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**LEARNING IDENTITY:
THE TRANSITION TO TERTIARY
EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL AND
COLLEGE LEAVERS**

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Abstract

The focus of this research is the re-conceptualisation of learning in higher education. By theorising the university as a group of interconnected discourses I have been able to develop an understanding of student *learning identity* which goes beyond the formal academic settings of the university and which explores the influence of both the social and academic spheres of the university in terms of student transition and engagement in learning.

Data were gathered in three phases: through in-depth interviews with sixty nine students entering their first year at three British universities, the collection of three day diaries from forty four of these students and follow up interviews with thirty students from the original sample. By negotiating positions on continua of continuity and discontinuity of experience with interlocutors in identified discourse settings, students were found to experience learning as an integral and transformative aspect of their identities.

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Introduction

This study is an attempt to re-conceptualise learning in higher education and to re-locate the experience of being and becoming a student within the educational process, socio-cultural context and biographical narrative of the learner. In this study learning is theorised as an integral and generative part of personal identity formation and experience, rather than adopting the more limited view of learning as being discrete acts of knowledge gathering and processing (Rosenthal, 1991).

At the outset of this study I was interested in developing an understanding of the interpretative frameworks used by traditional age students (those under 21 at the point of university entry) to make sense of their learning and their identities as students in the formal and informal contexts of the university. Through the analysis of data gathered from a combination of semi-structured interviews and autobiographical accounts, I have been able to identify dominant themes relating to these issues. In order to gain access to students' views I encouraged them to explore their social pasts, their prior educational experiences and their current experiences of becoming a student. This raised questions regarding the nature of the dynamic between structure and agency experienced by the students within the context of the university which had implications for the re-conceptualisation of learning attempted.

The research addresses the substantive issues through the organising concept of *learning identity*. This construct draws on notions of students' identities as learners developed in

the field of adult education (Weil,1986) and also incorporates the idea that traditional age students are involved in the process of learning about their identities as adults and as new students, during the period of their transition to university. Individuals are conceptualised as being active in the process of constructing understanding and making meaning from new challenges and experiences. In addition, it is also argued that many social influences also affect an individual's relationship with the learning process. Such influences include the cultural resources on which a learner is able to draw as well as the support, explanation and instruction they receive from others (Pollard, 1985). For example, a student's gender, ethnicity and social class are likely to influence the cultural resources available to them, whilst relationships with peers, tutors, siblings and parents may affect the type of support they receive when confronted with new learning challenges. To address the issues raised the concept of *learning identity* was developed and is central to this research.

In analysing the data gathered I have been able to move beyond the original theorisation of *learning identity* and explore the ways in which the students in the sample were active in the negotiation of their individual identities as students and learners within multiple discourse settings inside and away from the university. In these discourse settings it is argued that students attempt to position themselves in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience.

The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven parts:

Part 1

THEORISING LEARNING, IDENTITY AND THE UNIVERSITY (chapters 1-3)

Part 1 provides the theoretical groundwork necessary to position the approaches taken in the fieldwork and the substantive issues addressed. In this section of the thesis ideas about the nature of identity and learning are discussed and an understanding of the university as a set of interconnected discourses is established.

Part 2

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE STUDY (chapter 4)

Part 2 offers the reader an understanding of the methodology used. In this section the design of the study is outlined and the epistemological understandings which underpin the methods of data collection chosen is discussed

Part 3

LEARNING IDENTITIES EXPLORED (chapter 5)

Part 3 draws on the data gathered to explore the experiences of students pre and post university entry in terms of their temporal construction of *learning identity* and their changing notions of themselves as students.

Part 4

ENTERING THE ACADEMIC DIALOGUE: STUDENTS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS

(chapters 6-8)

Part 4 returns to the original conceptualisation of the university as a group of interconnected discourses and examines the data in terms of the experiences of the students interviewed had of the academic discourse settings of the university. In this section of the thesis students' interactions with key interlocutors such as tutors and peers are discussed with reference to the negotiation of *learning identity*.

Part 5

ENTERING THE SOCIAL DIALOGUE: STUDENTS AND THEIR PEERS *(chapter 9)*

Part 5 addresses similar themes to those discussed in Part 4 but in relation to the social discourse settings of the university and the centrality of social integration to students' experiences of the transition to university and the negotiation of *learning identity*.

Part 6

NEGOTIATING LEARNING IDENTITY BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY*(chapter 10)*

Part 6 takes the reader beyond the discourse settings of the university to look into the influence of family relationships in students' experiences of transition.

Part 7

BRIDGING THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL DIALOGUES *(chapter 11)*

Part 7 draws together the various strands of the thesis and discusses the integrated and holistic view of *learning identity* evident in the data gathered for this study before moving on to examine possible areas for future research in which the concept of *learning identity* developed here might make a useful contribution.

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Chapter One

Perspectives on Learning

In order to understand the ways in which students' learning within the higher education context has previously been conceptualised I begin with a discussion of four of the major research perspectives on learning adopted within the field. In the following sections of this chapter I examine some of the models employed by researchers investigating student learning, in order to draw attention to the assumptions about the experience of learning contained within them. The research perspectives explored are 'the approaches to study' research perspective, the 'styles of thinking' research perspective, the 'developmental' research perspective and the 'holist' research perspective. Though each perspective has offered a valuable contribution to the understanding of student learning at university I feel that there is still some way to go in developing an integrated theory of learning as process. Consequently I felt that there was a need to re-theorise learning in higher education, building on prior conceptualisations in order to develop a theoretic understanding of learning which can be better related to the social realities found in contemporary universities.

Before going further, it is important that I specify an important caveat, which is that this study is not concerned with psychologically testable aspects of learning, though some of

the literature I have drawn on during the course of this project has come from this research tradition. The ontological perspective I wish to establish is conceptually driven and informed through the collection and analysis of qualitative data gathered from interviews with first year undergraduates about their experiences of the learning process during the transition to university. The conceptualisation of *learning identity* I am suggesting, is an alternative way of understanding the learning experience of higher education, undertaken with a view to contributing to the on-going dialogue in the field of student learning.

Section 1: Approaches to Learning: A Research Perspective

The first of the research perspectives explored is the *approaches to learning* perspective which is focused around the standardised measurement of study styles and orientations through the administering of psychological inventories. The categorisations used to describe *approaches to learning* identified by Marton and Saljo (1976) and those developed by Biggs (1987) and Entwistle *et al* (1997) as expressions of the conceptualisations of learning, are some of the most predominant in educational discourse, in the area of learning in higher education (Haggis, 1996). Whilst the terminology used by authors in early writings to describe the *approaches to learning* which their research had identified differed, there was and is a growing consensus concerning the ways in which student learning is understood (Ford, 1981, Scmeck, 1983, Kember, 1997).

Many writers theorising learning in higher education now focus on the ways in which students co-ordinate and arrange their learning environments and the relative emphasis students give to the reproduction of non-negotiable knowledge (facts/information) or the understanding of underlying concepts, (Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1993; Wilson, Smart, Watson, 1996; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). The shift towards a greater consensus in this area of study can be seen in the standardisation of the category descriptors used by researchers in this field even if this represents only a superficial uniformity and disguises deeper conceptual diversity in the interpretation of terms. “Research has consistently identified three approaches to adult learning, labelled most commonly as deep, surface and achieving” (Wilson, Smart, Watson, 1996, p. 59). This way of thinking about learning has been widely accepted without challenge and needs to be re-appraised in order to develop a more connected concept of the ways in which learning relates to identity and students’ experiences within and beyond the formal learning contexts of seminars, laboratories and lecture halls.

At this point it is necessary to give brief definitions of the three categories commonly identified in approaches to learning research before offering a critique of them as a means of understanding learning in higher education.

The major theoretical tenet of those following the *approaches to study* school of research into students’ learning, is that learners in higher education primarily employ one of three approaches to study, *surface*, *deep* or *achieving (strategic)*. Though students may have complex motivational and strategic reasons for their pattern of study, they tend to favour

methods consistent with the fulfilment of a single main objective. Students' objectives may be to develop an integrated understanding of the area of study or to attempt to gain a superficial understanding of the topic or to glean some comprehension of the main concepts and themes and present inadequate knowledge in a way which imitates understanding and fulfils course criteria with minimum effort. However,

It is possible to accept that there can be both consistency and variability in students' approaches to learning. The tendency to adopt a certain approach, or to prefer a certain style of learning, may be a useful way of describing differences between students. But a more complete explanation would also involve a recognition of the way an individual student's strategy may vary from task to task.

(Entwisle 1981, p.105)

Students favouring a *surface* approach to learning are often described as extrinsically motivated. For these students the primary reason for learning is the reward of grades. They may have a reproductive view of learning, meeting the minimal requirements and targeting essential reproducible knowledge for their attention. The extent to which this may be perceived as "learning" is questionable. By "learning" I mean the incorporation of ideas and perspectives into the pre-existing web of knowledge already established within the individual's mind which can alter the learners' perceptions at a broader experiential level than merely recalling learned 'facts'. Svensson (1977) argued that students who adopted a surface-level processing approach to learning only reach a superficial level of understanding. They fail to comprehend the concepts underlying their subject of study

because of their tendency to view knowledge as a series of items which must be memorised and recalled uncritically and which are only loosely associated with each other. This style of learning lacks any engagement with ideas and is predominantly assessment focused. As a result students approaching learning in this way never develop a cogent understanding of the body of knowledge they are attempting to learn. However, it is the style of learning most commonly detected in surveys of student strategies (Gibbs, 1992) though it is perceived negatively by members of the academic community. Despite this, students may emerge from their degree courses with little real understanding of the concepts underpinning the discipline, a short fall which in many cases is undetected in course assessment (Marton and Saljo, 1976).

Students following a *deep* approach to study are seen as intrinsically motivated and “...search for meaning by integrating new information with existing knowledge” (Andrews *et al*, 1996). They are interested in the subject matter and are concerned with developing a personal understanding. This approach to study is adopted by students who regard the task of learning as being the pursuit of understanding and the meaningful engagement with ideas. Deep learning is widely regarded as the most valuable of the three conceptualisations and fits the definition of “learning” outlined above. This type of learning is commonly described as the ‘goal’ traditionally encouraged by higher education. It is often linked with the concept of critical thinking and the ability to develop clarity of thought and expression. However, it is less often identified as an approach to study adopted by students involved in ‘Approaches to Learning’ research than the other types of approaches to learning (Flett, 1996).

Students engaged in an *achieving (strategic)* approach to learning are motivated by the personal satisfaction, which the extrinsic reward of a high grade brings (Flett, 1996). These students organise their work strategies, time and course content optimally, in order to achieve their objective efficiently. Students pursuing this approach to study may assimilate both the techniques of *deep* and *surface* learning. They approach learning in a strategic manner, ever conscious of the criteria against which their work will be assessed.

The aim of students adopting this approach, is to identify what the tutor wants and to provide it, even at the cost of failing to fulfil their own conceptualisation of the nature of learning. A study by Arskey (1992) which investigated the approaches to study adopted by students who gained first class honours degrees, revealed that this utilitarian approach to the achievement of assessment criteria was often rewarded by the university system, rather than rewarding a *deep* approach to study. Though it is this *deep* approach to study, which the rhetoric of the university establishment suggests is the most highly valued and claims to encourage. Many students are able to detect the discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality of university study criteria and adapt their style of presenting work to fulfil the demands of a university system rather than to fulfil their own needs and interests as learners. This strategy could be regarded as 'illusory' rather than 'real' learning.

Investigations in this field have tended to take the form of quantitative studies of students' learning approaches. Marton and Saljo (1976) used the term 'phenomenology', to describe this way of understanding students' learning. They studied the ways in which students'

themselves interpreted certain learning tasks, investigating students' reading and understanding of an academic article and noting differences in students' study techniques, such as variations in their comprehension of the theoretical concepts and principles developed in the text. The meanings discerned by students from reading the same extract of text were used to demonstrate the different ways in which the students had read the article and approached the task. Subsequent studies attempting to follow Marton and Saljos' conceptual understanding of study approaches have predominantly used either the Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1979) or the Approaches to Study Inventory (Entwistle, Handley and Hounsell, 1979) and their successors. Each of these research instruments is used to measure *surface*, *deep* and *achievement* approaches in students' study habits.

The Study Process Questionnaire was devised from the theoretical and empirical literature surrounding the attempt to define the 'personal qualities' thought to be important to academic learning. It "...measures approaches to learning in terms of sub-scales reflecting the student's motives and strategies on each of the three major dimensions" (Wilson, Smart and Watson, 1996). The Approaches to Study Inventory is derived from interview-based research into student learning. This test measures the three study styles according to the broader categories of meaning, reproducing and achieving orientations. In addition a fourth aspect measures student learning pathologies as identified by Pask (1976). Pask suggested that students followed either a *serialist* (step by step) or a *holist* (complex) dispositional style of learning. He viewed these styles of learning as being stable personality or cognitive traits which shape the student's underlying approach to learning,

affecting the ways in which students gather and assimilate information and which can be seen across different learning contexts.

In addition to the approaches to study research, which investigates student learning, Hudson (1966) suggested a link between personality and learning based on the concepts of *convergent* and *divergent* thinking. Hudson suggested that convergent thinkers have a limited way of approaching problem solving, in contrast with divergent thinkers who were able to think laterally and to solve problems in a more novel way. Hudson claimed that divergent thinkers were more often found on Arts based courses, where such thinking was rewarded by an assessment system in which students are often required to tackle loosely defined areas of study which demand the processing and assimilation of disparate material in order to formulate an argument. Convergent thinkers, he argued, were more often found on Science based courses, which tend to be characterised by a more structured delivery of the course content and where assessment demands the ability to recall information accurately.

Gibbs (1992) argued that the concept of convergent and divergent thinkers was problematic, as research evidence has found that rather than being an enduring property or disposition, students' learning strategies may vary from learning task to task and context to context. The variation in the approaches to learning adopted by the same student at different times implied that ways of thinking and learning were not as stable as Hudson had suggested. As a result Gibbs argued that it would seem unlikely that styles of learning are so strongly influenced by cognitive characteristics. Instead he suggested that it is more

likely that the style of assessment used to mark the student has an impact upon the approach to learning typically adopted by the student, than the style of study being dependent upon the personality traits of the learner. Thus he acknowledges the potential for a more 'situated' analysis of the learning process.

Flett (1996) attempted to develop a model to assess the determinacy and interaction between learning approaches and cognitive personality characteristics. The aim of this study was to clarify the relationship between personality and student learning. Using the Lancaster Approaches to Learning Inventory (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) and a test based on occupational personality questionnaires (Sternberg, 1997) in order to determine whether the transferable skills and personal qualities demanded by employers are developed at the same time as traditional academic qualifications are gathered.

The tests were administered more than once over the course of the students' academic careers. It aimed to test the endurance of study habits and personality traits over time and to assess the extent to which stereotypical ideas of differences between male and female and arts and science students were founded in fact. He concluded that the traditional distinction between arts and science students were borne out to some extent by his findings. Arts students in his sample were less likely to adopt a surface approach to learning than were science students. However, they were no more likely to adopt a deep approach to study. Science students were found to be less 'critical' than other students, and social scientists were strong at 'relating ideas' from one topic on the course to another. Medical students were found to be 'meaning orientated divergent thinkers'.

Personal characteristics were found to have some impact on students' achievement in higher education. Conscientious students who followed a methodical approach to preparation were rewarded. Students who saw their subject as a whole, rather than as a series of discrete topics were at "...an inherent disadvantage" (Flett, 1996, p.21). 'Caring' was found to have a positive relationship with performance. However, the type of personality possessed by the student such as introvert or extrovert; were found to be unrelated to the students' academic performances. According to Flett (1996)

Personality does not appear to be related to approaches to studying and learning, but can be linked to certain study habits, types of motivation and cognitive learning styles. (p.25)

Flett (1996) suggests that many students adopt a conspicuously surface level approach to study during their first year. This approach is not rewarded by the university as the understanding behind the students' responses to assessments criteria are obviously limited. However, in his comparative study with first and third year students Flett (1996) noted a similar tendency towards a superficial understanding as an approach to study in final year students. However, these students were being rewarded with higher grades than those achieved by students approaching learning in a similar way during the first year of their course. Flett suggests that over the course of study students' underlying approaches do not dramatically change, instead they merely learn how to present surface level understanding in a way which mimics deep-level processing. Students become more effective cue-

seekers and are able to tailor their work to fit course requirements and tutors' preferences, an approach which obviously reaps rewards in terms of gaining good grades even if it does not fulfil the students' or the tutors' conceptualisation of learning.

Section 2: Styles of Thinking and Learning: A Research Perspective

The second research perspective I will examine is that of *styles of thinking and learning*. This understanding of the nature of thinking and learning also comes from a cognitive psychology tradition, which focuses on the testable nature of certain dispositions towards thinking and learning. Alternative theories of *thinking styles* were originally developed in response to the recognised need for psychologists to bridge the gap between theories of abilities and personalities. For example Kegan (1994) recognised that some children were more reflective and others more impulsive in their school work and in their lives outside formal education and Myers following the ideas of Jung developed a widely used test called the Myers-Briggs Type inventory. This produced findings which suggested that some people primarily rely upon sensing the world around them, whereas others rely more heavily on intuition. However, despite the diversity of theories available in this field I have chosen to focus my discussion of the *styles of thinking* research perspective on the recent work of Sternberg because of his interest in the impact of this theory on the experiences of individuals within education contexts. Drawing from a *profile of styles of thinking*, Sternberg, (1995), argues that individuals engage with the challenges they face in a number of different ways. The *profile of styles of thinking* available to them is neither

static or innate but is constantly changing in response to the socializing influences of others and the demands of the task in hand.

According to Sternberg's theorisation a *style of thinking* is not an ability but the manner in which a person uses their abilities. Each individual has a *profile of styles*. Though people may have a preference for a particular style of thinking they do not always have a choice about the style of thinking necessary in order to complete a specific task. Sternberg (1995) suggests that the most successful individuals are those who are flexible in their style of thinking and can modify it in order to accommodate the demands of the situation in hand. Such styles of thinking are not conceptualised as rigidly fixed but as socialised patterns of thought and behaviour. Styles of thinking are acquired through modelling the actions and strategies of those around us. Another crucial aspect of the conceptualisation of *styles and thinking and learning*, is that 'styles can change over the course of a lifetime' (Sternberg 1995, p.269). This temporal aspect of *styles of thinking* research is important as it suggests a fluid notion of learning which places the individual in the position of an active and flexible respondent to changing circumstances.

In his work *on thinking styles* Sternberg has suggested that individuals think differently from one another and that people over estimate the extent to which 'others think the way they do (Sternberg, 1994)' (Sternberg, 1995, p268). From this position Sternberg and Wanger developed a theory of mental self-government which they developed into a styles of thinking inventory in order to assess the extent to which each style is typical of an

individual's style of thinking (Sternberg, 1995). This inventory is organised around three categories of thinking style, *the legislative style*, *the executive style* and *the judicial style*.

People adopting a *legislative* style of thinking are creative and prefer to develop their own ways of doing things and like to make decisions about what they will and will not do. According to Sternberg (1995) someone with a preference for the *legislative* style of thinking might be orientated towards occupations which allow them to express their creativity. However, he also suggests that this style of thinking is commonly discouraged in educational environments such as schools, universities and training schemes.

Individuals preferring an *executive* style of thinking prefer to follow rules and work within the confines of existing structures. Though they enjoy problem solving they are uncomfortable with setting their own parameters and working within them. Sternberg (1995) argues that this style is more often valued within school or business as people preferring this style of thought 'follow directions and orders' (p.273). An *executive* style of thinking can be encouraged from within the peer group as well as by the educational environment, when children are encouraged to accept the norms of their peers rather than those of the school. Conversely a person orientated towards a *judicial* style of thinking 'likes to evaluate rules and procedures, and prefers problems in which one analyses and evaluates existing things and ideas' (Sternberg, 1995, p.273).

Within the theory of *mental self-government* four distinct forms of thinking are identified: *monarchic*, *hierarchic*, *oligarchic*, *anarchic*. Each form leads to a different way of

approaching the world and tackling problems. Sternberg (1997) argues that these different ways of approaching the challenges we face operate on a number of levels conceptualised as *global, local, internal, external, liberal and conservative*. According to Sternberg (1997), these multiple *styles, forms and functions of thinking* evoke different responses within formal education contexts. With teachers valuing children's abilities more highly if the child's style of thinking is in tune with their own. He goes on to suggest that the education system and other organisations create conformist cultures of acceptable ways of thinking and suggest that "People who question the way things are done are not viewed as creative, but rather as disruptive" (p.6). In his book on *Thinking Styles* (1997) Sternberg explores the implications of a clash between institutional and individual conceptions of learning through a series of case studies and also illustrates his ideas from his personal experience at university.

I first realized that things were going badly when the professor handed us back our very first test result... It turned out that what the professor expected of our essays and what I had thought he expected had no overlap. I thought that the use of an essay test meant the professor wanted us to be creative and go beyond the information given. In fact, the teacher had 10 points he wanted us to make about the topic of the essay. The test was scored on a 0 to 10 scale, depending upon the number of points that the professor wanted us to make that we actually had made. No pretences about creativity; no attempt even to encourage critical thinking...Indeed I even remember, perhaps falsely, a comment by the professor to the effect

that there was one Sternberg in psychology already, and that it appeared that there would not soon be two. I got the message.

(Sternberg, 1997, p. 13).

Within educational settings Sternberg and Grigorenko (1995) have assessed the utility of the theory of *mental self-governance* examining whether teachers' styles differed as a function of school. They found that large variations in stylistic patterns existed between teachers across schools and subject areas. 'Science teachers tended to be more local, whereas humanities teachers tended to be more liberal' (Sternberg and Grigorenko, 1997, p.709). Other differences in teaching styles '...seemed to make sense in terms of the kinds of education the schools were providing' (Sternberg and Grigorenko, 1997, p.709). Consequently Sternberg and Grigorenko devised an independent inventory to rate the ideology of the school for each of the style dimensions. When independently assessed teachers' styles were found to tend to match the ideology of the school in which they taught, a finding which was also reflected in the similarity found between students' style demographics and those of their teachers. This Sternberg identifies as being a factor which can influence teachers' perceptions of students' attainment levels, with students' often adopting and being rewarded for a more *legislative* style of thinking, commonly found amongst teachers.

Section 3: Critiquing the 'Approaches to Study' and 'Styles of Thinking' Research Perspectives

In reviewing the *approaches to study* and *styles of thinking and learning* research perspectives I have chosen to deal with both cognitive experimentalist psychological perspectives together in acknowledgement of the sympathy between these two theoretical positions in relation to the understanding of learning. Both views of learning are nomothetic and based on a realist notion of learning and thinking which attempt to identify and categorise the processes and experiences undertaken by individuals involved in 'acts' of learning, in order to make comments and predictions which can be generalised beyond the sample group. Though such research has developed some interesting conceptual paradigms in relation to the theorisation of learning this cognitive experimentalist approach, focused on devising inventories and developing scored responses to pre-devised statements narrows and to some extent disenfranchises the respondents involved in such studies, as they are unable to describe, clarify and qualify their responses to the questions asked of them. However, in saying this I am merely expressing my own individual preference for a qualitative approach to data collection, rather than criticising the findings of these studies.

At this point it is important to acknowledge the influence of the differences noted in students' *approaches to study*. The tripartite approach to tackling study, which has been so comprehensively noted and documented in studies of student learning, has produced interesting and widely accepted findings. Not least of which is the consistent observation

that many learners have a tendency to adopt a *surface-level processing approach* to academic tasks, which is characterised by a lack of reflection and a focus on memorising and reproducing (Marton and Saljo, 1976; Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1993; Entwistle *et al*, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

A number of contributory factors have been suggested to explain this surface orientation in learners' study habits, some of which have been outlined above. These include: learners' perceptions of the learning process (Saljo, 1982); the overloading of the curriculum (Ramsden, 1988); the inappropriate nature of some forms of assessment (Ramsden, 1992); the students' understanding of the learning situation (Laurillard, 1997); characteristic pre-dispositions or traits in the learner (Meyer, 1998) and teachers' perceptions of the teaching and learning process (Franz *et al*, 1996; Halliday and Soden, 1998). Though these offer some explanation as to the rationale behind why students' apparently favour a surface level approach to learning rather than a deep level processing approach, they fail to question the educational process within which the student is engaged. They also fail to take into account the life narrative, learning career and socio-cultural context of the learner, and do not attempt to discover the ways in which qualitative changes in thinking, and approaches to learning, may occur over time.

It is important to reaffirm that the categories used to describe the *learning strategies* adopted by students, like the *styles of thinking* identified in the theory of mental self-governance, were never intended to be employed as permanent or static descriptors of the students themselves. As Entwistle (1981) noted, the student's relationship with learning is

a dynamic one, directly affected by the task and the context of learning. Therefore it would be unhelpful to categorise a student as, for example, “a surface learner”, as on occasion that student may employ different approaches to learning. I feel that it is necessary to make this point explicit as in general usage I have noted a tendency for some of those involved in teaching within higher education to categorise students in this way. However, this does not negate the research findings which suggest a strong propensity amongst students to adopt a rather superficial, *surface* approach to study.

The concepts of learning measured by the inventories outlined above should be considered as only part of a complex system. Intellectual ability, personality, family background, prior experiences, subject areas, teaching methods, course structure and assessment practices all effect the student’s perception of the learning environment and influence the ways in which students engage in learning. The interaction of these multiple, complex and dynamic factors contribute to determine the student’s academic performance, the extent and complexity of their understanding of the course material and their satisfaction in the experience of learning.

On its own, the study of approaches to learning cannot explain the multidimensional influences and processes involved in learning. Sternberg’s (1997) theory of *thinking and learning styles* acknowledges the importance of the dynamic social and experiential factors which influence individual’s preferences for particular *styles of thinking* in different contexts and draws on the concept of behavioural modelling to explain such social influences on thinking.

The difficulty with the theorisation of learning contained in the *approaches to study* and *styles of thinking* research stems from two fundamental problems, one linguistic the other conceptual. The linguistic difficulty lies with the use of the terms *cognitive style* and *learning style* which are used interchangeably by some authors but which are regarded by others to be distinct from each other in meaning (Haggis, 1996). Riding and Cheema (1991) note three different uses of the term 'cognitive styles', identifying authors describing a stable feature of learning, a process which is dynamic and a structure and a process which is relatively stable. In contrast with the term 'learning style' Riding and Cheema (1991) "find cognitive style to be a relatively fixed characteristic, while strategy can 'vary, be learned and developed'." (Haggis, 1996). The term learning style has been understood in a variety of ways, Dixon (1986) describes it as a 'preferred way of grasping and transforming information' (in Mitchell, 1994), a 'behavioural disposition' and an 'intellectual personality trait' (Baron, 1986 in Mitchell, 1994). He notes that in Europe learning styles are regarded as more consistent or contextual than in North America where learning styles are seen as strategies which are easy to alter (Sternberg, 1997).

The conceptual difficulty with the implicit model of learning contained in work on *learning approaches and styles of thinking* lies in the fact that this research moves towards a position which attempts to see students' study patterns as fitting into discrete groups as a result of the need to categorise behaviour rather than to see the spectrum of learning approaches as one aspect of a wider process of learning. The reason why researchers feel the need to categorise is perhaps obvious. Category descriptors delineate groups of

learning behaviours and set them in opposition to other identifiable groups of learning behaviour, allowing contrasts and comparisons to be made about the style and efficacy of each identified *approach to study* or *style of thinking*. However, this approach to understanding learning does not reveal the complexity of the learning process beyond the opposites of *surface* and *deep* learning or *executive* and *legislative*. Though both Entwistle and Sternberg recognise that learners may adopt different approaches to different learning tasks there is little recognition that learners may adopt multiple approaches or styles in tackling a single piece of work.

Learners are far more likely to be 'both', than 'either/or', being 'holist' when they need to get an overview, but 'serialist' when they need to construct a detailed argument, using 'diverging' types of thought for brainstorming ideas but 'converging' thought when analysing detail. And who is to say that they cannot be simultaneously both, noticing interesting detail within a holistic view, or being cautiously aware whilst taking a risk?

(Haggis, 1996, p.79)

The categorisation of learning into *surface, deep and achievement (strategic)* also contains judgements as to the validity of each approach to learning. As has been previously stated, universities claim to promote *deep level processing*. The definition of which appears to be closest to an idealised view of learning held by many academics. However, Arskey's (1992) research has revealed that students attaining a first class degree qualification often do not follow this approach to study. Instead the narratives of the students' interviewed imply that using a mixture of surface and deep approaches to study which are tailored to

the task and course requirements, may be a more productive approach to learning than adopting a *deep* or *holist* approach and rejecting a *serialist* or *surface* approach to study.

In contrast with the implicit hierarchy contained in the descriptors *surface* and *deep*, Sternberg (1997) states that, his theory of styles of thinking is a non-hierarchical concept, which should not be confused with abilities. Each *style of thinking* may prove advantageous or disadvantageous depending upon the demands of the task in hand. In addition, several other ideas concepts can be drawn from Sternberg's work on *thinking styles* which are important in the process of re-conceptualising learning in higher education undertaken in this thesis. The theory of *mental self-governance* he has developed reflects notions concerning the fluidity and temporality of the learning and thinking processes. It also reflects an awareness of the range of styles of thinking available to an individual in their response to different tasks, challenges and situations and perhaps most helpfully, also acknowledges the significance of the process of socialization in developing the models employed by individuals in their styles of learning. Though coming from a research perspective located in cognitive psychology and concerned with the psychological testing and rating of variables, many of the factors he has identified are useful in developing a more fluid and qualitatively driven understanding of the learning process.

Section 4: The Developmental Approach: A Research Perspective

Other work in the area of learning in higher education has attempted to offer explanations for students' approaches to learning which link study habits with the developmental and maturation process (Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970; Waterman and Waterman, 1971; Chickering, 1975). These studies adopt a developmental approach to understanding the nature of students' changing conceptualisations of knowledge and of themselves as learners. Perry's (1970) model has received most attention within this field as researchers continue to draw upon the categorisations and the developmental stages which he put forward nearly thirty years ago (Katung, Johnstone and Downie, 1999).

However, Perry's research contains certain crucial limiting factors, as was pointed out by Belenky *et al* (1986). Few women were involved in the initial sample of students, which provided the data from which Perry devised his schema of intellectual and ethical development. Though Perry later included women in his investigation he used this pre-devised format against which to assess their responses. Unsurprisingly he found that their patterns of development conformed to those observed in the original, predominantly male sample as in a similar way to those who search for surface, deep and strategic approaches to study, he found what he was looking for. In addition he interviewed a relatively homogenous group of students, similar in socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and all of who were attending an 'ivy league' university with the educational expectations and cultural milieu which are part of such an institution.

Perry proposed that all students passed through an invariant series of nine 'positions' during the course of their university career. Progressing from an initial position of *basic dualism*, where the student deals only in the polarities of right and wrong and where learning is dependent on the dissemination of knowledge from 'authorities', through an intermediate stage where the student becomes aware of *multiplicity*. In this stage the student's faith in the polarities is shaken and succeeded by a position of *relativism subordinate* where the student develops the skills needed in the study of an academic discipline, and adopts a more analytical and evaluative approach to learning. Ultimately the student may move towards the position of *full relativism* where the student perceives all 'truth' as relative and dependent upon context. At this stage the student understands that knowledge is constructed rather than given; context dependent not unconditional and multiple rather than unitary. Perry believes that it is within this framework of relativism that the student's personal identity and self-responsibility evolve.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) attempted to assess the validity and relevance of Perry's 'stages' of moral and ethical development for women involved in various forms of education. Unlike Perry's sample the 135 women interviewed in this study varied in age, prior educational experiences, socio-cultural background and were not all drawn from university departments. However, a number of the women included in the sample fitted quite closely with Perry's original sample in that they were of a similar age, educational background and were attending university. Therefore, it is probably of most relevance to concentrate on this section of Belnkey *et al*'s data.

Belenky *et al* (1986) found that the developmental positions identified in Perry's research were at odds with the experiences of the women they talked to. As a result a re-conceptualised understanding of the process of learning was developed, which took a more embodied approach to the understanding of the educational processes in which the women were engaged. Interview data was gathered about the backgrounds, experiences, thoughts on and perceptions of the educational contexts, of the women involved in the study. This information supported the 'embodied' conceptualisation of "Women's Ways of Knowing" put forward by Belenky *et al* (1986) which viewed the process of learning as integral to women's experiences of living. Belenky *et al* found that the ways in which the women in their sample understood themselves in relation to learning impacted upon the ways in which they engaged in relationships and saw themselves in different roles such as that of becoming a mother. In this role the women took on the position of teacher and possessor of knowledge both in relation to knowing what was in the child's welfare and as a sharer and shaper of another individual's formative learning experiences. For the women interviewed by Belenky *et al* (1986) motherhood was a turning point for many, as it placed them in the position of authority. A role which they were previously unused to. However, none of the interviewees in my own sample in this research, had yet experienced parenthood. The change in role, which they were undergoing at the point of being interviewed, was more related to a change in their position as a learner in relation to past and present educational contexts and their emergent understandings of their new role as a 'student' which resulted.

Drawing on the work of Gilligan (1982), Belenky *et al* (1986) argue that unlike men who define themselves through difference, women find their identity within their relationships and interactions with others. They argue that this typically fosters a morality of care and responsibility and a sense that

What individuals need cannot be worked out from universal rules and principles. Rather, in any situation of conflict, moral choices are to be worked out from the particular needs and experiences of each participant... through dialogue, which allows each individual to be understood, and leads to understanding and consensus

(Jarvis, Holford and Griffin,1998).

This conceptualisation attempted to illustrate differences in the construction of identity along gender lines and could be interpreted as women's identity construction being orientated towards patterns of convergent rather than divergent thinking. However, ultimately the idea that self identity is discovered through the search for morality which Gilligan (1982), describes, bears a close correlation with Taylor's (1989) notion of 'the search for self', as being an attempt to define human good and move towards a position of goodness. A concept, which bridges the gender divide.

It has been argued that the findings identified by Perry's study (1970) has enabled researchers to interpret the ways in which individuals respond to learning situations, and made it possible to,

represent ways in which students view themselves and their learning, how they make meaning of their world, and how they interpret and make sense

of the classroom environment, how they view knowledge and the process of learning and how they understand the roles of the teacher in this process.

(Katung *et al*, 1999, p.45)

However, the idea that students progress from position to position suggests a particular, cumulative view of identity formation. Though Perry acknowledges that the stages he identifies are not directly age related and that some students may never achieve the final position in his developmental schema, his view of intellectual maturation and learning suggests the possibility that identity may at some point be 'finished'. Bauman's (1993) theorisation of identity fits more cogently with my own understanding of identity formation. He argues that the search for identity "...has no visible end [and] is not a cumulative process... [identity formation] ...entails disassembling previous views of the self along with the assembling [or adoption of new elements in our understanding of our self identity]" (p.194). The perspective I adopt in relation to the theorisation of self understanding belongs to this tradition. As a result I view identity not as cumulative, but rather as selective and reflective.

Despite the limitations of this developmental understanding of the process of intellectual and ethical maturation, it may hardly be logically disputed that learning is a process of change, even if the linear nature of that change and the concept of progression implicit in Perry's (1970) research is brought into question. The act of learning is a dynamic part of both the internal and external world of the learner. It is a process which may not always be comfortable as deeply entrenched epistemological frameworks are questioned and new

ways of being and perceiving are constructed, a factor brought out in Perry's research as he notes the struggle students under go in the transition from phase to phase.

However, learning and identity are part of the same shifting understanding of life and experience. In the same way as life's narrative can be reinterpreted and transformed so can an individual's understanding of the nature of learning and information learned. The formation of an individual's intellect or identity is never uniform, continually progressive nor linear. For this reason I have chosen not to follow a linear developmental approach to understanding students' learning, but instead to re-theorise the place of students' learning in the process of higher education and identity formation, investigating students' understanding of the nature of learning and its part in identity transformation. By encouraging students to reflect on their conceptualisations of their role in and experiences of learning as process at different points in their first year of university study I have been able to develop a notion of *learning identity* in which knowledge is revisited and reprocessed in relation to changing contexts and experiences and the exposure to different 'others'.

