot of different changes taking place.”*

Bob's comments imply that the direct entrants are less qualified and therefore do not perform as well as students who enter at year one. However, the students have the entry qualifications for the course and so one question should be whether the university could do more to support the students' transition from FE to HE. It could be that the students are not performing as well as they might because they are expected to 'fit in' rather than being provided with the appropriate bridging arrangements, for example in terms of ensuring that they have the correct level of prior knowledge for each of the modules that they are studying. Similarly extra support in study and exam techniques are also important for direct entry students who have articulated from Higher National (HN) programmes, because the two systems have different assessment regimes. The HN students will have had little experience of sitting exams, and for mature entrants in particular, it could be a considerable number of years since they last sat an exam. Therefore there is much that could be done to support the students (Hockings et al., 2009, 2008, 2007, Gorard et al., 2006, Merrill, 2001).

Changes in the discipline also factored into the equation when considering the aptitude of students, since students entering university now have a

lifetime of experience of using computers. Students in the early 1980s applying for computer science courses would probably have never seen a computer prior to attending university never mind have any knowledge of how it worked, whereas today's students are digital natives, and have been using computers, mobile phones and games consoles from a young age. As Phil said:

*“A lot of the things we used to have to teach they now know because of their familiarity with computing before they come in, like basic switching on a machine, we used to have to teach that, but not now.”*

And Tony thought:

*“Well generally, the students here are more able, possibly that is because they are more familiar with computers nowadays, whereas when I think back to the early days of me lecturing, the students didn't have much experience in using computers, even the most basic student nowadays seems to have a fair bit of computing experience.”*



And Bob said:

*“Part of the problem with computing is that everything keeps slipping backwards because things that we were teaching maybe even five years ago you find that now primary school children can do it better! We used to teach students HTML, my daughter taught herself HTML from Bebo when she was at primary school. Is HTML a university level subject? I’m sure there are still universities teaching HTML even although there are eight and nine year old girls who could write it and produce some very slick web sites. It is very hard to set the level in computing, it really is, it’s a moving feast, and I think you are always fighting to keep the level right in computing.”*

Consequently, comparisons of changes in ability were difficult because of the constant changes in technology, and the familiarity that students attending the university now have with technology compared with, say, twenty five years ago. The quotes show that the students now enter university with a substantial body of prior knowledge in some areas of computing, which previous students would not have had, making it difficult for the lecturers to determine whether the students have become more or less able over time.

This increase in prior knowledge and experience was seen as a good thing by many of those interviewed as it meant that they could spend less time covering the basics, and more time covering the main points of their module(s). However, there were two areas which the lecturers identified as problem areas for the students, namely mathematics and computer programming. Many students find the latter subject problematic, not just at the university where this study is situated, but sector wide, and it is therefore a topic where research and sharing of good practice is constantly being undertaken to try to identify ways to make it easier for students to understand (Matthiasdottir et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2001). As Leo said:

*“Very little (change), I’ve been here now for X years and right from way back then we had a mix of some older students. The change is that we’ve got more CPD, more evening courses and so on. But in terms of the abilities of students, I don’t see a great change, students always have great difficulty with programming and every year we try something new to try to get the ideas across better. That’s always difficult you know. There have obviously been huge changes in the computers we teach them on, and the languages, and the technology, but the students remain*

*remarkably similar, still very positive, mostly very focussed. They respond to enthusiasm and I believe I'm quite good at putting that across."*

The diversity of students, plus the different delivery modes and multiple entry points, mean that it is very difficult for the lecturers to determine whether the students are academically better or not than previously. Similarly, changes in technology mean that students tend to have more prior knowledge and understanding of the subject, and lecturers have to continually reassess the level of their teaching materials to ensure they are at the correct standard.

### **Student attitudes to their studies**

The lecturers' views on whether the students' academic ability had changed over time were mixed, and many of the lecturers said that they found it difficult to determine since there were so many factors at play, including the type of student and the level of the course they were on. These factors are also influential when considering student attitudes to their studies. In addition, within the undergraduate and postgraduate categories there is a sub category of part-time students who are also

mature students (over 21), as well as a further subset which are distance learning students, who do not attend university and study at home. Each of these groups has their own set of common traits. The feedback from the lecturers shows that on the whole they considered mature students to be more committed to their studies. The lecturers also recognised that both mature full-time and part-time students frequently had to juggle undertaking a university course with work and family commitments, and that mature students tended to achieve this more successfully than younger students. It was also noted by some of the lecturers that the mature students were often more demanding of their time than the younger full-time students, and that although the majority of mature students were self-motivated and keen to learn, there were sometimes weaker students who just wanted the qualification and therefore were only interested in what they needed to know to pass the module(s) and course. These students were not interested in the wider benefits of a university education, nor expanding their depth of knowledge in the subject area.

Bob stated:

*“The students are unpredictable and when you get mature students, they are full of life experience, full of opinion and not very teachable. Very often*

*they want to know, look I just want to pass, tell me what to do, and some of them you can tell over and over again. .... whereas the kids from school with only one or two Highers pick it up fairly quickly. Some of these mature students in their thirties and forties are not going to follow no matter what you say.”*

Although Bob only identifies some mature students of not being interested in the wider educational experience, other lecturers concurred with the view expressed in a survey by Henkel (2000) that many students, not just mature students, particularly in the newer universities, adopt a minimalist approach to their studies and only want to learn what they need to know in order to pass the modules. Similarly, Coaldrake et al. (1999) discuss how the increase in student numbers has highlighted the differences between the views of what a university education should be, between lecturers and students. Many lecturers consider it to be about developing critical thinking skills and the wider person, whereas for many students, particularly from working class backgrounds, it is more about training for a career and gaining a qualification in order to improve their employment prospects.

The lecturers' views of mature students reflect those of Bourgeois et al. (1999) who compare the differences between mature students who attend

university for the first time having missed out on an earlier university education, and adults who are updating their knowledge and skills in order to improve their existing employment status. The university in my study attracts both these types of adult students, which explains why the lecturers had conflicting opinions on the mature students. The mature students who are upgrading lower level qualifications such as Higher National (HN) qualifications to degree level or above are likely to approach a university education from a different perspective, and with a different understanding of what is expected of them, than those who have little, or no prior experience of higher education.

Another category of students which presented challenges to the lecturers was distance learning students, and there was further diversity within this category since some of the School's modules were delivered via distance learning to UK students and some of the School's postgraduate modules were delivered to a partner institution in Greece. Des, who was involved with delivering distance learning modules said:

*“Those (students) who have done the assessments have actually done quite well; it's the week to week interaction which just isn't there. I know that part of distance learning is that the students can go at their own pace,*

*so they might not do anything for two or three weeks because of work commitments and then have a sudden splurge. But they don't seem to have any interaction with me in terms of allowing me to give them any feedback on what they've done. So you're kind of hoping that they are good students and that they are learning, but there are no indicators to that, and you can't give them any guidance because you're not hearing what they're doing."*

The lecturing staff responsible for distance learning modules can find it difficult to assess how the students are performing, and there can be a sense of frustration at the lack of control the lecturers feel that they have over the learning experience. The lecturers also gave the impression that they did not get the same job satisfaction from teaching the distance learning students, since they did not have direct contact with the students, and therefore did not get to know the students. Thus these lecturers were picking up on an area mentioned by other lecturers about smaller class sizes, namely, that direct interaction with students leads to greater enjoyment in their role. It was also noted that the students on the modules never came into the university to meet other students taking the same modules, and therefore the students had no interaction with their peers. They therefore needed to be very self-motivated if they wanted to succeed

since they had little or no peer support to draw on. I will discuss these themes of staff and student interaction and integration in the next chapter.

There were conflicting views, sometimes from the same lecturer, as to whether students had become more dependent on the lecturers, as well as more demanding, over the years. Most of the lecturers stated that they thought that the students had become more passive in their learning and, as was stated earlier, a few of the lecturers considered that some students wanted to be given all the relevant information, rather than go and do their own independent research. In addition, several of the same lecturers also said that some students expected them to be available on demand. For example, Des said:

*"I think I've found the students to be less independent in their working approach. I feel very much that you've got to lead them by the hand. .... So unfortunately you can't rely on the students actually doing any work outside of the formal class time, and I feel now that I have to spoon feed them more. Things that I would hope that they would recognise themselves they're not, and I'm finding myself having to tell them things which previously, when I first started, students would have found out for themselves, or asked questions about, and now I find myself spoon*



*feeding them more and more because otherwise they just aren't covering the material and it's become difficult."*

Des felt that he could not rely on the students carrying out any directed study that they were instructed to do, and had changed his teaching methods over time to cope with the fact that he could not depend on the students to do the necessary preparation for a class. Des also said:

*"Unfortunately, I think the way the University has responded is by lowering the bar, everything that's been done over the last three or four years has been aimed at getting the students through, where the students do the minimum of work, rather than trying to get the students to do more. I try to encourage the students to do more."*

Whilst Luc thought:

*"Overall I would say with students there is a stronger attitude that we should be doing more for them. .... there was a time when you could give a student a set of notes, a set of tutorial sheets, and the next time you*

*saw the student they would have tried the sheets, and read the notes and slides, and they would have questions to ask. Now it's almost as if you are expected to read the notes for them and point out the interesting parts. .... I don't know where that comes from ..... I do see that standards are declining."*

Similarly, Bill said:

*"Students, I think they did more outside the class, certainly in the first years I was here. I can remember people staying later which they don't do now."*

On initial reading, Bill's comment could imply that the students are not as committed as they once were. However another more likely reason for students not staying on at the university in the evening to work are the changes in technology, and the resultant reduction in cost. The majority, if not all, computing students now have their own computers at home and therefore do not need access to the university machines outwith scheduled class times, unless they have to use highly specialised hardware or software for a module which they do not have access to at

home. So the fact that the students are not staying late at university does not necessarily mean that they are not interested, nor that they are not studying, it could mean that the students find it more comfortable and convenient to work at home. This does however impact on the student's integration with the university, which I will discuss in the next chapter. It also raises questions about the purpose of a university education, and its ability to improve social capital by providing a whole university experience.

Several of the comments above indicate that the lecturers felt that they were being forced to change what they did by both the students and university managers. However, we also saw at the start of this chapter that some lecturers thought they had changed their teaching and assessment approaches without actually realising it. The lecturers are accountable for their module results and are under pressure to ensure that the pass rate for their modules are over 85%, irrespective of the difficulty of the module or the ability of the students. University managers would say that this target setting is to ensure that the institution does its best for the students. However some lecturers argue that it is more to do with ensuring that the university does not generate negative publicity, via league tables, from having high drop-out rates, as well as the resultant loss of fees. Some lecturers also argue that by lowering the bar and spoon feeding the students, they are giving them false expectations of their own ability and

not preparing them properly for the workplace where they will be expected to think for themselves, and use their initiative. Consequently, the lecturers feel under pressure to ensure that all students pass their modules since they will be held accountable by managers. There appeared to be a perception amongst some lecturers that university managers always attributed poor results as being their fault and never the students. As a result the lecturers' way of coping with this was to ensure that they made a full set of notes available to all students, so that they could at least say that the students had been given the necessary material in order to pass the module, thus passing the responsibility back onto the students.