Research studying the nature of students' evolving understanding of themselves as learners introduces an interesting set of theories to the current study. Though often focusing on a psychological model for the interpretation of student learning, research in this area offers a non-linear model of development which, unlike Perry's stage regulated understanding of maturation allows a more fluid explanation more sensitive to educational context and gender. The development of beliefs about learning during mid- to late- adolescence has

received attention from educationalists over recent years. Attempts have been made to understand adolescents changing understanding of self-regulatory control and the ways in which these changes mediate the ways in which adolescents approach and regulate their learning (Cantwell, 1998). The understanding that self-regulation is a fundamental attribute of effective learning underpins the recent work of Pintrich and de Groot, 1990; Bandura 1993; Winne, 1995 and Zimmerman, 1995. Their work suggests that effective learners demonstrate high levels of meta-cognitive awareness in the way 'the planning and monitoring of processing behaviours are both conceptualised and enacted' (Cantwell, 1998, p.27).

What develops in the adolescent period, then, is not only an accretion process where children's strategic repertoire increases, but also a synthesis process where related understandings of these strategies become increasingly more sophisticated (Biggs and Collis, 1982; Snow, 1989; Case, 1993). One may reasonably expect, then, to find evidence of an increasingly crystallised understanding of the nature of learning and of control over learning throughout adolescence

(Cantwell, 1998, p.29)

The current research is interested in this process of crystallisation and the impact of the higher education institution upon the learning process during the final phase of adolescence and early adulthood. Belenky *et al* (1986) found that when describing their intellectual and ethical development the women interviewed used a characteristic language formed from shared metaphors of speaking and listening:

In describing their lives women commonly talked about voice and silence: 'speaking up', 'speaking out', 'being silenced', 'not being heard', 'really listening', 'really talking', 'words as weapons', 'feeling deaf and dumb' 'having no words', "saying what you mean', 'listening to be heard' and so on, in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with a sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others. We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined.

(Belenky *et al*, 1986, p.18)

The use of language metaphors in the respondents' descriptions of their learning experiences reinforces my notion of the centrality of language to identity formation and educational experience. However, though offering an incisive and illuminating understanding of the ways in which women learn, this study (Belenky *et al*, 1986) was flawed in the same way as Perry's earlier work (1970) on moral and ethical development had been. By selecting to interview an 'all female' sample it is difficult to know whether male and female experiences and descriptions of learning really differed. Though the researchers contrast their findings with Perry's work, the methodology adopted in terms of the style of interviewing and the make up of the sample are sufficiently different to render a direct comparison of results unhelpful.

In more recent studies tackling the issue of gender in higher education the nature of academic work and the university curriculum have been problematised (Bagilhole and Goode, 1998; de Groot, 1997; Weiner, 1994). These studies suggest that members of the academe are "...gender-blind, biased and masculinist" (de Groot, 1997). In this culture of deeply entrenched, implicit assumptions about the nature of knowledge these researchers suggest that women are disadvantaged. The main premise of their argument is that all *knowledge* accepted within the university system is *constructed* and *legitimated* by middle class white males. Accordingly, any students who do not belong within this category are at an inherent disadvantage within a system constructed by and catering to this dominant group within western society. Bagilhole and Goode (1998) argue that "...male academics have defined not only what is taught in universities, but also how it is taught, in a way which marginalises women" (p.446).

Other researchers in this field support this theorisation of the university as a place which both undervalues and alienates women. Evans (1995) suggests that fundamental differences exist between the ways in which women 'know' and learn and the ways in which men do. She suggests that universities as institutions are geared towards the male mode of learning which emphasises the need for a "...rigorous separation between "thought" and "feeling" [and which stresses] the importance of maintaining distinctions between the subjective and the objective" (p.76). The distinction made by Evans between male and female ways of knowing strongly reflect the theory of learning put forward by Belenky *et al* (1986). However, little empirical evidence has been gathered to substantiate the gender differences in ways of learning suggested.

Other work in the area of 'gendered' experiences of higher education, suggest an alternative view of the reality of academic life at university, for women. Traditional gender specific subject choices have resulted in some courses in the arts/humanities (perhaps most notably English) becoming *feminised*. It has been argued by Gough and Peace (2000) that as a result the teaching and assessment practices adopted by these departments in universities are geared towards women, leaving male students at a disadvantage academically.

The impact of class and culture on students' perceptions of and achievement within the higher education system has also been an area of intense investigation. This has particularly been the case in recent years when government policies and universities' financial needs have encouraged a drive towards equality of access. Though the concept of widening the spectrum of university entrants has been put forward since the Robbins Report (1963). Some researchers argue that there has been an over emphasis upon

Equality of participation ..., not so much in terms of the quality of educational experience available to students, but rather in terms of movement up to a given stage in the educational or social ladder...Data documenting high drop-out rates, poor academic performance or poor employment opportunities show the limits of weaker notions of equality, in particular conceptions of equality which focus on equal access

(Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p.449)

However, in a study such as this, which is interested in students' identity formation, questions of class, culture and social barriers must be raised. Though the populist discourse of recent governments from John Major to Tony Blair may assert that Britain is a classless society, people's daily reality exists in direct opposition to this Utopian ideal. The experience for many, in the daily interactions in which they are engaged and the opportunities open to them conflict with the political rhetoric. In a society which is constantly transforming and an economy which has seen the decline of traditional industries and the growth of service and blue-chip companies traditional ideas about the nature of the class system must be re-visited and re-interpreted and questions must be asked about the roles of structure and agency in late-modern society (Giddens, 1991).

Class differences in education are not the result of some preconceived preferences, they are the by-product of an ongoing set of negotiations between agents and structures (the result of)... the dialectical interface between intentions and institutional practices in every day life

(Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p.447).

Class roles are changing as are the type of young people entering the higher education system, but universities, particularly those established prior to 1992, retain a traditional middle class culture (Scott, 1995). Though debates rage over the nature of the university's role in a global knowledge economy an implicit culture of middle class values exemplified by the concept that 'more education is good' regardless of its nature, pervades institutions

of higher education. Students entering this climate of thought may experience conflict and resistance as they examine their own values and realities and test them in a new and possibly alien context.

Section 5: Towards Holism: A Research perspective

In May 2000 the *Journal of Institutional Research* published an entire addition devoted to research into transition. It focused primarily on the transition from school to tertiary education, pulling together contributions from international researchers all of who are concerned with the successful movement of students from secondary to higher education. As a researcher in Britain, the publication of this journal was, for me, a moment of connection with the international research community studying in this field.

As I read about issues of, student isolation (Peel, 2000); the impact of learning communities on student success in higher education (Tinto, 2000); the role of oral communication in the undergraduate curricula (Crosling, 2000) and the significance of social transition in students' adjustments to the first year of university (Kantanis, 2000), I was able to identify connections between my own interests and ideas and those explored and developed by international colleagues.

In November 1997 when I began this PhD, research into such issues in a British context were only just receiving renewed attention in the wake of the publication of The Dearing Report and in the announcement of The HEFCE inquiry into student non-completion.

Until that time research into the experience of the transition to university in the U.K. had been confined to the revisiting of data collected in the 70s (Entwistle, 1997) and more localised reports such as the one conducted by Wall *et al* (1991) in Scotland for the Scottish Office.

It is only latterly that problems encountered by students during the transition to university and their first year of study have been recognised as a source of distress to both the individual and their family. In other countries where more research has been undertaken into the transition experience of students there is also a higher proportion of students who drop out and fail to complete. This attrition or student wastage presents a social and economic cost (Pargetter, 1995) which these countries cannot afford to leave unexamined. The relatively low proportion of U.K. students failing to complete a degree programme may in some way explain the relatively low levels of research activity into this topic until relatively recently. Much of the research into transition to tertiary education has taken place in Australia and in the United States where aspects of transition have been explored with particular emphasis on issues of attrition and performance (see review by Evans, 2000).

In his examination of the transition to university, from a school perspective Pargetter (2000) identifies a number of reasons why some students experience “an unhappy first year”.

- They cannot relate to the course or institution and drop out or fail and leave (about 15%)
- They do not have a successful first year of study passing in at least 75% of their units (about 30-40%)
- They do not have a level of performance comparable to their level of performance at school (70-80%)
- They succeed academically, but are personally unhappy

(Pargetter, 2000, p.14)

The figures quoted by Pargetter refer to the Australian higher education system. However, the HEFCE study (1997) identified similar difficulties being experienced by students in institutions of higher education in England.

1. Wrong choice of programme
2. Unhappiness with the environment of the institution
3. Dissatisfaction with aspects of the institutional provision
4. Inability to cope with the demands of the programme
5. Poor quality of the student experience
6. Financial and interpersonal problem
7. Lack of peer support

(reported in Yorke, 2000, p.37)

The underlying assumptions contained in this British research still focuses on a student deficit model of understanding students' negative experiences and withdrawal. Whilst

making the concession that "...the world is 'untider' than planners sometimes admit, and systems have to accommodate human foibles and fallibilities" (Yorke, 2000, p.35). Yorke describes school leavers as "...in need of a 'reality check'" and mature students as needing to "... 'get up to speed' quickly" as they may be "...rusty as regards studying...and may be uncomfortable amongst younger students" (Yorke, 2000, p. 37).

Conversely, Pargetter's study (2000) along with many other Australian researchers has moved away from this student deficit model in the conceptualisation of the transition to tertiary education. Though Kantanis (2000) notes that work done by Mc Innes in the early 1990s revealed that Australian academics also repeatedly expressed,

Dissatisfaction with the academic quality of students... Indeed less than a third of academics in 1993 were satisfied with the academic quality of students

(McInnes, cited in Kantanis, 2000, p.100)

She goes on to point out that in today's system of mass higher education, this line of argument is not a productive one to follow. Shifts in the student intake have created a student body whose interests, abilities, backgrounds and expectations are more diverse than those of previous student populations. Consequently a re-conceptualisation of first-year students and "...the qualities they bring to the university" (Kantanis, 2000, p.101) is necessary, as is "...a reconstructed understanding of the needs students have which the university should meet" (Kantanis, 2000, p.101).

However, it should be noted that this conceptual shift does not mean that transition is regarded as a process, which should be made cognitively easy or comfortable for new students. The process of becoming a student at university is acknowledged as being a time to challenge previous epistemological frameworks and to challenge notions of knowledge, studenthood and role. By re-focusing on the different learning environments of the university and the creation of opportunities for interaction and connection within them, the findings of this and other studies have moved our collective understandings of students' experiences of transition forward. Below is a summary of the research findings, which have been identified as significant in the re-conceptualisation of student transition. These have been synthesised by Pargetter (2000) from work done by Pargetter *et al*, 1999, Clarke, 1994, Peel, 1993 and Tinto, 1993.

- i) personal, social and community issues relating to young adults sorting out their personal lives, relationships with parents, living, studying and travel arrangements, and coping with social pressures and problems
- ii) lack of information about the nature of university life and university study, lack of preparation for the university experience and for self-management, a failure to come to grips with a new institution
- iii) mismatch between student and course, or between student interest and ability with choice of subject
- iv) loss of support network which was so important in year 12 consisting of school, friends and parents

- v) an inability to adjust to the learning requirements at university compared with those typically required in Year 12 at school

(Pargetter, 2000, p.15)

In addition to explorations of students' academic transitions to university, work on the role of social transition has also been carried out. Kantanis (2000) refocuses attention away from traditional academic measures of successful transition to explore students' experiences of the social adjustment to university. According to her findings,

The first year experience of a significant number of students is neither satisfying (in terms of personal fulfilment) nor successful (if academic achievement is the measure).

(Kantanis, 2000, p.100)

Kantanis' research (2000), highlighted the importance of the development of friendship networks underpinning successful academic transition. Large cohorts and few contact hours meant that for some students the experience of becoming a student was an isolating one. The lack of social networks of support was found to lead to undermined self-confidence and the inhibiting of social development and communicative competence. It was also found to preclude the discussion of underlying academic concepts, preventing students from acting as 'critical friends' and providing mutual feedback on academic work. This reduced levels of persistence because of a lack of group identification and precluded the expression of fears and the revision of expectations, reinforcing negative feelings towards the institution, others and self (Kantanis, 2000).

Kantanis argues that some of the difficulties experienced by first year students, which she identifies could be overcome to a greater or lesser extent were students to be, provided with time, quality teaching and learning contexts [and] the opportunities to form social networks

(Kantanis, 2000, p.109)

She ends her article with a reminder that the process of the transition to university should be viewed in a holistic manner, being continuously aware that in addressing issues of transition we are dealing with people's lives. This important warning remains central to my own work on transition and has informed the re-conceptualisation of learning identity explored in this thesis.

Chapter Two

Conceptualising Learning Identities

The conceptualisation of student learning, which I use throughout this thesis regards learning as a composite element in the students' identity formation and an integral part of their life experience. It locates the learner within the education process and problematises that process. I chose the phrase *learning identities* deliberately in the hope that it would evoke the idea that students are learning about their identities and that they are also in the process of constructing their identities as learners.

Section 1: Identity as Narrative

The notion of 'self' discussed in this research considers the formation of identity to be an on-going and dynamic process engaged in by the individual in the context of social interactions. A person's perception of self changes over time as a result of direct experiences, reflection and the evaluations of people close to them. Each individual experiences their world through their "...own particular frame of consciousness. We are conscious not only of the world about us but also of a world within of inner thoughts"

(Stevens, 1996, p.18). This understanding of self-identity has a long heritage in western philosophy. (Taylor, 1989). However, even after centuries of thought, notions of the self are still both complicated and problematic. One of the most puzzling questions surrounding the theorisation of identity is the problem of understanding and explaining the 'self' temporally. Locke, (1689) recognised the fragility of the concept of the continuity of self over time.

[Human] consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our lives wherein we have the whole train of our past actions before our eyes..., and we losing sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing i.e. the same substance or no.

(Locke, p.218)

The on-going nature of self - construction means that identity formation should not be regarded as a cumulative process, but rather as selective and reflective. Giddens (1991), deals with the problem of creating identity in an interesting and enlightening way, by regarding identity as a narrative, told to ourselves about our life and experiences, a "life story". This story does not have to remain the same, though it deals with the events in the life of a single person. Rather it may be strongly influenced by the storyteller's past and current circumstances. Self-identity is thus seen as a narrative, which is being continuously revised and can be both the 'teller' and the 'listener' in the story-telling process. The reflexive manner in which people evaluate past, present and future identity, allows for radical reinterpretations of life histories, depending on the criteria employed to select the memories from which the life story is constructed. Identity is represented to

others through the telling of the "...ready-made narratives that individuals select, structure and relate at appropriate moments" (Kehily, 1995, p.24).

The work of Mead and Vygotsky reflects this dynamic notion of socialisation and identity formation. Both were interested in the question of how people actively produce their social worlds through interaction with others. Language has long been acknowledged as one of the most influential agents of socialisation and has proved to be fundamental in the exploration of child development. Language remains a key concept in understanding adult socialisation as individuals use language as well as non-verbal communication in order to interact with others, represent and explore personal experiences and as a constituent cognitive process in inner thought. 'Language as both a publicly shared and privately utilized symbol system is the site where the individual and the social make and re-make each other' (Miller and Hoogstra, 1992, p.83).

The story-telling practices essential to the construction and articulation of identity have raised questions as to the genre in which they may best be understood. Traditionally such life stories have been regarded as belonging to the literary tradition of [auto]biography, whether written or spoken in their original form. Western society's literate culture has thus imposed the rules of written storytelling upon a mode of understanding identity formation, which is based in oral culture. "Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into the visual field forever" (Ong, 1982, p.12). The stories we tell about ourselves are often the spontaneous result of conversation and exchange of information with others. The way in which the story is told and the 'story' which is chosen

is highly dependent upon the context and purpose of telling. For this reason the oral properties of language are important in the creation of the narrative. Speech offers the opportunity to express thoughts as they are recalled in a way, which writing the same stories down, precludes as the written word is often bounded by conventions. The transient nature of talk allows more latitude to the teller as the words are spoken and gone, retained only as a memory by those present at the time of telling. This ephemeral property of spoken language allows for the dynamic reconstruction of life narrative as described by Giddens (1991). The spoken story is not the same in perpetuity but may be recast to fulfil the linguistic demands of the setting in which it is told. Of course identity construction can take place in the written narrative as well as in the oral.

Autobiography presents a particular representation of the self, and unlike biography, which tends to concentrate upon significant dates and events in an individual's life, autobiography more often focuses on telling the embodied story of a life. Events are linked together by more than chronological positioning and stories are spun to reinforce certain aspects of the self, which may differ from those regarded to be of importance by the biographer. In autobiography individuals confront their temporal existence, the main character always the same and yet continuously transforming and changing from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. A stage traditionally regarded as a period of inner stability but which is increasingly recognised as being subject to shifts and developments as earlier ages.

Erikson suggests that, “The sense of ego identity is ...the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others (1950, p.261). Autobiography ensures this continuity as the written word remains unchanging and the interpretations of self, encoded in the text are unalterable though open to multiple readings. Continuity of self representation in an oral sphere is less easily attained, though prior actions are re-‘written’ and re-told in order to present a stability of action across contexts, even if this self imposed continuity is largely illusory.

Section 2: Transitions through the life-course

On most occasions when the sense of self is challenged, the individual is able to overcome the threat and retain their sense of a continuous identity. However, during periods of transition a person’s sense of self may be more susceptible to reinterpretation. In response to a changed environment the individual may go through a period of self re-appraisal. As self-identity is formed and sustained only through the selection of memories and the linking of interpreted events in the individual’s life, it is possible that in times of uncertainty or anxiety people’s recollections of the past may change, altering their sense of self in response to these transformed memories. As Billington *et al* describe,

Accounts, the stories, scripts or narratives we tell or are told about ourselves, play an important role in linking the changes our bodies might undergo and the transitions that lead us into new social identities

(Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.62).

These stories provide a means of bridging the physical and temporal gap between past, present and future selves. As such the casting and recasting of remembered experiences has the ability to transform individuals' theorisations of selfhood.

In a society where the concept of the life-cycle has become increasingly ill equipped to describe people's life experiences (Coupland *et al*, 1993), fixed points of socially recognised times of change have largely disappeared. The age at which people marry, have children, decide on a career and make other important and life changing decisions, have become questions of lifestyle choices rather than social imperatives.

...[W]e do not move through a series of fixed points that are external tolls: a rigid, pre-ordered series of positions laid in place for us by society ...our movement is always in relation to others, who themselves are also in transition.

(Harris, 1987, p.20 in Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.64).

Our passage through the life-course, our 'trajectory', as Harris calls it, can be re-conceptualised as movements over time between positions in social space.

However, for a growing number of adolescents the experience of going to college or university could be regarded as a new point of commonality, a shared and culturally expected point in the life trajectory. Poole (1983) notes that within western society,

The cultural expectation, and indeed that embedded in life-stage orientation theory, is that the transition from school will lead to work or

post-compulsory education. Such a major transition in many ways marks a perceived age – stage shift from adolescence to adulthood (p29).

A change which brings with it a need for the re-evaluation of self in relation to learning as well as the imperative to establish an identity within a new and unfamiliar ‘adult’ context.

Describing the process of transition, Van Gennep (1960) considers the idea of *rites of passage*, and identifies three stages passed through by the individual during periods of change. These are, separation, liminality (threshold) and reintegration. Van Gennep suggests that a person is distanced from their former sense of self and their role within the community (separation) and enters a time of uncertainty and change where their role within the community is ambiguous (liminality) before finally being re-established within the community in a new role (reintegration). According to Billington *et al* (1998)

Passage through the liminal period involves exposure to danger in that customary rules are upturned. However, that which is dangerous is also that which is powerful, and it is the intensity of the experience, often involving ordeals of pain or humiliation, which ensures that a change has taken place

(Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.68).

The notion of liminality has been used to describe student life. Researchers such as Chatterton (1999) have applied the concept of liminality to the social experience of being a student. Working in the field of city geographies, Chatterton explores the privileged

sites of social consumption inhabited by traditional students and draws on the ideas put forward by Hetherington (1996) and Shields (1992) to make the case for the liminality of the experiences of studenthood, focusing on the existence of "...a student-focused popular culture infrastructure in the city" (Chatterton, 1999, p,117) .

In moving between different social statuses, individuals are, briefly, ambiguous in terms of their social identity. For example, a young person entering adulthood is neither a child nor a man or woman

(Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.67).

Prior studies dealing with the notion of transition have addressed questions surrounding the individual's ability to deal with the ambiguity of the liminal experience. Such studies address the concepts of 'coping processes' and 'control activities'. Which according to Duckworth,

...can range from the management of his own affective response to the novel situation, through to the modification of the situation in the direction of his personal preferences. Understanding coping processes, therefore, and the way in which they can be made more effective, is an important prerequisite for an adequate theory of transitions

(Duckworth in Adams *et al* 1976).

The report *Up to Expectations*, (Simmons and Parlett, 1988) explores the findings of research conducted into the experiences of first year students during the initial weeks at

university. Simmons and Parlett suggest that this time “...constitute[s] a period of very rapid adaptation and personal change, and [is] a time for setting patterns that are likely to be of long standing” (p.3). They go on to describe the disorientation felt by many students in their sample, arising from a combination of factors identified such as, inflated or inaccurate expectations of student life, being ill-prepared or badly suited to their degree subject and moving away from

...a secure and familiar school environment to a less structured setting – one in which the institutional norms, the student sub-culture, and the acceptable patterns of behaviour are all relatively undefined (p.3).

Simmons and Parlett (1988) suggest that some of these feelings of disorientation may be attributable to ill informed choices about higher education degree courses and institutions, arguing that “Many are caught up on what was described as a “*mindless escalator*” from secondary school: they apply for subjects in which they expect good A’Level results” (p.4).

During the period of the transition to university students must cope with domestic, administrative and intellectual change and come to terms with the fact that they now have primary responsibility for both themselves and their academic progress. University

...presents a much more ‘impersonal’ façade [than school]. One student’s first impression was of “*a lot of grey buildings and rain*”, another’s that “*you are one of a huge mass*” ...The message newcomers are confronted

with is that 'higher education is different and you are expected to be different too'

(Simmons and Parlett, 1988, p.4).

However, there are few rules to guide new students on how to become students and the role of the student within society and institution must be picked up informally. This can lead to feelings of unease and anxiety, "*I lost my identity totally for several weeks*" was the rather dramatic way in which one first year put it" (Simmons and Parlett, 1988, p.4). However, for many students the challenge of adapting to the new environment can be exciting and may offer opportunities for self- reinvention.

The transition process may be more disorientating for first-generation students facing the cultural challenges presented to them within the unfamiliar higher education system.

According to London (1992)

... every student making such a transition whom I have interviewed during the past several years has reported having to renegotiate relations with family members, friends, and, in a fundamental sense, with themselves. These negotiations are not always accomplished easily or with a happy ending, for such passages inevitably call into question the very meaning of allegiance and love, over which people can intensely disagree. Thus upward mobility can produce feelings of loss, conflict and disloyalty – as well as of discovery, reconciliation, and joy (Stierlin, 1974).

(London, 1992, p.6)

Drawing on the ideas put forward by Weber (1968) London explores the process of socialisation into the middle class, which such students experience. He argues that students must take on the “badges of status-group membership” which mark one out as a member of the student community. These include language (vocabulary and accent), social conventions and rituals, patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding outsiders, relations with outsiders, taste in clothes, food, music, sport and recreation. This can cause a conflict of identity as pre-established patterns of behaviour are questioned and modified in order to fit in with the pre-established cultural norms of student life. According to one student interviewed by London, she self-consciously tried to alter what she called her “harsh way of speaking and my ‘dems’ and ‘dose’” (p.9) another altered the way in which she dressed on campus. So for many new students the process of transition requires not only initiation into the language of academia but also into the unfamiliar language of middle-class studenthood. A position which has important implications for the transformation of these first-generation students’ identities whilst at university. Such identity transformations go beyond the use of language to include role-taking and modelling behaviours linked to the reappraisal of self in relation to others.

The transition from school or college to higher education “...requires the student to make a rapid adjustment in his way of life and his approach to learning and his first year at university is therefore critical (Hale and Tatersall, 1964)” (Kantung *et al*, 1999). In their report to the Scottish Office (1991), Wall *et al*, investigated some of the issues surrounding the transition from school to higher education in Scotland. They concluded that, “[t]here seems little doubt that the degree of autonomy and independence in studying can prove

difficult” particularly for students with Scottish qualifications (Wall, *et al* , 1991, p.15).

They go on to suggest that,

...students in their first year find difficulty in motivating themselves and are often unsure of what is required of them. Neither the schools nor the higher education institutions seemed to be providing systematic preparation for independent studying or for the different style of teaching in higher education, and this omission was considered to be creating unnecessary problems for students in their first year.

(Wall, *et all*, 1991, p.17)

The findings of this study act as an endorsement of Burchill’s earlier findings.

Burchill (1982) reporting on the transition for Scottish and non-Scottish students to higher education identified the following difficulties; motivating yourself, knowing what is expected of you, the rate at which work is covered, organising your social life, the size of classes, writing essays and taking useful notes in lectures. She goes on to contrast the teaching encountered in schools with that experienced in higher education, commenting that,

Students passing from a school...where non-academic pupils are in the majority and the teachers are often preoccupied with the socialising aspects of school may be at a particular disadvantage if they move to a tertiary institute with large classes where tutorials and written work are not

provided and where teaching staff expect students to adjust quickly if they have the potential to succeed.

(Burchill, 1982, p.63)

It thus appears that students experience a period of liminality in their academic as well as social lives during the process of the transition into studenthood. Academically as well as socially they must engage in the pre-constructed discourses of the student world both within and outside the frame of the university. Part of the process of “learning the rules of the student game” (Chatterton, 1999, p.121) is developing the vocabulary needed to engage in the academic as well as the social discourses of the institution. A process which can play an important transformative role in identity development and which represents the movement from a position of liminality to that of reintegration.

Section 3: Language, Thought and Making Meaning

Though non-linguistic processes play a fundamental role in human thought, language and thinking appear to be interconnected. Whorf (1956) argued that the formulation of ideas is not independent from language, in fact language determines the logic of thought. In other words, “...what is conceptual is inextricable from the pattern of linkage and connection we think of as being primarily linguistic” (Lee, 1997, p.440). Meanings and inferences are part of the cognitive system, which is developed through the physical, social and maturation process. The language we use alters the ways in which we think and perceive and impacts upon the process of constructing our identities. As a result the act of learning

the academic vocabulary needed for engagement in the discourses of degree disciplines may have an impact on the student's identity, as the ways in which they think are modified by the new linguistic demands made of them.

Language and the relationship between language and the teaching situation, has been identified as significant by Bourdieu and Passeron (1998), who argue that within French academia, language is, "Destined to dazzle rather than to enlighten, the academic livery of words fulfils the eminent function of keeping the pupil at a distance" (p.3). The perception of academic language as a barrier rather than an aid to understanding, though a less favourable view than that derived from the ideas of Whorf, contains more than a little truth.

Testing students on the words actually used in the lectures shows that it is the nature of university language and how it is applied which is most critical, but least cited, causes of the breakdown in the teaching relationship

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998).

Bourdieu and Passeron go on to argue that students disguise their misunderstanding of the language of the academic world accepting it as a natural part of what it is to be a student. "Obligatory resignation in approximate understanding is the precondition of their adaptation to this system, and at the same time its product" (pp.17-18).

As a result of this resignation to ambiguity, students become accomplices in the perpetuation of the cloistered and elitist tradition of academic discourse. Bourdieu and

Passeron (1998) suggest that within the education system it is the student's ability to understand and manipulate academic language which is being tested rather than intellectual ability and that the student's ability to decipher the complex linguistic codes of academic discourse is dependent upon,

...an apprenticeship in language which is unequally complex, according to family background...Everything tends to suggest that the further we ascend the social hierarchy, the greater the tendency to verbalise feelings, opinions and thoughts. The attitude to language cultivated in upper-class homes bears a close affinity to an education which demands a generalised 'verbalization' of experience

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998, p.21).

Thus the relationship between language, thought and making-meaning is highly culturally specific and without some form of mapping or modelling on the part of the teacher, many students may be unable to break the codes of the academic language of the discipline and engage with the ideas concealed behind the barrier of unfamiliar vocabulary.

Research studies investigating the student experience such as those conducted by Wall *et al* (1991) and Simon and Merriam (1988) have called for a demystification of higher education. A call echoed in other studies of adult education, such as that conducted by Merriam and Heuer (1996) which emphasises the importance of making the vocabulary of academia available to students in order to enable them to change their ways of thinking and perceiving, as Lee (1997) suggests is possible. Meaning making has been identified as an important aspect of adult learning and development (Merriam and Heuer, 1996). Drawing

on the ideas put forward by Meziro (1991) Merriam and Heuer suggest that “Making meaning is central to what learning is all about” (p.247) Meanings are made contextually, “The context is both a material and linguistic [in] location...” (Usher, 1993 p.170) and as Kegan (1994) suggests the development of more complex linguistic and cognitive structures will equip learners to see alternative perspectives and may according to Brookfield (1986) “...cause them to examine critically their values, ways of acting , and the assumptions by which they live” (p.23). All of which may have a transformative effect upon the student’s identity both within and beyond the classroom. This transformation and displacement of pre-existing epistemological frameworks, Daloz (1986) suggests may be achieved if teachers offer their students “...a ‘map’ of the new territory,...suggesting new language, new metaphors, new ways of thinking about the world, and so on” (Daloz, 1986, p.213) and as a result offer the student new ways of thinking and being which change the opportunities available to them when interpreting situations and making meaning in different contexts, thus transforming their identities.

In sum our need to make meaning is pervasive and fundamental...Personal meaning making has come to be recognised as a dynamic process that involves the self, reflection and experience

(Merriam and Heuer, 1996, p.255).

Section 4: The Constitutive Relationship between Language and Identity

The inter-relationship between language, thought and identity is a powerful one. However, language as a medium of self representation and self generation is an imprecise one which may be as restricting in the opportunities it offers for ways of being and thinking as it is liberating. Language may be seen in relation to identity in terms of light and prisms. An individual (a prism) may articulate emotions, reflections and events to themselves and thus construct an inner sense of identity through *reflexive* thought. Language is then used as a means to *reflect* the inner conceptualisation of the self to others, in order that they might understand the identity of the individual. However, the other person towards whom the light of identity is being *reflected*, can be visualised as another prism. As the words (light) hits the prism, instead of a *reflection* of the other person's perceptions of themselves being received, a *refraction* takes place. The language used to express the first person's sense of self is *refracted* by the interpreter, according to their own understanding of the language used and the messages sent by the other person.

I adopt this philosophical position in relation to the search for self-knowledge aware that I am bounded by the "inescapable frameworks" of western civilisation and the resultant notion of the inward quest for self - identity.

In our languages of self-understanding, the opposition 'inside-out' plays an important role. We think of our thoughts, ideas or feelings as being

“within” us, while the objects in the world, which these mental states bear out, are “without”

(Taylor, 1989, p.111).

Taylor argues that the modern inward seeking for self is the result of a historically limited understanding of self-interpretation which attempts to search for and to define human good. Within this frame of reference language plays a particularly significant role, ...identity is worked out only through a language of interpretation... To ask what a person is, in abstraction, is a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there could not possibly be an answer... But the self's interpretation can never be fully explicit

(Taylor, 1989, p.34).

Language both constructs and restricts the possibilities of being. As Bakhtin points out,

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accounts, is a difficult and complicated process

(Bakhtin 1934-35, p.294 in Marson and Emerson 1990).

Taylor's (1989) conceptualisation of the self melds identity with language in a complex interplay where language is simultaneously generative, limiting and interpretative. This dynamic view of language and identity is fundamental to my conceptualisation of *learning*

identity. I wish to re-locate learning within identity formation and to attempt to move towards an understanding of the interplay between self, language, learning and others.

... it is in the case of the self that language which can never be made fully explicit is part of, internal to or constitutive of the “object” studied. To study [selves, is to study] beings who only exist in or are partly constituted by, a certain language...A language only exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of the self. One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it”

(Taylor, 1989, p. 35)

An essential element in my approach to the re-conceptualisation of learning, is to treat the student as a whole person and to see learning as part of the internal and external dialogues of self-construction which generate self-knowledge and change they ways in which people think. “Language... lies at the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1934-35). In order for individuals to become their social selves they must *voice* their identities and participate in the generation of community. “The community and the individual therefore enter into a complex-interdependent relationship” (Coupland and Nussbaum, 1993, p.1). I would like to present this relationship in terms of perceiving communities as conversations drawing on the idea of the “...dialectical emphasis upon both the contingency and the creativity of human interaction - on our making of, and being made by, our social realities...” (Shotter, 1993, p.11).

Section 5: Community as Conversation

Adopting this image of 'community as conversation' I wish to explore the university as a context for communication and to begin to investigate the multiple language communities conversing within the frame of the institution. In addition I hope to locate the student's learning identity within these "webs of interlocution" (Taylor, 1989). If the university is to be understood in this way it is necessary to examine the manner in which individuals gain entry into these 'conversations' and to understand the impact of the behaviour of the interlocutors already involved in the dialogue, on the nascent identity of the in-comer.

In order to begin to understand the ways in which individuals become involved in an on-going dialectical process it is necessary to borrow from the vocabulary of the 'politics of personhood' and to appreciate the importance of "having a voice" (Shotter, 1993). Those already engaged in the dialogue must allow the newcomer to become involved in their established conversation. Shotter (1993) emphasises that "one must not first have to *prove* oneself 'qualified' before one can join the communal discourse" (p.9). Instead it is important that an individual feels able to contribute their opinion secure in the belief that it will be listened to and valued by those already involved in the dialogue.

To live under terms set out by others is always to feel not just different, but inadequate in relation to the others around one. That is, one must not feel one's own views inadequate in the sense of having to more fully

justify voicing them, than do those who already seem to possess a lifetime's unconditional membership of the community.

(Shotter, 1993, p.9)

This argument reveals the possible effects of the feelings of 'voicelessness' and disenfranchisement felt by a person, who does not see themselves as a valued member of a community. Belenky *et al*'s (1986) work on women students' experiences of education reinforces the importance of the idea of 'finding a voice' within the educational community and traces the struggle of many of the women in her sample to find a voice in the 'conversations' going on around them and yet not including them. The empirical findings of Belenky *et al*'s study link with the major tenet of the literature on the politics of recognition (Honneth, 1992). This literature draws on the ideas of Hegel and deals with the societal pressure surrounding identity realisation and the struggle for the mutual recognition of identity.

Chapter Three

The University as Discourse Communities

Section 1: Conceptualising the language communities of the university

So far I have suggested that language is central both to the formation of self identity and to the process of learning and that these two processes, are themselves inextricably intertwined. I have also put forward the suggestion that communities should be conceptualised as on-going, situated conversations (Coupland and Nussbaum, 1993); again emphasising the significance of language. Within the 'frame' (Goffman, 1974) of the university several language communities are in perpetual dialogue at the nexus of these 'conversations', I argue that students' learning identities are being formed.

In using the concept of 'frame' to describe the university, I like Goffman (1974) am referring to the situational meanings built up in accordance with the principles of organisation which govern social events and our subjective involvement in them. In order to begin to explore the ways in which students' learning identities may be transformed through their experiences of the higher education context it is necessary first to begin to

explore the frame of reference chosen to illuminate the formation of the learning identity, the 'conversation' or language community.

[Conversation]...requires some minimal consensus on what is getting done in the scene; from the least significant (strangers passing) to the culturally most well formulated (a wedding or a lecture), such a consensus represents an achievement, a cumulative product of the instructions people in the scene make available to each other; and because social scenes are always precarious, always dependent on ongoing instructions, the achievement of consensus requires collusion.

(Mac Dermott, 1987, p.123)

This claim is founded on two apparently contradictory observations on language behaviour. These are that language is always indefinite and based upon contextual understandings and interpretations and that language can be extremely exact, enabling interlocutors to share complex ideas and actions. "This marriage of indefiniteness and precision in utterance interpretation both requires and is made by conversationalists entering a state of collusion as to the nature of the world they are talking about, acting on and helping to create" (Mac Dermott, 1987, p.125).

The type of conversation necessary for community-building has been identified by a number of authors as being dialogic conversation (Taylor, 1999; Brookfield, 1996; Isaacs, 1996). Dialogic or critical conversation involves collective meaning-making which results

in a “collective commitment. It recognises the importance of multiple perspectives and opinions in ways that require the suspension of personal preferences and avoidance of judgements.” (Taylor, 1999, p.133). Dialogic conversation moves beyond task-orientated team discussions. In such conversations time spent on the clarification of the plans, ideas and purposes and accepted standards of the group prior to commencing work, is valued.

Isaac (1996) suggests that conversations resulting in meaningful and worthwhile dialogue may take place under the following conditions. Trust and safety issues must be resolved and interlocutors’ epistemological frameworks of beliefs and assumptions relating to the issue in hand must be brought out and challenged. “Its resolution requires their suspension, while failure leads to fragmentation, and a ‘discussion conversation’” (Taylor, 1999, p.134). If the suspension of beliefs and preferences can be achieved the interlocutors can collectively move towards the ‘generative thinking’ stage which completes the process, as those involved move beyond the initial thought brought to the discussion and begin to formulate new collective frames of understanding.

Communication through collusion and dialogic conversation are fundamental to the theorisation of the students’ experience of higher education suggested in this thesis. Within the framework of the university multiple micro and macro conversations are underway. The university, as an institution is involved in multi-level dialogues, which engage in the concerns of both those within and outside the institution. Those within higher education must converse with diverse and multiple interlocutors. Macro-institutional exchanges include: discussions with government over policy and resource issues; conversations with

employers over the question of “graduateness” and the place and form of transferable skills in degree courses; dialogues with parents and the wider public about the nature of higher education, now brought into question as a result of the introduction of tuition fees, the cutting of grants and the resultant parental investment which university attendance now involves; and conversations with unions about professional entitlements and provision.

Flexibility in structure and processes has been an essential prerequisite for universities responding effectively to opportunities for innovation, growth and indeed survival. Resourcefulness in generating private income has led to a substantial rethinking of most aspects of the university operation

(Schuller, 1995, p.39)

In addition to these debates over the purpose, nature and practicalities of higher education, is a growing discussion amongst members of the national and global academic community questioning the role of the university in an age of globalised learning and ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000). At a time when the authority of “knowledge” has been brought into doubt it no longer seems feasible to look for order constructed from consensus as academics dispute the existence of shared norms and values on which a sense of institutional role could be founded (Smith and Webster, eds., 1997). Instead conflict exists at the boundaries of institutional identity (Coffield, 1997). Higher Education is a ‘contested concept’ (Barnett, 1992) characterised by the ‘pluralism, contingency, ambivalence and consumerism’ which Halpin (1994) notes in society as a whole.

The debate surrounding the role of the university has intensified over the last decade as reforms made to the system of higher education have changed both its nature and appearance. The 1992 Education Act removed the structurally imposed binary division within the system and resulted in differentiation between institutions being pursued through mission and purpose rather than structure (Schuller, 1995). Bauman (in Smith and Webster, eds., 1997) argues that diversity within the system should be embraced and that institutions should be encouraged to specialise and rejoice in their differences, rather than attempting to conform to an out-dated theory of the role of the university based on a long expired consensus concerning the purpose of the university in society.

Increasing access to post compulsory education has transformed higher education from an elite to a mass system over a comparatively short period, leaving a tension amongst many of the more 'traditional members' of staff concerning the nature of educational provision they should be aiming for. Scott (1995) suggests that there remains a residual desire for intimacy in the teaching and learning process which it is difficult to fulfil given the time, resource and number constraints of the present system. In addition a cultural shift in the notion of post compulsory education has transformed society's view of higher education. University is now commonly viewed as part of a continuum of lifelong learning (Brookfield, 1995, in Schuller, 1995). As a result of the changes outlined above, the experience of education is radically different to that of a generation ago. "Universities are changing to address multiple purposes and, as a result are becoming fragmented" (Taylor, 1999, p.39).

Despite the difficulty of forging consensus in the diverse and political climate of the changing contours of the university, members of the academic community must “...develop different languages to talk about teaching and learning practices in higher education” (Nixon, Rowland and Walker, 1999), and learn to work with contingency. Barnett (2000) argues that it is essential for academics to engage in these multiple dialogues if they are to fulfil their responsibilities to society.

It means being able to communicate in ways which others around can understand. So we have to develop the art of speaking in multiple voices. Communication is in the end quite crucial to the act of projecting ourselves ... as educators. We're helping others to understand themselves and to project themselves in the modern world. And this is what the modern world requires of us, that we can communicate in different ways with different audiences.

(Nixon, Rowland and Walker, 1999)

Institutions confer identity (Douglas, 1986) and the role of cultural communicator is an important aspect of universities place within the social structure of late modern society.

What characterises institutions and organisations, is their relatively formal structure and purpose... and their tendency to persist over time, independently of particular individuals, although not necessarily

unchanged... organisations and institutions are social arrangements for accomplishing a range of social tasks, including work of various kinds.

(Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998).

Universities convey principles of stability, order and wisdom to a society dealing with the increasing complexities of daily existence. By offering a language with which to understand the changing order or lack of order in our lives, universities provide a useful service to society as a whole.

[E]ducation becomes the key to transforming information into knowledge that can be acted on. Education in the form of reflexive learning thereby has a central role in enabling people to meet the demands of living in a 'risk society' and a period of 'reflexive modernisation' (Beck *et al*, 1994)

(Dyke, 1997)

Though the higher education institutions themselves and the members of the academic community within them are undergoing rapid change and learning to live with contingency their presence within society provides a point of stability and continuity, though their role is constantly changing.

In this way universities provide a dual function in individual's identity formation by helping them to understand the world which they inhabit through using language to encourage the development of critical being and by maintaining their own existence and importance within a changing world. The developmental and reproducing functions of the education system which perpetuate the prevailing power structure are a more powerful

force than those which might threaten the economic and political climate of society. Institutions of higher education are part of the fabric of late modern society and in the ways outlined above, "...transmutations introduced by modern institutions interlace in a direct way with the self" (Giddens, 1991, p.1).

Universities are thus simultaneously providing two apparently contradictory functions in identity formation, offering both stability, however dangerous and illusory, as outlined by Mac Dermott in his theorisation of social order

One way of understanding social structure, in fact, is that it offers differential protection from confrontations in which pure lies must be told. Institutional authorities are afforded various shelters from unpredicted accountability. It is possible to live lies without having to tell them. Our institutions secure such lives for us at every turn.

(Mac Dermott, 1987, p.126)

and by encouraging us to question our own epistemological frameworks displacing ourselves into those opened through critical engagement (Barnett, 1996). The influence of institutions pervades society, for both good and bad as institutional "...structures are fundamentally dynamic entities working in and through collective and individual agents" (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p.451) bringing into question the power and control held by the university which gives direction to individuals and society, but may limit freedom and autonomy (Deetz, 1992; Townley, 1994).

Here it is important to begin to conceptualise the ‘language communities’ which compose the university and to consider the alternative linguistic demands made by each of these ‘conversations’ upon those involved. I suggest that there are two main ‘conversations’ occurring within the institution in which the student is an interlocutor. These, I have identified as *academic discourse* and *the processes of social interaction*. At a common sense level, it is obvious that these are the two ‘worlds’ of the university, in which the student is most directly involved. As this is a study of the ways in which students develop their ‘learning identities’ it is these two ‘conversations’ that I intend to focus upon. These ‘worlds’ or conversations, are neither wholly distinct nor completely separate from each other, but interact in complex and sometimes subtle ways. Students’ learning identities are formed at the nexus of these conversations as they engage in thought and dialogue with different interlocutors in multiple settings. This process could be termed the ‘cultural construction of educational identity’ (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Kauppila, Huotelin, 1996).

Of course the formation of learning identity if understood to take place within multiple language communities will be more complex and individual than this overview can illustrate, taking place outside as well as inside the frame (Goffman, 1974) of the university. Interaction with the home environment may play a fundamental role in students’ perception of themselves as learners and their engagement with learning, made all the more significant if the student remains at home during the course of their studies. The world of work also plays a part in the lives of many students and their role in this ‘extra-institutional’ community may play an important formative role in their developing

self - identity. The students in this study are all recent school and college leavers and none have yet taken on the role of spouse or parent, either of which roles would impact upon the students learning identities, as their position within society would change as their responsibilities to those other than themselves increases (Wilson, 1999).

However, through the examination of the two student 'worlds' focused upon in this study I hope to move forward the debate on student learning and identity formation in a university context. I take first the formal academic world of the student in my conceptualisation of academic discourse in relation to the (trans)formation of students' learning identities.

Section 2: Academic Discourse

Higher education is founded on communication and on engagement in critical self-reflective dialogue. This dialogue constantly redefines abstract concepts and forges links which interconnect new and existing theories. The term 'academic discourse' has traditionally been used to describe such conversations engaged in by members of the academic community both alone and in single disciplinary and inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary groups. According to Barnett (1992) the existence of these conversations within higher educational contexts creates a 'culture of critical discourse' (Gouldner, 1979) founded on the Habermasian search for truth, sincerity, comprehensibility and appropriateness. These four elements in academic discourse unite the loosely associated identities and purposes of each disparate academic discipline transcending language

communities with their unique internal linguistic dynamics and forming a united academic sense of being and purpose. Barnett argues that

Inner validity claims are always present in truth-orientated discourse in the sense that anyone proffering a statement could justifiably be challenged in any of these four domains.

(Barnett, 1992, p.66)

Academic staff engage in critical dialogue with their peers through research publications, face-to-face discussions and conferences, relating to one another in pre-established ways moving forward a discussion which may have been on-going across generations. “ ‘Conversation’ reminds us that knowledge is alive and is maintained through continuing dialogue, a dialogue that is being conducted now” (Barnett, 1996, p.81). The student entering higher education must enter this conversation and engage in an effective discussion if they are to be regarded as ‘successful’ in Dearing’s terms (1997). This is a philosophical educational position founded on a tradition of mentoring, which has a long history in higher education (Aristotle) ensuring a new generation of thinkers will be around to continue the dialogue. Indeed the main aim of higher education is often seen as being to help students develop a sense of ‘critical being’ (Barnett, 1996) or at the very least the ability to engage in critical thinking which would enable them to become involved in the academic discourse of their discipline.

However as Bourdieu’s thesis that “...the elements in an intellectual field also participate in a broader *cultural field* and in *cultural unconsciousness*” (Bourdieu, cited in Ringer, 1990) demonstrates, it is not always easy for students to participate in the academic

discourse of their discipline. “The ‘culture’ here refers to includes not only stated theoretical positions (elements in the *intellectual* field), but also implicit assumptions that are part of a way of life. These assumptions function at a preconscious level; they are typically transmitted by institutions, practices, and social relations.” (Ringer, 1990).

Recent criticism of university teaching practice suggests that tutors do not converse in the same manner with students as with their peers, thus not offering them an opportunity to learn from their teachers through talk and mutual engagement in subject matter. Though this criticism is of course not levelled at all teachers in higher education, Levin (1999) argues that there is a widespread pattern of teaching, particularly undergraduate teaching, being pushed further down the list of responsibilities by members of staff in universities who find themselves under pressure to pursue the ‘real’ work of research.

What seems to be happening is that academics are using very different ‘mental sets’ in their teaching, and in their research and professional discussion and debate; and – without telling their students – using the latter, not the former, when they assess students’ work and decide what the class of degree that a student is to be awarded

(Levin, 1999, p.89).

The rules for successful engagement and inclusion in the academic ‘conversation’ are the same as those outlined above for entering other language communities which are engaged in their own on-going discourses. Students must feel valued and be given a voice in the dialogue, a voice which is listened to and valued for its intrinsic worth (Shotter, 1993). In

addition, “Learning conversations” need to be built on past experiences and should ideally be held in an atmosphere of mutual trust and rapport between teacher and student (Barnett, 1992; Peelo, 1994; Taylor, 1999). Unfortunately such an atmosphere is sometimes missing from students’ experiences of learning in a higher education context, as Ramsden’s 1979 research into students’ perceptions of the academic environment reveal.

My criticisms will be very closely aligned to...the lack of empathy that some of the staff have about the ability levels of the students relative to their subject...In some of the areas we’re talked at a very high level. So you can’t attach anything you’ve been told to something you already know, which of course is a very important point in learning...they’ve gone so far into their own area that they’ve forgotten that we know nothing, essentially, compared with them

(Social science, student 7)

The existence of an inter-personal relationship between teacher and student is known to be a prerequisite for the creation of an effective teaching environment. Indeed the British tutorial based system of higher education was founded on just such an understanding and current educational research has focused increasingly on the role of environmental variables in enhancing or diminishing students’ motivation to learn (see for example reviews by Ames 1992 and Pintrich 1994 and research by Archer and Scevak, 1998). It is therefore somewhat surprising that some students appear to be experiencing similar barriers to their entry into to academic discourse to those reported by Ramsden over twenty

years ago. However, as in all human interactions the same teaching can lead to a variety of outcomes in the way in which students experience learning, as students enter higher education with pre-established conceptions of learning, different abilities and expectations and diverse preferences in the ways they like to think and work.

Understanding teaching and learning within a higher education context presents certain conceptual difficulties as autonomy and instruction vie within a system unsuited to the increase in the numbers of students entering university.

A study of 'excellent professors and their students' by Andrews, Garrison and Magnusson (1996) investigated the relationship between professors' approaches to teaching and their students' approaches to learning. Following from the work of Murray (1991) this study was an attempt to understand and identify how teachers conceptualise the teaching process and to identify the influence of this conceptualisation on their teaching practices. This study also took into account students' perspectives on the education process. A major finding of this study reinforced previous conclusions drawn from research by Brookfield (1990) who suggested that "...teacher authenticity is one of the characteristics that students value the most" (Andrews, Garrison and Magnusson, 1996, p.99). As one professor stated, " 'teaching excellence involves a pervasive positive affection for self, students and subject matter'" (Andrews, Garrison and Magnusson, 1996, p.99). Most importantly excellent teaching adopts a holistic perspective on the process of education and integrates the process with the outcome, thus creating congruence between teacher and students'

conceptualisations of learning and making it possible for students to become engaged at some level in the academic discourse of their discipline.

Tutors have an important yet ambiguous role in encouraging students to develop their learning identities. In his book *Helping and Supporting Students* (1992) Earwaker outlines the ‘...sense of moral responsibility and of personal attention’ (p.45) which the term ‘tutor’ conveys. He also goes on to outline a typical conversational interaction between tutor and student.

The student is likely to defer to the tutor, to wait for the tutor to speak first and signal when the tutorial should come to an end, to let the tutor determine the agenda, to respond rather than to initiate, to follow any change of direction and to give way whenever interrupted (Gahagan, 1984:74f). Taken together these are unmistakable signs of dominance and submission.

(Earwaker, 1992, p.60)

If the interaction described here between tutor and student is compared against the ‘ideal’ set down by Shotter (1993) several shortfalls can be seen. In the situation described students are always in the position of having to justify their viewpoints more fully than the tutor who is already a member of the community they are hoping to join through the course of their studies. The asymmetry of the tutor, student relationship is inherent in the education process as the tutor is regarded as the holder of knowledge, which the student does not yet possess. In addition the tutor is also in a position of power holding the authority to affect the students future prospects, as they are able to influence their degree

outcome. As a result the learning conversations engaged in by tutor and student will never be on an equal footing. Despite the inequalities within the relationship it is possible for the tutor and student to engage in academic discourse which contributes to the discipline and plays an influential role in the formation of students' learning identities. Indeed, the asymmetrical nature of the discourse confers a disproportionate weight to the tutor's evaluation of the student as learner, hence the tutor's moral obligation to honour the professional contract between teacher and student even when the pressures of research and other responsibilities make teaching feel like a 'burden' (Levin, 1999).

The 'burden' described by Levin (1999) of personal engagement between tutor and student may fall more heavily upon the shoulders of female academic staff than their male counterparts. "There is a sense in which every woman [in an organizational setting] is seen as a receptionist – available to give information and perennially interruptible" (Tannen, 1993). Female academics like women in other institutional settings may find themselves engaged in 'hidden' emotional labour which falls outside the masculine notion put forward by Weber and others of what constitutes social action, but which more successfully fulfils the necessary criteria described for meaningful academic discourse between tutor and student. As Billington *et al* (1998) argue, emotional labour takes place within both the public and private sphere, a notion which fits with my own understanding of the formation of the learning identity being formed at the nexus of these worlds.

The hidden nature of emotional labour by women in the workplace derives from the assumption that emotions and feelings are about 'being', and that

'work' concerns the imperative of action, of 'doing'...underlined by the ideological split between the public and the private

(Billington, 1998, p.162).

The emphasis on 'being' rather than 'doing' is crucial to the re-conceptualisation of university learning (see Barnett, 1996), the role of interaction and the transformation of learning identity.

As the experience of students entering higher education comes under increasing scrutiny relationships between the research and teaching functions of the university have been investigated, resulting in some disappointing findings being made concerning the perceived importance of and the practice of teaching in universities nationally.

Unfortunately the *mental sets that underlie conventional teaching do not help students to learn 'to be' and 'to think like' their mentors*. Students are taught 'subject matter' and left to themselves to acquire their mentors' ways of being and thinkingDearing's 'successful student', who is able to engage in an effective discussion or debate, will do so despite the teaching that he or she has received, not because of it.

(author's italics, Levin in Dunne, 1999).

As evidence of the short-comings noted in university teaching Levin (1999) cites the findings of the Cambridge history experiment. This experiment reveals that students' relationships with academic staff prior to the experiment could be regarded as a game where students must guess their teachers' expectations gambling on which approach and

style of study will be rewarded and which will be penalised. He also points to the resistance from academics and institutions to the aims of the Higher Education Quality Council's 'graduateness' programme, which wishes to make academic criteria and expectations explicit. This resistance he regards as evidence that members of the academic community wish to maintain the mystery and ambiguity of the current system. The enshrouding and encoding of critical thinking and 'being' makes entry into academic discourse difficult for the student unless they are able to break the codes and to force entry to the 'academic conversation' themselves. Such a situation forces questions to be asked about the relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs, the locus of control of learning within higher education and the affect which this ambiguous relationship has upon students' learning identities.

Enculturation and learning through 'osmosis' are often cited as ways in which students may gain entry into the academic conversations surrounding yet all too seldom including them at university (Newton and Newton, 1998). Students used to an asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student attempt to discern the tutor's expectations from their limited contact with them in teaching situations and try their previous conceptions of learning in their discipline against the illusive and unfamiliar agenda of the subject as a degree course (See the phenomenographical study by Franz, Ferreira, Pendagast, Service, Stormont, Taylor, Thambiratnam and Williamson (1996) for details of the ways in which students' wish to fulfil the tutor's expectations affects their conceptions of learning).

Is allowing students access to learning conversations in seminars/lectures enough? I would argue that it is not. I argue that these learning conversations play an influential role in students' formation of their learning identities, carrying importance beyond formal learning contexts and impacting upon the ways in which students' perceive themselves as learners. It is therefore disappointing that "...students are customarily viewed collectively as 'workload' and (at exam time) as 'artful dodgers': respect for students as fellow members of learning communities and indeed as customers, is long overdue" (Levin, 1999, p.94).

Murray-Harvey and Keeves (1994) agree that the ways in which students go about learning in higher education is still undervalued. Assumptions are commonly made by those teaching students that by the time they have reached university students will have learned how to learn and little time is spent considering how students develop their identities as learners in a higher education context. The rhetoric of the university's position on the value of deep learning implies an interest in students' development of meaning making in relation to their studies which is not always evident in practice. Terms such as 'developing autonomy in learning' are used to abdicate responsibility for students' engagement in academic dialogue and distance academics from students' final degree results.

Meaning making in a higher education context lies at the heart of academic discourse and students' learning identities. It is the foundation of phenomenographers' conceptualisation of deep learning and is crucial to Barnett's (1996) concept of 'critical being'. In his work Jarvis (1998) makes the link between meaning making and learning explicit, stating that:

Learning...is of the essence of everyday living and of conscious experience; it is the process of transforming the experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and beliefs. It is about the continuing process of making sense of everyday experience and experience happens at the intersection of a conscious human life with time, space, society and relationship. *Learning is, therefore, a process of giving meaning to, or seeking to understand, life experiences.*

(Jarvis, 1998:11, emphasis added by (Merriam and Heur, 1996, p.248)

Writers such as Mezirow, Daloz and Kegan emphasise the dialectic nature of meaning making. Indeed Mezirow argues that significant learning takes place only as a result of exposure to and involvement in multi-perspective dialogues with others which transform ‘...our meaning – making apparatus, from relatively narrow and self - centred filters’ and alter the way we view the world is view. The search for meaning as described by Wong (1989) is a search for the meaning of life. According to Wong (1989: page 517)

Symbolism is an active cognitive process that organizes the welter of personal experiences into coherent categories. Imagination is the creative process of generating alternative representations of real experience. Judgement is an evaluative process, having to do with value/moral decisions. Together, these three mental processes afford satisfaction to one’s deep-rooted need for meaning and coherence.

As previously discussed, the current study is interested in the world of the student and their formation of a learning identity and as a result attempts to conceptualise students' epistemological frameworks beyond the bounds of traditional academic environs. The search for meaning and explanation is part of the search for self and 'truth' described by Taylor (1989). So at one level Wong's insight helps us to conceptualise the students' search for understanding and control over their life narrative and at another by highlighting the 'deep-rooted need for meaning and coherence' he offers a way of understanding students' learning. Many philosophers and educationalists have made the connection between meaning-making life experience and learning including Dewey who defined education as the 'reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (Dewey, 1917: page 89 – 90).

The reconstruction process necessary for learning requires a setting where trust is present making risk possible. As Rogers (1951) observed, the learner will not be able to engage in learning if the self is threatened. In situations of "stress and threat, we tend to hold to those earlier parts of ourselves with which we feel safest; conversely when we feel safe, we can trust our growing edge more fully" (Daloz, 1986, p.131). If students retreat into earlier constructions of their life narrative and learning identities they are precluded from the process of 'being and becoming' a student (Barnett, 1996) while conversely if they are encouraged to participate in the academic discourse surrounding them they are in a position to grow and learn. As a result I argue that it is essential that students participate in the academic discourse of the university as involvement in these learning conversations

contribute to the transformation of their learning identities. However, as I hope I have clearly illustrated in this section, the possibility of students entering academic discourse is dependent upon many variables including the context of teaching and learning; the students willingness and ability to engage in the process of transforming their existing epistemological understandings and proffering opportunities for students to engage in these transforming conversations by members of the academic community.

Section 3: Social Discourses and Interaction

Universities like other language communities may be described as having a *verbal repertoire* (Coupland *et al*, 1991), this means that each community has available to it several styles and varieties of language through which to engage in discourse. Conceptualising language in this way draws on ideas relating to the study of ‘arenas of language use’ (Clark, 1994). According to this literature the construction of meaning within ‘language arenas’ is a collective activity, a collaborative process in which meanings are co-ordinated and utterances are designed for a specific audience. The academic discourse of the university has already been discussed as one such arena of communication and I would now like to examine the *social discourse and interaction* occurring within the ‘frame’ of the university as an example of an alternative and important style of communication negotiated between students within institutions of higher education.

To date I have argued that the nexus where academic and social discourses meet creates a dialogic space where the student negotiates the transformation of their learning identity. I have also put forward the suggestion that the conventions of academic discourse and the

asymmetric nature of the student tutor relationship, can create boundaries which may make it problematic for students to engage in academic discourses with members of staff (Earwaker, 1992, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994). The social discourse of the university thus plays an important role in the student's experience, as I suggest that it is within the discourses of social interaction that students learn the rules of engagement necessary in order to participate in the on-going "pre-constructed cultural discourses" (Chatterton, 1999) of studenthood.

Chatterton (1999) explores the social world of students and their role in the construction of entertainment spaces in city geographies. By focusing on traditional and non-traditional student lifestyles and the various ways in which students use and shape leisure spaces Chatterton raises some key issues concerning the nature of student engagement and participation in social aspects of student culture. According to Chatterton's analysis of available data 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students are distributed unequally throughout British institutions of higher education, "...with large numbers of traditional students concentrated within the older civic universities and non-traditional students concentrated in the post-1992 universities" (Chatterton, 1999, p. 118). Despite the differing makeup and nature of academic institutions across Britain it is the traditional students' use of leisure time which shapes public perceptions and media representations of studenthood. As such students inhabit discrete areas of cities and offer a source of livelihood for local businesses who attempt to fulfil their needs. This, Chatterton argues, creates a "mini-community who contribute to the 'divided city'" (Chatterton, 1999, p.119)

though a myriad of identities exist between the two stereotypical poles of traditional and non-traditional student lifestyles.

“Students” are not born but exist as a distinct social group solely because of the institutions which they attend and the social norms and behaviours of studenthood which are learned and created through immersion into the culture of student life. According to Chatterton, traditional student spaces are the basis for a

... common set of student dispositions, or something like a ‘student habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) ... it is evident that the British university and its associated spaces, such as the hall of residence, the shared student house and the pub, creates more than a simple co-residence of people

(Chatterton, 1999, p.119).

Spaces such as these allow an identifiable student culture to be developed, which is internalised and embodied by those participating in it.

The university with its residential tradition provides a framework within which notions of studenthood are negotiated and developed. Though this valued residential component to the university experience is decreasing in its importance as institutions, under increasing financial and spacial constraints, cannot meet the demands of an ever-growing university population. Students under similar financial pressures and ever increasing financial dependency on their parents increasingly chose to live at home or in private rented accommodation rather than halls of residence, even in the first year of their studies. Despite this the traditional hall of residence still plays a key role in many students’

experiences of university and the culture negotiated and maintained within these student communities affects the atmosphere of the institution as a whole.

The framework of university life encompasses the hall of residence, shared housing, lecture theatres, laboratories, the library and campus bars and unions, spilling out beyond the physical parameters of the campus or university buildings and absorbing areas of the town or city in which the university is located. According to Chatterton (1999) the student identity negotiated in such 'sites of social centrality' emerge not only as a result of dialogue between new and existing students but also in a wider process of socialisation.

In particular, student dispositions are also acquired and learnt from friends, siblings and even parents who have experienced, or are still experiencing, student life and pass these experiences on to would-be students. In this sense, there are those who occupy a 'pre-traditional student' stage whilst at school or during a 'year-out' before university, and those who occupy a 'post-traditional student' stage such as recent graduates... all [of whom can] be identified as part of a broader process of identity formation, of which being a 'traditional student' is only a part

(Chatterton, 1999, p.119).

Understanding the nature of the student's engagement in the social world of the university requires that some of the concepts and vocabulary of the sociology of language be employed in order to begin to develop theories about the influence and means of engagement in such dialogue for the student. The sociology of language is not only

concerned with the identification and understanding of 'pre-constructed cultural discourses' but also seeks to understand the rules and norms, which constrain and explain the language behaviour within communities. Research in this field explores the symbolic value of varieties of language for their speakers and thus offers a basis for developing theories of student engagement and participation in the social discourse and interaction of the university.

The descriptive sociology of language attempts to understand the extent to which the whole verbal repertoire is available to all groups within and between language communities and their constituent verbal subgroups. Attempting to describe the ways in which language communities converse within and between themselves employing different modes and styles of talk. The study of the dynamic sociology of language strives to understand how changes in the fortunes and interactions of such language networks alters the range and complexity of the verbal repertoire available to them (Fishman in Coupland and Javorski, 1997, p.28). All these varieties of the study of language may usefully inform the investigation of the social world of the student and cast light upon the ways in which students' learning identities are transformed by the transition to university.

According to Fishman, "...language varieties come to have symbolic or symptomatic value, in and of themselves, ...an inevitable function of their functional differentiation...Language is content: the medium is (at least partly) the message" (Fishman in Coupland and Javorski (1997) p.27). As such, it is useful to begin to think about the social discourse of the university in relation to ideas of symbolism,

differentiation and conformity to established cultural norms. The notion of what it is to be and become a student bridges the academic and social discourses of the university, however, I suggest that much of the negotiation concerning the nature of what it is to be a student takes place within the social rather than the academic discourses of the institution.

If Billington *et al's* (1998) theory of discourse is taken into consideration, the social interactions in which students are engaged may also play an oppositional role for the students, as such interactions are able to act as a forum for the re-negotiation of meaning and identity beyond the sphere of academic discourses. According to Billington *et al* (1998)

Discourses are frameworks which produce and limit subjectivity – meaning, experience and identity, so as in structuralism, language is central in the construction of persons, but Foucault like Althusser, holds on to the materiality of social life through the notion of practices. The concept of discourses also recognises the plurality of meaning systems in society, and the contestability of meaning. So discourses are sites of conflict and struggle. Foucault argues that within any discourse there is always the potential for developing an oppositional discourse

(Billington *et al*, 1998, p.33).

The social discourse of the university as a predominantly student orientated linguistic domain represents a functional differentiation in the style of language employed distinct from that adopted within academic discourse and as such has a symbolic value as a

language variety. "...there is no language without a social vocabulary. In the centre of this vocabulary stand a few key concepts, which embody a society's self-image ie. Some notions about it's characteristic order and cohesion most likely linked to general images of the world" (Haferkamp, 1989, p.16). Thus a student centred understanding of the academic institution is formulated through informal engagement in social discourse by generations of students.

In addition social discourse also acts as the medium through which a social learning system is developed. Wenger (2000) argues that, "In a social learning system, competence is historically and socially defined... Knowing, therefore, is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities... Socially defined competence is always in interplay with our experience. It is in this interplay that learning takes place" (Wenger, 2000, p.226). Wenger goes on to argue that competence and experience may exist in various relationships with each other, but "...whenever the two are in close tension and either starts pulling the other, learning takes place... It combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures" (Wenger, 2000, p.227).

Thus the social discourses of the university may be seen to have multiple functions as they contribute to the creation of a notion of student identity beyond the academic discourses of the institution and exist as the basis for the creation of a social learning system independent of those created within the formal learning context of the university. These functions I will now explore under the sub headings of *Learning the rules of the student game: Identity formation and social discourse* and *Participation in the social learning*

community. Remembering that “...there is not an external relationship between language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is part of society...” (Fairclough, 1989, p.23)

Learning the rules of the student game: Identity formation and social discourse

This section draws on the work of Chatterton (1999) whose ideas are based on those put forward by Shields (1992) concerning the concept of ‘social spacialisation’. Chatterton (1999) suggests that the spaces occupied by traditional students such as halls of residence and ‘student’ pubs “...can be considered as “pre-constructed cultural discourses”. Experience within, and use of, these spaces allows students to embed and reinforce their identity as a student. They act as “sites of social centrality” within student life in which the rituals of studenthood are undertaken and the rules of student life are learnt (Hetherington, 1996, p.39)” (Chatterton, 1999, p.120).

Learning the rules necessary to adopt an identity as a member of the student community can be an important aspect of readjustment during the transition to university. As previously described, transition periods can be a time of uncertainty and insecurity and the process of re-establishing the self socially plays an integral role in the student’s ability to pass through the periods of separation and liminality and to re-enter the community in a new role as described by Van Gennep (1960). Embodying the role of the ‘student’ gives a sense of security and control to an individual entering a new environment and a new stage in their life and experiences.

According to Billington *et al* (1998) “Roles are subjective and integral to our personalities. The roles we play become part of our identities, how we see ourselves and how others see us. They are at the same time objective, outside, part of culture and social structure, handed down across generations” (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.50). Playing out a ‘role’ accepted within society allows people to live out individual difference and identity according to accepted and acceptable cultural norms. This leaves space for individuality but ensures that the person remains within the protection of society as the role they are playing is a recognised one, which carries with it certain social and cultural expectations. “Paradoxically... we feel most ‘at one with our selves’ when we have a role to play, when our sense of identity is confirmed in our relationship with others, and we have a recognised place in society” (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.40).

Though the role of the student is composed of an amalgamation of social and academic expectations Chatterton locates the learning of student identity firmly within the social sphere of the university arguing that it is here in the

... ‘espace de jeu’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 1993) in which the students learn certain dispositions which enable them to know and recognise the laws of the field through practical experience within it. Learning the rules of this student game within these various spaces is mediated through certain institution rituals such as Freshers Week and the Freshers Fair, student publications, student radio and student peers

(Chatterton, 1999, p.120).

The need to belong within these 'sites of social centrality' may be at least partially explained by the need for group cohesiveness. In the field of social psychology the study of attraction to shared social identities has been widely explored (Hogg, 1992). As social groups occupy much of our everyday experience they play an important part in determining who we are and the type of lives we lead. "Even the groups to which we do not belong, either by choice or by exclusion, have a profound effect on our lives" (Hogg, 1992). Within the student community many sub groups and alternative cultures coexist within the socially accepted 'umbrella' understanding of what it is to be a student.

Building supportive peer groups and establishing an identity within particular student sub-cultures is part of the process of identity formation during the transition to university for many students. Once the individual has established themselves within a supportive network of peers they are in a stronger position to meet the demands of academic life at university and to tackle the issue of negotiating their relationship within the institution and confronting the uncertainty of the new demands of becoming a student. Research in the field of student transition (Entwistle, 1997; Wall *et al* 1991) has revealed that first year students regard social integration as being of primary importance during the initial weeks of university.

Traditional courses particularly in arts and humanities subjects often leave a great deal of unstructured time for the student to manage and the establishment of friendship and interest orientated groups offers a way for students, of structuring the day around events

and meetings which can add shape to the student's working day. Of course if routines are established which interfere with the fulfilment of the academic work demanded by the course, problems may occur.

The routines and habits, which the student develops, may to a large extent depend upon the social group to which she/he belongs. Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950) investigated the ways in which face-to-face informal social groups exert pressure upon their members to conform to group norms. Based on observational, interview and questionnaire data they suggested that "The positive valence of an informal social group... will be most affected by the extent to which one has satisfactory relationships with other members of the group" (Festinger *et al* 1950, p. 165). Later, this theory was transformed into a formal theory of group solidarity and psychological group formation and has more recently been re-conceptualised and reported on by Hogg (1992) who describes a multidimensional conceptualisation of group cohesiveness.

An interesting aspect of this multidimensional theory is the role of the 'sense of community' in understanding group cohesiveness. McMillain and Chavis (1986) suggest a general theory of the sense of community, "...a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). They suggest that there are four inter-related elements to this; membership, influence, integration and a fulfilment of needs.

This theory based on the concept that membership of social groups is based on a 'sense of belonging and identification" (McMillain and Chavis, 1986, p.10) offers, along with Festinger's (1950) notion of the importance of the friendship group, a way of explaining and understanding the social groups formed by students and the reasons for their formation. Just as it is important for students to feel they have a voice in the academic discourse of the university it is equally if not more important for them to feel that they belong to a friendship network of supportive peers on whom they can rely.

The basis for the creation of social groups can be partly explained by the complex and diverse language behaviours of their participants and the inter-group variables and processes which exist within and between them. Language plays a key role in the consolidation of social groups as inter-ethnic research has revealed (Giles and Coupland, 1991) particularly in the case of speech maintenance and convergent patterns of talk. This is a feature of all group participation, as members employ accommodating language in order to consolidate group identity. The extent to which participants accommodated each other within group interactions varied to a greater or lesser extent depending upon gender, status within the group, and the role within the group, which each member is playing at any one time. The interaction between group members is of course a dynamic process and subject to shifts. However, in mixed-sex interactions it has been noted that females made their own language patterns fit with the males of the group, accommodating their own language styles to echo those of the men they were speaking to. Though it was noted that other behaviour such as laughter remained divergent (Giles and Coupland, 1991).