Some of the lecturers also said that the students should take more responsibility for their own learning and be more actively involved with their own learning, by asking questions in class and so on. Similarly, some lecturers discussed adopting more student centred approaches. However the perception of accountability to management which the lecturers felt discouraged them from trying out new techniques with the students. As Des stated:

*"I must admit I've found it very frustrating. When I was a student basically lectures were information gathering sessions. I don't think I ever got a*

*hand-out in my life. It was all a case of chalk and talk and you were there to take as much notes as you could, and later on try to make sense of those notes. Personally I found it a very bad learning experience. I couldn't really see the point of it. I think we are now in a situation with all the technology we can provide students with materials, not exactly a verbatim transcript of a lecture, but you are providing them with almost text books. I effectively for each module I teach write my own text book. I split the notes into ten units, one each week and I've tried to think, what's the point of standing up and delivering that to the class, so I've tried to do other things. For example one year I had a small class, about ten or twelve of them, so .... I gave them the material one week and said okay you can read through the material, and it had self-assessment questions etc., and I said to them I would have a half hour session with them each week to replace the lecture i.e. to have a tutorial, and we would still have a lab at the end of the day so we'd meet as a group. But it met with a lot of resistance from a lot of the students. One of the students said to me 'You're not teaching us anything'. They wanted me to be in front of them and standing and reading from notes."*

Des has tried alternative approaches to try to get the students more involved with their own learning; however, it did not work since some students do not like being taken out of their comfort zone, and he received

a considerable amount of criticism from the students. Des also said that he thought that the students were just interested in being told what they needed to know in order to pass the module. This view is confirmed by work carried out by Henkel (2000) and Coaldrake et al. (1999), who found that many students were not interested in receiving a more rounded education. Des's feeling was that for alternative teaching methods to be accepted by the students then other colleagues would need to adopt similar approaches. However he said there was no suitable forum for these types of issues to be raised, and so he had just backed down and resorted to the traditional lecture approach the students wanted. Consequently, if lecturers such as Des do not feel that they will be supported when they try to be innovative then they will continue to use the same methods as they have always done. I discuss this further in the next chapter.

A similar theme expressed by a number of lecturers was that many students lacked motivation and were easily put off, and therefore dropped out of courses. Several lecturers said that they felt they had to keep the students entertained, because if the students did not find the course and particularly their module interesting, then they tended to fall by the wayside. This observation was supported by the fact that although the student numbers for what could be described as 'traditional' computing

programmes had declined in recent years, the popularity of programmes which the students perceived as more interesting and fun, such as Computer Games, Animation and Music Technology had significantly increased. Luc said:

*“We’re offering degrees that are far more media oriented, and music oriented, and all the rest of it now, and to be very, very cynical about it, it’s about attracting people. You’ve got to attract people, not because they want an education, but because they might find some fun in your place for a while. .... I find that a very worrying trend.”*

Although some lecturers described the students as being more passive learners, others expressed the view that the students were in many ways more demanding in terms of wanting more attention and feedback from their lecturers, which was a finding that Coaldrake et al. (1999) also identified. Several of the lecturers stated that although many students were less likely to come to their office door to ask questions, they found themselves bombarded with emails from some of the more demanding students who expected them to reply instantly, irrespective of the time of day or night. For example Les said:

*“With the impact of technology, obviously electronic mail, students’ expectations are that you can read and reply to anything within five minutes, which is absurd. So it is clear that their understanding of our work environment has become almost nil, and that didn’t used to be the case. They asked have you the time and requested to see you. There is this ridiculous real-time expectation.”*

Les also said:

*“So one is expected to write or respond to huge email responses instantly which is absurd, and it is certainly true that students, more and more students, expect to have that frequent contact. So it could be several times a week. So what their view of education is, quite frankly, I don’t know at times. It can often be the same students who don’t turn up to the tutorial, so you end up almost at a dead end ultimately. So their understanding of academic support, the academic process, is sometimes quite ridiculous.”*

Les highlights the fact that the students who do not attend his classes are usually the same ones who bombard him with emails relating to the



classes that they have missed. So it seems that many students want one to one attention from their lecturers and expect their lecturers to be available at a time that suits them, rather than the other way round. Thus the lecturers' responses show that many students expect their lecturers to be available to them 24/7. How the lecturers dealt with the bombardment of emails differed from person to person. Some of the lecturers were able to leave them to be dealt with at a suitable time; however others, such as Luc, found it more difficult:

*"I don't leave emails. I hate the thought of leaving emails. That's one part of paperwork I could really gladly do without in the job, but it's because I've never really been able to see a bold email and say I'll read that another time, I answer it now!"*

Therefore advances in technology, especially email, and the students' expectations of lecturers can make it difficult for some lecturers to switch off from work. Delanty (2007) states that although technology can be empowering for lecturers because it can lead to greater autonomy in the students, it can however lead to stress in some lecturers because there is no clear distinction between home and work.

## **Summary of changes in students**

In this chapter I have outlined the initial responses of the lecturers to the changes in the students. The major change identified by academic staff has been the increase in student numbers in the 1990s, followed by the reduction in student numbers which followed the dot com bubble bursting in 2000. Although there was a perception amongst some of the lecturers that the current students were not as able as previous students, there had been no lowering of the published general entrance qualifications for the programmes, other than to remove the condition that the students must have Higher mathematics for some programmes. However, since all universities had witnessed a decline in applications for computing programmes, and the university in the study was not in the position of being able to select the most highly qualified students, it was acknowledged that more students entering the programmes were likely to have the minimum entry qualifications required.

Another factor supporting the view of lecturers that the students did not seem as able as previously, is the fact that students who do not meet the published entry requirements are sometimes admitted through the clearing processes in August. Similarly, the standard entry requirements for

undergraduate programmes can be waived, at the discretion of the Programme Leader, for mature applicants. In addition, the removal of minimum progression criteria for Honours year and MSc level study has led to more students with a greater range of abilities progressing to these levels, and therefore many of the lecturers found it difficult to cope with the different abilities and expectations of many of these students. Likewise, the removal of the requirement for mathematics for some programmes means that many students find it difficult to cope with the computer programming and mathematical content of some of the modules. However, this has to be balanced with the fact that the majority of students now enter the programmes with a better understanding of technology, thus allowing lecturers to spend less time on the basics and more time on the areas where the students are having difficulties.

The lecturers also commented on the fact that the students' perceptions and expectations of what a university education should be, and their attitude to their studies, was not necessarily the same as the lecturers'. The diversity of students has therefore led to a wider range of expectations. Many students appeared to view the primary role of a university education as providing a route to employment or improving existing employment prospects. Therefore the students were not looking for as wide an educational experience as some academics would like to

see. Similarly, the students were in many ways more demanding of the lecturers, and as Boccock et al. (1994, p113) stated, “*a growing number of mature and ‘streetwise’ students expect a combined academic and personal counselling service (the two are inseparable in their minds) on demand*”. Likewise, improvements in technology mean that many students expect their lecturers to be available twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.

The lecturers found themselves in the position of trying to maintain academic standards whilst having to cope with a diverse student body. Therefore the lecturers had to balance a number of conflicting priorities. They were being encouraged by managers to adopt new innovative teaching methods; however they did not feel that the students necessarily wanted to try out different approaches. Similarly, the lecturers were under pressure to ensure that they met their pass rate targets, so they were reluctant to try out anything new in case it resulted in lower pass rates. In addition, there was a greater range of abilities at Honours and MSc level so that the lecturers found themselves having to re-assess their expectations of what they required of students at these levels.

In the next chapter I will expand on several of the areas covered in this chapter, focussing particularly on the impact of staff/student interaction on student integration and achievement. I will also describe the ways in which changes to curriculum delivery such as modularisation and semesterisation have affected student integration with the discipline and institution.

## **Chapter 8 – Lecturers’ views of student integration**

This chapter discusses student integration from a lecturer perspective with a particular focus on the influence of staff-student interaction on student retention and achievement. For a student joining a university there can be several types of integration, including, integration with their peers, integration with academic staff, integration with their chosen discipline, as well as integration with the wider university, both staff and services such as student support services and the library. Retention has become an increasingly important issue, both for the sector and for the institution in this study, as well as for the Scottish government and the media. Potentially, it is therefore particularly important for academics’ understandings of their role and their relationships with students.

Given my focus on lecturer perspectives, this chapter will describe the effect that structural changes to the delivery of the curriculum, such as the introduction of modularisation, trimesterisation and block delivery structures, have had on the integration of students from the lecturer viewpoint. I have singled these changes out for discussion since they have impacted on a number of other areas, such as the integration of students with their discipline, academic staff, their peers and the wider university.

## **Student - Staff Interaction**

A number of previous studies have concluded that students consider good staff-student relationships to be extremely important to their success (Murphy, 2009; Hockings et al., 2009, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005; Duggan, 2002; Thomas, 2002; Gallacher et al., 2000; Walker, 1999; Yorke, 1999; Martinez, 1997; Hughes, 1996; Cullen, 1994; Tinto, 1975). However there has been little work on lecturers' views of this topic. As a result I was interested in exploring the lecturers' views on student integration with the university as a whole, together with the interaction of the lecturers with students, and how important or otherwise the lecturers thought good student integration and staff-student interaction were to student retention and achievement.

Thomas (2002, p432), drawing on a case study in a modern university in England, which used student focus groups and questionnaires to investigate some of the issues surrounding student retention, states that *“students who feel respected by staff are more able to take problems to staff, and thus sort them out. Academic difficulties that are not resolved may well lead to failure, and ultimately involuntary withdrawal”*. Thomas (2002) found that for students who find themselves struggling with a

particular area of their course, support or otherwise from their lecturer can often be crucial in determining whether they will withdraw from a programme.

The commitment of lecturing staff and their attitude towards students is therefore important in influencing a student's decision to continue on a course or not. There is also evidence showing that students at Scottish universities often withdraw from a course and continue with their studies at another university, if the original programme does not meet their expectations, and/or if they feel that they are not getting appropriate support from their lecturers (Christie et al., 2005; Johnston, 1997). This is particularly important for the university in this study, since as mentioned previously, the university is one of four in a relatively small geographical area and therefore the students have alternative study options available. In addition, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications (SCQF) framework means it can be relatively straight forward for students to articulate onto later years of a programme at another institution, especially universities which encourage direct entry applicants.

The comments from the lecturers indicated that most of them recognised the importance of good student-staff interaction and relationship building



from everyone employed by the university, not just one particular group.

For example, Phil said:

*“I think from the moment they walk in to something like an Open Day we can start to have an influence on them for better or for worse, and it’s just not down to how long they have to wait to speak to you at the Open Day, it’s about how that’s dealt with. It’s difficult. I think we try to strike a balance between being professional and having the technical ability and know how to teach them etc., but it’s about being more relaxed and not like school, being approachable etc., and I think it’s about striking that balance, and that’s the difficult thing .... on the occasions when you get that balance right, that balance between being an educator an entertainer, a friend and a counsellor, when you get that balance right the class goes exceptionally well, and very often if you don’t get that balance right, then there is very little you can do to retrieve it.”*

Phil views staff-student interaction as important, and talks about his particular relationship style with students. For Phil there is a balance to be achieved between keeping a professional distance, whilst also remaining friendly and approachable. Phil also said:

*“It’s a bit glib to say everyone, but I do think that’s the crux of it, from the guy who opens the barrier at the car park, to the Principal, it is absolutely everybody’s responsibility. I come from a working background which was sales, and that was very, very much the attitude, no matter who the customer spoke to, the emphasis was on making them feel comfortable, dealing with their problem. Now though I do feel there is a kind of element of that in kind of selling ourselves in education, it is not too far-fetched to think we will go down that route, but my impression of places where I’ve studied isn’t just restricted to the lecturer, but includes the library, the union and the welfare services. It’s a package, it’s a whole, so I do think it’s important that everybody’s involved in this .... that everybody needs to feel part of the same team, and recruiting people who are willing to do that.”*

So Phil considered the integration of the students with the university to be the responsibility of everyone who works in the university, irrespective of role. Similarly, Phil talks about how everyone should feel part of a team and be working together to achieve the same aim, in order to make the students feel valued and welcomed. This latter point is worth noting, as it expresses the view that the lecturers themselves should be integrated into

the wider university and working with others, rather than operating as individuals. However, we saw in an earlier chapter that many of the lecturers felt isolated and unsupported, and they appeared to be operating individually rather than part of a team, even although many modules are delivered by several lecturers.

Most of the lecturers recognised that universities exist in a highly competitive market place, and that the staff-student relationship is important in terms of retaining students, since small things can cause students to withdraw. Thus staff need to be flexible and collegiate in their interface with students, and students need to feel that staff are approachable. Luc compared his role to that of working in a shop:

*“I think, how you deal with a student is basically like how someone behind the shop counter deals with the people who come in. If I go into a paper shop and buy a paper and the person who serves me is either rude or dismissive, or whatever, then I won’t go back there, and I think we need to look at this as being the same sort of thing now.”*

So both Phil and Luc showed that they recognised a need for relationship

building and marketing. They talked about relationship building in terms of marketing a service, which they were providing. In both cases, they referred to commercial business practices as a way of supporting their claims, and they drew on their previous backgrounds to evaluate their current experiences. They also identified students as being customers, and as stated earlier, the students can easily go to another institution without too much inconvenience, since there is a choice locally and most of them live in the local area. Phil said:

*"I think clearly there must be an element of training for everyone in, for want of a better word, in what is 'customer care'. I say that, but I hate it, because I don't like to think of students as customers, but I think that people come to expect that now, the culture abroad is, you know, you are the customer no matter what it is you are doing. I've heard people saying it about priests, "I'm not going back to that Chapel because I don't like the way he said .... We've got this culture of I'm here for a service, and if I don't get it here I'll go somewhere else."*

Phil had once worked in sales and it can be seen from his comments that although he did not think students should necessarily be treated as customers, he did think that there should be an element of 'customer care'

in the way that the students are dealt with. Phil thinks that all lecturers should get training in customer care which is worth noting, since the university provides training for all non-academic staff in this area, but not lecturing staff. Many lecturers would agree with this since they are used to interacting with students on a daily basis and therefore do not believe they need any training. But some of their colleagues would disagree with this view since, as we shall see later, some lecturers seemed to have adopted student avoidance tactics and were not particularly helpful or accessible to students.

There was a general view amongst the lecturers that they were better teachers if they had some appreciation of the problems that the students were having, both academically and outwith the university. Furthermore, several of the lecturers endorsed what Phil had said, namely that it is sometimes difficult to get a balance between keeping a professional distance, and yet still being considered approachable by students. A number of lecturers also acknowledged that their colleagues have different backgrounds and capabilities, and therefore this comes more easily to some than others. For example, Phil said:

*"I think it's partially down to the nature of the person involved. Some people find it relatively easy to do and probably do it without thinking, but it is probably alien to other people, it is difficult to say. .... I think there are people who are good at that (getting the balance right) and people who aren't. I do think it needs a mixture and possibly that mixture might be at the level at which you teach e.g. maybe when you get into the higher years, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 4<sup>th</sup> year, I suppose these things aren't as important since students are maturing, gaining confidence .... certainly at 1<sup>st</sup> year you definitely need to ease them in, because it's difficult, very, very difficult. .... I think it's possible to be more, I'm not sure aloof is the right word, more remote the further up you get. I think it's possible to be like that and still be able to do your job very well. I think earlier in the course you need someone who is much more hands on, a bit more involved, friendly, relaxed. I think at that stage the students are just getting eased in and later on it is more acceptable for someone to come along and basically present the material with not much in the way of social interaction. .... The class is much better formed by that point anyway, and they don't necessarily need the interaction with the member of staff much, while earlier on I think they do."*

Thus Phil thinks that it is important that students in the early years of their course have lecturers who are friendly and relaxed when interacting with

students. He recognises that this is not easy for everyone, since it does not necessarily come naturally to some people. Therefore he suggests that lecturers who are not particularly comfortable with interacting with students are best suited to taking later years of the programmes where there are likely to be fewer students in the classroom, and the students are more likely to be able to cope without this type of interaction. However, since the university recruits a substantial number of direct entrants into later years of the programmes, it could be argued that all lecturers should have these skills, irrespective of the level of the modules that they deliver, since the integration of direct entry students is equally important.

Phil also said:

*"I think as things are changing one of the most important attributes that a lecturer has to have now, probably more so than ever is empathy. I think you've got to understand the pressures that are on students, just because they've come here to study doesn't mean that the rest of their lives have stopped, they still have the same worries, the same money and friends, relationships, parents, all these things are still going on in the background, and yet they come here to do something which is quite difficult. Not only that, but I think one of the big advantages that I've got is, I didn't sail*

*through my exams, I had to work hard to get them and there were things which I genuinely didn't understand, and I think that that is one of the biggest advantages that I have, when students say to me that they don't understand, then I look at them and think, I know what you mean. I remember my feeling, it maybe wasn't on the same area or topic, but I remember feeling I hadn't a clue what he said there, and I think sometimes universities suffer from the fact that very often the people who get into the position of lecturing never had a problem studying, never had a problem understanding anything, and it can be difficult to put yourself in someone else's position and say, I never had a problem with that, but yes, I understand why you do, and so sometimes I think empathy is the biggest thing, because students can tell, students know whether you're thinking you must be stupid not to understand this, or whether you're thinking, yes I can see why you are having difficulty with that, and given that our job is not to show them how clever we are, but to show them how clever they are, I think that's a biggie for me, and I think maybe as I'm getting older I'm getting better at that. I think I always was fairly empathetic, but maybe I'm becoming sympathetic. But for me that's the No.1, the No.1."*

Phil, unlike many of his colleagues, had not followed the 'traditional' route of leaving school and progressing to an 'elite' university, but rather had attended university as a mature student with family commitments.



Consequently, he felt that he understood the other pressures in a student's life, and thought that some of his colleagues needed to develop a similar sense of empathy for the students. However, he did appreciate that this can be difficult for lecturers who have not experienced the same type of situations as the students. For Phil it was also about getting the balance right, which is not always easy to achieve. Therefore lecturers need to be flexible and adopt multiple roles, as appropriate, rather than be the 'sage on the stage' and aloof. Building a relationship with students and making them feel that they are valued should help to improve retention and progression rates.

### **Lecturers' opinions on factors influencing student achievement**

When asked whose responsibility student retention and achievement was, the general response from the lecturers was "everybody's". However most of the lecturers stated that it was also the responsibility of the student. A number of quotes from the lecturers were typical of that from Ken, namely:

*"I think when it comes down to it, all the staff who come into contact with students need to worry about student retention, because if the students*

*don't come here, then we don't have a job any more, and it is up to us to give them a good experience."*

Similarly, several lecturers commented on the fact that they thought that interaction with lecturers could make a significant difference to the students' performance. Tony said:

*"What influence do I think? I think that that has quite a high significance. I certainly feel that students that I can interact with, and find that I have a rapport with, seem to do better in my subjects. Maybe they don't feel the fear of coming forward and asking me questions, and they can discuss things with me, and they get on far better than the ones who just sit and don't say much, and sit in the background and work away."*

Luc commented on the fact that lecturers who are 'awkward' in their interactions with students can do a lot of damage, particularly in a university where the students are not necessarily the strongest academically, and who can be put off easily. Therefore the attitude of the lecturer is important. He said:

*"I've seen, not here, I've seen some real atrocities being performed on students. I remember seeing a guy in X, a student came and asked him what he thought was a stupid question, I don't think any question is a stupid question. He had a blackboard duster in his hand and he did that [blows] and blew dust in his eyes. That was assault, and that was the sort of thing he would have gone into his staff room laughing about. I've never seen anything like that happening here, but I have seen lecturers who are quite happy to make a remark that I would have taken as being demoralising. Fortunately not that many, and probably, for most of the students it's not that bad, but I'm kind of always aware that there could be somebody who could be very upset by that, and perhaps I have myself inadvertently, it's probably something you can't avoid from time to time, probably just something that happens."*

And Bob said:

*"I find that I have to spend time making up for mishandling by other academics and teach students that it is all part of life's rich tapestry, and to move on. I think that poor quality teachers can do a lot of damage, particularly in a university with fairly weak academic students"*

These comments from Luc and Bob indicate that they are well aware that lecturers need to be very careful when dealing with students, since it can be very easy to say something which the lecturer does not think is of particular significance, but which a student can take very seriously. It should also be noted that both of these lecturers consider some of their colleagues to be unhelpful and off-putting with students, compared to themselves, which is a point I will come back to later in this chapter.

Ken also identified teaching style as important when it comes to retaining students:

*“I think it can make or break them. If you’re not enthusiastic about what you’re teaching them, then the students won’t be enthusiastic about learning about it, and won’t be interested, so I try to be enthusiastic about what I’m teaching even if it’s not the most interesting stuff in the world sometimes. I think even if it’s a subject that the students aren’t that interested in, if they can see that there are bits of it that are interesting, and exciting, then they are more likely to study for it, to do well. Yeah, I think if you’ve got a deadly boring lecturer delivering dull material, who*

*doesn't seem very interested in it, and also doesn't seem very interested in whether you pass or fail, then there's not much motivation to do it. You've really got to be well self-motivated and I don't think that a lot of our undergraduate students are."*

As Ken states, if a lecturer is not interested in what they are teaching, how can they expect the students to be. Likewise, if the lecturers are enthusiastic about their subject area, then they can inspire the students, thus raising their confidence and ability in the subject. This in turn should improve achievement and retention rates (Thomas, 2002). Similarly, Les said:

*"Huge, absolutely huge influence. If you are in education and you can't believe that by raising the bar, raising the expectations, the support, the motivation, the confidence, that being able to tune your approach and methods to individuals and groups of individuals, doesn't have a huge bearing on results, you shouldn't really be in education, quite honestly."*

Thus it can be seen that some of the lecturers interviewed acknowledged that their attitude and enthusiasm towards their subject and students could

have a huge influence on a student's achievement. However, Joe refines this slightly by distinguishing between different types of students with diverse needs, saying that he thinks some students do not need too much help and are happy to just get on with things:

*“Ah yes. I suppose I can summarise by saying, some, they don't need influence, they just need clarity, whereas others are strongly influenced by us. They like the connection. I can see they like the smaller groups. They like to talk one to one, or one to few, and see that you really are hearing them, and you care about them, and you care about their career, and stuff like that, and where they go from here. Others, float around and they don't really care. They don't care so much because they're sorted, they're going to get there.”*

Joe identifies two different categories of students. One group who expect/need a lot of support and attention and another set, who are likely to have previous HE experience and are building on existing qualifications, and who view gaining their degree as a 'means to an end'.