The question of convergence and group identity is particularly potent when examining the experience of first generation students. For these students affecting convergence of language, tastes and ideas with peers can be more problematic and require greater accommodation on their part than for traditional students entering the group. According to writers such as London (1992),

... upward mobility [as defined by the transition to university] can produce a discontinuity that arouses feelings of loss, conflict, and disloyalty --as well as of discovery, reconciliation and joy (Stierlin, 1974)... it is the case that these students live on the margin of two cultures

(London, 1992, p.p.6-7).

He goes on to talk more specifically about the experiences of first generation students with regard to notions of belonging within the institution and group identity, drawing on ideas put forward by Weber (1968).

Among the everyday, seemingly insignificant badges of status-group membership that Weber discussed were language (including vocabulary and accent), social conventions and rituals of all kinds, patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding outsiders, relations with outsiders, and matters of taste in clothing, food, grooming, and hairdo. Students, it should be noted, extend Weber's list of status-group insignia to include tastes in music, sports, cars, and recreation. These items, in other words, are part of the substance or content of a status-group's culture, and thus

they inform its members of the group's boundaries. Those who take on the culture and its symbols are themselves taken on as insiders, though if they do not share the same ethnic, racial, or religious heritage they may not be seen as full members. Conversely, if one repudiates or otherwise casts off the symbols of membership in one's status group, one risks being held suspect...

(London, 1992, p.7)

This view highlights the potential difficulties which students may face when attempting to become included in the on-going cultural discourse of studenthood and join a group of peers.

The social discourses of the university play an important and integral role to the transformation of students' identities. It is important for students to feel part of these cultural discourses and to feel that they have a "voice" within them. Engaging in the social discourses of the institution is an important aspect of student identity formation as these discourses serve as a way of establishing an identity as a student beyond the academic discourses and domains of the university and as a space in which it is possible to renegotiate meaning and establish friendship and interest groups. This offers students the opportunity of building a supportive network of peers who can provide help and support in a time of academic or personal readjustment.

Participation in the social learning community

This section is based on the notion of a social theory of learning as put forward by Wenger (2000) and suggests that students participate in social learning communities. Participation in these communities helps to shape students' identities whilst at university.

According to Wenger (2000) a social definition of learning is based on social *competence* and personal *experience*. He suggests that there are three modes of belonging through which individuals participate in social learning. These are *engagement*, *imagination* and *alignment*. Within a social learning community competence is socially and historically defined.

Knowing, therefore, is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities... Our experience of life and the social standards of competence of our communities are not necessarily, or even usually congruent. We each experience knowing in our own ways. Socially defined competence is always in interplay with our experience. It is in this interplay that learning takes place

(Wenger, 2000, p.226).

Outside the formal academic contexts of the university students engage with each other in learning discourses, testing their experiences against those of others in the group. These dialogues may be focused specifically on aspects of the degree course or may belong to the sphere of 'pre-constructed social discourses' identified by Chatterton (1999). I suggest that aside from those interactions which can be clearly be assigned one or other of these

purposes there are many exchanges between students, which occur within the identified sites of social centrality such as campus bars or halls of residence, which blur the boundaries between the purely social and the academic. In these exchanges learning also takes place.

For many students the experience of 'bridging the academic and social divide' (Tinto, 1997) in their discussions is an essential part of their experience of learning at university. Part of belonging to such a learning community is the relocation of the self within a broader understanding of others' experiences. Students' personal realities, observations and ideas can be tested against the views of those around them. Though the concepts underpinning the theory of group cohesiveness suggest that students may be strongly influenced by their peers' expectations of their behaviour, the formulation of a generally agreed notion of 'studenthood' is negotiated between members of the group.

The 'competence' which Wenger (2000) suggests is a necessary part of participation in the learning community does not need to be demonstrated through wholesale conformity to the opinions of others in the group. Having said this, discussion of ideas often results in opinions being aligned during the course of exploration and negotiation occurring in social talk. The seeking of commonality of experience and opinion is part of the wish to belong to an identifiable group and maintain a social role in discourse. It also helps an individual to build up an understanding of their own identity and to justify their interpretation of events through seeking validation from others. Wenger suggests that because "We want to become one of them [a group member]. We feel an urgent need to align our experience

with the competence 'they' define. Their competence pulls our experience" (Wenger, 2000, p.227). Competence and experience exist in a dynamic relationship that can range from a position of extreme congruence to one of extreme divergence. "But, whenever the two are in close tension and either starts pulling the other, learning takes place. ... It combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures" (Wenger, 2000, p.227).

The idea that learning occurs within the social sphere of the university to an equal if not greater extent than it occurs within the academic sphere, is not new. Writers such as Ainley (1994) suggest that "...the informal curriculum of campus and college activities ... teaches students most of the lessons they learn at university" (p. 77). This notion builds on a strong traditional view of the university experience based on ideas about the collegiate, residential nature of the student community. According to this view of student life the student community exists tangentially to the academic community, immersing themselves in extra curricular activities such as clubs and societies, discussing ideas of intellectual moment with their peers and imbibing alcohol to 'oil the wheels' of this social interaction. Though this extreme view of student life is located within a mythical Oxbridge 'golden age' of studenthood, elements of the image hold true even in the rapidly changing and diverse system of today's British higher education system. Though this may in part be a consequence of students' engagement in the pre-constructed cultural discourses of studenthood, which help to portray student life in a particular 'carefree' and socially orientated way.

An updated and re-conceptualised version of this image has recently been discussed as a possible way forward for universities in a 'post-modern age'. Kumar writing in Smith and Webster (1997) suggests that instead of concentrating on curriculum-based transmission of knowledge, the university should accentuate the importance of the residential and social side of the university experience. Though this view of higher education as the 'melting pot of ideas' and the opportunity for intellectual exploration and personal development is appealing, wider societal changes are bringing about alterations in student intake and increasing financial burdens are reducing the proportion of students able to regard higher education as solely a time of intellectual exploration. Against this background and with growing numbers of students remaining at home whilst studying at university, it is difficult to understand how Kumar's vision of the future could be achieved.

Instead I would argue that the learning community located within the social sphere of the university has a more pragmatic role. Students belonging to increasingly modularised courses experiencing a fractured involvement in their degree subject and relationship with their department seek a sense of security and continuity in the informal groups in which they socialise and in many cases live. Informal support networks may be established outside the course which provide academic and emotional support for each other, bridging the academic and social divide.

Though focused on the study of classrooms in the role of the social mapping of student interaction, Tinto's (1997) conceptualisation of the university is similar to the one put forward here. He urges us as researchers to

... remind ourselves that our current two dimensional graphic representations of interaction, which depict social and academic systems of colleges as two separate boxes, mask the fuller relationship between these two spheres of activity. A more accurate representation would have academic and social systems appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus

(Tinto, 1997, p.619).

The re-conceptualisation of students' experiences of learning urged by Tinto (1997) can be seen in this work which attempts to relocate learning within the wider social discourses of the university and to develop a fuller understanding of the relationship between the social and the academic, relocating students engaged in the process of transforming their learning identities within the frame of institutions of higher education today.

Part 2

Designing and Implementing the Study

Chapter Four

Methodology

As chapters one to three have demonstrated, complex relationships between learning and the developing identities of learners exist as part of the unfolding life course of each individual. However, as Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) point out, current British policy making based on explicit and implicit assumptions about the nature and purpose of learning, often fails to take into account such complexities. An example of this is the assumption that “growing individual responsibility for learning is inevitable, desirable or both (DfEE, 1998)” (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999, p. 5). It is also often assumed that young people are able to make the right choices at key points in their educational and working careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997) and that the education and learning in which they participate is undertaken in order to facilitate employment (Avis *et al*, 1996).

This study was undertaken in order to move towards a better understanding of *learning identity* and the life course. The research reports on traditional aged students’ experiences of learning in higher education, examining these students’ progression from school or college to university with reference to their lives beyond formal educational settings. Part one of this thesis has established the conceptual framework from which

this investigation of students' *learning identities* developed. In part 2 I will explore the methodology of the research project, examining the design and implementation of the study, the research methods used and the qualitative methods of data analysis employed to transform interviews and diary extracts into data.

Section 1: Overview of the Research Design and Implementation

This qualitative project is based on a preference for the analysis of meanings rather than behaviour as described by Silverman, (2000, p.8) in which respondents' answers have been understood as cultural stories deployed as narrative explanations of their actions (Miller and Glassner, 1997). The data was generated through semi-structured interviews and diary extracts gathered from students in their first year at university at three research sites. In choosing this approach to data collection I was concerned with the temporality of meanings and experiences associated with attempts 'to document the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersley, 1992, p.165) in this case students involved in the transition to university.

The research was conducted at three research sites in the UK. Two of the three institutions studied are in Scotland and one is in the north of England. Rather than a cross sectional study of different groups of students at different stages of the transition process, this research pursues a longitudinal interest in describing the expectations and experiences of one group of students, tracing their reflections on learning and university

at points throughout their first year of study. In total **99 interviews** were conducted and **44 diaries** collected during the course of the project (see fig.1, p.106).

There were three distinct phases in the data collection process. **Phase one** was focussed on the experiences of prior educational settings and the initial weeks of the transition to university for a sample of students. During this phase **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with **69 first year students**. The **second phase** of data collection was intended to provide me with data on the daily experiences of students in the context of their lives at university and relied upon the completion of **three day diaries** by students involved in the first round interviews. Of the 69 students asked to take part in this round of data collection, **44 completed** and returned their diaries. The **final phase** of data collection was intended to encourage students to reflect on their year at university and to articulate their experiences and conceptualisations of learning within the context of their lives at university. Follow-up interviews were conducted with **30** of the students from the original sample in this final phase of data collection.

The phases in this research project were designed to reflect the longitudinal experience of the same group of students over the course of a year to and in doing so, the temporality of the transition process. The first round of interviews took place at a point when students had newly arrived at university and were immersed in the experiences and processes of transition. The second phase of data collection was undertaken at a point in the students' first year when they had had time to begin to establish themselves within the setting and were in a position to write about the routines and habits of their daily life

at university and to reflect on their experiences within this setting. Phase three of the data collection was carried out at the end of the students' first year of university and focussed on encouraging a sub-sample of students to reflect on their experiences of transition as expressed in the first interview and to talk about the ways in which their views had changed over the year, if indeed they had. The focus of this interview was on the students' conceptualisations of learning and experiences of learning in different contexts within the university setting.

Fig 1: Table showing the number of students involved in each phase of data collection by institution.

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Pilot Study</i>	<i>Phase 1 Interviews</i>	<i>Phase 2 Diaries</i>	<i>Phase 3 Interviews</i>
<i>Research site 1</i>		October/November 1998 N=26 M=13 F=13	September/October 1998 N=19 M=8 F=11	October/November 1998 N=10 M=4 F=6
<i>Research site 2</i>		April/May 1999 N=21 M=13 F=8	April/May 1999 N=11 M=8 F=3	April/May 1999 N=10 M=6 F=4
<i>Research site 3</i>	September 1998 N=15 M=8 F=7	June 1999 N=22 M=7 F=15	May/June 1999 N=14 M=5 F=9	May 1999 N=10 M=4 F=6

N= number of interviews conducted during the phase at each research site.

M/F= number of male/female students

Analysis was concurrent with the collection of the data during each round of interviews, with further analysis being undertaken at the end of data gathering. From the outset, the emphasis of this study was on deepening my understanding of young people's experiences of the transition to university. Analysis of the first round interviews focused upon the students' experiences and evaluations of their knowledge and learning at school or college as well as upon their expectations and experiences of learning at university. The students were asked to reflect on the ways in which their views on these issues connected with their lives outside the context of formal education, if they believed that they did. The analysis undertaken at this stage of the project entailed a search for a means of describing and conceptualising the data gathered, using the comprehensive constant comparative method of data analysis (Perakyla, 1997). This involves the use of an element of grounded theory based on comparing all data fragments which arise in a subset of the data collected (arrived at through data reduction as described by Miles and Huberman, 1984), in order to generate emergent categories and themes which can then be compared with the rest of the data set (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The second round of data comprising of the diary extracts written by students were not analysed until the final round of interviews had been conducted as much of the data from this round was not returned to me until the final interviews were underway. In the final phase of interviews a more intensive monitoring of a sub-sample of students was conducted in which 30 students were asked to think and talk about their views on knowledge and learning and their experiences of university and to reflect on any changes in their perspectives on these issues over the year. As analysis of the data progressed I

searched for patterns and began to process and develop the concept of *learning identity* further, taking it beyond the initial theoretical framework as part of a process of negotiation between the students' narratives and the original a priori conceptualisation (Lather, 1991). I was also conscious of the necessity to look for atypical student narratives which did not fit with the emergent theory (Silverman, 2000) in order to strengthen any claims made about the data.

The method of data analysis adopted is based on an understanding of narrative analysis of interview data which regards such data as potentially both culturally defined narratives and factually correct statements (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987). By treating the respondents' answers to interview questions as expressions describing internal experiences such as feelings and meanings (Silverman, 2000) I regarded the interview data as being stories or narratives through which the students described their world. In addressing the questions of 'reality' and 'truth' in relation to the analysis of interview data, Glassner and Loughlin argue that narrative analysis can take the form of an examination of the nature and sources of the 'frame of explanation' used by the interviewee. However, the "character of what the interviewee is saying can also be treated, through a realist approach, as a factual statement validated by observation" (Silverman, 2000, p.125). Such an approach was conceptualised by Glassner and Loughlin (1987) as a *methodology of listening*, concerned with seeing the world from the respondents' perspectives.

In deciding upon this course of data analysis I accept the assumed 'authenticity of experience', as expressed by the respondents, as do those adopting a realist stance in relation to data collection, however, I also wish to address the narrative from which these perspectives arise. By 'embracing' the tensions which exist between, "On the one hand ...a broad, interpretative, postmodern, feminist, and critical sensibility [and] on the other hand [the] more narrowly defined positivist, post-positivist, humanistic and naturalistic conceptions of human experience and its analysis" (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994, p.576), this research is representative of 'the fifth moment' in educational research as described by Lincoln and Denzin (1994) and as such is representative of the struggle between the desire to accept a realist perspective in relation to the data in order to present a deepened understanding of contexts and processes engaged in, in social settings which have the possibility of influencing practice, and an acknowledgement that each individual constructs a shifting and unique narrative to explain their responses to and actions within the context of social interaction which makes extrapolation of experience difficult and direct action in response to such data almost impossible.

The research project was designed according to the principles of descriptive research as outlined by Verma and Mallick (1999). Within the field of education such study may incorporate many different methods of data collection. However, the overarching principle of this type of research is that it attempts to depict the "current position of a given situation" (Verma and Mallick, 1999). In this case, the study attempts to describe traditional age students' (under 21 at the point of university entry) experiences as learners in their transition to three British universities.

The process of descriptive research is more than the collation and tabulation of factual data. It involves the development of an understanding of the nature of the interaction and relationships between actors in a scene. Comparisons were made, without attempting to establish a cause and effect relationship. Such studies can contribute to the understanding of a setting by identifying the nature of the factors involved through the constant comparative method of interpreting their meaning and significance for those involved in the scene (Perakyla, 1997).

Though often criticised for creating a bias towards the subjective judgements of the researcher (Sechrest, 1992, cited by Guba and Lincoln in Lincoln and Denzin, 1998, p.196) , the adoption of such a research design is useful as long as the project is carefully planned and structured. Following a similar approach to that described by Verma and Mallick (1999) I adopted a seven step strategy for the planning and implementation of the research designed to expose possible researcher bias and to maximise the validity of the data collected and the findings ultimately arrived at.

The steps involved in the research process were:

1) *The research area was identified and defined*

The focus was established as being the investigation of the transition to university as experienced by traditional age students (under 21 at point of entry), as through the research I hoped to develop a greater understanding of the ways in which these students' gained entry in to the academic and social world of the university.

2) The parameters of the study were set and the type of data necessary decided upon

In accordance with the focus of the study it was necessary to gather detailed information from students concerning their thoughts and experiences of transition and learning at university (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987). Consequently, semi-structured interviews and student authored diaries were decided upon as methods of data collection.

3) The research was located within the literature of relevant fields and a conceptual frame of reference was constructed

The concept of *Learning Identity* was established in order to make explicit my interests in the temporal nature of identity formation and the role of students' identities as learners in identity formation. Possible 'Critical Moments' (Silverman, 2000) in the transition process were identified in order to shape the phase orientated design of the study. The first critical moment identified was the beginning of the students' first semester/term at university. At this point interviews were conducted as it was suspected that students may feel disorientated and at a loss as to their role within the university context at this time. The second critical moment was seen as the mid point of the students' Summer term/semester. At this time diary data was collected as the students had had time to establish the routines and habits of student life and which it was hoped that the students would be in a position to comment upon. The final critical moment used to shape the data collection was the end of the Summer term/semester when the final interview with a sub-set of student' from the original sample was carried out. By this point it was hoped that the students would be in a position to reflect on their prior

understanding of their roles and identities as learners and talk about any changes in their understanding of these issues during the course of their year at university.

4) Three research sites were selected and the sample of students was carefully constructed

Three research sites were chosen in order to reveal possible differences in students' perceptions of the transition process which could be regarded as contextual i.e. institutionally specific. For this reason it was decided to include students from more than one institution in the study. Universities from both the Scottish and English tertiary sectors were selected as research settings as it was thought possible that difference between national education systems may play a part in students' experiences of the transition process. In addition to the national differences between systems, each of the universities was constructed as a member of a different 'type' of university environment which attracted a different 'type' of student cohort. Research Site One being a traditional university, Research Site Two a post-1992 university and Research Site Three, a post-Robbins university (Yorke, 2000).

A focus group of 75 students was identified by the three participating institutions, all of whom had entered university with qualifications which surpassed those of the course entry requirements. Of this sample 69 students agreed to participate in the research. These students were drawn from a variety of disciplines within the university in order to establish a picture of students' experiences which bridged the possible subject divide in students' experiences.

5) Research tools in the form of the original interview schedule were developed

An interview schedule for the first phase of data collection was developed. This schedule was designed to take students through different aspects of the transition process, focussing initially on their first few weeks of university before moving beyond this to questions about their school and college experiences, their views of learning and their responses to their new university departments. In addition the social world of the student was also discussed in relation to questions about leaving home, settling in to halls of residence or shared housing and experiences associated with the social life of the course and establishing friendships and working relationships with peers. In the first instance a version of this schedule was piloted with 15 students at Research Site Three and revisions and clarifications were made in line with the feedback offered by the students in the pilot study.

The proforma for the student diary was developed in a manner which allowed students the opportunity to write as they chose about three days in their life at university. The only divisions on the diary sheets sent out were those of morning, afternoon and evening. Other than that the pages were blank (Musson, 1998). The final interview schedules for use in the third phase of data collection was individually constructed in the light of earlier comments in the initial interview. These interview schedules were designed to encourage reflection on the part of the student as to the nature of any changes in their attitudes or experiences of university during the course of the year. They also served as a means of testing the interpretation of the data collected in phase

one of the project and developing a greater understanding of the ways in which students were conceptualising the process of learning and their role as learners within the context of the university.

6) Significant issues relating to the construction of learning identity were identified from the data collected

The issues identified concerned the notion of negotiation in establishing learning identity in discourse settings within and beyond the university. Analysis identified the manner in which these issues were connected within the narrative accounts of the students interviewed. This led to a deepening of my understanding of the process of transition and the significance of student involvement in various discourse settings. As a consequence of the re-examination of the data in relation to both the theory and the emergent issues identified through preliminary analysis as suggested by Lather (1991), I developed a re-negotiated conceptualisation of *learning identity* which took into consideration the fluid and at times recursive nature of self-construction and the unique significance of positioning within discourse settings for each student.

7) The results were described, analysed and interpreted and then reported

In the data chapters which follow this revised theorisation of *learning identity* will be explored in relation to the settings in which the social and academic discourses of the university are on-going. In each discourse setting identified, such as the halls of residence or the seminar room, students are in the process of renegotiating their position

on continuity/discontinuity continua of experience with interlocutors present in the setting, their previous notions of themselves as learners and the internalised views of significant others. Students' experiences of negotiating and aligning their identities within each of the conversations located within these settings are explored in chapters 5 – 10.

Section 2: Carrying Out The Research Project

In this section i explore the reasons behind the choice of research sites, giving a brief outline of each institution before moving on to discuss the selection of the student sample and the three phases of data collection in greater detail.

The Research Sites

The three institutions were chosen according to theoretical considerations, which took into account the contrasting approaches to the provision of degree level courses and the different education systems within which the universities operate i.e. Scottish and English. Though the sites were selected for their differences they cannot be regarded of representative of a particular 'type' of institution, such as a 'new' or a traditional university, or as being representative of other institutions operating within the particular national education systems.

Research Site 1

A traditional university located in a major city in central Scotland.

Research Site 2

A post-1992 university located in a major industrial city in the north of England

Research Site 3

A post-Robbins university located just outside a medium sized town in central Scotland

Research Site 1

Founded in the 16th century the university is one of the oldest in the UK and at present has 15900 students of which 86% are undergraduates and 24% postgraduates. The university has three main campuses within the city, one of which is the location of many of the buildings and lecture theatres used by those studying arts, social science and humanities subjects and which is also the site of the main university library. Another campus houses the university's science facilities and a third the Faculty of Education. Additional university libraries are situated at 23 different locations throughout the city. The split site nature of this university and its location within a city were important considerations in its selection as one of the three research sites as it was thought that both of these factors may play an important role in students' experiences of the transition to university.

According to the 2001 league tables, this research site is currently ranked in the top ten universities in the UK. Undergraduates study in nine faculties: Arts, Divinity, Law, Medicine, Music, Science and Engineering, Social Sciences and Veterinary Medicine.

Figures available for this university with regard to non-continuation following year of entry amongst young full-time first degree entrants 1996-7 reveal that of the 199 entrants from low participation neighbourhoods 89% continue or qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line, 2001). Of the 2,815 entrants drawn from other neighbourhoods, 93% continue or qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line, 2001). As a proportion of all first degree honours graduates in 1995-6, 75% gained firsts or upper seconds (THES, on-line, 2001) (See Appendix A for further details). The size of the institution and the mix of students from different backgrounds was thought to be possibly influential in students' experiences of the transition process.

Despite the perception of some of the students interviewed at this research site who thought that the majority of the students at the university had come from independent schools, 64% of the student intake is drawn from state school and 34% taken from private schools. An equal split exists between the number of male and female students at the university. 81% of the students are UK residents and 19% come from overseas. These figures, drawn from the on-line alternative prospectus are important in some of the students' explanations for their choice of university.

The university guarantees Halls of Residence accommodation to first years living outside the City District, international students and students with proven medical, social or psychological problems. 35% of all students live in University accommodation. There are 5900 places available, 4000 to first years. Most students in their 2nd, 3rd and 4th year live in private sector accommodation. 10% of first year students live at home.

The university has 1900 full-board rooms at £77 pw (£88 en suite) which are available only during term time. In addition there are 4000 self-catering places costing between £49 and £62 pw which can be leased from September to June or longer. The type and location of the students' accommodation emerged as being important in defining students' opportunities to access to the on-going 'discourses of studenthood' within 'sites of social centrality' (Chatterton, 1999) and to negotiate their *learning identities* within these sites with their peers.

Student welfare services are provided by both the university and the students' union in the form of a walk-in service run by the students' union, a chaplaincy centre a university run counselling service and Nightline, a telephone comfort service run by students. However, none of the students interviewed reported using these facilities, instead preferring to rely on help and support from friends.

There are 11 university bars situated in 7 locations and opening times are extended at the main union until 3am on Club and Band nights. Apart from the usual academic and political societies this university has hundreds of student organised clubs and societies including the Huggabugger Jaffacake Appreciation Society, which proved to be a popular choice with many of the students interviewed at this research site. Unions, bars and clubs were identified as a key context in which to form and develop friendships, second only to the halls of residence or other shared student accommodation. Social relationships in these settings provided an influential forum for the discussion and negotiation for the individual and collective construction of student identity.

Research Site 2

The university's central campus is located in the city centre next to the main railway, bus and coach stations and near to the city's library and theatres and the main shopping area. Two other campuses are situated elsewhere within the city and cater for students studying for social science and humanities degrees and those studying art and design. There are libraries at each of the university's three main sites. The university traces its origins back to the design school founded in 1843 and the institution as a whole was awarded university status in 1992. In total 21600 students attend this research site, 72% of whom are undergraduates and 28% of whom are postgraduates. The university is among the country's ten largest and was selected as a research site for this project on this basis and its location within a city and the number and profile of its undergraduates (UCAS on-line, 1998).

The university is divided into the Schools of Business and Finance, Computing and Management Sciences, Cultural Studies, Engineering, Environment and Development, Education, Health and Social Care, Social Science, Sport and Leisure Management, and Science and Mathematics. This research site is currently ranked within the top 60 university's in the UK according to the 2001 League Tables. Attracting students from a variety of backgrounds, this research site is the most mixed in terms of student ethnicity and social background. A flexible admissions policy 'welcomes people from all parts of society, providing opportunities for all those who want to study at university' (on-line

prospectus, 2001). Around half of the undergraduate students at this university are older than 21 at the point of entry, a figure which increases annually.

Figures available for this university with regard to non-continuation following year of entry amongst young full-time degree entrants 1996-7 reveal that of the 399 entrants from low participation neighbourhoods 85% continue and qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line, 2001). Of the 2,271 entrants drawn from other neighbourhoods 88% continue or qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line). As a proportion of all first degree honours graduates in 1995-6, 49% gained firsts or upper seconds (THES, on-line, 2001).

89% of the student intake at this university are drawn from state school with students from private schools comprising of 11% of the student population. 54% of the students are male and 46% female and 92% come from the UK and 8% from overseas. Again these figures are included as students expressed such ratios as being a factor in their choice of university.

A guidance service is provided for applicants "...to be sure you've got the right information and advice". Educational advisors talk to students individually and in groups, advising them about courses and opportunities. Printed information and computerised databases are also available. There are also 6 university counsellors and 3 union advisors and there is a health centre on the main site which is staffed with doctors and nurses. However, students at this research site also expressed a preference for

relying on social networks of support to ease their transition to university, rather than institutionally provided welfare arrangements.

The university's on-line prospectus provides links for new students to relevant web pages which offer advice on starting university for different types of applicants. The pages directed at recent school leavers show an awareness of some of the challenges faced by these students during the transition to university and state that the university "...make sure that they get all the help and support they need to take control of their student life and get the most from it" (on-line prospectus, 2001).

Mature students are also offered support and are reassured that the "broad range of experience" they bring to university will be valued and that they may "find it easier than younger students to deal with the self-motivation needed in higher education" (on-line prospectus 2001). The university also publishes a handbook on all aspects of becoming a mature student. The university's explicit awareness of issues pertaining to student transition was also a reason for the choice of this university as a research site.

A substantial number of applicants to this university are drawn from the city and the surrounding region. These students are encouraged and reassured by the university's publicity material, that, "It is no longer considered unusual to go to your local or regional university – many students find it brings advantages of its own, including cost, stability of environment as a student work base and local knowledge which can be much in demand from your fellow students" (on-line prospectus 2001).

Students with a variety of entry qualifications are considered and GNVQ students with appropriate qualifications are welcomed as are students with more traditional university entry qualifications such as A level or their national and international equivalents. Credit for previous study and work experience which did not result in a qualification may also be given in certain cases.

An outreach programme where students study at nearby colleges for foundation courses and the university's higher diploma currently includes 1,000 students. These students may transfer the university at a later point or choose to complete their course at their local college. Access courses offered at local colleges provide a route into higher education for local mature students. This programme, along with the increasing proportion of students drawn from the region and the age and qualification profile of the students belonging to the university are important factors in shaping the institution's culture and public image of support and flexibility.

Housing proved to be a critical issue for new students attempting to establish themselves at university. Accommodation at this university is a difficulty with only 50% of first year students being offered halls. As a consequence many first years end up living in the city. This proved to be stressful for a number of the students interviewed. The allocation of accommodation is based on distance travelled from home. The lack of student accommodation has led to the building of halls of residence by private firms, these halls were under construction at the time of data collection and are modern and

spacious and include satellite television access. However, they are very expensive. For those students who do not gain accommodation in halls the university also offers student flats and low rise houses which are organised into a student estate. This accommodation lacks amenities such as shops and is not close to the university's main sites.

The university acknowledges its problem with housing and offers an advisory service and a special 'housing week' which is run in August where students are grouped together and shown various properties. They also provide an authorised housing list of university approved accommodation. The cost of university owned catered accommodation is £71 pw (33 weeks). Self-catered accommodation owned by the university is provided at a cost of between £38 and £51 pw (34-46 weeks). The average rent charged for private accommodation is £40 not including bills.

The social spaces of the university are important sites for conversation for students involved in the negotiation of *learning identity* at university. There are food and drink courts in the university's main buildings and there are also several bars and clubs as well as the students' union. At the two other campuses in the city there are also university bars but these do little more than serve drinks. Many students go into town for nights out. Though the union houses cafeterias, bars, clubs, a cinema and shops and attracts big bands and well known DJs (UCAS, University and Career Guide, 2001).

Research Site 3

The university was established in 1967 and is situated in a landscaped campus just outside a town in central Scotland. There are approximately 6,500 undergraduates and 1,000 postgraduates drawn from about seventy countries world wide (Education Virtual Campus, 2001). At this, the smallest of the research sites, the library is housed in the university's main building. This university was selected because of its campus location and its post-Robbins status, both of which it was thought, might influence students' experiences of transition.

The academic sessions at this research site comprise of two semesters of fifteen weeks. BA, Bacc and BSc undergraduate degrees are offered, as is the DipHE in Nursing or Midwifery. The university also offers postgraduate MA, MSc, MBA, MPhil and Diploma courses in addition to postgraduate qualifications by research in all major subject areas.

This research site is currently ranked in the top 40 universities in the UK according to the 2001 League Tables. Figures available for this university with regard to non-continuation following year of entry amongst young full-time first degree entrants 1996-7 reveal that of the 168 entrants from low participation neighbourhoods, 88% continue or qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line, 2001). Of the 687 entrants drawn from other neighbourhoods, 94% continue or qualify at the institution (HEFCE, on-line, 2001). As a proportion of all first degree honours graduates 1995-6, 62% gained firsts or upper seconds (THES, on-line, 2001).

93% of the student intake are drawn from state schools with the remaining 7% coming from private schools. There are more women than men studying at this research site with 59% of students being female and 41% male. 87% of the students are UK residents and 13% come from overseas. These figures are included both to give a sense of the university's composition and as a consequence of the interviews conducted with students which revealed that factors such as the profile of students attending the institution influenced their university choice.

Located within the Scottish tertiary education system the university's degree programme is flexible and allows students to change the emphasis of their degree during the course of their studies. There is a university policy of continuous assessment in all subjects with grades derived from a combination of attainment scores in coursework and examinations. The majority of students are full-time, however, part-time degree programmes are offered.

Nearly, 2,300 students can be accommodated on campus in purpose built flats, halls and chalets, and places (either on or off campus) are guaranteed to all undergraduate students in their first year. Residential areas on campus contain launderettes, television rooms and social areas, and are linked via bridge with all main facilities. The main teaching complexes adjacent to these residences and most areas are accessible to wheelchair users. Catered halls of residence cost between £48 and £55 pw (34 weeks) and self catered accommodation costs between £44 and £47 pw (30-37 weeks).

There is a student information and support service, and students are allocated academic advisors to help them to make decisions about their course choices. However, students at this research site like those interviewed at research sites 1 and 2 favoured the informal support of their peers over institutionally provided welfare services.

There are five student bars in the union building as well as a dance venue and there is also a sports bar on campus however, many students go into town to socialise. Again, the social sites of the university and town offer students opportunities to negotiate their identity as students and to position themselves on the social continua of continuity and discontinuity of experience.

Selecting the Student Sample

Theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to ...your theoretical position...and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample ...which is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory and explanation

(Mason, 1996, p.93-94)

In selecting the student sample for this research I was conscious of the need to relate the group of students chosen to the explanation of *learning identity* and transition I was

developing as suggested by Mason (1996). In deciding upon the student sample I needed to secure a group of school and college leavers making the transition to university who were secure in their access to the research site universities. This was necessary as I was interested in focussing on the negotiation of *learning identity* within the social and academic contexts of the university and did not wish to focus in this research upon particular access difficulties (Peel, 2000). In developing an understanding of transition for those students whose access to university is secure I hoped that future research could employ some of the theorisations arrived at to explore the experiences of different groups of students such as mature and overseas students. In selecting traditional age students (those under 21 at the point of university entry) I was also concerned with exposing the heterogeneous nature of a group of students often characterised as homogenous (Peel, 2000). The variations in the type of institution and the variety of courses from which students in the sample were drawn, resulted in the sample including students with a range of prior educational experiences and different levels of prior educational attainment at school and college (see Appendix D).

It was important theoretically that the students in the sample were selected by the institutions as I wished to gain access to the narratives of those students who had met and surpassed the entry requirements of the university's admissions policy. Selection was managed by each of the universities either centrally through the admissions office at the point of acceptance onto the course, departmentally from information held by the faculty or through a combination of these methods, depending on the institution and their internal administrative set up. It was also important to the theoretical design of the

project that students from a range of subject areas should be allowed to express their experiences of transition and learning within their subject. Five subject areas were chosen at each institution from the courses offered, which bridged both arts and science subjects (see Appendix D). Once the university had selected a group of students from each of the subject areas I had specified I was responsible for contacting the students and asking them to participate in the study.

Though none of the students interviewed were studying a modern language as their main subject choice at degree level, some students at the Scottish universities were taking a modern language as a second or third subject choice. Because of the nature of the degree programmes at all three universities all the students interviewed were studying subjects outside their main degree choice. Differences in the course provision between the universities made it impossible to talk to students studying the same subjects in each university as research site two offered a number of more vocationally orientated courses and research site three offered a smaller subject range due to its size. However, within the overall sample of students from each institution the split between arts and science courses was maintained as it is this division in subject choice which has been shown to be most significant in prior studies investigating students' responses to study demands at university (Flett, 1996).

Other recent research also emphasises the importance of specific disciplines in shaping students' approaches to learning at university (Neuman 2001) and comments on disciplinary differences in university teaching and the learning demanded of students

across subject areas. Possible disciplinary differences were taken into account in the design of the study as a result of work by Becker (1989) which demonstrated strong interconnections between disciplinary culture and subject knowledge. This influenced my decision to select students from a number of subject areas rather than focusing on the experiences of a group of students in a particular subject area.

69 students took part in the initial round of interviews, which took place in the Autumn Term/Semester 1 of the academic year 1998/9, the students' first term at university. Initially attempts were made to ensure an equal split between the number of male and female students interviewed in each subject area as the imbalance between male and female respondents in previous studies (Perry, 1970, Belenky *et al*, 1986) was recognised as problematic. However, due to a number of factors this was ultimately not possible. These factors included the gender specific subject choices made by some students, with a predominant number of female students opting for politics while more male students chose computer science courses. In addition in some subject areas such as biology more female students gained high entry scores, with male applicants achieving lower entry grades (see Appendix D). Added to these determinants was the greater willingness of female students to participate in the study and agree to be interviewed. Consequently, more female than male students were involved in this research, however, the gender specific breakdown differed across the three research sites (See Appendix D).

The process of finalising the group of students with whom I would conduct the initial interviews was less straight forward than I had hoped. Bound by the data protection act,

the universities were unable to provide me with contact addresses for the students whose names they had put forward to take part in the study. Consequently I was faced with the challenge of tracking down the students through email and through letters held for them by their nominating department.