In addition, most of the lecturers saw it as their responsibility to ensure that students were appropriately equipped in order to pass their exams, and as we saw in the previous chapter, lecturers such as Luc, said they did this by producing hand-outs which were almost like text books. The responsibility for passing the module(s)/course then became that of the student. Some of the students did appreciate that they were not necessarily the strongest academically but that they could succeed if they put the necessary effort into their studies. As Bill said:

*"I think it's difficult to generalise. I think the intention is to make sure that the lectures are delivered, the tutorials are done well, and basically everything's in place for the student. But I do think that you can put everything in place for the student, but if the student doesn't do it, then it's very difficult. You see that with the results. Students who come to the classes generally perform best, even the students that are not the best. Recently a student said to me, 'I'm not the best in the class, but I'll pass because I'll do the work'."*

Likewise, as we saw earlier, there was general agreement amongst those interviewed that it was everyone's responsibility to ensure that students

were successful on their chosen course, including the students themselves. Leo said:

*“Well it’s the student. We really expect the student to put in the work that is required.”*

Whilst Bob said:

*“I would say it was the individual lecturer or teacher, depending on how well you’ve taught them. On the other hand, it’s equally the students’ responsibility. If they don’t turn up, attend, and they don’t do the work, then they fail. I have no qualms about failing wasters, I’ve no qualms. I’ve qualms about failing kind of numpties because my job is to bring them further on, and if they haven’t been brought on, then I didn’t bring them on, and everybody is a numptie at first, and they have to be brought on or whatever. If I just can’t get them to apply themselves, then I just have to give up, but there are very, very few.”*

Bob also said:



*I don't actually think that the actual environment in terms of teaching makes that much of a difference. I think the relationship between the teacher, between the master and the scholar, if you want, between the teacher and the pupil, teacher and the student, is what matters. If I have a bad failure rate then it really, really bugs me. .... The fact that these are shoddy breeze block buildings I don't think is important, really. I think if you've got inspiring lecturers then that's much, much more important."*

Similarly, Tony said:

*"It's our duty to make the courses as interesting as possible and to encourage the students as much as possible, to keep them involved, keep them interested, so for the most part I think it is our responsibility as academics. There are other areas. Retention should be the responsibility of the general management of the institution as well, in providing a nice surrounding, a friendly atmosphere, and facilities for the student, that's all part of it as well."*

Although both Bob and Tony think that inspiring lecturers are much more important than the physical environment, they do state that it is the responsibility of management to ensure that the environment is attractive and not off-putting to students. It can also be seen that lecturers such as Bob, felt responsible if students failed, especially if they believed that the student had been working hard. In addition, Luc said that he could not imagine any of his colleagues not providing additional help and support for students. Similarly, most of the lecturers stated that they operated an open door policy and that they were always willing to help students. However, not all of the lecturers agreed that their colleagues were as approachable as they implied. For example, Leo stated:

*“Well now, I think it’s important to have an open door policy for students, but not everybody does. Too many staff haven’t got their name on their doors, and I really think that’s a pity. I think that students are on campus rather less than they used to be, and so that’s very dangerous for them anyway. Even though I’ve got an open door policy, I’m a very busy person and I’m very likely not to be in my room when they go and knock on the door, so that’s a problem, but you know the same excuse doesn’t apply to everybody, I guess. But still I think that apart from that, there was a time when we had too many students, I guess when we were less accessible than we were before, and probably some lecturers developed a student*

*avoidance mechanism round about that time, which they've not fully cured themselves of since."*

At the time of my interviews most of the main campus teaching staff in the School had their own offices. Some rooms had opaque windows on the door. The majority of the lecturers kept their room doors shut when they were inside, which meant that it was not immediately apparent whether they were inside or not. In addition, many of the lecturers who had opaque circular windows on their doors with a clear border of approximately 1cm had chosen to cover the border with paper, thus ensuring that no one could see inside the room. Similarly, on the main campus the School offices, lecturer offices and labs were spread over a number of different floors and buildings. Therefore the layout of the facilities and the general environment did nothing to encourage students to ask for support, and students needed to make a determined effort to track down academic staff if they wanted to speak to them. As Bob said:

*"It can be difficult in a building of sealed cell like rooms where the only thing that is missing is the little thing for the warden to look through, and the academics keep the door shut rather than open, and I worry that if they*

*get away from the building then I've lost them, and again the building is very unfriendly and the fact is that I can't be here all the time."*

Bob also said:

*"There's a colleague here who on his door has a notice which says, do you know if blob is in? **NO**. Do you know where somebody is? **NO**. Do you know when he'll be back? **NO**. Do you know where he's gone to? **NO**. I'm stuck what should I do? Well don't ask me, go and ask the School office. **NO**, no, no, no or a closed door. It is really negative."*

Both Leo and Bob thought it essential to have an Open Door policy for students, because it encouraged student retention and achievement. Similarly, several of the lecturers were critical of their colleagues for not putting their names on their door and covering up the very small gap in their windows, so that no one could see if anyone was in the room or not. However, it should also be noted that several of those interviewed, who were critical of their colleagues, had also blocked off their windows, or did not have their names on their door! It was acknowledged by some of the lecturers that these actions originated in times when the student numbers

were more buoyant, and the lecturers could not cope with the constant demands of the students. It appears that although the student numbers in computing have decreased, many lecturers have not yet managed to change their behaviour, so only the most determined students are likely to be able to access additional support, outwith the timetabled hours, from some lecturers.

Although Bob and Tony thought that inspirational teaching was more important than the actual classroom environment, several lecturers did comment on the fact that little things can put students off, and that students can be disheartened easily. Leo said:

*“I think that PDP and putting things into context, enabling the students to do more interesting tasks as part of the course, which is where the research links come in, and better direction for how the course is relevant, how it fits in, how it is important to them, can help, because all of these things help to engage the students more, so they feel the course is the one that they need to do, or would be useful for their career, ... I think the students are very easily disheartened. If there are technical difficulties with the operation of a course, or if the books don't arrive, very little things can loom large and be off-putting for students. Or say a lecturer is off sick for*

*the first three weeks of a course, or something like that, then that can be quite damaging and can really have a serious effect on retention, and it's one of the reasons why I think it is actually quite important that difficulties of that kind be covered for, and fixed if possible, by colleagues in the School. .... so yes, in that sense retention becomes everybody's problem, but I think there are things which we can do which help."*

Leo therefore thinks that small technical issues in the first few weeks of a course can often switch students off, particularly students who are not totally committed to a programme. Likewise, it might be expected that students who are categorised under the 'widening access' heading are most likely to drop out of a course, however this is not necessarily the case. Many of the students in this category are mature students who have made a conscious and considered decision to enrol on their chosen course, and therefore are committed to their studies and more likely to persevere and work around any difficulties encountered, rather than drop-out. As Leo said:

*"On the whole I think the people we have widened access to have not been a problem as far as retention is concerned. The problem I think with retention is when you are dealing with students who come through*

*clearing with the minimum qualifications, then usually the reason why they come through clearing is because they haven't really seriously thought about doing a university degree or one in computing until the very last minute, and so for the first half of the semester they are wondering, do I really want to do this anyway, and so never really engage with the course, and they drop away, and so our biggest retention problem has always been in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester."*

Leo suggests that one of the reasons for the poor performance of some students, as well as their lack of integration with the university, is, at least in part, due to the fact that a significant number of students, particularly school leavers, are recruited through clearing. These students are ones who have not achieved the necessary qualifications for their preferred choice of course and university, or students who have waited until late August / early September before deciding to go to university. Consequently, they can end up on courses which they have the minimum qualifications for, and which they are not particularly committed to. Hence the decision to withdraw is often easier for these students to make than those of their peers who are on their preferred choice of course.

Leo also commented on the difficulty many students have with computer programming:

*“Our second biggest retention problem has always been the inability of some students to do programming and that’s a different story. That’s a story because they are doing six modules and so they think it would be reasonable to think that all modules would be equally easy, and to find one module that is really, really hard, they can’t, don’t engage with it, and that’s a motivational thing, that’s something we’ve got to explain to students. Yeah you’ve got six modules now, but one of them you’ve got to maybe spend five times as much time on as the others, because this is the one that earns the money, this is the one that is in demand, the programming one ... we are always a little disappointed at the programming results!”*

Thus a student’s academic suitability for a course can be another barrier to achievement. As mentioned above, and in an earlier chapter, many students find computer programming, which is core to most computing courses, hard. Consequently, students admitted at clearing, who therefore tend to have the minimum entry qualifications, and are perhaps not completely committed to their chosen course, can be put off easily with the difficulty involved. We shall also see that changes to curriculum delivery



including modularisation, trimesterisation and block delivery have aggravated the issue, since students need to grasp the subject in a shorter period of time, and do not always have a suitable assimilation period.

### **Direct entry students and integration**

This discussion on student integration would not be complete without considering the integration of students with advanced standing into the programmes. As we have already seen, the university recruits a significant number of direct entry students into later years of its courses, particularly third year, and this presents a particular set of challenges for both the students and the lecturers, in terms of integration with the wider university, as well as their chosen programme.

Gallacher (2002), building on previous research (Maclennan et al., 2000; Gallacher et al., 1997; Sharp et al., 1996), identifies a number of issues that students articulating to degree programmes at a university can encounter, such as different teaching, learning and assessment approaches. Similarly, the larger size of universities and the teaching groups associated with this can also cause transition difficulties for these

students. Likewise, the direct entry students often find themselves in a class where the majority of the other students have known each other for several years, and therefore they have formed their own social groupings, which can be difficult for newcomers to become part of. Thus the transition and integration of direct entry students can be difficult. However, Phil recognises that direct entry students often arrive in pairs, which allows them to support each other and form their own distinct group, which can in turn help with their integration:

*“I think we often have students who arrive in pairs ... but even if they come in and they are on their own, they will form a group with other people who also started on their own, and they share experiences, just by the nature of the thing. They have got to ask people for a copy of the timetable, where they should be next, and break the initial barriers down, and they’ve got something they can talk about which is non-threatening which just allows them to get to talk. I think it is my experience that people will get together. .... I think it is this shared experience this trench mentality of they have an enemy, whether they see that enemy as us or as achievement, they have an enemy and they are on the same side.”*

Phil also suggests that it is more important for the students to get on with their peers rather than the lecturers, since *“no one understands what a student is going through better than the person sitting next to them”*. However Phil acknowledges that since the groupings tend to be with other direct entry students, such as themselves, rather than with the existing students, this can lead to other issues surrounding the integration of the direct entry students with their peers and the institution as a whole, especially if they enter in year three and only study for one academic session, since there will be little time for the integration to take place. This lack of integration means that students do not feel any particular loyalty to the institution and therefore it is easier for them to drop out. However, if the direct entry students do not intend progressing to Honours level, then their lack of integration with the university is less likely to be an issue.

It should also be recognised that the School in the study delivers several programmes at local colleges. These students may never access the university campus during their studies. They will have their own cohort cohesion in the local college, but are unlikely to feel particularly integrated with the university and their university peers. Integration with the wider university and any benefits that this might hold, such as improving social mobility, are less important for these students than gaining a degree and improving their employability. The students who study at the colleges are

generally students who are considered 'wider access' students, and it is likely that if the degree was not delivered in the college then they would not be studying it at all, since their family and other commitments, as well as the additional travelling time and costs, would make it impossible for them to do so (Gallacher, 1997).

### **Impact of curriculum structure on integration**

The most significant change to the structure of the programmes was the introduction of modularisation in session 1995/96. This change is far from unique to the university in this study, but is one of a number of changes which have taken place more generally in HE. Then, prior to the start of session 2007/08, the University took the decision to extend modularisation further by revalidating all of its programmes in order to change the modules from fifteen to twenty credits. The effect was to reduce the number of modules which a student would take each session from eight to six, resulting in students taking fewer modules and, consequently, it was argued that the assessment load on students would be reduced, thus improving attrition rates. The restructuring of the programmes also led to a reduction in the overall number of modules being delivered in each

programme, which meant that many lecturers saw some of their modules disappearing from the curriculum.

At the same time as the modules were changed to twenty credits, the University moved from a semester to a trimester system, which meant that academic staff could be expected to teach throughout the calendar year. The actual implementation of this change has varied depending on School, however the School in my study delivers a number of Vendor awards and therefore some lecturers have been expected to deliver modules in the third trimester (June – August). In addition, a block delivery mode was introduced which means that each module is delivered in a fixed block of time on one particular day, rather than the hours available for the delivery of the module being spread throughout the week. The impact of this is that the number of times that a student is required to be on campus has been reduced, and therefore there is less time for the integration of the students with the wider university.

Modularisation, block delivery and adoption of semester/trimester delivery patterns have occurred to some extent in the majority of HEIs in the UK. Morris (2000) who used a case study approach to investigate the effects of modularisation and semesterisation in ten UK Business Schools, concludes that modularisation has had little effect, whereas

semesterisation has actually increased costs without the associated benefits. Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2002) who discuss the findings of a small scale study of attitudes to semesterisation, together with those of a larger scale study of a well-established modular course, note that there is little pedagogic research evidence on the benefits of such systems. Likewise, Henkel (2000), who carried out a survey of academics at eleven UK universities, also found that many academics thought that modularisation had been imposed by university managers for a number of reasons, none of which were educational. These views concur with my findings, where we saw in chapter six, that only Ken considered the changes to be a positive move by the University. Most of the other lecturers were sceptical of the University's reasons for change, considering the restructuring of the curriculum to be more about cost cutting than for sound academic reasons. Ed said:

*"I don't think the reasons are anything to do with educational and everything to do with reducing the number of staff and getting more out of us. Reducing the number of modules, reducing the effort required. Nobody has come up with a satisfactory explanation in my mind of what you are going to do with the extra five credits. I've heard all sorts of facetious nonsense about why don't you ask them to go to the library and read up on the history of databases or something like that. Well you can just*

*imagine yourself getting killed in a stampede for the door; people aren't going to do that are they? The fact is, it's about reducing the amount in the modules and it's as simple as that, it's not for educational reasons, it's for economic reasons. They might be very good economic reasons, strategic reasons, but it's nothing to do with enhancing the student experience."*

Henkel (2000) states that modularisation has reinforced existing problems with the massification of HE, and that modularisation has resulted in the compartmentalisation of knowledge into manageable blocks that can be delivered in a set period of time. In addition, the imposition of delivery modes where the delivery of a module cannot be spread over semesters or trimesters has led to problems with assimilation, particularly for weaker students. There were several adverse comments from the lecturers on the constraint that all modules had to be delivered in one trimester rather than spread over two, especially for subjects which the students traditionally found more difficult, such as computer programming.

Similarly, changes to the structure and delivery of programmes means that the lecturers have found themselves having to deliver a highly specific curriculum in a fixed period of time, and are unable to deviate from the set curriculum to other areas which could be of interest to the students. In

particular, this means that some lecturers are unable to share their own research interests with the students if they are not directly related to the module being taught. These constraints are even more noticeable for the lecturers in my survey, since the university is a multi-campus institution, and therefore a module can be delivered on four different campuses during the day, plus on two or three college sites as well as have several evening deliveries. This means that the lecturers delivering the module cannot digress too far from the learning outcomes for the module or they will find that their group of students are not adequately prepared for the assessments for the module. This in turn will have a negative impact on module pass rates.

Several of the lecturers considered modularisation and the block delivery system, to have discouraged independence on the part of the students. For example, Des believes that many students do not study throughout the week, nor use the days when they do not have classes for independent study, but rather only work on a module when timetabled. Des said:

*"I think one of the big problems we have is, I think, I've seen this not caused by, but enhanced by, the module system that we have now, and the block timetable. .... for example I've a class on a Thursday morning,*



*and I'm pretty sure that they close the book at one o'clock on a Thursday and don't open it again until the next Thursday at nine o'clock, and even if you give them things to do, activities to do, to prepare for the next class, then they don't do it."*

This contradicts the view of the European University Association (Sursock et al., 2010) which considers modularisation to encourage a more student centred approach to learning. Similarly, Des said:

*"I think one of the biggest problems is that it's almost too easy for students to drop out here, because there's so little interaction from their point of view, and you can easily lose them."*

The block delivery mode means that modules are timetabled for continuous periods of time on the one day. It also means that the modules are delivered over fewer days, and therefore many students are unwilling and/or unable to attend university on the days when they do not have classes, even if they require assistance, since they cannot guarantee that they will be able to find a particular member of staff. Students often want help immediately and the block structure means that a lecturer can be in

class for a block of four or five hours and therefore unavailable to a student who might have an issue on that day. Students have different coping strategies and some can give up easily if help is not available when they require it. There are therefore issues regarding the students' integration with the university since the students are on campus less, and when they are on campus they are in class.

The block delivery mode also means that there are usually no non-timetabled breaks between classes, so the students tend to attend classes and then go home. Since many of the students live locally they continue to socialise with the same friends that they had at school. This therefore means that they do not integrate fully into university life, nor socialise with their peers between classes, and do not build a relationship with their peers or the university. This lack of interaction and integration with the wider university can therefore make it easier for a student to decide to withdraw.

Brennan et al. (2008) agree that modularisation has led to fewer chances for students to integrate with their peers and the wider university and thus students are not gaining the wider benefits of a university education, such as improving their social and cultural capital. However, there are

conflicting opinions, since the National Audit Office report (2007) suggests that modularisation is a way of improving student choice and therefore enhancing student retention. Similarly a report on the trends in European Higher Education for the European University Association (Sursock et al., 2010, p46-47) also states that modularisation has provided more choice for students, *'thus supporting the goal of creating flexible and transparent learning paths'*, however the report also acknowledged that *'44% of institutions that have introduced a modularised system reported an increase in the number of examinations'*. This increase in the number of examinations would therefore seem to imply, as suggested by Henkel (2000), that modularisation has led to compartmentalisation of knowledge, and a loss of integration between modules.

The School in this study offers a number of broad computing programmes which share modules. However in order to attract as many students as possible the School has expanded the number of courses that it offers by developing programmes in areas such as Computer Games, Animation and Music Technology. Des thinks that this move away from offering students general computing programmes to specialised programmes has not necessarily been a good thing for the students, since he thinks that the students are being offered too much choice too soon. This in turn restricts their ability to change programme at a later date, and therefore means that

students have little option but to withdraw if a programme does not meet their expectations. However, these specialised courses have proved highly attractive to students.

Les said:

*"I think the students certainly have changed, but I think there have also been other changes which have affected them. .... I think one of the issues for retention here is that if a student starts here, then finds at the end of the first semester or the end of first year that what they signed up for isn't actually what they want to do, then where do they go, it's not easy to make side way steps here. I think we offer the students too much choice far too soon, and if they're not engaging with the material, engaging with the modules, then they can drift away, and it can affect their exam performance and not come back."*

One way round this issue would be to offer a common set of modules in the first year of all programmes, however the downside to this approach is that students could be de-motivated because the course does not meet their expectations in terms of content and material covered. It is therefore

a delicate balance trying to ensure that the curriculum is broad enough to allow students to move between programmes, if they so wish, as well as providing sufficient specialised material to ensure that students remain interested in their chosen programme and do not drift away.

Bob suggested that a way to improve student interaction with the content of a module was to spread the assessment load throughout the delivery of the module, rather than end loading assessments, since in his opinion, assessments encouraged student engagement with a module:

*“The one thing that students do respond to is assessments ... we give assessments at the end of the semester, and again the students’ approach tends to be for the first half of the semester the coursework isn’t due in for three months, I’ve got plenty of time, and in the last few weeks of the semester it’s abandon all classes, and attendance goes right down, and they just throw themselves into the coursework for that module. I think we really need to be more imaginative about what we do with students. .... individual modules have individual coursework, why don’t we have something more collaborative? You might be able to have coursework week two, and something handed in week four, and something handed in at the end, but again that requires collaboration rather than an individual*

*doing their own thing, and there has to be an impact on course design so that you have modules which run in parallel, which have some kind of relationships, so that some have collaborative work for the students to do and hand things in.”*

Bob's view is that students appear to be able to cope with only one assessment at a time, and if they are given an assessment for a particular module then they seem to abandon the work for all other modules until they have completed it. One solution is therefore to integrate assessments for modules. However the modular structure of most programmes restricts this. A module could be included in multiple programmes, and therefore the modules which it could be combined with are not necessarily part of the same courses. In addition, there is no forum to encourage this approach. Similarly, the sharing of modules between a number of programmes, and the flexibility of choice provided by many modular programmes means that students on the same programme can often choose different pathways through a programme, and therefore there is not the cohort cohesion which can improve student retention and achievement.

Modularisation and the changes in academic structures also mean that the module co-ordinator, and to some extent the programme leader too, do not have the complete picture of an individual student's performance, although the programme leader is expected to. Joe commented:

*"I guess it comes to the programme leader who is the one who gets hit on the head when things go wrong, and it's not the module co-ordinator or module lecturer. They can do their best, but normally you don't have the whole picture, so although maybe you've failed a student you might hope they don't fail anything else and you're maybe unaware that they have failed everything. You only know that if you attend the panels and I've noticed over the last few years, it used to be that everyone was invited but now it's become a select few who will attend the panel, and so lecturers will not know that they are the ones causing problems unless of course it is brought to their eyes, or of course their students are failing across the board."*

The changes in academic structures mean that not all lecturers are required to attend the subject panels and progression and awards boards, which some might see as lightening the load on individual academics. However it seems that at least some academics would still like to attend

the panel meetings, since it allows them to determine the progress, or otherwise, of individual students. It also lets the lecturers, particularly Programme Leaders, see how students are progressing through their course. Consequently, although managers might think that they are doing the lecturers a favour by cutting down on the number of meetings that lecturers need to attend, the lecturers did not necessarily see it the same way. This concurs with the findings of Taylor (2008) and others (Blackmore et al., 2011; Henkel, 2000), who found that academics do not mind carrying out additional duties from which they derive personal satisfaction.

In addition, modularisation means that many programmes are no longer distinctive, cohesive structures. It can be seen from the comments above that the Programme Leader did not feel that he was in control of his own programme, which echoes Boccock et al's (1994, p108) view that courses are now '*award routes made up of a variety of modules*', rather than being courses in their own right which are managed by course leaders who know their students and keep a watchful eye on them. Therefore there can be a lack of ownership of the programme by the Programme Leader, as well as a lack of integration by the student. Thus more could be done to engage and integrate both lecturers and students.



Moreover, it is not only students who stay at home who do not integrate fully with the wider university. A similar point was made by an Erasmus student at the University's annual Teaching and Learning conference (June 2009). Being an overseas student, the student was living in the university's Halls of Residence and since the majority of the university's students live at home, this student found that his social time was spent with other overseas students. The student said that although one of his reasons for choosing to study in the UK was to improve his language skills, he had found that there was limited opportunity for him to do so, since he tended to socialise with students who were from his own country or other non-UK students, some of whom did not have particularly strong English skills. He found himself talking in his own language rather than English, and therefore not improving his spoken English. This concurs with Summers et al. (2008), who analysed questionnaire data from 233 students on their attitudes towards culturally mixed groups on international campuses. They found that although there were many chances for the students in their study to mix with students from other backgrounds, the students still tended to socialise with students from the same cultural background as themselves.