At research site 2 the university staff members were particularly helpful in this respect, approaching the students on my behalf and providing them with the information about the project, which I had sent in writing to the heads of faculty and the member of staff named as departmental contact. At the other institutions assistance in establishing contact with the students was more variable, with some members of staff being interested and supportive of the research project and others finding it difficult to spare the time to pass on the information I had provided to their students. This difficulty contributed to the final breakdown of the students in the sample.

Participation rates were highest among those students, who according to international research are most likely to persist in higher education. These students are typically women, students with university-educated parents and siblings, and those with relatively high entry qualifications (Peel 2000, McClelland and Kruger 1993, West *et al* 1986). The university was not given a brief in terms of the ethnic breakdown of the students they chose to participate in the study and those selected by the institution were overwhelmingly white, with only one student from the 'Asian' community and one 'Afro-Caribbean' student (UCAS descriptors) nominated to take part.

Collecting the data

Phase 1: Semi-structured interviews carried out with the whole student sample

The first round of semi-structured interviews was conducted during the initial weeks of the students' first term/semester at university, the academic year 1998/9. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were designed to encourage students to talk about their experiences of starting university. In total 69 students were interviewed during this first round of data collection, 21-26 from each institution, 3-6 students from each subject area (see Appendix D). The students chosen to take part in the study are not a representative sample and it was never intended that they should be. The priority throughout was to work with a group of students who offered the maximum richness and diversity of experience within the parameters of the original sampling criteria (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999).

Phase 2: Student Authored Diaries collected from the original student sample

The second round of data collection took the form of the collection of diary extracts. This data was collected during the Summer Term/towards the end of Semester 2. All 69 students who had participated in the first round of interviews were contacted and asked to keep a diary for three days. These diaries took the form of a blank proforma, which allowed students to write about they were doing and how they felt about the experience

of university without being confined to ticking boxes or responding to questions which I as the researcher thought significant, but which they might not. The diaries offered me the opportunity to explore how students' university courses influenced and interconnected with students' lives and how students' lives influenced their experiences of their course (Montgomery and Collette 2001).

The scale of this research project and the profile of the students who formed the focus group led me to believe that it would not be feasible for me to attempt to collect longitudinal data through diaries as it had proved to be challenging enough for me to get the students to remember to meet me for the interviews. However, the combination of initial interviews, diary extracts and follow-up interviews allowed me to trace the changes in perspectives and experiences reported by students over the course of their first year at university. In total 44 diaries were returned completed, but again a gender imbalance was present, with more female than male students completing and returning the diaries, though the gender balance differed across the research sites (see fig 1, p.106).

Phase 3: Semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-group of the original student sample

The third round of data collection took the form of follow-up interviews with 30 students from the original sample, 10 from each institution. The first round interviews were transcribed and a preliminary content analysis was carried out prior to the selection

of the students. This analysis revealed patterns in the issues which students spoke about in relation to living and learning at university, despite the unique experiences and perspectives of each student evident in the responses to the questions asked of them. However, it was not possible to think in terms of a typology of students. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) discovered in their research into learning careers, interviews investigating students' experiences of learning generate unique narratives.

On the basis of the analysis of the first round transcripts, the students who spoke most interestingly about their experiences and who offered a mixture of contrasting and confirming stories of transition were asked to participate in the follow-up interviews. These students' stories formed a cross section of the views expressed by those in the original student sample. The follow-up interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and focused on the students' views of learning in a university setting. The schedule was designed to develop an understanding of the ways in which students perceived themselves as learners, what the process of learning was like for them and how the academic and social spheres of the university interacted in terms of their views on learning.

Section 3: Towards a conceptualisation of the research process

An emancipatory social research calls for empowering approaches to research where both the researcher and the researched become..."the

changer and the changed". For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical work offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that it enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations

(Lather, 1991, p.57)

In thinking about the way in which the research process could be conceptualised I was influenced by the ideas of Lather (1991) who explores the challenges presented to researchers in bridging the discourses of feminism, neo-Marxism and postmodernism in order to come to a theorisation of research as empowering praxis. Lather's (1991) view of the 'emancipatory', 'energizing', 'catalytic' role of research in encouraging self-reflection in both the researcher and the respondent are important to my own view of the research process which seeks to develop a reciprocal relationship between data and theory in which the concepts of reciprocity and the negotiation of meaning are central.

By resonating with people's lived concerns, fears and aspirations, emancipatory theory serves an energizing, catalytic role. It does this by increasing specificity at the contextual level in order to see how larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life. The result is that theory becomes an expression of progressive popular feelings rather than abstract frameworks imposed by intellectuals on the messy complexity of lived experience.

(Lather, 1991, p.61)

Through this research I intend to develop the 'larger issues' surrounding the school / college to university transition process which are embedded in the narratives of the

individual students involved in the project. This will enable me to move beyond the theoretical frameworks developed in part one of this thesis in a manner which constructs a picture of the lived experiences of the students interviewed whilst maintaining a sense of their shared experiences and common cultural points of reference.

Lather suggests that,

Building empirically grounded theory requires a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. Data must be allowed to generate positions in a dilectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which data must be poured. The search is for theory which grows out of context-embedded data, not in a way that automatically rejects a priori theory, but in a way that keeps preconceptions from distorting the logic of evidence.

(Lather, 1991, p.62)

In accepting this view and regarding social science as discourse language I acknowledge the inextricable bond between the social and the ideological. I hope to express this in the manner in which the data is presented in the following chapters and demonstrate my awareness that the ways we talk and write are situated within social practices, historical conditions of meaning and the positions from which texts are both produced and received (Lather, 1991). The absence of formulas to guarantee valid social knowledge

forces us to “operate simultaneously at epistemological, theoretical and empirical levels with self awareness” (Sharp and Green, 1975, p.234).

Theoretical considerations concerning the research process

The qualitative approach to data collection taken in this study was founded on certain epistemological and ontological perspectives I hold as a researcher. In accordance with the ontological position I take, I regard individual’s knowledge, views and interpretations of experiences as a meaningful part of constructed social reality, which this research is designed to explore. My epistemological position suggests that access to the data is best accomplished through qualitative, interview based research. According to Verma and Mallick (1999), the interview represents an interaction between three variables, the interviewer, the interviewee and the context of the interview, which includes the questions asked.

Good quality interviewing is hard, creative work. It is a much more complex and exhausting task to plan and carry out a qualitative interview, than for example to develop and use a structured questionnaire for asking a set of predetermined questions. In that sense the informal and conversational style of this form belie a much more rigorous set of activities

(Mason, 1996, p.42-43)

Semi-structured interviews are an effective way of gathering data on respondents’ ontological perspectives, as they allow interviewees to respond to questions in a

relatively informal, flexible and conversational environment. It was important to me as a researcher to create such a non-threatening environment in which to talk with students in order to encourage them to speak openly and honestly about their thoughts and experiences of the transition to university. As Elbaz (1987) points out, "...the notion of person only takes meaning within a discursive event". In a semi-structured interview issues can be explored and explained in the interviewee's own words, rather than being constrained by the parameters of a Likert scale or other more structured and closed forms of questioning.

I am, however, aware that through the interviews I was only able to access those interpretations and understandings revealed to me by the respondent. The students I spoke to may have had reasons to be selective in the accounts they chose to give of their experiences and motivations, and may, in some instances, have themselves have been unaware of the implicit frames of reference which they have employed in the order to construct their narrative of the transition process. This according to Denzin (1989) can be conceptualised as "A truthful fiction (narrative) [which] is faithful to faculties and facts. It creates verisimilitude, or what are for the reader believable experiences" (p.23).

Certain critics of the interview question their rigour as a method of data collection, as the data generated are the product of a complex set of social relationships between interviewer and respondent (Kvale, 1996). However, interviews are the source of rich data and are adaptable to the needs of the researcher within a given context. Through

the use of a carefully planned interview the researcher can probe responses, investigate feelings, experiences and attitudes in a manner, which no other research instrument can offer. As a consequence of the data collected through a combination of interviews and student diary extracts I feel that I was able to come close to a plausible interpretation of the experiences of being a learner at university through the negotiated interpretation of the experiences disclosed to me.

The concept of the construction of a negotiated meaning between researcher and researched, was an important aspect of the way in which this study was designed and carried out. According to Lather,

Negotiating meaning helps build reciprocity. At a minimum this entails recycling description, emerging analysis and conclusions with at least a subsample of respondents. A more maximal approach to reciprocity would involve research participants in a collaborative effort to build up empirically rooted theory

(Lather, 1991, p.61).

Reciprocity implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power

(Lather, 1991, p.58).

Within my research I attempted to negotiate meaning with respondents through the recycling of description and the discussion of emerging interpretations with a sub-group

of students from the original sample in the manner suggested by Lather (1991). I did this by conducting detailed interviews and involving respondents included in the follow-up interviews in my interpretation of what they had said in previously in an attempt to unlock deeper levels of data content and give back to the respondent a picture of how the data were viewed. During the research process I was wary of imposing meaning on the data generated in order to make it fit with my prior conceptualisations of the transformation of *learning identity* during the transition to university, instead I was concerned with constructing meaning through negotiation with participants. This was accomplished through encouraging the involvement of respondents in construction and validation of knowledge in order to establish a dialogue between a priori theory and the data as negotiated by the researcher and respondent.

However, negotiation and reciprocity were only achievable in this study to a limited degree. The time pressures of PhD study and the fact that I was the sole researcher, responsible for the collection, transcription and analysis of all data, meant that I was unable to involve all students from the first round of data collection in the negotiation of meaning undertaken with the sub-sample of students involved in the follow-up interviews. In addition I was also wary of moving towards the position of full negotiation described by Lather (1991) which involved self-disclosure on the part of the researcher during the interview process. I felt that to move towards this position, might result in the questions becoming leading as the disclosure of my own experiences might create too rigid a framework for the students to engage with rather than allowing them to define their own responses to the research topic. Consequently I chose to deflect

questions about own life asked by respondents as I felt that they might unduly influence the data gathered.

Other epistemological reasons for conducting the interviews in the way that I did include the belief that knowledge is situational and contextual. This view led me to adopt a distinct approach to the generation of data for this project as the context of the interview has shown to influence the data gathered (Lather, 1991). In order to elicit the genuine accounts I looked for from the interviewees I took a flexible and sensitive approach in my responses to the dynamics of each interaction, tailor making the interview structure and wording of questions to the respondent's style of social interaction (Mason, 1996).

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) advise the interviewer to remind themselves that '...the purpose of the research is to learn people's perspectives, not to instruct your subjects' (p.99) even where your views conflict with those of the respondent. 'You are not there to change views, but to learn what the subjects' views are and why they are that way' (p.99). Throughout the course of the interview phases of the data collection I bore this advice in mind and did not respond to the students' comments with evaluations. However, as a researcher interested in the concept of emancipatory research I felt that Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) desire not to change the views of the respondent through interviewing were limiting, as to my mind, a crucial aspect of the research process is the transformative influence it offers, in encouraging respondents to articulate previously unformed ideas and views. This process in itself may challenge respondents'

assumptions, as it empowers the interviewee through the process of increasing reflective self-awareness.

A flexible approach to interviewing was important because of the nature of the information I needed from the students much of which was complex and personal and possibly not clearly formulated in the interviewee's mind prior to the question being posed. As a consequence of adopting this style of interviewing I was able to take cues from the student during the course of the interview and follow up interesting responses or seek clarification in a manner which, I could not have anticipated in advance of the interview. The semi-structured format also allowed me to be flexible with regard to the order in which the questions were asked as interviewees often answered questions in a way which related their experiences to topic areas which appeared later in the schedule. The flexibility afforded me by the semi-structured approach to address the key topic areas in a manner which fitted the student's narrative line of expression.

The interviews for each phase were based on separate schedules. Throughout the interviews I attempted to encourage the students to explore the issues behind the questions in order to discover what they themselves felt was important about their experiences of transition and to allow them to tell their stories in a way which was meaningful to them. Miller and Glassner (1997) describe this process in the following way, "Interviewees deploy these narratives to make their actions explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand" (p.107). In some of the interviewees' stories direct challenges were made to what the respondents know to be

popular beliefs about students. Instead of accepting the conventional definition of their behaviour and lifestyle they use the stories they told to convey alternative aspects and interpretations of their lives, in a similar way to that identified amongst respondents by Miller and Glassner (1997).

The interview schedules were based on asking students' questions about their past and current experiences of learning and about other experiences, which they felt, had influenced their learning. During the course of the interviews the students were encouraged to move between description, explanation and evaluation. In these accounts students described events in their education and in their lives outside. Through their stories I was able to explore their perceptions of learning and the contextual factors which influenced them as learners. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Before each interview the interviewees were assured of confidentiality and all possible steps have been taken to protect their interests and pseudonyms have been used for people, places and universities.

Student Diaries

In recent years there has been a growing recognition amongst educational researchers of the value of accessing personally generated documents created by respondents in a study (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The unifying feature of projects utilising this approach to data collection is the recognition that,

individual motivations and social influences have no easy demarcation.

Such a recognition in biographical studies is seen less as a

methodological hindrance than a way of observing in the exploration of the *narrative* features of human identity, how the structural and interactional are intertwined. It is further argued ...that biographical and autobiographical analyses can examine the significance of selves in relation to general or prevailing values

(Erben, 1998, p.1).

The decision to ask students to keep short diaries stemmed from my desire as a researcher to access the voice of the respondents without the intervention of the researcher in structuring the interaction, as was necessarily the case in the type of the interviews I conducted. Ever aware of audience, I am sure that the diary extracts gathered were fashioned in the knowledge that I would be reading and examining them, however, the students were able to chose aspects of their life at university to talk about which they considered to be important and I was surprised at the level of personal disclosure included in these autobiographical accounts of a few days at university.

By allowing the actors to speak for themselves I was able 'to access the sense of reality that people have about their own world, and attempt to give 'voice' to that reality' (Musson, 1998 p.11), whilst being aware that, 'Autobiography...does not record the life and capture the essence of a 'real' subject that exists independently of its textual inscription through autobiography. The subject of the autobiography exists or comes into being *because* of the act of inscription' (Usher in Erben 1998, p. 19-20, author's italics).

Integrating methodologies

By selecting a dual approach to collecting data for this project I was mindful that 'social phenomena are inherently dualistic ...and multi-levelled' (Davies, Corbishley, Evans and Kenrick, 1998, p.290). There is no 'clear window into the inner life of an individual' (Lincoln and Denzin, 1998, p.24). The only observations possible are those which are socially situated. Research subjects seldom have the opportunity to fully explain their actions and situations, more often they offer stories or accounts of their actions and their reasons for believing and acting in a certain way. As a consequence I elected to use both diaries and interviews as interconnected interpretative methods of generating and analysing data in this study, in order to make the worlds and experiences studied more understandable.

Transcription and analysis

From speech to text

Though interview transcripts are interpretative constructions of de-contextualised conversations which have been abstracted from their base in social interaction, they do provide a way of introducing the reader to some of the complex and rich data gathered in this research and for this reason I elected to partially transcribe the interviews I had conducted. Despite my awareness of the limitations of the transcription of interviews as the basis for analysis, I felt that it was a process worth undertaking as a means of giving a 'voice' to the thoughts and comments made by the students in their interviews.

According to Ong problems with interview transcripts are due less to technical aspects of transcription than to the inherent differences between an oral and written mode of discourse (Ong, 1982). This view is echoed by Kvale (1996) and acknowledged by me as a qualitative researcher, as the spacial, temporal, and social dimensions of the interview are immediately given to the participants in the face-to face conversation, but not to the out-of-context reader of the transcript (Kvale, 1996, p.167).

...transcripts ...are artificial constructions from an oral and written mode of communication. Every transcription from one context to another involves a series of judgements and decisions

(Kvale, 1996 p.163).

The transcription process which structures the oral word into text is the beginning of the analytical process. “The transcriber then on behalf of the subjects translates their oral style into a written form in harmony with the specific subjects’ general modes of expression” (Kvale, 1996, p.170). Thus a continuum exists between description and interpretation.

In critiquing the use of the interview transcript Kvale (1996) draws attention to problems confronting a team of researchers in the processes of data collection, transcription and analysis, where different people are involved in each aspect of the task of transforming speech into text and then into data. He outlines the difficulties faced by a secretary in transcribing interviews from audio tape when he/she was not present at the original face-

to-face interaction and are consequently deprived of the non-verbal, contextual information which plays so crucial a role in making meaning of spoken language. Kvale (1996) also speaks of the problems associated with team interviewing where a number of interviewers conduct interviews with respondents, each having an impact on the data collected.

As I was the sole researcher on this project some of the difficulties described by Kvale (1996) have been obviated, as for example when I was transcribing the interview tapes I was able to recollect the context of the interaction with the students and to make meaning of their comments in the light of my own recollections of the face-to-face interaction and the field notes I had made at the time of the interviews. The problems described by Kvale (1996) in dealing with multiple researchers conducting interviews was also lessened as a result of my carrying out all the interviews for the project, however, some of his warnings about the influence of the researcher on the social interaction of the interview remain a consideration even in individual research projects. Though, only I interviewed the students, the interaction with each individual was unique and as a consequence my influence on the data gathered varied depending upon that unique interaction.

Despite these considerations the inclusion of data drawn from interview transcripts offers a great deal to this qualitative study as it offers the reader access to at least some echo of the individual's own words and explanations of the process of negotiating *learning identity* in transition.

Understanding student narratives in text: the use of student diaries

The development of an understanding of student narratives from text does not require the problematic translation of language from its written to oral form as is the case in the transcription of interviews. However, it does contain its own difficulties for the researcher in interpreting and constructing meaning as the choices made by students when writing their personal accounts of daily life, necessarily remain implicit. However, the collection of students' written accounts allowed me greater depth of information when focusing "on the ways in which individuals account for and theorize about their actions in the social world over time" (Musson, 1998, p.10).

The use of diaries in this research allowed me to access an alternative perspective on the constructed sense of reality that students have of their own world, by allowing them to speak for themselves. Such personal accounts have been used differently by branches of the social sciences from Anthropology to Psychology to Sociology. In the analysis of the data collected through the textual accounts provided by students for this study, I move between the anthropological and sociological perspectives on life history research as described by Lincoln and Denzin (1994), in which the constitutive nature of narrative is recognised. To quote Valery and Geertz,

There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared of some
autobiography

(Valery, P – quoted in Olney, 1980, Preface).

man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun

(Geertz, 1973, p.5).

In this investigation of student transition respondents were asked to keep a three day diary in which they could write as they chose about their life, experiences and motivations. In analysing the data from the student diaries I was interested in moving towards the subjects' perspective to provide me with an "experience near" as well as an "experience distant" conceptualisation of the transition process (Geertz, 1988). By moving between the "experience near" and the "experience distant" perspectives I have attempted to draw upon the "Inner perspectives, experience near phrasing and conceptualisations ...feelings and emotion present individuals and their lives ...[which] coalesce into larger images and patterns" (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994, p.298) seen in the group of student narratives gathered. As a researcher I was responsible for structuring and presenting these accounts in the complex role of narrator-interpreter. In this role I move between the individual and the group narratives of transition in order to provide the reader with a sense of the complexities of the social processes in the transition to university experienced by these students.

Structuring meaning through oral and written narratives

Analysis started after each round of interview data had been gathered. From the outset I was concerned with developing a deepened understanding of students' experiences of *learning identity* during transition. Analysis of the first round interview was focused on the respondents' experiences and evaluations of knowledge and learning at school and their aspirations of higher education, as well as their experiences of the initial weeks of university.

By looking for counter patterns as well as the more striking emergent patterns in the data collected I attempted to take the necessary steps to ensure the validity of the findings discussed in this thesis. Throughout the analysis process I was consciously wrestling with the tensions between researcher imposition and false consciousness (Lather, 1991): “The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality” (Acker, 1991, p.429)

In analysing the interview data gathered during the course of this study I treated the analysis process as a form of narration (Kvale, 1996), as a continuation of the stories told by the interviewees. A narrative analysis of these stories led to a new story being told. This story developed from the themes of the original interview. The analysis was also condensation and reconstruction of the many narratives told by the individual respondents in both oral and written form, which transformed them into a ‘richer, more condensed and coherent story’ (Kvale, 1996) whilst maintaining the individual stories of the separate interviewees in some areas of data representation.

According to Mishler (1986) the interpretative possibilities of seeing the interview as narrative allows emphasis to be placed on the temporal, social and meaning structures. Through this analysis process I wished to encourage the stories of the interviewees to unfold as,

The biographical subject will always blur the boundaries between the abstract notion of a unique self and the abstract notion of group identity. Far from being a methodological stumbling block there is here recognition that the self is constituted in the indissolubility of ego and sociality. This indissolubility will take a unique form for any given biographical subject

(Erben, 1998, p.6)

Thus, in my exploration and analysis of the data I move between the roles of “narrative finder” and “narrative constructor” in order to develop the “experience near” and “experience distant” perspectives (Geertz, 1988) I wished to expose.

Locating the researcher within the study

Through out the planning and implementing of the research design I was actively making epistemological judgements about myself as a researcher and the effect of my interactions with interviewees. In relation to the development of the interview schedules I was in a strong position because of my own recent experiences as an undergraduate. At the time when the data was collected, I was myself only three years older than the students I was interviewing. Moffat (1989) in his research with first year students at university raised issues of identity and experience and of age. As an older adult he found that “His ideas about appropriate vocabulary and behaviour had to be modified to accommodate the gendered identities of younger college men” (Quoted in Coffey, 1999, p.51). I was fortunate that I did not need to adopt these self-conscious strategies for

communicating with the students I interviewed. This gave me a great advantage when it came to relating to and talking with the students about their experiences at university. The majority of the students interviewed appeared to regard me as a fellow student who was genuinely interested in their experiences, rather than as someone who was there to judge or evaluate their performances as students.

Much has been written about the researchers' responsibility for "impression management" (Coffey, 1999) in the research process. Writing about the ways in which the appearance and persona of the researcher can influence access to research sites and the quality of the data collected, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) state that, "The researcher must judge what sort of impression he or she wishes to create, and manage appearances accordingly. Such impression management is unlikely to be a unitary affair however. There may be different categories of participants and different social contexts, which demand the construction of different 'selves' (p.87).

In gaining entry to the research sites and making contact with members of academic staff within the participating departments I was conscious of the need to present an alternative image of my self which differed from the manner in which I interacted with the student respondents. I felt the need to present my self as a professional researcher rather than a research student in order to be treated as an equal (Coffey, 1999).

The notion of social connectedness between myself as a recent graduate and the respondents as new students was clearly important to many of the students involved in

the research. According to Chatterton's theorisation of learned student identity (1999) this could be explained by seeing me as a recent graduate as being at one end of the continuum of the discourse of studenthood and the respondents, as new students as being at the other. In these interviews I presented myself in my role as a student, all be it a postgraduate, conducting research, rather than as member of academic staff in order to encourage a different type of negotiated interaction to take place. This allowed me to engage in an alternative manner with the students to the conversation which an older researchers might have had with the respondents as I shared with the interviewees certain points of cultural identification and language which eased communication particularly in relation to the social aspects of their university experiences. Rather than attempting to minimise the control effects of the social interaction involved in the process of interviewing, I felt that it was important instead, to explore the complexities of such interactions as I have outlined and conceptualise myself as active and reflexive in the process of data generation instead of presenting myself as neutral data collector.

As Lincoln and Denzin point out,

Qualitative research is endlessly creative and interpretative. The researcher does not just leave the field with mountains of materials and then easily write up his or her findings. Qualitative interpretations are constructed. ...the field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions and hesitations. This tension works back and forth between the broad, doubting postmodern sensibility and the more

certain, more traditional positivist and postpositivist, and naturalistic conceptions...

(Lincoln and Denzin, 1998, p.29-31).

The following data chapters are 'caught in and articulate in this tension' (Lincoln and Denzin, 1998, p.31).

Preface to Data Chapters

The concept of *learning identity* developed in the initial chapters of this thesis was important in the interpretation and analysis of the diary and interview data collected. The research has identified recurring processes, which run through the individual narratives of the 69 students in the original sample. *Learning identity* has proved to be a useful construct in developing an understanding of these students' stories of transition. It represents a conceptualisation of the temporal process of becoming aware of oneself as a learner through interactions across different learning contexts and involvement in multiple discourses. In addition it encompasses notions of developing identity within wider adult contexts.

Though the initial notion of *learning identity* and the *academic* and *social discourses* of the university (as described in chapters 1-3) offered me a way into collecting and then analysing the data I was conscious of not merely fitting the data into the theory. I was instead interested in establishing an understanding of the transition to university which was the result of a negotiation between theory and data (Lather, 1991). This led to a transformation and development of the theorisation of *learning identity* from the way in which it was conceptualised in the initial chapters of this thesis. As a consequence of the data analysis I was able to re-conceptualise the process by which new students gained access to and negotiated their position within the multiple discourses occurring within the university.

In doing so, the point of **transition** was significant as it resulted in new contexts in which students' *learning identities* were shaped and negotiated. The settings for conversations

emerged as being important in the process of coming to understand *temporal learning identity*, as did the concept of **multiple continua of experience** which ranged from **continuity** of experience at one end to **discontinuity** of experience at the other. These continua existed in a number of the **discourse settings** in which the students were involved. Within each setting the new students were in the process of negotiating their position along these continua through conversation with others physically involved in the dialogue and with their prior notions of self and the opinions of internalised 'significant others', such as parents, siblings, teachers and school friends.

The continuity/discontinuity continua do not necessarily represent continua of positions in relation to engagement or dislocation in relation to the student's experience of learning and the institution. Continuity of experience in transition is not regarded by the students as universally good and discontinuity as universally bad. What is significant about these continua is the student's individual desire to negotiate a position for themselves at a certain point on each continuum and their ability to do so. Positive and negative pressure points occur when the student feels forced to re-negotiate his or her position on the continua or inhibited from doing so. The point on the continuity/discontinuity of experience continuum at which the student wishes to position themselves, may differ in the different conversational settings in which *learning identity* is negotiated. The *learning identity* of each individual does not necessarily forefront *learner* identity (Weil, 1986), however, amongst the students in this sample it appeared along with the need for a firmly negotiated position within a network of peer support to be very important.

Some students desired discontinuity of experience in relation to their prior identity as a learner and wanted to completely renegotiate their relationship with knowledge and their role in the learning process. For these students in the discourse setting of, for example, the seminar they looked to negotiate a position of discontinuity on this continuum. However, the same students may have wished to establish continuity of experience and identity in terms of their ability to forge friendships within the conversational setting of the halls of residence, therefore on this continuum they wished to position themselves towards the continuity end. The negotiation of the individual's position on the continua may be recursive and successful transition is apparently dependent upon the student's perception of their profile across these continua and their ability to align experiences within discourse settings with their internalised view of themselves.

This theory does not depend on a fragmented view of the self (Gergen, 1987, Hird, 1998) which would regard there to be a different 'self' in each setting. Instead it works with the notion that individuals behave differently in different contexts and desire to be perceived differently in these contexts. The negotiation of an individual's position and their perception of their position on the continua contribute to the process of constructing the life narrative and the situated stories they tell about their actions in different contexts and discourse settings.

In the following chapters the process of negotiation in which the students are involved in locating themselves on the **continuity/discontinuity continua** is examined in relation to significant discourse settings in which *learning identity* is being continually constructed.

Chapter Five: ***Learning Identities Explored***

Chapter Six: ***Negotiating a Position Within an Institutional Culture: Students' Perceptions of Their Universities***

Chapter Seven: ***Students and their university department(s)***

Chapter Eight: ***Negotiating Learning Identities within Peer learning communities***

Chapter Nine: ***Negotiating Identity in Social Discourse Settings***

Chapter Ten: ***Renegotiating Identity in relation to the Family and Financial Responsibilities***

In the chapters which follow I will discuss the negotiation of *learning identity* within different discourse settings. Part 3 of this thesis (chapter 5) considers *learning identity* prior to university entry and in the first few weeks after transition. In parts 4 and 5 I have elected to maintain the distinction between the social and academic spheres of the university, as outlined in the conceptual framework of this thesis (chapters 1-3). In part 6 I move outside the frame of the university to examine the influence of the family as a context for the negotiation of *learning identity*.

The structure for the presentation of the interpretation of the data collected has been informed by concepts which have emerged from the analysis of the data itself and by MacIntyre's (1985) understanding of the fragmentation of human existence, which encourages a compartmentalised perspective on the experience of living. MacIntyre's theorisation allows the separation of the academic from the social, which some students described as the way in which they managed their university experience.

The social obstacles [to envisaging each human life as a whole] derive from the way in which modernity partitions each human life into segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal...All these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of what we are taught to think and to feel

(MacIntyre, 1985, p.204)

As one student put it,

I feel there are two types of learning at university. You're learning academic things – facts, figures, how to argue, how to read. But outside of that you're learning how to be compassionate to others, how to live with others. They are both important and work together.

(LD/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1,R2, R3)

Though the concept of the compartmentalisation of experience provides a useful framework for beginning to interpret emerging issues, it does not fully answer the demands of understanding and exploring the data gathered in this study. In order to represent the more dynamic experience of becoming a student I explore the narratives of the students across conversational settings, offering an understanding of *learning identity*, which bridges discourses.

As I will argue in part 7, some students maintain a more holistic and integrated notion of their experiences across different settings than MacIntyre's theory of compartmentalisation suggests which is illustrated by the students' comments below.

Why is education separate from life? Why do you go to an institution to learn things? Education is segregated – something you do and then stop doing. ...I don't see that you have to 'do' your uni course and then 'do' your outside interests and see it all separately. I want to use psychology as the basis for other aspects of my life...Separating learning from living makes no sense.

(BG/Male/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

The university binds all my wider experiences together and gives me a structure around which to work

(CB/Female/Research Site 1/ Politics/ R1, R2, R3)

The bridging of these discourses raises interesting questions regarding the importance of *learning identity* and transition and its wider impact upon identity transformation in a university setting.

Note to the reader

In the chapters which follow, extracts from student interview transcripts will be italicised and extracts from student diaries will be displayed in boxes. Beneath each section of data an indication of its origin will be given in brackets, e.g. (*KB/Female/English/Biology/Research Site3/R1, R2, R3*). This reference should be read as the student's given initials followed by their gender, nationality, main degree subject and the research site at which the data was collected. The phase of data collection in which the individual student participated is represented as R1, R2, R3 and the phase of data from which the extract is drawn is highlighted in bold.

In the data chapters which follow I have made the decision to avoid indicating the precise number of respondents who suggested certain ideas and experiences. This decision was made on the basis that quantifying qualitative data can be unhelpful. However, in order to help the reader to get a feel for the proportion of students suggesting particular understandings or experiences I have used the following terminology to loosely indicate the percentage of students from the sample expressing a similar view:

Most students – 70% +, Many students – 50%+ , Some students – 30%+, A few students–
5%+

Part 3

Learning Identities Explored

Chapter Five

Learning Identities Explored

As outlined in the preface to the data chapters, the concept of *learning identity* and the process through which the students in this sample negotiated their *learning identity* during transition has been deepened in the light of the data gathered. The on-going temporal nature of *learning identity* and self-construction has been explored (chapter 2) and the notion of **continuity/discontinuity continua** operating within discourse settings has been discussed. As this respondent expresses, *learning identity* and broader notions of identity are intermingled and mutually constitutive, changing and challenging epistemological notions and re-shaping students' understanding of themselves and others within different discourse settings.

I'd definitely describe myself as a learner. It would be difficult to find a day or a week where something has happened at university which hasn't had an impact on the way that I think about something, a person or a subject.

(MD/Male/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

By asking students to talk about their views on learning and their understanding of themselves as learners, I have been able to explore the ways in which *learning identities* influence and are influenced by, students' experiences at a pre-university entry stage as well as by their involvement in academic and social discourses once at university. In researching *learning identity* I do not want to suggest that temporal changes lead to new coherent, constant or consistent transformations in identity. Instead, I would suggest that changing experiences continue to alter students' views of themselves as learners throughout their life course. Consequently I am not arguing that students' become different learners in any lasting or complete sense through their experiences of the transition to university. All I can do is to use the student narratives available to me, to highlight some of the experiences that students spoke of as encouraging the transformation of *learning identity* at the point of the transition to university and first year of study.

Section 1: Making Choices: exploring the relationship between learning identity and students' choice of university

In thinking about the notion of *learning identity*, the transition to university and the concept of multiple continua of continuity and discontinuity of experience within discourse settings, it is important to be aware that the process of transition and the re-negotiation of identity is occurring prior to the students' physical relocation to the

university context. A significant part of the extended transition process occurs when decisions are made about whether to apply to university, when to apply and subsequently, which university to apply to.

I wanted to come to a good university. I wanted to come to a decent city.

...My friend said that her sister was here and I came to visit and I knew it was the right place to go

(SO/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/R1,R2,R3).

For students, making the right choice of course and institution is important. The personal appropriateness of the university and the courses decided upon can influence students' subsequent experience of university. In America an overt institutional marketing culture has prompted extensive research into students' choice of university (Chapman, 1981, Paulsen, 1990). This research has shown the significance of relationships between students' decisions over college choice and their later experiences of college life (Villeglia and Hu 1994, Wiese 1994). Similar research is now being carried out to examine the impact of student university choice within the Australian context of higher education (James, 2000).

When talking about their experiences of transition, the importance of an acceptable match between the students' expectations and their chosen course and university emerged. For many students in this sample these decisions were based on their understandings of themselves as learners within the context of achievement and

attainment at school. For these students, evaluations of prior relationships with learning and self-efficacy beliefs appear to be influential in the process of decision making at the point of application, helping them to identify institutions which seem to match their own interests, standards and aspirations for present and future attainment. Wider issues such as conceptualisations of national and regional identities also play a part in this process, as do personal requirements about the optimal distance from home and the atmosphere of the university campus. These influenced students' choice of institution as they were key areas in which the students interviewed felt the need to align their sense of *learning identity* with the positions they believe that they could negotiate on the continua of continuity and discontinuity of experiences within the context of the university.

In order to illuminate some of these issues, I have decided to include a section of interview transcript which records a student speaking about his *identity as a learner* at school, his process of choice of university, his current sense of self as a learner and his future aspirations within his chosen institution. Disillusioned with his experiences of school but convinced of his ability to succeed at university Tim seeks to negotiate a position between continuity and discontinuity in terms of his relationship with knowledge and his identity as a learner at university. He has a positive image of his ability to achieve within the education system based on his experiences at school and expects himself to attain a good degree. Consequently he attempts to negotiate a position of continuity in relation to his sense of self as a learner and the way in which he wishes to be perceived by interlocutors in the academic discourse settings of the university. However, he seeks discontinuity of experience in relation to the social

settings of the institution. In choosing a Scottish university, distant from home, family and friends, he allows himself the opportunity to renegotiate his position on the continua in terms of his social identity.

I'd been there [at school] since I was four and stayed to do my A Levels: Maths, Physics and Chemistry. I got a C for Maths, B for Physics and B for Chemistry. It was kind of what I expected ...I didn't do much work until about a month before the exams. Then I did about nine hours a day. I began to think I should have done more before hand. I was mostly just doing problems, going over the subject or the topic. Earlier in the course I did quite a lot at home in the evening, but I was doing so much other stuff, like clubs and stuff, that I didn't really have time.

Towards the end of the A Level course I got restless and bored of school. I was so impatient to leave... I definitely think I'm in a better position now, having had a year out because if I'd come straight from school I'd have been just as restless as I was at school. But now after having a year out bumming around and having fun you feel like you want to sit down and do something and so now I'm doing what I want and I'm not going to hitch to London next week, because I'm happy doing what I'm doing. ...I don't know what kind of degree I expect. I doubt I'll get a first, but I'll aim for a first and then I might get a 2a. But aim for a 2a and you'll get a 2:2. I always expected to come to university. I think they've [my parents] always expected me to come. I didn't have a problem with that. I wanted to go.