## **Summary of lecturers' views on student integration**

The lecturers surveyed were in general agreement that good staff-student interaction is crucial to the student experience. The lecturers considered a student's likely success on a course to be based on a number of factors, including how well they were taught, and how much effort the student is prepared to put into the modules. The actual teaching environment was considered to be less important. Students all have very different expectations and requirements from a university education and some are more motivated to succeed than others. The lecturers felt that they could only do so much, and that the students needed to meet them at least half way. Most of the lecturers had themselves followed the conventional student route at traditional universities. Therefore, although they said that they understood that their students had other commitments and responsibilities, several also said that they did not really know what life was like for their students.

The greater diversity of students means that students come from a wide range of backgrounds and can enter programmes at any level, not just first year. The School attracts a large number of direct entry students into later years of the programmes and therefore there are issues surrounding the

integration of these students. The direct entry students usually join the course with other students that they have studied at college with, and since little is done to encourage the integration of these students with their peers on their programmes, there is little or no cohort cohesion or integration. Similarly, the School delivers the third year of some of its degree programmes at local colleges. Many of the students who enrol on these courses say that they would not access degree level study if it was not delivered locally. This raises a number of questions about the wider benefits of a campus based university education; however this is clearly not an issue for the students concerned.

There are therefore a number of challenges relating to the integration of the students with the university. Many students, such as mature students and part-time students have neither the time nor desire to integrate more fully with the wider university. Bourgeois et al. (1999) state that adult students are not looking for the same experience as school leavers, since they have other lives and family commitments. Similarly, the younger students who attend the university in this study are more likely to live in the family home and socialise with school friends rather than their university peers, so, like the mature students, they are not necessarily expecting a social experience based around the university. This limited interaction with university peers limits their ability to improve their social

and cultural capital. However, the main priority for many of these students is improving their employment prospects, rather than the social and wider benefits of university life (Brennan et al., 2010). This presents a different view of the role of a university education, but that is not to say that it is any less relevant than the traditional view. It is just a different way of looking at what a university education is, and how it is accessed by the students. As Brennan et al. (2010, p192) state *“while higher education in part reproduces economic, cultural and social capital and the related student identities, its effects are also socially and culturally transformative and individually liberative, providing an environment in which some students at least deconstruct and reconstruct their personal and class identities.”*

The diversity of the student body also means that the lecturers need to be extremely flexible and adaptable in their delivery of a module, since the students all have individual prior knowledge and ability. We saw in chapter five that the lecturers believe that being able to adapt to the situation in front of them is a skill which they have developed with experience. However the constraints imposed by multiple deliveries of the same module by a number of different lecturers, as well as the fixed time allocations, mean that lecturers cannot deviate too far from the set curriculum or they will not get the students through the module in the time

available, nor will the students be adequately prepared for the module assessments.

In addition, modularisation and trimesterisation have had an impact on most areas of student integration. They have led to less integration with academic staff, since students spend less time in the university. Similarly there has been a loss of integration with their peer group since programmes are no longer distinct, but rather a collection of modules that can be packaged into a particular programme. Therefore programmes are often viewed by students as a collection of discrete modules rather than comprising a cohesive set of components each relating to one another, thus causing a loss of integration with the subject / discipline. This in turn has caused a loss of cohesion for many students and the current programme and delivery structures make it difficult for lecturers to take steps to improve this. In particular, the programme leaders that I spoke to shared a sense of loss, since modularisation means that they no longer felt that their programme belonged to them. The fragmentation of programmes also means that they find it difficult to identify the students on their programmes and give them the support that they were previously able to do. Likewise, students now spend less time on campus which means that they are integrating less with the wider university and its services.

Although some of the lecturers interviewed considered a few of their colleagues to be distant from the students, many of those interviewed did state that it was the interaction with the students which made the job worthwhile. For example, two lecturers who were in promoted posts and therefore in a position to cut back on their teaching commitments said:

*“I do enjoy working with the students. I do think that’s a crucial part of the business, frankly for us it’s a core part of the business, so I’ve kept that alive.”*

And:

*“I’ve got a senior management contract but I still do teaching, I still enjoy teaching.”*

Overall, the majority of the lecturers showed that they were aware of the wider environment and the fact that the way they, and others, interacted with students could affect student retention and achievement rates.

However, most also said they expected the students to 'fit in' to the existing system, and few had even considered changing anything that they did to accommodate the students. Student integration is extremely important and more could be done to encourage integration of the students with lecturers and the wider university. However, a balance needs to be achieved, since not all students have the same expectations and requirements from a university education.

## **Chapter 9 – Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

The main aim of my research was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the massification of HE have impacted on the role of lecturers. In particular, I wanted to know what influence the lecturers thought they had on the student experience. My review of the literature showed that a student's decision to remain or drop-out of a programme is often influenced by staff attitudes as well as the student's integration or otherwise with the institution. Therefore I was interested to discover whether the lecturers had adapted their practice to accommodate the needs of the diverse student population and thus improve student engagement and success.

There is widespread agreement among researchers that massification of Higher Education (HE) in the UK has led to greater diversity in the student population and the institutions that they attend (Taylor et al., 2011; Brennan et al., 2010; Teichler, 2007; Gallacher, 2006; Barnett, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Scott, 1995). In particular, a number of researchers have drawn attention to institutional stratification and its effects (Bolivar, 2011; Cheung et al., 2007). In respect of the Scottish system, Gallacher's work



shows that while participation rates have grown considerably since the late 1980s, there is also evidence of persisting inequalities linked to patterns of differentiation and stratification between institutions (Gallacher, 2006). My study focussed on the perceptions that a group of computing lecturers, at a large post '92 Scottish university, had of the changes that have occurred in the student body. The student profile shows that the university is successful at widening access to students from lower socio-economic groups. Over 98% of the students attending the university are educated at state schools, and more than 23% come from areas of multiple deprivation<sup>23</sup>. All of the students, irrespective of whether they are part-time or full-time, have many competing demands on their time. As a result, this university's student population has many of the characteristics that are frequently linked with issues with student engagement, which can in turn affect student retention and achievement.

Curriculum organisation at the University also mirrors many of the features that are often associated with concerns over student engagement. The University provides a range of delivery modes and entry points. Students can study part-time (day or evening) or full-time, on campus, via distance learning, or at deliveries in local FECs. Some students start their studies not in the first year but enter later years with advanced standing. Thus the

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<sup>23</sup> As defined within the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)

students enrolled on a particular module can have a wide range of prior qualifications and pre-requisite knowledge, and the lecturers cannot assume that the students enrolled on a particular module have all followed the same pathway through a programme. These features are often said to inhibit the development of a shared student identification with the university that Tinto, and others, regard as favouring retention and success (Brennan et al., 2010; Thomas, 2002; Walker, 1999; Tinto, 1993, 1987, 1975).

The University therefore provides a wide range of students the opportunity to access a university education in a way which suits their personal circumstances. Flexibility in delivery modes and entry levels means that every student has an individualised experience (Brennan et al., 2010). However this does present lecturers with a number of challenges, since they cannot make assumptions about the prior knowledge and experience of the students they are teaching.

In this chapter I will discuss my findings and consider the implications for our understanding of academic identities and student engagement. I will also explore the impact of current Scottish government policy on widening access, as well as suggest areas for further research. I will begin by reflecting on the research process.

## **Reflections on the research process**

Undertaking this study has helped to develop my understanding of the research process, which will benefit any future studies that I carry out. An empirical approach was used consisting of semi-structured interviews with a sample of computing lecturers. I consider the timing of my research interviews to have been opportune since the institution had only recently been formed from the merger of two HEIs. I was therefore a relatively new insider and unknown to most of the lecturers in the study. This meant that I had the advantages of being both an insider and outsider in the research process. I was very aware that as an insider I needed to do my best to adopt a neutral, unbiased position when interpreting the data, and also that I needed to ensure that I did not impose my own views on the data. An advantage of being an insider was that I had a better understanding of what was actually going on within the university, as well as access to internal information such as university documents, including data on student numbers and the staff climate survey.

I used mind maps extensively throughout my research for both data collection and on-going analytical purposes. I found them to be an extremely useful tool in aiding me to pull together and summarise relevant

information. I used them to hold details of journal articles in relevant areas, as well as providing a prompt for the questions I wanted to cover in my interviews. I also used them to gather together, and identify, the main themes which emerged from my analysis, which in turn helped me to shape the chapters of my thesis.

My study was small scale and concentrated on the perceptions of lecturers in a particular subject area and institution, thus the findings cannot necessarily be extrapolated or replicated. The University has a specific history, as does the discipline, and I have tried to acknowledge this limitation at every stage of the study. All institutions and disciplines have particular features of organisation, and have their own histories, making it fruitless to claim that any case study can be 'typical', however well designed. I am also aware that I am presenting my interpretation of the lecturers' perceptions of their experiences (Skelton, 2012). However, I believe that this study has provided a valuable insight into the ways in which a particular group of lecturers have experienced the changes around them, and offers ideas and suggestions which should be of use to the institution and the wider FE and HE communities, as well as contributing to our understanding of higher education at a time of change.

## **Changes in the lecturer role and impact on identity**

One of the main areas that this research focussed on was the many internal and external changes which have affected HE and the ways in which the lecturers have coped with the changes. Consequently, my research centred on lecturers' perceptions of a number of continuous and constant changes which have taken place, both before and during my research. These have included a large increase in student numbers and the resultant diversity in the types of students studying at universities, as well as modularisation and trimesterisation. I therefore found that the lecturers had to cope with greater complexity in their role.

In order to have a better understanding of lecturers' perceptions, I first needed to have some appreciation of their academic identity. One of the greatest changes for academics has been the massification of HE (Henkel, 2000; Scott, 1995). In particular, Scott (1995) argues that the move from elite to mass HE systems has widened the status gap between universities and thus impacted on the identity of academics. The increase in student numbers has led to a greater diversity of students entering HE, as well as an increase in the number of females participating in HE (Scott, 1995). These factors apply to the university in my study, but there are two important differences with respect to the discipline being considered.

Firstly, although student numbers in Computing increased rapidly until 2001, there was then a significant decrease (Chapter 2, diagram 7). In addition, the percentage of females in the student population has remained constant over this period, despite an overall increase in the proportion of female students within the case study HEI and in HE nationally (Chapter 2, diagram 9). Therefore the changes that have taken place in HE have not been uniform.

Henkel (2000) considers there to be three key variables in influencing an academic's identity, namely institution, age and discipline. The institution is a Scottish post '92 university and the lecturers in my study were all experienced lecturers who had been in the role for at least ten years (Appendix 2). Initially Becher (1989) considered the identity of academics to be centred on their discipline and that loyalty to discipline was stronger than to the university. However Becher et al's second edition (2001) reported, as did other researchers (Clegg, 2008; Henkel, 2000; Scott, 1995), that although academics' loyalty was primarily to the discipline it was weakened slightly in institutions where there was not a strong research culture and/or where new types of disciplines and courses had developed, such as the university in my study.

In my own fieldwork, there did not appear to be much evidence of a strong disciplinary culture and identity amongst the lecturers. There could be several reasons for this, including the type of institution and the lack of a research culture amongst the lecturers. Similarly, the relative newness of the discipline and the fact that many of the lecturers, in common with lecturers in other new disciplinary areas, have degrees in areas other than computing and therefore do not have common educational experiences to identify with, could, as suggested by Brennan et al. (2010), also be factors. Another possibility is the lack of formal interaction the lecturers have with each other, as well as the shortage of opportunities to exchange ideas and discuss different teaching approaches, which is exacerbated by the multi-campus nature of the institution. Becher et al., (2001) state that lecturer interaction strengthens disciplines, whereas the lecturers in my study appeared to be operating very much as individuals. Therefore a combination of all these factors help to explain why there did not appear to be a strong disciplinary identity amongst the lecturers.

I also found, as did Scott (1995), that the lecturers had multiple roles and demands on their time which they had to try to balance, including teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. Similarly, the responsibility for the delivery of modules in different modes such as distance and blended learning, as well as at different locations, including

colleges, has led to a loss of cohesion in their work. In addition, time pressures, lack of a social space to meet up with colleagues, and the fact that the lecturers were distributed over four campuses, had all caused a feeling of isolation for many lecturers. Thus, this lack of integration and communication with colleagues and the wider university meant that many of the lecturers did not necessarily know the direction in which the School and University wanted them to move in, and they were therefore unsure as to how they should prioritise the many demands on their time.

In common with many lecturers in post '92 universities, all the lecturers considered teaching to be the main part of their role, whereas managers wanted lecturers to engage in both teaching and research (Henkel, 2000). The present emphasis on research is a consequence of current funding models and league tables which do not rate teaching and research equally. In particular a strong research focus raises the status of an institution and its position in the league tables, as well as generating additional funding (Skelton, 2012, 2007). Therefore the lecturers found themselves with the dilemma of where they should focus their efforts. Most lecturers felt that they should concentrate on their teaching role and providing academic guidance and support for the students since this would improve retention rates. However they acknowledged that these types of



activities did not appear to be valued as highly as research by university managers.

Although the lecturers indicated that they considered their role to be focussed on teaching and supporting the students, I found, as did Taylor (2007), that the lecturers had little direct contact with the students outwith scheduled classes. I also found that although the lecturers said that their role was centred on teaching, little, if any, time was spent reflecting and discussing ways to improve their teaching methods or consider new teaching approaches. Therefore there was a difference between what the lecturers thought they should be doing and what was happening in practice. The lecturers said that this was due to the constant demands on their time, however many also expressed concern about the decline in student numbers, which would suggest that teaching related activities had reduced rather than increased. Thus it would seem that the lecturers' perception that their workloads had expanded was due to an increase in quality assurance and administrative tasks rather than greater student numbers (Henkel, 2000; Tight, 2010).

The delivery of many of the modules on multiple campuses and at local delivery sites has changed the nature of the lecturers work. In particular, it

has led to a loss of autonomy and a reduction in flexibility in what they can deliver, whilst at the same time increasing the fragmentation of their academic identities. Multi-campus deliveries mean that module coordinators are required to develop materials which can be delivered to a wide range of students by different lecturers in the time allocated. Similarly, the lecturers delivering the materials cannot readily adapt teaching materials and approaches to suit the particular group of students that they are teaching. There are several reasons for this including the fact that the University requires students to have an equivalent experience on all campuses, while the lecturers need to deliver the materials in a fixed period of time or they will not complete the module in the allocated hours. These constraints have led to a de-skilling for some lecturers, who are required to deliver materials which they did not produce and which they have limited scope to change. Similarly, the restrictions imposed on the lecturers also constrain their ability to provide suitable individualised support for students, as well as affecting student integration and staff-student interaction.

I therefore found that the lecturers had to cope with a number of conflicts and tensions between the expectations of managers and students with regards to their role. While the massification of HE has led to more students entering HE, many students expect an individual experience

tailored to suit their particular requirements (Brennan et al., 2010). The lecturers identified that in many respects the students had become more demanding, expecting individual support from lecturers on demand. The lecturers considered this to be in conflict with the advice they were being given to develop innovative teaching approaches and develop the students' independent learning skills.

Autonomy was another area where there were contradictions and complexities. In one respect autonomy was viewed as positive, since it allowed lecturers to have a degree of academic freedom, however in other respects it was seen as leading to a sense of isolation. The multi-campus nature of the institution and the delivery of modules in colleges meant that many lecturers had to deliver modules which were co-ordinated by others which would suggest a need for team working. However, it also meant a feeling of isolation for some, since they were geographically distant from many of their colleagues.

One lecturer likened the isolation he felt to being in a large shopping complex where everyone was using the same space but there was little interaction between people. He felt, that in many ways, his colleagues were in competition, rather than co-operating with each other. However,

one lecturer did contradict this slightly by stating that the main support he received came from his peers.

The multiple delivery modes and delivery sites meant that some lecturers had to deliver materials which they had little or no input to. Hence there was a de-skilling for some, but on the other hand the lecturers said that they were expected to be multi-skilled with respect to marketing programmes and producing items such as course information leaflets. The lecturers also identified the conflict between the de-skilling with respect to their teaching role and the emphasis being placed on research and research led teaching.

Most of the lecturers considered themselves to be teaching focussed, but they also acknowledged that they spent little time reflecting on their teaching, and discussing different teaching approaches and methods with colleagues. This links back to several issues including time pressures and autonomy. In particular, it highlights one of the downsides associated with autonomy, namely, the sense of isolation.

Although in some respects the lecturers perceived part of their role to have diminished, the multi-campus nature of the institution, in college deliveries, diversity of students and entry / exit routes had led to greater complexity in other aspects of their role. Therefore the role of the lecturers was being re-shaped to suit the changing demands from managers and students. The lecturers had to teach a diverse range of students, many of whom were direct entry students into later years of the programme. This meant that the lecturers could not assume that all the students had the same prior experience and knowledge. Therefore the lecturers had to balance the need to treat all students equitably, whilst trying to determine the extent to which they should adjust the curriculum to suit different student groups, particularly direct entry students.

Block timetabling and modularisation were other areas where there were conflicting opinions. Most of the lecturers saw these as having a negative impact on the students' learning since they discouraged integration of knowledge and reduced assimilation time, which in turn influence withdrawal rates. However university managers and many students, particularly part-time students, considered the flexibility provided by these modes of delivery as advantageous.

In summary, I found that , the multi-campus nature of the institution, the diversity in the student body and the wide flexibility in entry levels and delivery modes had led to greater complexity in the role of the lecturers. In addition, although the lecturers still had a considerable amount of autonomy, there were changes to some parts of their role which had caused a weakening and fragmentation of their identity.

### **Widening access and student retention and achievement**

My review of the literature identified a wide range of reasons for students withdrawing from programmes, but found relatively little research into the role of the lecturer. Early work by Tinto (1993, 1987, 1982, 1975) and others (Stage 1989; Braxton et al., 1988; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983) identified academic and social integration as key factors in determining whether a student withdraws from a course. Later work by Thomas (2002) and others (Christie et al., 2005, 2004; Reay et al., 2001; Walker, 1999; Ozga et al., 1998; Martinez, 1997) built on Tinto's framework and considered the student's integration with the discipline and more importantly the student's relationship with staff to be significant factors. Many institutions, including the one in my study, have put strategies in place to improve attrition rates,

however in most cases these have centred on the students. A number of researchers (Christie et al., 2005; Wilcox et al., 2005; Lahteenoja et al., 2005; Quinn, 2004; Taylor et al., 2004; Read, 2003; Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2001; Walker, 1999; Martinez, 1997) found that students consider staff attitudes towards them and feeling valued by the institution as being particularly important when students are deciding whether to withdraw from a course or not. Thus my review of the literature suggests that lecturers adapt to suit the needs of their students rather than putting the responsibility for student retention onto the students and expecting them to adjust. However I found little evidence from my study to suggest that this has happened.

The students attending the university are predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, attending their local university, living at home, have part-time work and are mainly mature students (over 21). Brennan et al. (2010, p185) categorise these types of students as having an individualised student experience and suggest, along with other researchers (Henkel, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 1999), that integration with the university is less important to these students since their main aim in attending university is gaining the necessary qualifications to improve their career prospects rather than the wider benefits associated with a university education. In addition, modularisation and block delivery

structures mean that the students are only on campus when they have classes. Thus, for these students their “*experience is predominantly an academic one*” rather than a “*social one ‘around the campus’*” (Brennan et al., 2008, p183). Therefore since the students are not integrated with the wider university then they are likely to have little loyalty to the university which has been identified as being particularly important for retention.

I found that the lecturers thought that staff/student interaction was important and they were aware of the diversity within the student body which included mature students, part-time students and direct entrants into later years of the programmes. However I also discovered that many of them shared the traditional view of a university student and therefore expected the students to adapt to fit the existing system rather considering changing their approaches to suit the students. Many lecturers stated that they found it difficult to cope with the different levels and abilities of the students, but they did not necessarily see it as part of their role to ensure that students were adequately prepared and had the necessary pre-requisite knowledge for the modules they taught. Most saw their task as being to teach the students in their classes with the material prepared, and few had considered adapting it to meet the needs of the particular student group. As far as most of the lecturers were concerned, student retention and achievement was “*the University’s*” responsibility rather than theirs.



Therefore although the majority of the lecturers said that student retention and achievement was everyone's responsibility, there was little evidence of them taking steps to improve student engagement, and in fact several said they had not considered changing what they did to suit the diverse student body. Therefore there appeared to be a gap between university policies, including those on widening access and student retention, and the implementation of the policies by the lecturers. Many of the lecturers did not seem to be engaged with the wider university, nor did they think that they received the necessary time and support to implement the changes required. High quality teaching is vital for all institutions, but particularly so for institutions which accept students with lower entry qualifications than the more selective universities, and therefore a challenge for university managers is to ensure that those lecturers who choose to support the students feel their role is appreciated.

### **Impact of changes in delivery on student integration**

As well as the massification of HE there have also been changes to the structure of the curriculum which have been imposed on the lecturers, including modularisation, trimesterisation, block delivery modes and distributed delivery on multi-campus and college sites. I concur with Henkel (2000) and Scott (1995) that modularisation has led to a loss of

cohesiveness in programmes together with a loss of autonomy for many lecturers and a weakening of disciplinary identity.

The University provides students with a wide range of study options so that they can tailor the curriculum to suit their own requirements. However the changes to the delivery structures have all impacted on the coherence of programmes, as well as student integration with their programme and the wider university. Programmes are no longer made up of a cohesive set of distinct and related modules, but rather modules can be studied by students on many different programmes as well as by part-time students who may not be enrolled on a programme but who are taking stand-alone modules. In addition, programmes can be delivered on multiple campuses as well as in colleges. Consequently, most programme leaders had experienced a sense of loss since they no longer had control over their work nor did they feel that they knew the students on their programmes as well as they once did. Therefore Programme Leaders should be given more ownership of their programmes and more involvement in tracking the progress of individual students, since one of the rewards of higher education is watching students develop and mature as they progress through their programmes (Henkel, 2000). Similarly it was not always possible for the students to identify the other students who were enrolled on the same programme as themselves, thus causing a weakening of

cohort cohesion amongst the students. These factors all impact on the integration of students with the university as well as their lecturers, and thus adversely affect student retention and achievement.