[Research Site 3] was my first choice. I'd never been to Scotland before I hitched to Edinburgh. I didn't want to go anywhere near home. I did apply for some English universities as well, but only ones quite far a field, I mean like York and places like that. Scotland I particularly liked because of the different kind of programme, the four year course. It seemed like you had more option, more choice than you did at English unis. I also wanted to go here to get to know the country and the different kind of culture and stuff. I mean it is quite different here especially from the south I think. I mean culture is so much more of an issue here. I mean the south of England doesn't really have any culture. Like it has its old cultures of settlement, the distinct counties, but there isn't really anything like tartan and the bagpipes and shortbread.

...Before I came I never really pictured what it was going to be like. So I didn't think it was going to be like this, so when it was I didn't bat an eyelid. I wasn't disappointed either, I mean I'm enjoying it. It's a beautiful place and it's really nice to study in this place. I get on well with the people and the topics are really interesting.

(TD/Male/Politics/English/Research Site 3R1,R2,R3)

Like many of the students interviewed across the three research sites, Tim had carried on at school to complete his A levels, rather than moving to a sixth form or FE college. This meant that he had a strongly established network of friendships which had been built up over a number of years and also had a clear sense of his position academically within the

peer group. Both these factors contributed to Tim's sense of identity at the point of application, as did his location within the family. Tim's older siblings had already made the choice to go to university and there were parental expectations and aspirations of him to follow the established family pattern.

Though seemingly uninspired by the learning contexts available to him in the final phase of his school career, Tim maintained a strong sense of his own abilities to succeed academically despite being aware that he had not worked as effectively as he might have during the latter phase of his A Level course. He expected and achieved strong exam results, and this expectation prompted him to identify certain universities to apply for, including research site three and York.

Being accepted by his first choice of institution, (research site three) acted as confirmation of his beliefs about his deservedness to become a student at the institution of his choice and also helped to confirm for him his aspirations and notions of studenthood, however, ill formed and unarticulated prior to university entry. In their study, Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo (1994) found that, students admitted to a selective college or university saw this as evidence that 'academically they belonged to their institution' (p.62). Tim not only expected to 'fit in' to the institution but also expected to experience continuity in his academic achievements once at university. It has been argued in other studies (Abousserie, 1995) that such beliefs in relation to academic self-efficacy increase students' sense of control over events which in turn enables them to deal more effectively with discontinuity of experience in other areas of their life.

Tim's awareness of his own *learning identity* led him to make the decision to defer university entry for a year in order to overcome the restlessness and boredom he experienced during his last year at school. In making this decision he showed maturity and self-awareness. He began university refreshed and with the desire to work after his year out of education.

McInnes and James (1995) found that one third of school leavers in Australia believed that they had not been ready to make key decisions about selecting universities during their final year of school. In the UK context, Yorke (2000) also identified the 'wrong choice of programme' as being among the key factors influencing undergraduate non-completion. In Tim's case he expresses the belief that he made the correct decision to defer and the subsequently made the right choice of course and university, attaining a close fit between his personal interests and sense of the process of *learning identity* and those of the institution the department to which he now belongs.

Though each of the 69 students interviewed had followed a unique process in making decisions about their choice of university, this student's story raises a number of interesting factors which link his changing conceptualisations of *learning identity* over time.

The closeness of fit between Tim's own aspirations and interests and those of the department are evident in both the grades which he managed to achieve during the first

semester and his desire to aim for a first, all be it with the expectation of not attaining it. This aspiration also reveals a pattern of continuity in his academic self-efficacy beliefs as Tim aims high and expects to meet the challenges placed before him. This suggests that rather than experiencing conflict between his prior notions of his academic ability and his current attainment in the context of the university, he has experienced continuity. Consequently he has not had to dramatically reappraise his *learning identity* but has instead been able to build on his prior conceptualisations of self whilst engaging in the process of becoming a student at university. This is evidence of the coherence, continuity and affirmation of experience described by Weil (1986) in her conceptualisation of the possible impact of university upon learners.

In his process of decision making, it is evident that Tim made some judgements about his own needs as a learner and made an effort to make an informed choice about the type of institution and course structure best suited to those needs. In common with many of the students from the sample who attended a Scottish university he had actively chosen a degree course which offered flexibility and breadth as well as depth of study options.

He also made a personal choice about the location of the institution, opting to study at a relatively long distance from home and family and choosing a Scottish university in order to increase his experiences of living and learning within a different British culture.

From the data gathered from this study four groups of issues influencing applicants' choices of course and institution were apparent. The student quotations which follow,

illustrate the manner in which students described their choice process in deciding on a university and also illustrate the way in which such statements were categorised and analysed.

Personal 'fit'

Students expressed views associated with the personal 'fit' between the individual, the institution and the chosen course of study

I got a bit of help from teachers, but I mainly did it myself. I came here on an open day and it just felt right

(WJ/Male/Package Design/English/Research Site 2/R1,R2)

For Wayne and others in the sample, much of the decision making process in deciding upon a university is experienced at an unarticulated level and involves notions of a sense of place and the student's belief that they could align their sense of themselves with the institution.

For others their sense of identity and their awareness of their own needs from the university allowed them to eliminate certain options and to consider their identities as learners in relation to the views of others who offered them alternative or confirming conceptualisations of themselves. These views were also associated with their own and others' beliefs concerning the match between the individual and the institution.

The careers guy at school told me to apply for Oxford or Cambridge but I don't think I would like that. It wasn't for me. I didn't want to go to England and do a three year degree.

(FM/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site1/R1,R2)

This student received a positive view of herself in relation to her abilities as a learner from the school, which manifested itself in the advice of the careers teacher to apply for Oxbridge. However, the student's own view of herself and her view of Oxford and Cambridge did not match and as a consequence of this belief that a 'personal fit' between herself and these institutions would not be possible she eliminated them from her university options.

The extent to which students believe that a personal fit between themselves and the institution is possible, could be conceptualised in terms of the relative positions between continuity and discontinuity of experience that the individual student wished to negotiate on the multiple continua operating within the different settings of the university.

Future career considerations

Students spoke of their university choice as being focused on obtaining skills and experience associated with a career in a particular field.

I chose the university I came to carefully. There is no point in getting a degree and then five years later it not being any use to you because you've

gone to the wrong place. I was lucky in that this was the place I wanted to go and it was good

(TE/Male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/R1)

Todd has a clear notion of his expectations of his future graduate identity and made a calculated decision about his choice of university on the basis of how he believed he would be perceived as a graduate of a particular course and institution, by future employers. As a consequence he was involved in the process of attempting to maintain continuity between how he perceives himself in relation to his subject at a pre-entry stage and his post-qualification identity as a graduate.

Concern over graduate identity was shared by other students such as Claire, though in her case she chose the course over the reputation of the institution from which she would graduate.

I had the choice between x (an established local university) and y (Research Site 2). X is the better university in the background. But the only thing is it was a pharmacology degree and it was a pure academic 3 year course, no work experience. It is a practical based course here... I've got some friends in the Pharmaceutical industry and they say that they won't employ any one without work experience...Even though it's not a good university the work experience will cover that. ...It was a big

decision because I could have gone to x and got all the credit. I only needed 12 points to get here and I got 24

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/ R1R2,R3)

Claire's decision was influenced by her perception of her future graduate identity and information she had received from employers about the nature of the qualities and experiences desirable of a graduate in the field which she hoped to enter. In order to maintain her image of herself as 'successful graduate' she was prepared to face the possible discontinuity she felt between her notion of herself as an able student and the reputation of the institution she was attending which she perceived as jarring with her own sense of identity as a learner, *'It was a big decision because I could have gone to X and got all the credit. I only needed 12 points to get here and I got 24'*.

Academic programme and reputation of course

Students spoke of their choice of university in terms of academic programmes and specific courses offered. The quality of teaching, reputation of course with employers, options for study were all important factors.

I did get help from my friends who were at university already, who were doing English because I knew what kind of course I wanted, modular, that got rid of half for a start. It's just a case of whittling it down until you've got the one

(PB/Male/English Studies/English, Research Site 3, R1)

For Paul his sense of self as a learner led him to decide upon the course structure he desired. This allowed him to eliminate a number of institutions from his options. In dialogue with friends he discussed his view of knowledge and his desire for control over learning which were central to his notions of *learning identity*. As a result of this interaction he constructed criteria which his chosen degree course needed to fulfil in order to allow him the opportunity of negotiating a position of continuity in relation to his notions of *learning identity*. Thus for him modularity was a core requirement.

Other students also took into account the reputation of the course and in some cases re-appraised their view of courses in relation to the views expressed by others about the course itself and the other's perception of the identity of them as a student.

I really wanted to apply for Bradford but my tutor was like "No". It sounds really snobby but it was because the degree was called 'Peace Studies' and he thought it sounded too airy fairy and I should go for a straight Politics course at a university

(CB/Female/Politics/English/Research Site 1/R1)

In Catherine's case her desire to be regarded as a 'good' and 'successful' student and the perceived conflict which a choice to attend this university and graduate in this particular course posed, led to her decide to attend research site 1 and do the '*straight Politics course*' her teacher had advised her to do. Apparent parity between the perception of the

institution and course by others and her own view of herself as a student was important to her in the maintenance of her view of herself as a learner.

Reputation of institution, location and facilities

Students were also concerned with institutional characteristics and reputation, such as the campus, the location, the prestige and image of the institution, and the facilities available to students

Major university is major university...

(BO'L/Male/Maths and Computing/Irish/Research Site 1/R1,R2)

For Bob the nature of institutional difference was less important than the university's perceived standing in relation to others, if ranked highly in the league tables, one university was as good as another.

Sarah's choice of institution was limited by her desire to maintain continuity of experience in relation to the location of the university. It had to be near home and therefore familiar.

I only really considered two universities, here and research site 1.

Research site 1 is too spread out. I like research site 3 because of the campus. I'd been through quite a few times before, so I knew the campus

(SB/Female/Computer Science/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

Similarly, Jade also required the security which close proximity to home and family offered to her.

I didn't want to go too far away in case anything goes too wrong and I'd be miles away. I thought about commuting but I'd miss out on a lot

(JMcm/Female/Management Science/Research Site2/R1/R2)

These students valued continuity of experience in the social dimensions of their student life and wished to create the opportunity for themselves to negotiate a position of continuity in these areas when managing possible discontinuity in other aspects of their student life.

Quantitative studies have identified similar emergent themes in student choice of university. The areas identified as influential in this study echo those reported by James (2000) in his breakdown of the findings of the 'Which University?' study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education in Australia (James, Baldwin, McInnes, 1999). In other studies conducted in American universities, Pascarella *et al* (1986) also found that persistence in the US was affected by the person / environment fit, in his study of students' pre-college characteristics and academic and social integration measures. West *et al* (1986) and Power *et al* (1986) found that low commitment and withdrawal are often the result of inadequate counselling and decision making about university courses. However, the focus of these studies was not the transformation of *learning identity* within

the university context and no links between students' desires for continuity and discontinuity of experience were made.

Section 2: Temporal learning identity and the point of transition

The physical relocation to university is a critical moment in the process of transition and the construction of *learning identity*. Once students have made their choice of course and university and have been accepted by the institution, they begin to face the reality of starting university in much more concrete terms. Expectations and doubts surface and prior views of themselves as learners are questioned as new students move into the unknown with the loss of significant others to reinforce their image of themselves. It is at this point that the dynamic, temporal nature of self-construction and re-construction is most apparent and when the challenge of positioning the self in relation to others on the continuity/discontinuity continua has to begin to be negotiated within the discourse settings of the university. This process of negotiation must be achieved at least partly in conversation with multiple interlocutors, few or none of whom are aware of the new students' prior identity and all of whom are themselves in the process of negotiating and re-negotiating their positions on the continua.

As can be seen from Hannah's comments the loss of parental affirmation and support at this time can be sharply felt,

I mean the summer before I came I didn't really think about it and then when it got to a few weeks before hand I thought, "Oh no! I'm not going to be with my parents and they're not going to be there to help me and I'm going to have to cook and I'm gonna be in a little room with no home comforts or anything".

(HA/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/R1,R2,R3)

In addition to anxieties such as those expressed by Hannah above, some students have extra burden of family expectation, which can increase existing worries about coping and settling in at university.

I'm the first person from my family to go to university, so there is quite a lot of pressure on me at the moment, not to fail

(DH/Male/Computer Science/English/Research Site 3/R1)

As the anxieties expressed by these students reveal, the initial weeks of university is a challenging period of adjustment and a crucial point at which new students begin to re-evaluate past experiences, re-framing prior notions of their identities, in terms of their perceptions of their new social and academic roles. According to Van Gennep's theory of transition (1960), this could be conceptualised as a period of liminality. During this time of adjustment several key moments can be identified which bring the on-going negotiation of identity into dramatic focus, these points occur both socially and academically.

In the first round interviews students spoke about the first essay or piece of written work, as a point of crisis and uncertainty. Unsure of what is expected of them and insecure about the worth and appropriateness of their prior learning experiences, students had to confront their anxieties and attempt to discern and fulfil the university's expectations of them. In doing this many of them evaluated their prior learning and looked for points of continuity and discontinuity between what had been expected of them in the past and the demands of the task in hand.

I wrote it [my essay] in the same way as I wrote my A Level essays but the difference was that it was more up to me to find out the stuff, whereas at A Level you were just basically using your notes and they sort of give you the information and then it's up to you to use it.

Here the only difference is that you have to find things out for yourself and make more decisions yourself about what they're saying and how to use it. For my A Level history, part of it was a major piece of coursework...So that was quite similar to what we have to do here

...We got a sort of booklet of information about things as well. It said "Don't plagiarise, if you quote you must cite a reference". So we've had help...in one of the tutorials the tutor said a little bit about it, basically

just going over what sort of stuff we should be doing. But that was more stuff like, do it on A4 paper and double space it – stuff like that.

...I don't know if my essay is any good or not. I was quite proud of myself that I actually managed to do it because I thought when I first got it that it was a bit daunting. At school you get lots more help and they tell you what to do. Whereas it was a bit scary not knowing what to do, but I sort of managed all right – I think it was okay

(RB/Female/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/R1,R2)

The importance of the temporal sense of *learning identity* in the on-going negotiation process engaged in during the transition to university can be seen in this extract from Rebecca's interview transcript. Rebecca has been successful at school and values her own ability to accomplish a competent piece of work at A Level standard. On being asked to complete an essay at university, she looks for points of continuity in the expectations she believes the institution has of her, whilst being aware of differences.

Rebecca focuses upon her prior experiences of meeting demands similar to those asked of her by the university, in this case the completion of her history coursework. She also attempts to incorporate the articulated values of the institution into the way in which she engages in the piece of work. For example, she talks about it being up to her to find out the information and decide how to use it. Autonomy in learning is an explicit goal of this university, mentioned in the prospectus and in other publicity material.

However, as can be seen from the remarks that Rebecca makes about the information she receives from her tutor, she feels that the means of engagement in the institution's cultural expectations and suggestions about how to rise to the challenge of fulfilling them, are, in this instance, implicit. The tutor's remarks and advice are confined to editorial and presentation tips rather than being concerned with active engagement in the academic dialogues of the institution or the discipline.

Despite the uncertainty over what is being asked of her, Rebecca experiences a boost in her sense of control over her own learning and recognises the achievement she has made through tackling a new educational challenge. Consequently, despite the initial anxiety over her ability to meet the expectations of her, ultimately completing the piece of work was an affirming experience. As a result of meeting the challenge of the first piece of written work at university, Rebecca is reassured in her belief that she is able to 'be' a student (Barnett, 1990) and that her evaluation of the demands of studenthood are acceptable to the institution.

Reconciling individual *learning identity* with institutional demands is a process of negotiation. Students' sense of their own self-efficacy as learners and their perceptions of the university's expectations of them sets up an internal dialogue where students test their own values and aspirations against those transmitted by the university through both explicit and implicit differential power relations.

Such negotiation is seldom a clear-cut process where all experiences are positive or all negative. Students are often more successful in negotiating a hoped for position on the continuity/discontinuity continua in some areas of their life than in others. In the majority of cases the students interviewed had both bad and good experiences of different aspects of starting university. The process of negotiation is a way of aligning these experiences and assimilating them in to their life narrative. Students thus construct stories around their past and present circumstances, which create an overall narrative response to the new environment, making sense of new experiences and challenges in the context of their prior sense of self.

This process, as can be imagined, was not unproblematic for the majority of the students interviewed, even when they were ultimately successful within the parameters of the university's publicly expressed notions of achievement, which were mediated through the implicit and explicit expectations of the departments to which each student belonged.

Amongst the students interviewed there existed a split in responses to initial experiences of academic life at university. For many students, the first few weeks of lectures were a repeat of concepts and information they had already covered at school. This was particularly true of those studying science, maths or computing courses, and Claire's comments are typical of many of them.

Chemistry is not learning. It's all what I did before

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2, R1,R2,R3)

Whilst not particularly challenging, many of the students on these courses agreed that the chance to review familiar material in an unfamiliar context was a useful way to begin the course. The variation in entry qualifications and differences in exam board syllabuses meant that students on certain courses often repeated topics they had studied at school. This worked both to student advantage and disadvantage motivationally. Many students expressed their satisfaction with their courses, however some felt disillusioned with an introduction to university, which did not present the challenge they were expecting. Eva's comments are illustrative of such views, .

It's been quite interesting. I found accounts at the moment is quite boring though – because they've got to assume no knowledge and I've got Higher. I've done mostly everything we're doing at the moment. I don't find I do much work outside lectures for that. It's repeating what I've already done. I don't need to do it.

(EA/Scottish/Accountancy and Finance/Research Site 3/R1)

Whatever, individuals may feel about reviewing information at the beginning of university courses, it is certain that many students do not have the reassurance of using the first few weeks to consolidate their pre-existing knowledge and find their feet. When such opportunities do exist, the nature of the repetition is important, as topics can be re-covered without the thinking demanded being repeated. The extent to which this happens is at least partially dependent upon whether knowledge is viewed by those delivering the courses as being constructed, in which case it can be renegotiated within a new context,

or whether knowledge is seen as given, which may lead to ideas being recovered in the same way. Repetition can lead to the danger of complacency, boredom and disillusionment and can in some cases inhibit students' opportunities to re-evaluate their relationship with knowledge discouraging them from 'becoming' a student in the way described by Barnett (1990).

Other student narratives contained implicit evaluations of academia and whilst revealing a need for understanding and a desire to make-meaning also appeared to employ a deficit view of themselves as students, regarding themselves as outside and possibly excluded from the academic discourse of their discipline.

Catherine's comments illustrate some of these emotions,

A lot of stuff you read is so much harder to understand. Here you've got really clever academic writing about things and I don't understand it. But, I suppose that it's good to stretch yourself

(CB/Female/Politics/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

However, Catherine's comments also show that the students interviewed often regarded the academic challenges involved in meeting the demands of a new course as an exciting aspect of starting university, even if it is not always comfortable and straight forward. This view was shared by Iain and many others,

I suppose I had to develop new ways of doing things. You know you're much more on your own and you don't have all the info in front of you. You have to go and look for it elsewhere and find out more- rather than just having set books and everything like you do in school. I think it's quite good. It's a good way of learning. It forces you to go out and look for it yourself...

(IM/Male/Scottish/Computer Science/Research Site 3/R1)

In evaluating the demands of the course as a '*good way of learning*' Iain is in the process of renegotiating his *learning identity* within the academic sphere of the university. He repositions himself in relation to learning at the discontinuity of experience end of the continuum. A repositioning '*forced*' by the demands of the course which required the construction of argument from a variety of sources, and reinforced by his own perception of his need to be included in the discourse of his discipline. Though not comfortable, the discontinuity of experience felt by Iain, is embraced by him. Discontinuity of experience within the academic discourse settings of the university was for him a positive experience.

For Karen the information, ideas, experiences and expectations of university were also challenging and unfamiliar. Similar views to Karen's were expressed by many those taking subjects such as Psychology, Social Anthropology or Politics, of which the majority of students interviewed had no prior knowledge, and consequently, no former identity as a learner in the field. As a consequence these students cannot reinforce their

identity as learners in terms of past achievement in the subject, others views of their abilities in the field and in addition often have little or no knowledge of what might be expected of them. These factors appeared to contribute to students' feelings of uncertainty at the beginning of the course and they often spoke in a manner which suggested that they, at least initially, felt excluded from the subject discourse.

In contrast to Iain, Karen clearly feels unnerved by the language used in lectures and as a result found it difficult to engage with the subject material. Discontinuity of experience and uncertainty about what the actors in the scene [lecture] are trying to achieve, leads Karen to construct a deficit model of herself as a student in order to explain the difficulties she is experiencing in attempting to negotiate her desired position on the continuity/discontinuity continuum, as an 'able student at university'. Consequently, her need to maintain continuity of experience in relation to how others perceive her as a learner, remains unmet. For Karen, who is striving for continuity of identity in this key context, discontinuity of experience is perceived by her in negative terms.

I remember sitting in the first lecture and not understanding anything. I thought, "Is this what it's going to be like for the next 4 years?" I was scared because this man just opened his mouth and said, "I expect you all know this", and I just thought, "What if everybody knows this and I'm the only one that doesn't?" You kind of get used to not knowing

what they're saying. It is quite strange not to be able to have any input in it and just having to sit and listen.

(KS/Female/Psychology/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

Despite experiencing such feelings, students in this study, as in Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) study at French universities, accepted the ambiguity and incomplete comprehension of what was being communicated to them in lectures or in texts. Like Karen, they simply regarded incomprehension as being part of the experience of being at university. Thus becoming complicit in their misunderstandings.

As Brew (1999) suggests, the system is rarely if ever challenged by the students. Instead of questioning aspects of their experience and the value of the learning opportunities offered to them, many students appear to feel responsible for the process of assimilating their experiences at university into their temporal notions of learning identity. This is the case even when conflict arises between their prior sense of themselves as learners, their current self-efficacy beliefs and the values promoted by the institution. As a result students become complicit in maintaining the existing status quo even when this makes them unhappy and threatens their sense of self. Some of the students interviewed had taken on a deficit model of 'the student' and internalise failure and incomprehension as wholly their responsibility to resolve, often not alerting their tutors to their concerns.

Of course, as I have stressed earlier, each student is engaged in a unique process of negotiation during the transition to university, responding individually to different teaching and learning contexts. However it is unquestionably the case that, not every student successfully negotiates the transition to university and the challenge of revising their prior notions of themselves as learners whilst coming to terms with the demands of a new system. It was evident from some students' responses that the transition to university had brought with it feelings of disorientation and being overwhelmed. These feelings were complex and diverse in origin. For some of the students interviewed they arose from a misconception about their role as a learner within the higher education system and a conflict between past and current levels of attainment.

Liam's feelings of resentment, hostility and uncertainty represent perhaps some of the most extreme views expressed by the students interviewed. Though struggling with the challenges confronting him, he is able to identify his needs as a learner and determine that he should be able to satisfy some of them himself, though, he feels unable to do so. Liam, has a view of what a student should 'be' but feels that he does not have the right skills to develop his own student identity. This failure to align his own *learning identity* with his view of studenthood results in expressions of dislocation from the institution. Such dislocation is the consequence of multiple failures to locate himself where he wishes to be, on the continua of continuity and discontinuity of experience within the various settings of the university, both academic and social and is not the result of a single misalignment.

Oh I hate it. I hate it. It's horrible because like at school my teacher was really good, and like I still go back and see him now. He's cool, I almost consider him my friend, he's that cool. At school you're spoon-fed and you sit in class and "today we're going to talk about Charles V". So we'd spend 2/3 lessons, of an hour, on Charles V, and it's beautiful. They give you the facts. They say it really clearly. Maybe it's just that mine were good, but they say it really clearly and coherently so you can understand it and get it all down. So you get all the notes and they write things on the blackboard so it's there for you. And you can ask lots of questions, so you're not left with any doubt, so you know exactly what is going on. They tell you how to tackle essays and they write it down – the main facts and everything, and say "Go away and learn that and make sure you know it". I like that because you see your teachers all the time you can just go straight to them to ask any questions, you know? I don't ask the teacher anything here. That's not how I feel, cos the relationship is not close. It's different isn't it? But it's just so much easier for you when it's all there for you.

Whereas here obviously it's meant to be degree level, but there are so many questions I haven't been able to ask anyone. I didn't know where to go and it's so impersonal because you're just sitting with 60/70 other people, like, you know? I want to ask the teacher but I can't. It's terrible because we had one class on the French Revolution and we were meant to

do the reading, but I didn't know that. Then that's it – you go on to another topic. It's a lot of help! An hour and a half - you can't even scratch the surface. Okay, the teacher is giving you notes. But you don't know what you need – like I'm quite good at taking notes. I can pick out the basics, but if it's up on the board then it's okay – but they just don't do it here – so it's up to you. There's a lot of room for error because say I'm half asleep and I miss some vital factors (laughs). Obviously you go to books and read in books but it takes a lot of time...I want page references. I admit I'm babyish but you want more guidance and focus.

(LL/Male/History/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Although as he acknowledges, Liam's expectations of university are a little "babyish", his story does provide a useful way into the examination of some key difficulties experienced by some students during the transition from school to university. In this extract he talks about his feelings of alienation and isolation within the system. Unable to approach the tutors for reassurance or to engage them in dialogue about the course, he struggles alone with the difficulties he is experiencing in negotiating the demands of the new system. He feels excluded from academic dialogue as he is unable to form any kind of teacher/student relationship with his tutors or lecturers. He expresses problems in identifying relevant points in the literature and taking notes. However, Liam's major challenge is obviously one of self - motivation and expectations about his role as a learner at university. When talking about his school experiences earlier in the interview, he said, *"I reckon that's proper history. That's the only way to go about it really"*. This

reluctance to move beyond prior conceptualisations of learning inhibits his ability, to meet the challenges presented him by his course. Though he wants to succeed his is unable to reposition himself comfortably at the discontinuity of experience end of the continuum in relation to styles of teaching and learning and a view of knowledge as constructed and as a result he resists the demands of the course which he feels are forcing him to confront discontinuity.

For other students the causes of a clash between their view of learning and their role as a learner at university, and the demands of the institution, were located differently from the concerns expressed by Liam, though the resultant feelings of dislocation and alienation experienced are similar and are again the consequence of multiple misalignments in the different settings of the university.

Well it just feels like more of school. I don't know? At school it felt like people had forgotten why they were there. They were just doing it, and you know when you get here you just expect people to know the real reasons why people do things. I mean other things like the sciences they are here for the real reasons because they do research. But like English, you expect them to be, I don't know? All imaginative and stuff. But it's not quite like that when you start out. The first bit just seems like more of the same.

(PB/Male/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/R1)

Paul came to university thinking that he understood the aspirations and expectations of the institution and that he would be able to negotiate a good 'fit' between himself and the institution. He was disappointed to find that he had been mistaken. Paul's conceptualisations of what it is to be a student in his subject area conflicted with his experiences of university and reinforced his negative opinions of institutions which he had formed at school. For Paul the continuity experienced by him in the demands made of him to conform to notions of learning and studenthood which conflicted with his own. This caused feelings of disappointment and alienation. He had hoped that the transition to university would bring him into contact with others who held similar notions of studenthood, however, this had not proved to be the case, and the discontinuity of experience he had hoped for had not been realised. In addition Paul felt that because he was not enjoying university and was disappointed in his experiences as a student, it was his fault. Paul's comments again reveal the student self-deficit model which many of the interviewees expressed when alignment between their own hoped for positions on the continuity/discontinuity continua and the positions realised was not possible and they felt powerless to take the actions necessary to force alignment.

I don't know if it's just expecting something and not getting it...You build it up all through school and stuff, you know – if you don't really like that...I thought you would be able to study what you wanted to study – which is sort of creative in itself. But instead it's like having stuff rammed down your throat. I hope it's not just me – I don't think so, at least I hope it's not

(PB/Male/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/R1)

As a result of the disappointment Paul felt and his ultimate inability to accept, what he perceived to be the non-negotiated learning demanded of him by the institution and the lack of social connection with his fellow students, he eventually left university. Though it should be pointed out that out of the 69 students interviewed for this research he was the only one unable to achieve an acceptable relationship between their own and the institution's goals, values and beliefs and achieve a negotiated position across the continua in various discourse settings. In many ways Paul's experiences were closer to those identified in Weil's work (1986) with mature students in which she found high levels of alienation and dislocation amongst respondents, than to the experiences of other traditional age students (under 21 at the point of university entry) in this sample.

Each student's unique relationship with their university, is the result of on-going attempts to mediate and negotiate a position between their own views of themselves as students and the received views of studentship transmitted by the institution both implicitly and explicitly. As has been indicated, not every student has a positive experience of meeting the challenge of university education and fulfilling the institution's cultural expectations. In some cases the fear of failure and the loss of control inhibits students from taking the risk involved in transforming their *learning identities* and 'becoming' a student (Barnett, 1990) and negotiating a position of discontinuity sometimes required of them in relation to prior views of knowledge and themselves as learners.

I think I'm always quite scared of failing, so I leave things until the last minute. I wouldn't want to read something and not understand it, so I leave it until I've got no choice...I think if you're positive you can work, otherwise you just stop doing things. What I've learnt from my last year at school and this year here from reading books is important to me. It always seems to be useful. ...But I think a lot of the time being a student doesn't involve learning. I think a lot just involves work, not really thinking. But I think that learning does have to be part of the process. Sometimes you can write an essay or go to a lecture and think, "That didn't have any effect on me at all".

But I do get really annoyed with myself when I don't do well. I'm really disappointed and push it to the back of my mind...I put too many things off and leave it to the last minute, but I know I've got to pass and I do get very depressed. I've learnt that if work has to be done I can do it. But I've also learnt that I've not got the attention span or the will to do well. I've let myself down a bit. Worrying doesn't get things done...I've tried to change in the last four weeks and I think it's working. I thought I could get away with doing nothing and I couldn't...I have to teach myself to understand that I want to do the work and I want to do well.

(LD/Female/English Studies/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R3).

Lucy's comments identify the feelings of constraint, which she feels that her fear of failure has resulted in, in relation to transforming her *learning identity* within the context of the university. Lucy feels that her own fear is preventing her from meeting her own view of learning and defining her own position as a learner which she sees as being interactive, meaning orientated and individually transforming in terms of identity. She rationalises the emotional conflict she is involved in by attempting to modify her behaviour in order to renegotiate her position on the continua to bring her attainment in line with her view of learning. This process is possible as a result of her own self awareness and prior *learning identity*, which enables her to assess her situation and take action and *'teach herself to understand that I want to do the work and I want to do well'*.

A different outcome of the negotiation process is illustrated by Tom. Tom experienced conflict between his own personal constructs of *learning identity* and the institutions' goals which he resolved through a process of internal negotiation where a compromise between the attributes he valued and those esteemed by the university, were set in balance.

I don't take learning as seriously as I did when I first got here. It's not that big a deal. It's a means to an end – you just do it and get it out of the way. I know it probably isn't the best way to think about uni but I don't stress about it too much. I just work on it, get it out of the way. Actually I do stress about it a bit – that's good- it motivates you to do it. But I don't worry about it. I tend to go and work on it straight away

which makes me stop worrying about it. I can never shut off completely from it and have a real cause of stress because I'm thinking about it too much...Being at uni has reinforced the way that I learn.

(TS/Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

In order to affect this negotiated position, Tom has changed his view of learning to fit more closely with the demands made of him by the university. Disappointingly, he no longer feels that learning is as important to him as before and has instead adopted a utilitarian approach to succeeding within the cultural parameters of the institution. The values and attributes accepted by the institution as being 'right, valid and good' (Tenbruck, 1989) are perceived by the student to be focused around attainment and achievement rather than the process of learning. As a result he has altered his own view of learning to bring it more into line with the predominant expectations of the institution and is consequently very successful within the system.

For Tom, success has reinforced the notion that although not the 'best' way to learn, it is the most effective way to achieve recognition as painlessly as possible. A similar view of study was also expressed by many of the students interviewed by Arskey in her study of students gaining first class honours degrees (1992).

The students' comments included in this section have been used to illustrate the on-going negotiation of *learning identity* which all students are involved in but which is brought in

to sharp focus at the point of the transition to university. All the students interviewed were struggling to position themselves on continuity/discontinuity of experience continua within the various settings of the institution. As has been suggested earlier, the student's ability to negotiate an acceptable profile of positions across these continua is important in conceptualising successful transition and failure to reach an acceptable profile may lead to feelings of dislocation and isolation from the institution as described by Mann (2001).

Section 3: Students' Perceptions of Preparedness, confidence and transition

The following section explores further the ways in which the students interviewed attempted to achieve the position they hoped for on the continuity/discontinuity continua, in relation to the conceptualisations of prior *learning identity* which students brought to the university context and notions about the prior *learning identities* of fellow students, both of which contribute to the relative, negotiated position students are attempting to achieve once at university.

School matters: the construction of learning identity and prior educational experiences

The students interviewed talked unprompted about their views of their own and others' qualifications as being a marker of their perceptions of the confidence and preparedness of individuals in meeting the academic demands of university. These narratives reveal certain qualitative differences in students' responses to learning opportunities offered

them within the context of their discipline, which some students attributed to the learning demanded of them at school or college. The students' views of knowledge as either 'given' or 'constructed' were also spoken of in terms of the demands made of them in previous educational contexts.

For Sarah, knowledge was conceptualised as 'received' or 'given' rather than as 'constructed' or 'negotiated'. This view of knowledge meant that she regarded learning as a passive activity and resisted attempts to change her view to one of active engagement. The extent to which discontinuity of experience in terms of her learning was desired or demanded was dependent upon the subject area studied. In her maths course, Sarah's existing view of learning was not contested or challenged by the demands made of her by the course and she was able to negotiate a position of continuity of experience in relation to her learning in this subject, a position with which she was happy. However, in her education course she was confronted with discontinuity of experience in terms of her learning as she was asked to participate in the construction of knowledge rather than remaining a passive recipient. This forced position of discontinuity was resisted by her and she spoke of her desire to '*drop education*' because of it.

In our education class we discuss things and everyone is putting their point of view in. At school they just told you something and you said, "Okay". I don't really talk very much. I'm quite quiet. I talk more when we're in a wee group. ...It's cos there's not really an answer, there are only points of view. I'm a wee bit hazy about things like that. I like

things that have got an answer – this is right – this is wrong. I've decided to drop education. Maths is quite easy at the moment. I'm understanding that. We get worksheets in the tutorial, for the week – so I suppose it is kind of the same as school. They tell you how to do it and give you questions to answer.

(SB/Female/Computing/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

Sarah found the idea of being active in the construction of knowledge difficult to come to terms with and was happier retaining her established, passive notions of learning than meeting the challenge of engagement and dialogue demanded of her in education. Willing to accept 'facts' without question, she did not enjoy the uncertainty of being exposed to multiple perspectives on issues and found taking a particular stance and justifying it, uncomfortable. For this particular student there was no apparent desire to move beyond her former conceptualisation of learning and to develop her *learning identity* in response to the challenges she was presented with.

Conversely, Niall, believed in a constructed and negotiated view of knowledge. He had stayed on at school for an additional year in order to complete an SYS course and he believed that as consequence of this he had experienced an altered relationship with knowledge and learning. He craved the challenge of personal engagement with complex concepts, for which simultaneously many and no answers exist. Though in Niall's case he was forced to look beyond the parameters of his course to find the intellectual

stimulation he needed as he felt that computer science offered only a passive role for him as a learner.

I started studying philosophy for my Artificial Intelligence project and I sort of got hooked on it and kept doing it afterwards. Free will – all sorts – everything to do with philosophy about our selves and the universe and everything – very deep. It's good to have interests because if you're doing something like computer science which is really boring and not enjoyable – you've got to have something that you can switch to that will interest you, keep you motivated and keep you moving forward. There is a feeling when you look at philosophical texts, a feeling of discovery, which I never get with computer science. It all feels like you're being fed bare facts. With philosophy it's a lot more personal. They generally propose a problem and some solutions – all of which could be equally viable. But there is always one which to you feels that much more - whereas, computer science has an answer.

(NF/Male/Computer Science/Scottish/research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

The vocabulary Niall uses to differentiate between the view of knowledge he feels expected to adopt in relation to computing 'fed bare facts' and the knowledge he desires 'a feeling of discovery' reveals the intensity with which these two views conflict. He is only able to negotiate a position of continuity in terms of his view of learning outside the

constraints of his university course and feels forced into a static position of non-negotiable learning in his degree subject.

Samantha, a second year entry chemistry student, also talks about the process of active engagement with ideas in an interesting way, deconstructing her views of the nature of knowledge, and being actively aware of her own approach and response to the uncomfortable but rewarding demands of essay writing.

When I think of learning I think of knowledge I suppose. ...You read a hell of a lot and get lots of ideas implanted in you mind, and the more you read the more they build up. ...When you've written an essay you feel sort of buzzing with knowledge, as though you know loads and loads of stuff, because it forces you to organise it all, not like reading. It's not very nice – it's kind of painful. But when you've done it you feel like you know more because you've been forced to do it.

(SO/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site1/R1, R2, R3)

An important aspect of Samantha's *learning identity* is the sense of excitement she expresses in relation to learning, stimulated by the imperative of a successful outcome in assessment.

The differences in these students' perceptions of their roles as learners could be interpreted in a number of ways. Prior studies, (Flett, 1996) have chosen to explain such

differences along the subject divide between arts and sciences. With arts students, being considered more willing to accept uncertainty than science students. However, as all these students were studying for courses in the sciences this explanation is not wholly satisfying. As an alternative view, I am arguing that differences in the ways in which students perceive knowledge and their own role in learning is dependent upon their prior and current experiences as a learner and the modes of study which have rewarded them in the past. Consequently, those students who have experienced largely passive learning at school and were comfortable with their role as learners in that context, appeared to find the demands of active engagement and participation in the production of knowledge more daunting than those students for who knowledge has long been negotiated.

In addition to differences in students' views of their prior role as learners, Scottish students entering university straight from Highers are usually a year younger than other students. They tend to be 17 years of age as opposed to their Northern Irish, Irish, English and Welsh contemporaries beginning university post Leaving Certificate or A Levels at the age of 18 or 19. As a consequence of their comparative youth many of the students interviewed felt inexperienced in comparison to their older colleagues and valued their qualifications less highly than those possessed by fellow students. These feelings meant that they were often less willing to participate in seminar discussions or laboratory practicals and initially doubted their ability to succeed academically, a view shared by their peers. This was exemplified by Kevin who said,

It was a culture shock in the main – feeling not able to ask anyone anything. I felt I wasn't able to ask anyone anything – and the shock of being 17 and all these people on the course who are 20 and you felt like the smallest and youngest person there and that everyone else was doing really well and I wasn't. It was a feeling – but I talked to other people in my halls and the people that were the same age as me felt the same way. So I think if we'd gone to school for a couple more years we would have been better prepared. Like the English students were better prepared and the course was aimed towards them cos they were A'Level level, and we were Higher level. There are a lot of English students here.

(KC/Male/Computer Science/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1)

Kevin perceives himself as being too young to fulfil the role he attributes to students. As a consequence he felt outside the discourse in both the academic and social spheres of the university. It was only by identifying a group of people in halls of residence, a site of social centrality (Chatterton, 1999), that he was able to find a group of people with similar shared experiences and to negotiate with them an explanation for their shared emotions and experiences of discontinuity. Until the point of collective negotiation of experience Kevin had excluded himself from active participation in the discourses of the university by regarding himself as uniquely vulnerable.

Other, older students also ascribed the perceived difficulties experienced by younger students as being a consequence of their age, experience and entry qualifications. In

casting these students as group who should perhaps not be students, they were able to reinforce their own position as people who should be students.

I've seen people and they just go crazy. I'm glad I did that extra year at school.

(JH/Female/Chemistry/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1, R3)

I think the English students were more prepared than the Scottish students because they seem to be the ones struggling... I think it's because they're a year younger. I know Highers are pretty hard, but they don't cover as much stuff, so when we go into lectures they haven't heard of half of it. I think that would be really hard if you'd not done it and the practicals as well, cos it all relates. I mean the girl living next door to me is 16 and that's a bit too young to come away and be mature, cos I wasn't (laughs).

(HA/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3).

Many of the students I interviewed felt that SYS had given them an insight into a new kind of learning and offered them the opportunity to develop new skills and ways of thinking which had helped them to achieve academic continuity of experience during their transition to university. The comments made by these students echo those made by English students who had attended sixth form college for A Level rather than staying on at

school for years 12 and 13. Transfer to college was seen as an opportunity to move to a new level of study and the social dynamic of changing institutions was also seen as good preparation for university. The option system and non-contact time were regarded by the students as useful in encouraging them to develop self-awareness and study skills, which fitted them for their new role as university students.

I'm really glad I did SYS because it makes you think. SYS was good because you have to do dissertations and the exam questions are sort of like what you have to do here. They made you do your own research too. It's not just getting handed it in a text book.

(FM/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

SYS are like tutorial groups really, there were only two of us in the class. SYS are so much better than Highers. They prepare you so much more. I don't know if that's just because there were only two of us, or if just generally they're like that and just prepare you much more than Highers could ever do? The work is really different. I mean I did things in Sixth Year Studies English and I picked English this semester and I'm using things I did in SYS for my English course here. It's working at a different level

(JL/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

I think college was good because for a lot of people who went to school 6th form, it's such a big jump coming to university. Going to university is such a change where you're totally on your own and you've probably moved house as well- And suddenly, I don't know? You're told to do things in your own time – and if you want to turn up to lectures – turn up. I think people are likely to rebel more if they've been given that option straight after school rather than gradually. Cos college was to a certain extent – if you turned up it was up to you. If you didn't you got a letter – but it was up to you

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2,R3)

Both SYS and college were perceived by many of the students interviewed as providing a transition period between 'school' constructs of knowledge and time management and the displacement of existing frameworks of knowledge and learning they believed were demanded of them by the university. This was described as being an important part of the process in preparing themselves to engage in the academic dialogues of the university as it encouraged them to regard knowledge as being contestable and constructed rather than being transmitted and objective. Though students specifically mentioned the role which SYS and college played in this process, other students experienced similar engagement with ideas and concepts through their experiences at school.

Perceiving the self as a 'student'

As comments made by students in earlier sections have intimated perceiving the self as a 'student' is an important aspect of the transition process and also effects the extent to which students feel able to negotiate their position on the continuity/discontinuity of experience continua operating within the conversational settings of the university. Envisioning one's self as a student at the point of university entry relies on pre-constructed notions of what it means to be a student, these are influenced by the images of studenthood, which the new students have come into contact with prior to university entry. These images of studenthood and notions of the self as a student in the pre-entry stage of transition will be explored in relation to the differences described by the students in this sample who had access to others' experience of the system and those who did not. The experiences of trusted others at university appears to influence new students' notions of studenthood in the early days of the transition to university. This could be conceptualised as the *expectancy interface* between students' expectations of university life prior to entry and their experiences once at university.

Access to Others' Experience of University

Aside from their views of knowledge and their prior roles as learners, another factor, which emerged as significant in the process of successful inculturation into university life, was the student's access to the university experiences of trusted others' prior to university entry. Students who had friends, parents or siblings who were either in the higher education system or had been, had different expectations of student life than did their peers who had no access to such knowledge.

All the students' interviewed who had parents or siblings who had been to university described an expectation of themselves as graduates. For these students the identity of 'student' was not an unfamiliar one in that in many cases these students had always expected to go to university and had been involved in imagining themselves in this role for a long period of time. The decision to go to university was a long -standing assumption rather than a choice made at a distinct point in their educational career.

Well my brother is at university as well...He's at Manchester...My dad went to Cambridge...I've always expected to come. I think my parents have always expected me to come. I didn't have a problem with that – I wanted to go.

(TD/Male/Politics/English/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

My parents went to college. Mum got a degree a few years ago and then did a Masters at Glasgow. I always wanted to go to university. My parents helped me to choose which one I went to. They read the prospectuses with me and went to a couple of open days with me and told me what to look for. Mum works for a university so she knows about those things.

(FM/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

My dad has got a PhD in geology and he is a research professor. He went to Sheffield. My mum is a history teacher and she went to Liverpool. It was always expected that I would go. I just didn't even consider going straight into work or anything

(GH/Male/Package Design/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2,R3)

As Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo study (1994), also discovered,

College was simply the next, logical, expected and desired stage in the passage towards personal and occupational achievement. The passage actually originated in the educational attainment of parents, older siblings or close relatives who have at least attended and frequently completed college (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991)

(p.62)

These were findings reinforced by this study as Tim's comments illustrate. For Tim the messages he was exposed to from his family were reinforced by those transmitted to him by the school, both of which focussed on future professionalism and graduate identity.

In my family you go to school, you go to university and you get a job. My dad went to Oxford, and I've got two sisters at university. My eldest sister went to Cambridge and did history and now she is doing a law

degree. My other sister is at UCL doing classics but she wants to be a barrister. I definitely wouldn't have wanted to start working, but at school you weren't even given a choice – not that I didn't want to go to university

(TH/Male/Chemistry/English/research Site 1/R1)

Knowledge of university prior to entry appears to play a significant role in students' expectations of university life. Students with older siblings in particular appeared to have a pragmatic and realistic view of what the experience of becoming a student might be like. Many had stayed with brothers, sisters and friends in university accommodation and spent time talking about student life prior to entry. This engagement in what Chatterton (1999), describes as pre-student cultural discourses, subsequently eased their transition into the university when they eventually became students themselves.

Experience of university prior to entry enabled them to establish a sense of place and lifestyle and influenced the choices they made about which university they themselves should go to. Many spoke of discussing university choices with siblings and making decisions about whether to apply for a city university or a campus university on the basis of their experiences. However, though siblings offered examples of how the experiences at university contribute to changes in the individual, the new students' views of what it is to be a student remained necessarily partial, as most of the experiences the students had of university at a pre-entry stage were confined to the social aspects of university life.

My sister went to Manchester and I really liked staying with her – so I just knew I was going to go somewhere like that. ...In terms of living I knew what it would be like. I wasn't sure about the work but I'd stayed quite a lot with my sister. She's in her 3rd year – she's living in France for a year this year – but she like went to Manchester so I went to stay with her and it was like, city life. So I knew if I came here it would be better than living in a small town. I just remember her telling me about having your own routine, going to bed when you want, doing what you want. I was looking forward to that. Like I knew it would be different but I knew it would be good.

(TS/Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

As Tom's comments show expectations of freedom and lifestyle issues were for him an important part of the process of constructing a view of studenthood prior to university entry as was the desire to belong to such a community, '*I knew it would be different but I knew it would be good*'.

Without Access to Others' Experiences of University

Other students did not have access to others' experiences of the system and were instead reliant on developing a view of the role of the student from different sources. These students were largely on their own in terms of discovering their way through the system.

I was the first one in my family to stay on and do A' Levels. I did everything on my own because my parents didn't know the process

(ER/Female/Management Science/English/Research Site2/R1)

For some of these students the decision to go to university was deferred until a much later point in their educational careers. In Jade's case, she attributes this later decision to the fact that she *couldn't see herself at university*. She was unable to visualise herself in the role of 'student' in the way in which the students with access to siblings and parents with university experience appeared to be able to.

It was in the sixth form that I decided to go to university. I was going to get my A Levels and then see from there. I couldn't see myself at university. It's good because I like to work and I like to learn and I don't want to go out into the big wide world and get a job. Mum and dad didn't put any pressure on me. They said that they didn't expect me to go. I didn't want to go too far away in case anything went wrong and I'd be miles away

(JMcM/Female/Management Science/English/Research Site2/R1)

In Jade's case her decision to go to university appears to have come about almost by default as she *didn't want to go out into the big wide world and get a job*. However, she juxtaposes this reason for becoming a student with the more positive reason that she likes

work and learning. These are clearly attributes which she thinks are a necessary part of the student persona.

Though many of the 'first generation' students spoken to during the course of this research expressed the same long term expectations of going to university as other students interviewed, many more of these students decided to attend a university closer to home. Students deciding to remain at home whilst studying or to stay within easy commuting distance often did so for a variety of reasons. In some cases financial considerations were the main reason behind their choice of university, for others it was the desire to remain within easy access of their family's emotional support. As Jade's comments reveal, students can feel anxious about beginning university, an anxiety sometimes increased by lack of knowledge of the system and want to be able to draw on their family's support in order to reinforce their sense of personal identity and provide them with security. For such students the security of their identity appears to remain dependent upon proximity to the family a notion apparently reinforced by the lack of the 'leaving home at 18' model in the family.

Prior studies have suggested that first generation students who have no links with friends or family, who have been to university, may experience feelings of cultural disjuncture (London, 1992). In other studies such students have been shown to find the academic transition to university more challenging than the social, whereas traditional students found making friends more of a challenge (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo (1994). However, this was not evident amongst the narratives of the

students interviewed in this research. First generation students without parents or siblings with experience of the university did not express the view that the academic challenges they faced at university were more daunting than the social. Instead both those with and those without prior knowledge of university were initially more concerned with social integration than with their academic transition to university. However, this could be explained by the profile of students interviewed, all of whom were considered by their institution/department to have entered with some of the highest qualifications of the students in the cohort.

However, for some first generation students, aligning their experiences between home and work and university was problematic, as Fern's comments illustrate,

I tend to find when I go home – especially back to work – I try to make myself, not stupid, but different. I don't know? I don't want to be seen as an arrogant student because I think it's quite an issue. So I'm careful what I say. I change. I don't know if I should really do that, but I do.

(FM/Female/Research Site 1/Politics/Scottish/R1, R2, R3)

For Fern, returning to home and work after being away at university posed the challenge of aligning her internalised and externally represented identities. Aware that people might perceive her as 'arrogant' if she spoke about university and her life and opinions away from home, she censored what she said and watched how she behaved, making

herself, “*not stupid –but different*” in order not to appear to be “*an arrogant student*”. This form of self-censorship has been noted in previous studies examining mature students’ experiences of attending university whilst still trying to maintain social and working relationships with the people they knew before they were students (Tennant, 1993). In her time at university Fern has negotiated a role for herself as a student, which differs from how she believes that others perceive students. She does not wish to reinforce the negative stereotypical view of students she thinks her work colleagues have and consciously modifies her behaviour and persona in different contexts outside the university.

Section 4: Wider Individual identity Constructs

Aside from important factors linking prior educational experiences to the concept of *learning identity* explored in this thesis, wider individual identity constructs also appear to play a significant part in students’ experiences of the transition to university. Some of these issues are explored below under the following subheadings: experiences of national and regional identity, perceptions of racism and identity and ‘concepts of class’: defining the self in relation to others.

Scotland and England: Experiences of National and Regional Identity explored

In conducting the interviews for this project experiences of national and regional identity were talked about by some of the students. In the initial days of university much of the

conversation held between students focuses on where each other are from and the qualifications people have attained. This was true across each of the research sites, however, questions of national identity appeared to be most significant to the students interviewed who were attending Scottish institutions, **research sites one and three**. This was the case for both Scots attending Scottish universities and some English, Irish and northern Irish students also attending those institutions. For students at **research site two** the Post-1992, split-site, city, university in the north of England, national identity appeared to play a more implicit part in their own and the institution's cultural identity, though location and regional identity did play a role in student choices of institutions.

The significance of being Scottish, being English or being Irish at research sites one and three (the only nationalities included in this study) appeared to be based on the ways in which those identities were constructed by others at the research site.

I talked to friends all the time, especially when we first arrived, about where people lived. They use it as an identity... they talk about where they're from

(KB/Female/English/Biology/Research Site 3/R1,R2,R3)

According to Haseler's theorisation of national identity,

...whatever group consciousness and identity continues to linger may no longer be national or even local, but rather personal, based on individual characteristics...Thus being English, let alone British becomes much less

important than being young, or being a student, or being a woman. And geographically, being a Londoner becomes more important than being English or British

(Haseler, S, 1996,p.102).

Whilst this may be true for English students studying at English universities, for many of the Scottish, Irish and Northern Irish students at the Scottish institutions a sense of continuity was bound up with their notions of national identity. For students at the English university, this notion of the significance of location was manifest in terms of choice of regional location. The complex entanglement of social and national identities with temporal notions of *learning identity* reveal the centrality of the concept of learning identity when exploring ideas of studenthood along with wider and more commonly recognised constructs of identity and role (Goffman, 1974). What emerged from this study was a view of identity in which context defines what is significant in an individual's conceptualisation of their identity.

For some the need for continuity in notions of self in relation to national identity were a key point in their choice of location with regard to university. Bob's reasons for choosing a Scottish university were similar to those expressed by other Irish students interviewed. Concerned with maintaining a sense of continuity in cultural experience, at a time of upheaval in most other areas of life, the Scottish, Irish and Northern Irish students selected to attend a university which they believed would not dramatically challenge their notions of national identity in the way that they feared other British universities may.

There was Ireland, no. Wales and England, no. That left Scotland. Aberdeen is too cold so that left Glasgow and Edinburgh. I wanted to come here because I think it's more like an Irish city. The accent is more similar. I chose the place where the university was, first. I mean I wasn't going to go anywhere that wasn't good anyway.

(BO'L/Male/Irish/Computer Science/Research Site 1/ R1, R2)

In this student's case the existence of a pre-established group of Irish people settled within the city and the university was also an important consideration. He chose to reject the option of attending an English institution in favour of a location in which he felt his sense of identity could be retained in relation to being 'other' than English, a notion which was important to him.

In addition to the desire to maintain notions of national or regional identity, for some Scottish and English students studying at the three research sites, proximity to home and the continuity of experiences provided by the familiarity of the location was an important factor in their choice of university.

I chose Research Site 1 because it was closest to home and it had a good reputation

(KS/Female/Psychology/English/Research Site 1, R1, R2)

For Lucy it was impossible to separate her need for the security which proximity to home provided from the financial imperative of having a job.

I go home every weekend because I have a job. I applied for here and to Edinburgh. I'm glad I came here, it's too expensive to go to England and I wouldn't like travelling up and down

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site3/ R1, R2, R3).

Whereas English students studying in the Scottish universities often expressed the challenge of relocation and the opportunity to remake oneself, as one of the reasons why they chose to study in Scotland. Some of these students embraced the opportunity to challenge their own notions of British and English identity and to question their preconceived ideas of different British national identities, seeking discontinuity of experience in the context of their national identity, whilst others had not considered the possibility that their national identity would matter.

The thought of coming to Scotland was a bit different. My friends were all going to Sheffield, which is a brilliant place – but half the 6th form went there and a lot of people went to Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. Although I probably would have enjoyed myself there too – I'm glad I came here.

(SO/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Beyond the initial reasons for the choice of university, national and regional identity was found to play a role in students' experiences of university life. Aside from key structural differences in the programmes of study offered in Scotland and England, cultural values and expectations and prejudices, left unexplored whilst unchallenged, surface when students from different backgrounds mix.

Go to Student Union for beer and Pizza. Big tense argument about Scottish and English – again.

(RB/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

As Rebecca's diary shows that questions of national identity can be a cause of confrontation as well as a source of reassurance and affirmation. This appeared to be particularly the case at Research Site 3 where notions of nationalism were often the topic of arguments in the students' social spaces as well as being debated in the academic contexts of many degree courses such as Politics, History and Education. English students' notions of Englishness were consequently developed in response to the sometimes hostile notions of English national identity presented to them by their Scottish peers. In the same way as it has often been argued that Scotland's identity as a nation is forged only through its people's sense of their 'otherness' to England, so individual English student's sense of national identity is constructed in reaction to being confronted by Scottish nationalism and Scottish views of Englishness, which often jarred with their own sense of self and identity.

I don't think that I ever really thought about being English until I came to Scotland. It was only when people started to describe me as English and talk about being English in a bad way that I thought about it. Being 'English' or 'Scottish' or something - it's so much more of an issue here than it was at home. I don't know if that's just because I was English and so was everybody else –or what? But it was a bit of a surprise to be confronted by hostility because of where I was from and how I spoke. Most of the time people are just messing about – having a laugh and slagging you off – but sometimes I think there's more to it than that.

(JD/Female/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/R1)

My position as an English researcher may have had an impact on what students chose to tell me about their views on national identity and the impact it has had on their experiences. I did not ask any specific questions concerning notions of nationalism, but as can be seen from the interview extracts above it proved to be a contentious issue for a few students. However, national identity was much more commonly raised as being a cause for feelings of discontinuity amongst students at the Scottish institutions. This can at least be partially explained by the comparatively homogeneous group of students interviewed at research site 2, i.e. they were all English.

However, within Scotland as within England regional cultural variations are widely recognised and accepted, as informing individual notions of self-identity and contributing

to the development of wider national identity constructs. “Local experience mediates national identity” (Cohen, 1986, p.13). National identity also mediates local experiences (Mc Crone, 1992), “ ‘Scotland’ is above all a set of meanings, as is England... Much depends on whose meaning wins out” (McCrone, 1992, p.32)

Alternative regional identities are often linked to notions of social class with, for example, Glasgow being traditionally associated with industry and shipping and Edinburgh seen as being more middleclass, ‘white collar’. Such divisions posed challenges for some Scottish students who chose a university away from their place of birth, but still within Scotland.

As Devine explains,

...pronounced regional variations within Scotland, as between the prosperous Grampian and Edinburgh regions at one extreme and Glasgow and much of the western lowlands at the other...

(Devine, T., 2000, p.597).

Perceived differences in regional identities and social background were used by Lucy to explain the feelings of discontinuity in her perceptions of her self in a social context once at university. In thinking of herself prior to university entry, Lucy had regarded herself as someone who made friends easily. She looked for continuity of experience in this aspect of her life at university and was surprised to find herself confronted with discontinuity. In attempting to understand the reasons for the discontinuity she experiences she tries to renegotiate her perception of her position on this continuum.

I used to feel as though I was quite an easy person to get on with and I've always made lots of friends, but I think that's because I've always been in an environment where people have got things in common with me. If you meet people at school they've all got things in common with you. When you come here people come from boarding schools and people come from the east end of Glasgow like me – do you know what I mean? You're in a mixed group and it's harder to make friends.

(LD/Female/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Perceptions of Racism and Identity

During this chapter, a recurring theme has been the importance of negotiating a sense of continuity in order to manage discontinuity effectively during the transition to university. For some students their wider personal identity constructs, such as their perception of national or regional identity, or social class and ethnicity, jarred with the predominant culture of the university and their experience of being a student was not necessarily one of belonging to the institution. Such feelings of dislocation seem to be most prevalent amongst students who expected continuity of experience but who failed to find it. These students wished to relocate themselves comfortably in the same position on the continua as before university entry but were forced into a re-negotiation by others in areas of their life which they did not expect to find their identity challenged and where they did not want to be relocated. In such cases renegotiating the relationship between the individual and the institution, can be problematic.

Taylor, writing about the politics of recognition provides an insight into some of the feelings of alienation associated with experiences of misrecognition.

...[O]ur identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being

(Taylor, 1994a, p.25).

For one student I interviewed the feelings of alienation he experienced in his academic life at university were compounded by the racist treatment he felt he received from university staff. He believed that because he was black certain negative judgements were being made about him.

My other major problem is the security guard. Here's an instance for you. Okay, obviously you're not going to notice it but where I come from it's quite cosmopolitan, a lot of different cultures. But up here, I've encountered since I've been here, a lot more racism. I really have. Like for instance the security guard in my hall. The very first night I was here. I went out. I went out by myself cos I had nothing to do. So anyway, I came

*back and went to walk up to my bedroom. Wasn't drunk or anything and the security guards, they sit in a little office just watching T.V. That's what they do. It was like I was a f***ing criminal. It was like, "Where are you going? Where are you going?" Like I wasn't supposed to be there. I said, "I'm going to my room". They said, "What room?" I said, "I live here". They said, "Where do you live? Where do you live? What's your name? Show me some ID". I said, "I haven't got no college ID, I'm a first year". They said "What's your name?". I said "Liam". So they went to look it up. I was like, f*** - you don't believe me. Right the next night. The door was locked, right? And I didn't know how to unlock the door. I knew I had a key, but I thought it was just the key to the mailbox. So I knocked on the front door and they wouldn't let me in. So I say, "Can you let me in please?" They say, "Why?" – "I live here". The security guards change right. "I live here, can you let me in?". "What's your name?" So they had to check my name and I showed him the ID, so he let me in. Happened three times in a row. The next night I got pissed off, "What's your name? Blah, blah, blah" I said, "F*** this" and walked off. They said, "Where are you going? "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to my room – look I've got a key. If the key fits, this is my door. This is my room so can you just f*** off yer?" I put the key in the lock, turned it and went in*

(LL/Male/History/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

The incident described by Liam is of course open to alternative interpretations to the one ascribed to it by him, however, because of his feelings of being forced to re-evaluate others' perceptions of him as a black man at university, as he describes himself, he perceives the security guards' actions as being racist. For Liam dislocation between his sense of identity and his experiences of the institution (Mann, 2001) is occurring. Such feelings of dislocation are the consequence of feelings of discontinuity in multiple settings throughout his university experience when he is seeking a position of continuity (see page 189-192 for his views of learning and his experiences of history at university).

'Concepts of Class' defining the self in relation to others

Universities are evaluators of ability and success. Mac An Ghail (1996) has researched class, culture, and difference in England in terms of deconstructing the institutional norm and Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) study of Irish universities identified three sets of barriers experienced by low-income, working-class students in accessing and succeeding in higher education. These factors were economic, social and cultural, and educational. "The three sets of barriers were found to be highly interactive" (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p.445). The culture of an organisation appears to play an important role in the self-selection process undertaken by staff and students when deciding upon applying to a particular institution. A student's sense of their academic attainment and social characteristics and status were also found to influence the self-selection process involved in applying to university. The perception of the student of themselves and their perception of the institution can contribute to some students' decisions not to apply to certain universities.

Evidence of this can be seen in comments such as,

The careers guy said to apply for Oxford or Cambridge, but I decided not to. It wasn't for me. ... I applied here and to other Scottish universities instead

(FM/Female/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 1/R1, R2,R3)

Implicit in this student's rejection of Oxford and Cambridge are notions of her own need for continuity of experience. Her rejection of these institutions stems from her perception of herself as not being 'like' an Oxbridge student, 'it wasn't for me'. Other students experienced similar difficulties in imagining themselves as a student at all, prior to application.

I couldn't imagine myself being at university. I only applied in the sixth form.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/R1, R2, R3)

However, for the students interviewed, once at university, social class appeared to play a more subtle role in students' experiences than has been discerned in other research. The only students who made explicit reference to notions of class relating to their experiences of university were at research site one, and these comments differed from the feelings of social exclusion reported by working class students in the other studies mentioned. In this research it was 'traditional' students, many of whom had parents who had been to

university and who came from home where their financial dependency was not a major burden, who spoke about their perceptions of social strata at the university. For these students concepts of class were more to do with how they defined themselves in relation to others in the scene and their understandings of the worlds these other inhabit.

As a second generation student with pre-constructed notions of studenthood prior to university entry, Karen did not expect to be confronted with an alternative model of student life. In identifying the group of students defined as the 'yahs' she is categorising herself as the other in relation to this group.

It's hard to pluck up courage and go and speak to people. I also feel that it's very upper class here and I feel very common most of the time. You can just tell when you speak to them if they're a "yah". It's unbelievable the money that they have. They jet down to London for the weekend

(KS/Female/Psychology/Scottish/Research Site 1/ R1, R2)

Describing herself as feeling 'common' she contrasts her own perception of herself with her perception of this other group of students attributing to them the feelings of confidence, belongingness and experience which she feels that she herself lacks. However, for Karen the notion of a moneyed group of students conflicts with her view of students as financially struggling. A sentiment echoed by Sarah who says,

It's a posh, rich place. You get the feeling that they look down on you.

(SO/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Conversely, in defining themselves as not belonging to the 'yah' group both Fern and Catherine are defining themselves in positive terms in relation to a group of students which they characterise as 'funny' and 'sloany'. For them, an important part of their identity as a student is not to be seen as belonging to this group.

The "yahs" – they're quite funny actually. I'm friends with some of them.

The boarding school thing – Rugby and stuff – it's all quite funny

(FM/Female/politics/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Research site 1 is famous for being sloany. I didn't really know anyone from public school before – but here people are from Harrow and Eaton - which is good in a way because it made me recognise my prejudices. Some of them are really nice – others aren't. It's not their fault their parents chose to send them there.

(CB/Female/Politics/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

As the extracts from the student transcripts have shown, for the students in the sample concepts of class may operate in less explicit terms than prior studies have found (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998), however, such notions are still a key identifier in these students experiences of constructing their identity at university.

Section 5: Negotiating the student role at the point of university entry

Through out this chapter I have been concerned with identifying areas of interaction, which influence both how students position themselves and are positioned in relation to others in terms of individual *learning identity* at a pre and post university entry stage. The emphasis of this study is on the individual's interpretation of support, dependency, interdependency and reciprocity in relationships within the 'frame' (Goffman, 1974) of the university. The development of students' views of their individualised role as a student is the cumulative result of their experiences of continuity and discontinuity within the cultural discourses of the institution in addition to wider factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity. According to this theorisation, the person and the world should be seen as simultaneously shaping. The concept of *learning identity* includes the notion of the importance of interaction and negotiation and deals with transition as a dynamic process of reciprocal engagement between the individual's thoughts and feelings and the environment and circumstances in which they find themselves (Stevens and Walker, 1996).

Recent work by Mc Innis, James, and Mc Naught (1999) has suggested the centrality of the extent to which individuals regard themselves as suitable to be students at the point of transition.

Students who are positive about their sense of place at university, and who see themselves firmly in the role of student, are said to have made a

'comfortable entry' to life on campus (Williams 1992: p 63)...we believed the extent to which individuals see themselves as students was conceptually more central than 'belongingness' to the process of integration and involvement...A clear majority of students in the sample (73%) really liked being university students, and only a very small minority (8%) were negative at the end of the first semester

(McInnis, James, and McNaught, 1999, pp. 39-40)

The importance of conceptualising oneself as a student prior to university entry has been discussed (pages 208-216), however, once at university it is important that students negotiate an individual role for themselves and move beyond their previous notions of studenthood, which as can be seen from the students' comments earlier in the chapter, are often based on Utopian constructions of student life maintained through the cultural discourses of studenthood at both a pre and post university stage (Chatterton, 1999) located within the social rather than the academic discourse settings of the university.

'Student' learning identities could be regarded as concentric circles with broad notions of studenthood drawn from the media and engagement in pre-student cultural discourses forming the out side layer. Once at university notions of role are negotiated and personalised forming an inner identity construct of the individual as 'student'. This image is mediated by the culture of the institution to which the student belongs and the process of specialisation and professionalisation begun when participating in the academic discourses of their disciplines. Prior attitudes towards learning formed at

school and within the family also influence the notion of studenthood arrived at by the individual.

It has been argued by McInnis, James, and Mc Naught, (1999) that,

...it seems reasonable to conclude that somewhere between 3 and 7 % of the students sampled are seriously alienated from the university. On the other hand students who are only marginally committed but not particularly concerned about it, present a bigger and more subtle challenge for universities

(McInnis, and James, 1999, p. 41)

In trying to understand degrees of alienation experienced by the students in this sample, it was the cumulative 'misalignment of students' desired positions of the continuity/discontinuity continua across discourse settings which appeared to result in students' feelings of dislocation and lack of commitment to the university, see for example Liam and Paul's experiences (pages 189-192 and 192-194). A conceptualisation seemingly reinforced by McInnis and James (1999) observation that,

...the social nature of the university experience has the potential for contributing positively to academic performance, and more generally should influence the individual's sense of competence. It is also the case that social involvement can undermine academic outcomes, and likewise reinforce negative views of competence. The nature and extent of social

involvement is meaningful in its own right as part of the process of personal development and identity formation

(McInnis, and James, 1999, p.47)

Students in the sample demonstrated an awareness of the multiple discourses in which they were interlocutors and spoke of the tensions experienced in their attempts to align their experiences of themselves across settings in negotiating their positions between continuity and discontinuity and forging a revised understanding of *learning identity*.

I think that time management and managing your social life are very important at university because it's very easy just to concentrate on one. University is the only place when you've got time to discover things about yourself. I'm trying to find out what I want to do, what will motivate me and what I'm interested in. ...I thought I could get away with doing nothing and I couldn't. There was a lot of things going on and I was trying to be somebody different – be seen here and there and boyfriends and stuff. I feel like I was expected to be a certain kind of person and go out and stuff. ...It's been difficult learning as well that you don't have to live the life of a student. You don't have to be seen running about the corridors all the time 'having a good time'. You don't have to be seen with a book every night studying. You don't have to take up these roles. You don't have to know everyone in halls and mess about all the time. I think you think that you have to do that for your own benefit. If you don't make an effort there would be nobody there for you. Now I know

enough people to be happy with. If you see other people that's fine. You don't have to be seen everywhere.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site3/R1, R2, R3)

Prior to coming to university Lucy had ideas about what the 'role' of a student might mean for her. These seem to have centred upon social expectations of going out and being seen to go out by others. This initial student 'role' can almost be seen as a mask or stereotype of student behaviour, which she feels compelled to adopt initially out of fear of social isolation. She says, *'I think you have to do that for your own benefit. If you don't there would be nobody there for you'*. During the course of the semester she renegotiates her position within the social discourse settings of the university in order to reposition herself academically within the institution. Lucy's priorities change and continuity of experience in terms of academic achievement become increasingly important and as a consequence of this her need to *be seen running about the corridors all the time, 'having a good time'*, lessen. Once she has established a network of friends she is able to reject elements of her initial conceptualisation of the student 'role' and to negotiate an individualised position in relation to her location within the various discourse settings in which she is participating.

The process of developing an individualised interpretation of studenthood was spoken about by many of the students interviewed. In a lot of these cases the renegotiated position which the students describe striving for is concerned with a notion of

studenthood more firmly located within the academic discourses of the university than the stereotype of student behaviour had led them to envisage.

You hear all these stories about never doing any work or going to any lectures. But if I never went to any lectures I'd be totally lost. I always go to my lectures unless I've got a good excuse, but you hear about students just lying in bed all day – if you did that you wouldn't know what was going on. I think it is a big myth that students are drunk every night and asleep all the next day.

(LC/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/R1)

Bill expressed a similar rejection of the notion of student and pupil which he believed had negative connotations. His own negotiated position in terms of *learning identity* went beyond his current situated experiences of university towards a conceptualisation of learning identity as synonymous with person hood.

I think of myself as a learner, but only know you've asked me. I would never describe myself as that. Words like pupil and student have a lot of connotations, but not very much to do with learning at all. Learning is what you do as a person. If you don't learn, you don't go anywhere. From wherever consciousness starts, you're building your brain from the inside.

(BG/Male/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 2, R1, R2, R3)

In addition to challenging the stereotype of academic laziness which many of the students' narratives attempted to do, other students wished to challenge the notion of the rich, apathetic student which they felt conflicted with their own individually negotiated experience of studenthood.

I think being a student is about learning. People always think of students as staying in bed all day and watching daytime TV. and drinking constantly – which is an important part (laughs). But we're not given credit for other things we're involved in like giving up time for the Kosovo crisis or doing environmental work or taking kids from bad parts of the city out. People don't have that image of students because there are a lot of rich students, especially here [research site 1] people in the city just think they're mobile phone carrying ...and there have been all these stories in the press about students here having champagne receptions and flying helicopters to London and things like that.

(CB/Female/Politics/English/research site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

In this way the popular myths of student life which are part of the cultural discourses which surround and construct notions of studenthood are reviewed by students once they become part of the institution. Individuals thus negotiate their own role as a student within the context of their experiences of university and their expectations of higher education formed prior to entry.

In this chapter I have offered examples from the data which illustrate the process of negotiation involved in 'being and becoming a student' (Barnett, 1990). In the following chapters the theorisation of *learning identity* as constructed and negotiated within various discourse settings within and beyond the university will be explored further. In the next chapter I will be examining students' experiences of negotiating *learning identity* within the internalised discourse setting of their perceptions of the institution's culture and their individualised 'role' within it.