### **Areas for further research**

My study is a limited one based on a group of lecturers in a School of Computing and is therefore very specific. Similarly, the subject area is male dominated and therefore my study did not focus on gender specific issues. It would therefore be interesting to investigate how the perceptions of the lecturers compare to those of colleagues in other disciplines within the same university. In particular, it would provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the lecturers' perceptions with those of colleagues in subject areas where there are more female lecturers and/or students. This would provide a better understanding of the importance of discipline on academic identity as well as student engagement.

Likewise, the university is a post '92 institution; therefore another possible area for further work would be to compare the perceptions of lecturers in the same disciplinary area but in different types of institutions. This would

allow comparisons to be made between the identity of lecturers in the same disciplinary area in older and newer post '92 universities.

A third area for further work could be to evaluate the effectiveness of any steps taken to support the lecturers. For example, staff development could be provided to help the lecturers to understand the diversity of the student body together with the importance of good staff-student interaction. Similarly, the lecturers could be given the necessary time and support required to fully implement university policies. In addition, the provision of an environment where the lecturers could integrate with each other and discuss ideas should lessen the feeling of isolation experienced by some lecturers and produce a more collegiate atmosphere. It should then be possible to ascertain whether all of these actions have changed the lecturers' perceptions and improved student achievement.

### **Final thoughts**

Widening participation and fair access to further and higher education continue to be priorities for both the UK and Scottish governments. SFC

figures (2011, p11)<sup>24</sup> show that only 12.9% of Scottish domiciled entrants recruited onto undergraduate courses in 2009/10 were from the 20% most deprived areas and they want this figure increased. Similarly, the Scottish Government wants to improve articulation links between colleges and universities (Von Prondzynski, 2012; Scottish Government, 2011) and is considering legislation in order to ensure that all universities comply. The university in this study is well-placed with respect to both these targets. It recruited 23% of its students from the 20% most deprived areas in 2009/10, and it also recruits significant numbers of students (over 1000) into later years of its programmes, as well as delivering programmes in colleges.

Recent and ongoing changes in the college sector in Scotland mean that the University is reviewing its strategic partnerships with colleges, in order to enhance the flexible opportunities for students wishing to articulate from college to university. In particular, university senior managers are involved in a dialogue with colleges to determine how best to take forward the SFC's wish to see formalised guaranteed entry to university for college students. Clearly, the lecturers will need to adapt to any new delivery models proposed.

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<sup>24</sup>[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP\\_AIC2December2011\\_02122011/AIC\\_11\\_16\\_Developing\\_Widening\\_Access\\_Agreements.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP_AIC2December2011_02122011/AIC_11_16_Developing_Widening_Access_Agreements.pdf)

At the same time, policymakers in Scotland and elsewhere are placing greater emphasis on student retention and achievement (Scottish Government, 2011). Through its new mechanism of outcome agreements, SFC has asked the University to maintain recruitment of MD20 entrants at current levels. The SFC has also set four year targets for the University which include increasing retention of all students but particularly those in the MD20 group and articulating students. More broadly, the Scottish Government has placed considerable emphasis on improving higher education retention rates as part of its post-16 review (Scottish Government, 2011). Consequently widening access and student retention will continue to be significant issues for the University, as indeed for the sector more widely, certainly over the next four years, and probably for some time to come.

Since I began my study the economic climate has changed and there has been a downturn in the economy. There is greater demand for university places at the same time as there has been a freeze on funded student number places and an overall reduction of 11% in the SFC teaching budget<sup>25</sup>. The Scottish Government has committed to an increase of 1.9%

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<sup>25</sup> 8.9% cut in session 2011-12 for universities in Scotland

by session 2014/15; however this represents a cut in real terms. Thus universities will be required to do more with less funding. It will also be interesting to see whether the increased demand for places, which is in part due to the current economic situation, leads to an improvement in student achievement rates.

The role of the lecturers in my study has become more complex, and I found that there were many contradictions and tensions at play. My study identified several issues associated with lecturer autonomy and the resultant isolation. The one lecturer who commented positively on support said that his main source of support came from his peers. Therefore more could be done to provide socialisation opportunities for lecturers, particularly across campuses. This would allow the lecturers to get to know each other better thus reducing the feeling of isolation. It would also provide the lecturers with the time and opportunity to discuss and reflect on their teaching methods and research interests.

Modularisation and blocking of the timetabling are considered to provide more flexibility for the students, particularly part-time students. However the lecturers raised issues with both of these delivery structures. The lecturers felt that restricting delivery of a module to one day a week, rather

than spreading the allocated time over several days, led to issues with assimilation of material. The lecturers' view was that many students did little or no work on modules outwith class time, and therefore they forgot what had been covered from one week to the next. Similarly the complexities surrounding modularisation have meant that it is less likely for there to be integration of material across modules, as well as cross-assessment of modules. This can lead to over assessment and a loss of cohesion between modules, which can in turn adversely affect pass rates. Likewise the delivery of modules in a fixed block of time meant that students tended only to attend university when they had a class and so there was less integration with their peer group and the wider university. Consequently all of these issues impact on retention rates and therefore university managers should re-consider whether the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

This doctoral research provides a better understanding of the perceptions of a particular group of computing lecturers with respect to changes in the students, widening access and student achievement, and therefore contributes to the evidence base in an area of growing significance for policy and practice. In particular, it provides a greater understanding of the perceptions lecturers have of their students, highlights areas of good practice and identifies areas for improvement in current practice. The



findings should be of value to the School and University, as well as the wider academic community.

The University plays an important role in providing a diverse range of students, who do not necessarily have the social and cultural background and/or academic qualifications to attend elite institutions, access to a university education. The University may not be well represented in league tables, but feedback from students at QAA reviews, validations and reviews of provision at local colleges indicate that students value the opportunities that the university is providing. Substantial numbers of current and former students are appreciative of the chance, or in some cases the second chance, that they have been given. Therefore the University is making a valuable contribution to the widening access agenda and lives are being transformed.

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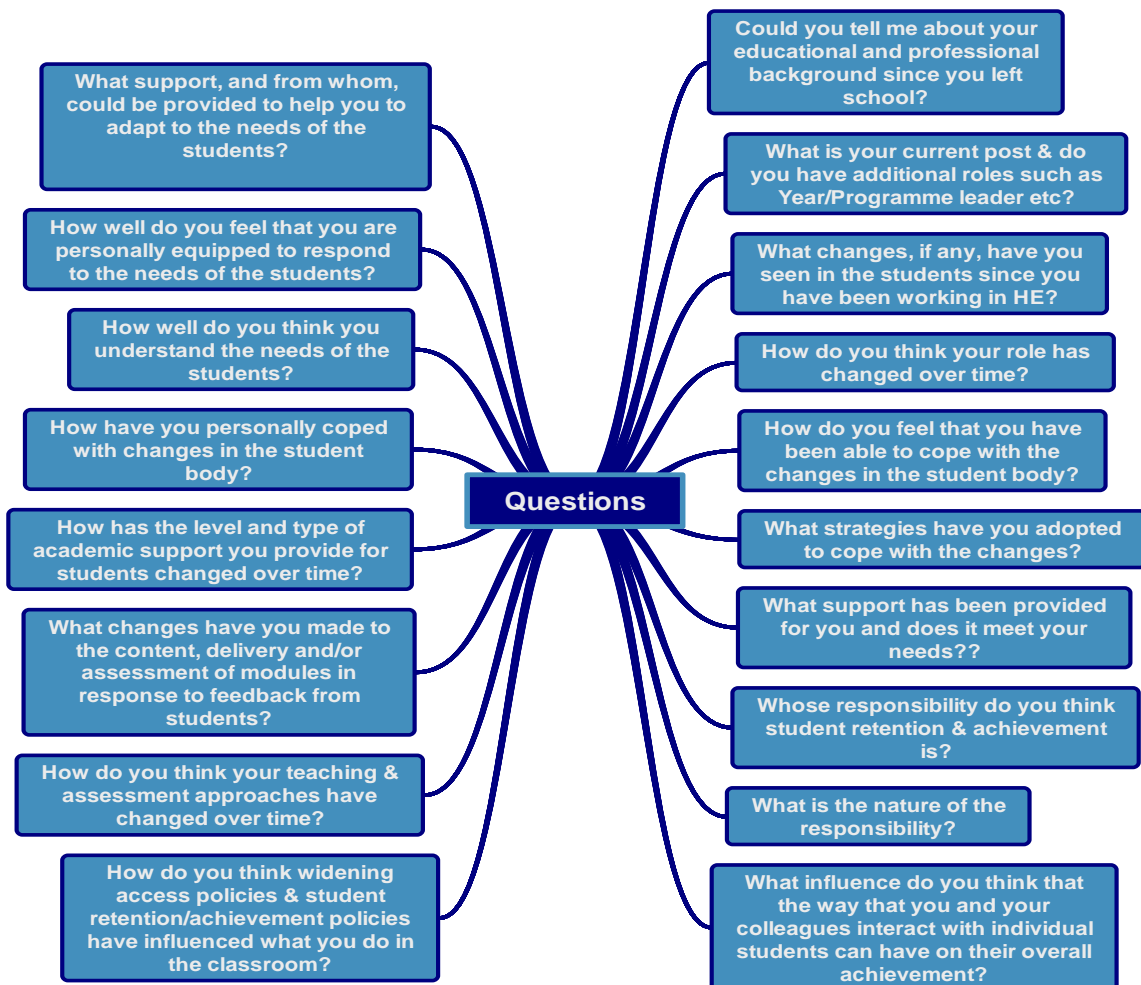
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 - Mind Map Example



## Appendix 2 - Profiles of lecturers

<b>Name</b>	<b>Bill</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Post Graduate Diploma, Degree (Hons), Teaching Qualification
<b>Professional membership</b>	N/A
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Bob</b>
<b>Position</b>	Promoted Post
<b>Qualifications</b>	Doctorate, Masters, Degree
<b>Professional membership</b>	Chartered Engineer
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	4 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Des</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Post Graduate Diploma, Degree (Hons)
<b>Professional membership</b>	None
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Ed</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Masters, Degree
<b>Professional membership</b>	Fellow of the Higher Education Academy
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Joe</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Doctorate, Masters, Degree (Hons)
<b>Professional membership</b>	Fellow of the Higher Education Academy
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	None

<b>Name</b>	<b>Ken</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Degree (Hons)
<b>Professional membership</b>	Member Institution of Engineering & Technology
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 10 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	None

<b>Name</b>	<b>Leo</b>
<b>Position</b>	Promoted Post
<b>Qualifications</b>	Doctorate, Degree (Hons)
<b>Professional membership</b>	British Computer Society, Chartered Engineer, Member Institution of Engineering & Technology
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	None

<b>Name</b>	<b>Les</b>
<b>Position</b>	Promoted Post
<b>Qualifications</b>	Masters, Degree, Teaching Qualification
<b>Professional membership</b>	Fellow of the Higher Education Academy
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years FE & HE
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	9 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Luc</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Masters, Degree, Teaching Qualification
<b>Professional membership</b>	Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Chartered Engineer, Member Institution of Engineering & Technology
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years FE & HE.
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Phil</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Masters, Degree, Teaching Qualification
<b>Professional membership</b>	None
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years FE & HE
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years

<b>Name</b>	<b>Tony</b>
<b>Position</b>	Lecturer
<b>Qualifications</b>	Masters, Teaching Qualification
<b>Professional membership</b>	None
<b>Academic Experience</b>	More than 20 years FE & HE
<b>Industrial and Commercial Experience</b>	8 years