Part 4

Entering The Academic Dialogue:

Students And Their Institutions

Chapter Six

Negotiating A Position Within An Institutional Culture: Students' Perceptions Of Their Universities

—The following chapter is concerned with the ways in which students negotiate *learning identity* within the context of their perceptions of the university's institutional culture. The concept of institutional culture is important in relation to the ways in which students experience the university at an application and post entry stage. Pre-entry, the ways in which the students in this sample perceived the culture of the institution appeared to influence the extent to which they expected to experience a 'personal fit' between self and institution, their notions of the reputation of the university and its location within a particular national education system and the academic reputation of their chosen course. Once at university students' experiences of the cultures of learning operating within the three research sites became increasingly important as they struggled to position themselves within the academic discourses of the university.

In this chapter I intend to explore the relationship between students' *learning identities* and the institutions to which they belong in terms of the data gathered from respondents at research sites one, two and three. In doing so I hope that the following discussion of will illuminate the complex negotiation of identity undertaken by traditional age students during the transition to university.

Culture is a social reality in so far as it is representative culture...Representative culture includes those beliefs, understandings, images, ideas, ideologies, etc. which influence social actions, either because they are being actively shared, or because they are being passively acknowledged as valid, right, good, or the like

(Tenbruck, 1989, p.22).

When conceptualising university culture I draw on the ideas put forward by Barnett (1990) and Tenbruck (1989). The culture of the university examined in this chapter is an exploration of the values, attributes, attainments and expectations which those involved in the institution accept as shared and are collectively regarded as being 'right, valid, or good', or which they passively accept as the same. The inter-relationship between students' learning identities and the cultural discourses of the university will also be explored in the in the light of MacIntyre's (1985) concept of the influence of the institution as a setting on developing an understanding of temporal identity.

We place the agent's intentions, ...in causal and temporal order with reference to their role in his or her history; and we also place them with reference to their role in the history of the setting or settings to which they belong

(MacIntyre, 1985, p.208).

Section 1: Conceptualising Institutional Culture

The concept of institutional culture is amorphous, as each individual belonging to an institution may perceive its culture differently. What is important is not the identification of a tangible institutional culture, but the ways in which the students interviewed conceptualised and reacted to their perceptions of the culture of their institution. In talking of institutional culture I refer to the shared values and beliefs which the students attending the university believed operated within it, and the abstracted notion of their 'role' as students of that institution. The notion of student 'role' in relation to institutional culture differs from the socially orientated construct discussed in chapter five. In contrast this version of the student 'role' should be regarded as an academic orientated view of studenthood which is located firmly within academic/course related learning. It is an idealised rather than an individually constructed view of studenthood rooted in the student's conceptualisation of what it is to be a successful student at their particular university.

Students' experiences of institutional culture appeared to be dependent upon the extent to which they believed that they were able to negotiate their own position within it. Difficulties occurred for Bill when he felt that no space existed for him to negotiate his own identity as a student within the cultural constraints of the institution.

You go to an institution and they try to impose upon you what they think a person who is really interested in this subject should be like. Instead of allowing you to decide how interested you are in things, they insist that you must become obsessed with it and make it a complete and integrated part of your existence. But you can't do that. It's not specific to the individual. It's not paying attention to you as a person.

(BG/Male/Social Anthropology/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Bill's response to the institution was particularly hostile, viewing it as he did as a means of depersonalised social control. Conflict arose for him as the result of his perception of the institution as defining and limiting his own construction of *learning identity*. In his view the notion of studenthood was not sufficiently negotiable within the confines of his interpretation of the institution's culture.

This research focuses on individual's *learning identities*, however, it is important to remember that tutors, lecturers and universities strongly influence learning through the control of learning tasks and the assessment of learning outcomes. However, some

students go beyond the parameters of assessment criteria in order to define their own learning. My data does not allow me to say anything meaningful about particular members of academic staff or individual departments or faculties, however, as the research progressed, significant differences between students' perceptions of the cultures of the three institutions in my sample became apparent.

In part one of this thesis I put forward the idea of conceptualising communities as conversations and throughout chapter five and in this and subsequent data chapters this remains an important notion. Discourse sites in which students negotiate their *learning identity* and their positions in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience should be seen as both communities and conversations which individuals are either able to join and participate in, or are excluded from. The culture of the university as perceived by the student is just such a discourse community, which offers the opportunity of either exclusion from the academic community or integration into it.

In the *Idea of Higher Education* (1990), Barnett explores a similar notion of the interrelationship between culture and community of discourse.

The idea of culture suggests a shared set of meanings, beliefs, understandings and ideas; in short, a taken for granted way of life, in which there is a reasonably clear difference between those on the inside and those on the outside of the community.

Part of the sharing, and sense of community, resides in the taken-for-granted aspects of the culture. The unquestioned stock (of dominant ideas, concepts, theories and research practices) bestows personal identity and sustains the community as a community. Consequently, those on the inside recognise each other as one of themselves. The recognition takes several forms, including modes of communication. All these features are apparent in the academic community.

(Barnett, 1990, p.97)

Though later going on to explain that, the sense of consensus amongst academics within an institution may not be as strong as the sense of 'community of discourse' pervading the national or global academic discipline, Barnett's notion of culture and its impact upon the individual in terms of the shaping of identity through the communication of values and specialised language, is an interesting starting point for the exploration of ideas relating to institutional culture and identity addressed in this chapter.

However, Barnett's (1990) theorisation of the link between culture and identity does not fully answer the interpretation of the construction of *learning identity* I am suggesting as it contains the notion that culture is both tangible and that individual's relationships within it are given rather than negotiated. Such an interpretation of culture and its influence on identity apparently reinforce the notion of 'institutional culture' expressed and experienced by Bill, the assumption that individual's must adopt all aspects of the 'role' assigned to them within the culture of the institution in order to become part of the community of discourse and be seen by others as 'inside' rather than 'outside' the

dialogue. This I would argue was not the experience of all the students' interviewed in this project. Many felt able to negotiate their own position in relation to their perception of the demands of the institution of them and were able to feel as though they could participate in the discourse community without adopting whole-sale a 'role' assigned to them by the institution.

The idea that institutional cultures influence the identity and personal development of their members has often been revisited, (Ringer, 1990, Evans, and Farley, (1998), Sun, Creemers, and de Jong, (2000); James, (2000)). The ways in which students' perceive and interpret the culture of the institution is important in the extent to which they believe their position within it to be negotiable rather than given. To put this another way, do students' perceive the culture of their institution to be static or dynamic; constructed or given? In addition, if they do see institutional culture as dynamic, do they see themselves as part of the construction process? These questions are particularly relevant in relation to students' experiences of the institution (Barnett, 1990, Antikainen *et al*, 1996, Brew, 1999). In James' study of the transition to tertiary education in Australia (2000) he found that the 'successful' students interviewed identified the 'unsuccessful' students, as having failed to connect with the institution and it's learning environment, or with their peers.

As Brew (1999) points out, "All research, scholarship, teaching and learning activities taking place in academic contexts are dependent on prevailing discourses regarding the nature of knowledge" (p.291). Universities are active in the creation and maintenance of

an individual institutional culture. This is distinct from the cultures of the invisible colleges to which members of academic disciplines belong (Barnett, 1990). However, both members of institutions and 'invisible colleges' are involved in on-going discourses concerning the nature of knowledge. As the interlocutors are involved in both institutional and discipline specific debates, these dialogues are intertwined and consequently help to establish a prevailing notion of knowledge and its transmission or negotiation within the wider academic community. This in turn has implications for individual universities as, "The way in which knowledge is conceived is central to the kind of teaching that is done and to what we understand research to be" (Brew, 1999, p.291).

According to Rowland (1996, p.15) knowledge can either be perceived as, 'absolute, specialised and unrelated to wider perspectives or experiences of life' or as 'tentative, open to reinterpretation or containing insights which can be applied more widely'. The various positions held by the each university within the dialogue on the question of knowledge, influences every aspect of teaching and learning within the tertiary education sector and has implications for students attempting to gain entrée into the community of discourse.

Language is used as a marker of individual inclusion in community discourses and entrée into the community culture operates through acceptance into the discourse (see chapter 3). Institutional cultures interlace in a direct way with the identities of those involved in and belonging to them (Giddens, 1991). They provide a notional frame of

reference against which students and staff are able to try their conceptualisations of what is 'valid, right and good' (Tenbruck, 1989) within the individual's perception of the cultural prescription of the institution. Consequently perceptions of institutional notions of knowledge as either constructed or transmitted play an influential part in the process of negotiation involved in the transformation of students' temporal understandings of their *learning identity* within the context of the higher education institution.

In coming to an understanding of the modes of communication students are responding to in constructing their notions of institutional culture Brew (1999) suggests that the concept of 'socially useful knowledge' is important. The researcher, tutor and student work within the organisational and social context of the institution. "...[R]elationships of power existing within the academic community and within society in general define what findings are deemed acceptable. Indeed, there appears to be a hierarchy of political, academic, ethical, cultural and historical forces which define what counts as socially useful knowledge" (Brew, 1999, p.293). The notion of what counts as 'socially useful knowledge' is partially constructed, mediated and transmitted by the institution to those belonging to it and who are already interlocutors in the discourse.

This framework offers a way of understanding students' perceptions of success and inclusion in the dialogues of the institution and as a result can have a powerful influence on the self-efficacy beliefs of the individuals who by their participation in the university community, create and maintain its culture and establish their own identities in relation to it. The notion of a shared conceptualisation of 'human good' represented by an,

institution's culture also strongly reflects the ideas put forward by Taylor (1989) in his discussion of *The Sources of the Self*. In this text Taylor describes individuals' search for identity in terms of people striving for a notion of truth and goodness. The institution proffers one interpretation of the nature of 'goodness' which members can in theory, choose to accept either actively or passively, or alternatively choose to reject in favour of an alternative notion of what is 'right, valid or good' (Tenbruck, 1989). However, rejection may result in marginalisation or possible alienation, though this does not necessarily mean failure for students in assessment terms.

The study of organisational symbolism (eg Strati, 1998) and research into language in organisations (e.g. Cossette, 1998) has enabled researchers to develop a greater understanding of the ways in which institutions influence the people who compose them. However, as Blasé (1993) acknowledges, political theorists have argued that systems models of organisations have failed to account for the complexities within each setting. Such models ignore individual differences in 'values, ideologies, choices, goals and interests...' (p.3) and consequently miss out key factors, which influence the micro-political culture of an organisation. The picture is a complex one, and as Kantung *et al* (1999) point out. The untangling of the inter-relationship between students and their institutions is not a straightforward or easy process.

Section 2: Experiencing Institutional Culture

Institutional cultures are the product of multiple discourses of identity, which include both the individual and collective identities of staff and students. The university locates

itself within a global debate over the nature and purposes of higher education. It also sets itself within a national context in terms of the image it presents and promotes to others in the higher education community and beyond. This process is collectively managed by the staff and students, who represent the university publicly, as well as those involved in the marketing of the institution. However, the culture which is created within an institution is necessarily more subtle and complex than the image promoted. Creating and maintaining an institutional culture is a dynamic process influenced by national policy initiatives as well as by the values and expectations of the members of the institution. This process encompasses dialogues concerning the nature of knowledge and learning set within global, national and regional identity constructs, which are themselves constantly changing and transforming over time. Such dialogues are relevant to the student because they are used by them to construct their sense of institutional culture and their place within it.

The impact of increasing accountability (Barnett, 2000), reduced levels of autonomy, coupled pressure to publish and increasing student numbers, have encouraged discussions concerning the nature of academic professionalism (Nixon, 2001). Identity constructs have been questioned and staff within the university sector, have been forced to reappraise their role within the institution and within society at large as the questions about the generation and ownership of knowledge are brought to the fore. However, this debate must now also be explored in terms of students' experiences in the changing higher education system. To label students as consumers or customers or to look at staff, student ratios and access and completion rates is not sufficient, students'

relationships with their institutions deserve the attention that staff relations have received in the last ten years in the UK (Nixon *et al*, 2001).

An aspect of this debate concerns the way in which power operates within an organisation, often in unofficial and unintended ways. In terms of the impact of an institution's micro-politics on the formation of institutional culture, the differential power relations existing in universities, play a significant role, as the creation and maintenance of an institutional culture is based on shared understandings of these power structures. According to Higgins, Reading and Taylor (1996),

Students are ... acutely aware of the 'system' within which they operate.

...it seems that students often collude with the system and many remain compliant in the face of differential power relations. They may seek to challenge their individual tutor but rarely engage with the system as a whole. The reasons for this are complex, but clearly any challenge to the status quo is both extremely threatening and time consuming. Students only have a few years (or less) of study at any particular institution.

Tutors are in a far better position to influence change

(p.102-3).

The ways in which the culture of an institution influences the learning identities of the students who belong to it can be strongly affected by the closeness of 'fit' between what the student considers to be 'right valid and good' (Tenbruck, 1989) and the values are

presented as the public image of the institution (James, 2000). According to Weil (1986) who deals with a similar notion of temporal learner identity within an adult education context,

The evidence related to the construct 'learner identity' suggests ... hypotheses about the conditions which on the one hand, promote conflict and crisis, alienation and fragmentation, or on the other, coherence, continuity, integration and wholeness for diverse adult learners interacting in various learning context.

(Weil, S., 1986, p.224)

It is clear from the data gathered in this study and the findings published by Weil (1986, 1989) that students' temporal notions of themselves as learners plays a key role in their shifting constructs of *learning identity*, whether they be mature adult returnees or traditional age students. However, the polarised view adopted by Weil (1986) does not fully answer the experiences described by the students interviewed in this study. Rather than experiencing either 'continuity, coherence, integration and wholeness' or 'conflict, crisis, alienation and fragmentation' the students interviewed more often spoke of a mixture or all of these experiences in different contexts and at different times during the course of their first year at university.

The examination of students' expectations of themselves and the institutions to which they belong has been important in attempting to understand the significance of

institutional culture in the shaping and transformation of *learning identity*. ‘Their experiences of transition is influenced by a complex array of personal and social factors mediated by the organisational culture of the particular university’ (McInnes *et al*, 1995, p.29). He identifies the central problem for teaching and learning in the current climate of diversity as being one of aligning institutional goals with individual needs and balancing a necessary challenge for students against the risk of the tension becoming overwhelming and leading to students becoming dysfunctional and counterproductive. Whilst this may appear to some to be an extreme view, I would argue that students need to feel part of the community of discourse.

HEFCE data collected during the 1998-99 academic year were disaggregated by institution. These figures revealed that non-completion rates were considerably higher in the post-1992 universities and in colleges than in other higher education institutions, where there was a high proportion of working class and mature students (Yorke, 2000). The 1997 HEFCE study found that one of the five main factors influencing non-completion amongst students in English institutions was incompatibility between the student and the institution. Students often made the wrong choice, through insufficient information, or had expectations, which were not fulfilled. Though this is the most recent British data available at the time of writing, the structuralist conclusion attributing cause and effect would seem to be too simplistic in terms of the findings of this research project. Instead I would argue that for a more detailed exploration of students’ relationships with their institutions. In the following section I present three contrasting

institutional contexts and discuss students' perceptions of them as learning environments.

Section 3: Three Contrasting Institutional Contexts

Ideas about what is 'right valid and good' (Tenbruck, 1989) differ throughout the higher education system from institution to institution as the data gathered from the three research sites in this study reveals. As a result notions of 'representative' culture must be confined to the cultural aspirations accepted by those within an institution. The culture of the university is promoted and maintained in a number of ways, some of which are within the institution's power to control and some of which are not. These factors include the portrayal of the university's ideals in publicity material, interactive websites, the accepted working practises and aspirations of those involved in teaching, learning and research in the university, and the wider public perception of the institution and its role and goals all of which play an important part in shaping students' expectations at the point of university choice.

The following explorations of institutional cultures at the three research sites explores the complex relationship between the institutions' self promoted identity, public perception and the culture of the institution as perceived by new students pre and post entry.

Research Site One: A Traditional and Long Established Split-Site City University in Central Scotland

This section is designed to place research site one in context and to offer a composite view of the institution from the students' comments and the publicity material openly available to students which helped to shape their view of the institution.

At research site one, a culture of autonomy and self-sufficiency in relation to learning is strongly promoted and departments encourage students to think in terms of ideas of the university's research and teaching excellence and superiority in various fields. A positive image of both the institution and those who belong to it is strongly encouraged. This image is reinforced by public perceptions of the institution in the academic community and by employers in the public and private sectors.

In the university's mission statement (Prospectus, 1998, p.1) it states that two of the institution's 'core strategic objectives' are "to sustain its identity as a research and teaching institution of the highest national quality" and "to produce graduates equipped for high personal and professional achievement". Students opting into this culture are defining themselves as eligible and able to cope with the demands, which the institution will place upon them to meet expectations of autonomy and achievement.

The institution also promotes a strongly Scottish identity, allying itself to the value system attributed to Scottish Tertiary education, which emphasises the value of 'breadth'

as well as 'depth' in study. As a result the institution offers a four year degree programme and ensures that students take two additional subjects as well as their main degree. Students are also able to delay specialisation until a late stage in their degree programme. The culture of the institution as described in the prospectus, is ostensibly Scottish despite the large numbers of English staff and students. In the university's publicity material the valuable "...intellectual and economic relationship with the Scottish community" (Prospectus, 1998, p.1) is highlighted. This relationship, it is claimed, "...forms its (the university's) base and provides the foundation from which it will continue to look to the widest international horizons enriching both itself and Scotland" (Prospectus, 1998, p.1).

As Mc Crone Points out, "The abstract idea of society can not be separated from the concrete reality of a national society, since this idea is defined as a network of institutions, controls and education..." (Mc Crone, 1992). However, the relationship between institution and Scottish cultural identity can create a conflict of identity for Scottish students entering the university as their sense of self as a Scot may conflict with the notion of Scottish identity promoted by the institution (see chapter 5). In contrast, for English students the particular brand of Scottishness promoted by the institution is accepted and internalised as unproblematic.

I thoroughly enjoy it here. It's a really good laugh and it's great being in Scotland. The courses are pretty good too. I think they give you enough guidance on what the course is about and what is expected of you at the

start... There is a great deal of anxiety at one point before you leave home, the last few days. But once you're here it's fantastic and you meet so many people and you're living in a new part of the country, away from home. It's excellent.

(AR/Male/Politics/English/Research Site 1, R1, R3)

A Positive Culture For Learning

In this section I examine the ways in which students position themselves in relation to their perception of the institution. The received view of this university as expressed by the students interviewed, was one of a highly academic institution which demanded autonomy of its students and expected them to be successful within such a culture. The respondents accepted this view of the institution and saw themselves as potentially able to succeed within the demands of such a culture. The respondents attending this university all had a positive image of their identities as learners at the point of university entry. All had achieved high grades in their A levels, Highers or Leaving Certificates and were selected by the university to participate in this study as a result of their strong prior academic achievements. Despite their success most of the students interviewed were a little surprised at how well they had done and were therefore not complacent about their future achievements.

5th year I was totally shocked, well, relieved actually, because everybody had expected me to get 5 A s except myself. ...Here at university you're expected to manage a lot more by yourself and that can be quite hard

(FM/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

Entering university with a strong record of success in prior learning contexts, most of the students interviewed wanted to study. Students were motivated to negotiate positions for themselves as learners, which fitted the 'proactive' 'autonomous' learner which they perceived the institution to desire them to be. The following diary extract shows a student actively engaged in such a construction of *learning identity*.

15/5/99

Went to interesting bookshop and spent £30 on Spanish literature and history books. Spent all afternoon until 9pm reading Spanish novel – it takes ages, much longer than I thought it would. 9 hours work in one day and feel completely drained and my neck is killing me. Also must tidy up my room and organise all my notes, which are half missing and randomly scattered everywhere.

Went to a flat party, but hardly anyone I knew there. Everyone seems to have gone home or mysteriously disappeared somewhere! Feeling quite isolated because I've got so much work on and hardly ever see my friends. Went to bed at 11 – not exactly a wild student lifestyle this week, I'm afraid!

(SO/Female/Social Anthropology/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Sophie's perception of the kind of studenthood demanded of her requires that she should work hard and long in order to maintain her position of continuity of experience in

relation to academic success once at research site one. In the diary it is evident that in accepting the received view of studenthood she believes is demanded of her she feels socially isolated and unable to fulfil the alternative socially orientated view of student role she had constructed prior to university entry '*not exactly a wild student lifestyle this week, I'm afraid!*' For Sophie it appears that at this point, rather than negotiating her own identity as a student and as a learner, she instead moves between the socially and academically constructed student roles discussed earlier in this chapter and chapter five.

Later in the project (round 3 of the data collection – the follow up interview) Sophie again talks implicitly about understanding of her role within the culture of the institution.

It's a lot different to school because I'd probably just use one bit of one book. I think I know now more how you're supposed to do essays – like using lots of sources. It's like I'm getting to know what they expect a bit, whereas before I had no idea. It was a really daunting prospect. I've gone down a bit this term because I wasn't working hard, but now I'm working really hard and it just seems like you're trying to keep your head above water all the time – there is so little time to do things in.

...I'm not satisfied with just passing – I want to do well. It's probably left over from school because I was used to getting the best marks but

then you come to university and everyone is better than you or the same level as you

(SO/Female/Chemistry/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

In Sophie's transcript I have highlighted her use of language and the cumulative imperative for success which underlies all she says about her work at university. She acknowledges the role she believes is demanded of her and her willingness to alter her behaviour and to '*work hard*' to provide her tutors with what she thinks they '*expect*' is evidence of her desire to maintain a sense of continuity of experience in terms of her identity as a high achieving student in an environment where she at first felt repositioned in relation to other students at the university. Instead of gaining '*the best marks*' as she was accustomed to at school she perceives everyone at the university as academically the same or superior to herself.

Achievement, in line with the aims of the university, was considered to be important by the majority of the students interviewed. Positive attitudes to learning were seen as an integral aspect of the institution's culture by all the students spoken to. However, for some students at this research site the transition to university had encouraged them to reappraise the markers by which they evaluated their success, transferring it away from a preoccupation with grades and towards less concrete or measurable notions of satisfaction with their life and learning. Isaac's comments illustrate such views,

I used to worry more about the marks I was getting – but now I think less about that. I've learnt that other things are important too, like having friends and being happy. Obviously I want to do well, but grades aren't the most important thing. I'd rather get worse grades and feel that I'd learnt more.

(IN/Male/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site1/R1)

Many students valued the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning and most were not dissatisfied with their relationships with their tutors, though they acknowledged that their experiences had been varied. Tom's comments illustrate his expectations of members of staff who he regards as already belonging to the academic discourse which he hopes to join through the course of his studies,

My Director of Studies, he's really nice ...He's a psychology lecturer – he specialises in perception and stuff like that. He's quite young...He's really friendly, but he seemed a bit scatter brained. Hopefully that won't be an issue because he'll sort it out. I mean I went to see him and he forgot to give me my timetable and then a few days before lectures started I suddenly realised that I didn't know where to go or what to do. I went back to see him and I was like ready to argue – but he was really apologetic and really nice and sweet. I was worried that psychologists might have German accents and big white hair and long white sticks and be old men. No but he was really nice.

(TS/Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Tom's stereotypical view of tutors was challenged through his interaction with his director of studies. Unfortunately other students experienced reaffirmation of the negative stereotype they held of members of academic staff and felt that a deficit model of students was being conveyed to them which conflicted with their own view of themselves as students.

My first impressions of psychology were not good because we had this mad lecturer who talked really fast. He said himself that he'd not taught first years for a long time and he just acted as though we were all rubbish – so I didn't like that. After that it got a lot better

(RB/Female/Psychology/Scottish/Research Site 1/ R1, R2)

Many of the students interviewed appeared to seek a positive role model in their interactions with members of academic staff, as Bill's comment highlights.

There's a big variation in lecturers. Sometimes they're really dry and under prepared. It's good if they seem genuinely interested in the subject.

(BG/Male/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Overall most students had had enough positive experiences of the university to convince them that they had made the right choice of institution for them. Attracting a highly qualified and apparently well motivated group of students, research site one maintains a positive culture of learning. This leads me to the next section in which I examine the subtle culture of elitism identified by the students as present in the university.

A Subtle Culture Of Elitism

[Research Site 1] is good for chemistry – that's why I chose it and I've been really impressed by how enthusiastic and friendly the tutors and lecturers have been

(SR/Male/Chemistry/NI/Research Site 1/ R1, R2)

The students interviewed were aware of the status attached to attending research site one. Shaun had a positive image of himself as a learner established at school and had chosen a university which he believed would be a good personal 'fit' for his own values and aspirations. Such a sense of efficacy appeared to be an important and factor in influencing many students' choice of research site one. The university's reputation and its place within the league tables and the esteem which students believed that future employers held for qualifications gained from this university were repeatedly mentioned as being a crucial element in students' decisions to attend the university. Most of the students interviewed made some mention of the perceived reputation of the institution and or the course to which they were applying at research site one.

The comments, made by these students in the maths and computer science departments, are typical of the kind of remarks concerning decision making made by those interviewed.

I wanted to go somewhere that had a good reputation for maths. I went to university open days and to one of those fair things and picked up prospectuses. I also talked to teachers. That way I picked up ideas about what different universities are like. I've got friends that have been to university already so I talked to them too. I came here and I just fell in love with the place, it's such a beautiful city as well

(AG/Female/Maths/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

I wasn't going to go to somewhere that wasn't a major university, as far as I was concerned major university is major university. The place where you go is important

(BO'L/Male/Computing/Irish/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

In some subject areas such as Chemistry, Research Site 1 discourages applicants who have not completed a sixth year and either taken SYS in relevant subjects or sat additional Highers. The university also has a policy of allowing students with strong entry qualifications to join certain courses (particularly science) at second year entry

level. Some of the students interviewed, who had taken this route experienced feelings of youth and disorientation in comparison with older and more experienced peers. Though for these students such emotions were tempered by the knowledge that both the university and the department considered them to be strong enough candidates to miss the first year of their degree course. During the time that these interviews were conducted (the academic year 1998/99) tuition fees were in place across the whole of Scotland and England. As a result a higher than usual number of candidates had opted for second year entry in order to decrease the number of fee-paying years they were at the university.

It was like being thrown in at the deep end because I went straight into second year. Everyone else knew what they were doing, and I had no idea. Practical classes were really difficult because at A Level we did no practical work...It's better now because I've met up with other people who went straight into second year, there are about 30 of I think.

(TH/Male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

I got second year entry for Chemistry and Geography. It's more of a challenge. Lots of people are going into 2nd year this year than ever before because of tuition fees. It's put a lot of my friends off, people that would have come to university before.

(SO/Female/Chemistry /English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

I'd got straight into second year. I'd turned Cambridge down when they offered me a place – I enjoyed that. I've always loved chemistry and I've always been good enough not to have to do too much work.

(TE/Male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/R1)

As the student comments above show, 'fitting in' outside the peer group initially posed difficulties for most of the second year entry students interviewed. However, these problems were countered by university affirmation of their perceptions of themselves as able students.

Aside from the clear focus on academic attainment and high expectations of success, social class was explicitly raised as being an issue by a number of the students interviewed. As has been examined earlier, the difficulties some students experienced in relation to social class at this institution are different from those identified in other studies (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998).

It's a posh, rich place. You get the feeling that they look down on you.

(SO/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

At this research site students with graduate parents and who were not financially struggling felt the divide between them and the group of wealthy students identified as the "yahs". These students had the reputation for having privileged backgrounds and

large amounts of disposable income. Some students perceived this group as a threat because they seemed more confident and self-assured than other students. However, as Catherine's comments reveal, for other students the existence of a wealthy student elite was a chance to confront her prejudices and examine her views of those who have attended fee-paying schools. Such divisions within the student body exist within every institution, though perhaps in a less pronounced manner than at research site 1. The heterogeneous nature of the student body is a factor, which can often be ignored, especially within the student population drawn straight from school and college and of 'traditional' age. However, as these students' responses reveal perceived social divisions can affect students' engagement both socially and academically.

The Influence Of Research Site One On Students' Identities As Learners

After a year at the university, the majority of the students interviewed were positive about their experiences at research site 1. Most saw it as contributing to an increase in their confidence and their ability to take control of their own learning. For many students being at this university reinforced and supported their aspirations as learners, encouraging feelings of increased self-confidence and independence.

I feel that here I'm doing what I want to do. You get that feeling to an extent at school but here some of the lecturers are really inspirational and you feel that's what it's meant to be like. You go to university to get a job, but there's more to it than that. ...It's nice to know people from different subjects because you have a really vague surface knowledge of

something and they'll be really into it. Whenever someone is really into their subject it's interesting – no matter what it is.

(CB/Female/Politics/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

A strong influence on students' identities as learners appears to have been through the culture of the university. The largely positive effects of the university seem to be mediated by each department's ethos and expectations of their students. However, because I only have detailed data on the perceptions of students at the research sites and have not carried out multi-perspective research, which would have included interviews with tutors as well as students, any explanation can only be tentative.

Once at the university the students interviewed predominately identified most with their departments using their identity as a student of the institution as an important, but secondary identity construct within this specific context. This could be explained by the fact that the interviews were focused on their past and present experiences of learning and consequently located within the individual demands made of them by their discipline. According to the students interviewed, *learning identity* is influenced greatly by the department, however, when speaking to others outside the university the membership of the institution becomes an important indicator of the kind of student they wish to be thought to be. In using the short-hand cultural assumptions people outside the university have of those belonging to it students are able to construct a superficial identity as 'student' which answers the conversational need of the time, but which is not

representative of their individually negotiated profile on the continuity/discontinuity continua of the various discourse settings of the institution.

In negotiating individual *learning identity* within the academic discourse setting of the department Lynne acknowledges the superficial understanding of Anthropology at the point of her degree choice. She has no prior *learning identity* in this subject and is in the process of discovering how to gain access to the dialogue of her discipline, the process of which she describes as changing the way she thinks.

Anthropology is really weird. I didn't really know much about what it was, but I thought, 'yeh – study cultures'. But it's a whole new way of thinking about things.

(LC/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/R1)

Because of the way in which the degree programme at this Scottish university is set up students do not specialise until their third year of study. Up until that point they take 'outside' subjects as well as their main degree subject. Though many students enjoyed the challenge of '*different ways of thinking about things*', for some the additional courses were a burden. Positions between continuity and discontinuity of experience needed to be negotiated in each department, which represented a re-negotiation of *learning identity* within the various academic discourse settings in which the students were involved.

I think it's a bad thing that you have to do outside courses. ...Like it's totally a good thing to be broad, but the way I feel about my outside courses, I think it's crap that I can't do what I want to do.

(LC/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/R1)

Despite some students' dissatisfaction with elements of the provision, the largely positive experiences of the students at the research site appear to be independent of a particular teaching strategy, such as student-centred or experiential learning, small group work or lectures. However, as has been reported earlier, these positive responses were not independent of teacher attitudes to subject and students, with many students stressing the importance of teacher enthusiasm for the subject and interest in the students. Despite the split-site campus and the large number of faculties, the broadly positive effects of being at this university were felt by students from across the disciplines, from different backgrounds and of both genders.

Once the initial period of settling in had been managed none of the students at this research site reported a sense of alienation or said that they deliberately distanced themselves from university life. All the students at this site had managed to satisfactorily negotiate a profile of positions between continuity and discontinuity of experience in the various discourse settings of the university.

Research Site Two: A Post-1992, Split-Site City University In The North Of England

The culture of studenthood promoted through the official discourse of this post 1992 institution focuses less on the need for and desirability of autonomous learning than at research site one. Instead a culture of support is fostered and promoted, as the publicity material reveals. The prospectus reassures students that, “We don’t want you to feel as though you’ve been dropped in at the deep end...” (1998 Prospectus, p. 14). As evidence of this concern an induction course exists which is designed to “...break the ice with other student [and] help you to get a foothold in new surroundings, and prepare you for your studies” (1998 Prospectus, p. 14).

The large intake of non-traditional students is reflected in the institutional discourse’s concern for flexibility. Flexibility of learning patterns and methods is built into degree programmes, as is the opportunity to gain work experience during the course. There is a strong emphasis on tailoring students’ choices of study to their post-university choice of career. The official literature of the university promotes a strongly urban multicultural identity, which reflects the diverse cultural experiences of the students belonging to the institution.

Heterogeneous Cultures Of Learning

The construction of institutional identity and culture is problematic for all concerned, particularly for post-1992 universities who have to redefine their role within a system which, to a large extent remains binary despite the '92 legislation. As some of the high achieving school leavers pointed out, once at the university the attitude of some members of staff towards them suggested that their perception of the institution of itself and the students which attended it was low.

Claire regarded this lecturer's comments as being an attack on other students' self image but retained her own positive view of herself as a learner by distancing herself from the group of students dismissed by the lecturer in question.

This lecturer really shocked me. We were sitting in a tutorial and she asked a question and nobody said anything. She said that we were all poor students and had come through clearing so it was no surprise that we couldn't understand things. I haven't come through clearing myself but I was insulted on other people's behalf. If I had I would have complained. You can't talk to people like that

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Malcolm had his own views on how staff members perceived the institution,

I think because it's turned from a polytechnic it's really lax in a lot of ways. They let everyone in and then they're too strict in a lot of ways because they're so hung up about being a polytechnic. Like tolerance and stuff- they get mad quickly if you get an answer wrong and say "You haven't been learning anything, have you?"

(MG/Male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

In his comments an implicit view of knowledge as received rather than constructed is evident in the comments he attributes to staff members.

However, this view of knowledge and students was not attributed to members of staff by students in all departments. Some departments which participated in the study such as Art and Design had an almost separate identity as 'excellent within their particular field'. This appeared to colour both the perception of the staff of themselves and their perception of the calibre of their students

I looked at a lot of courses and thought Product Design was for me. The other places I could have done it were like, Salford Institute and that didn't appeal to me because it sounds like a mental asylum. It's a really good course here and a nice uni and it's got a good reputation...there's a lot going on here

(GH/Male/Product Design/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

In other departments a point was made of singling out the 'best' students for special praise and encouragement. With members of staff making their high expectations of that student's success, clear.

Supposedly I've got the most points out of anyone on the course. The tutor told me. They've got all these expectations of me - Pressure! (laughs) it means that you can't just blend into the background – you can't just mess about because they know you already

(PMcM/Male/Management Science/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Though describing the high expectations demanded of him as 'Pressure' Phil responded positively to the expectations presented to him. However, in their treatment of Phil as a special case, it encouraged me to question the reported experiences of other students.

It is clear from the different experiences reported by students, that unlike research site 1, research site 2 does not have a strongly shared institutional cultural identity binding the students across the subject areas and multiple campuses instead heterogeneous cultures of learning exist within individual department and campuses. Nevertheless, students still reported largely positive experiences of belonging to the university and nearly all thought that they had made the right choice in going there. Many students reported high levels of engagement with others on their courses and were satisfied with the level of support they received both from their peers and from members of staff.

It wasn't what I expected of the course. It's a very close working relationship with tutors which wasn't what I was led to expect. You always here that at university tutors are very distant – but they're not on this course at all. When you go into a career it's good to have this level of interest from your tutor because it helps you get used to that level of scrutiny.

(GH/Male/Package Design/English/Research Site 2/ R1, R2, R3)

Many students at this research site were drawn from the region, with a number of the students interviewed living at home whilst studying. These students reported enjoying the opportunity that high levels of group work offered them in getting to know their peers and establishing learning support networks and were as a result able to rely on others from their course group to assist them with academic difficulties (Tinto, 1997, 2000).

Because Pharmaceutical Chemistry is a small group and there are other little sub-groups I know my group really well. All the other groups I've got to know quite well recently.

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Far more students spoke of working collaboratively on projects and assignments at research site 2 than at research site 1 where peer support networks were more often

composed of students studying on different courses, with social learning and discussions touching less frequently on task specific topics.

21/4/99

Spent most of the morning working with friends on a group piece of coursework. Nearly finished my bit of it, but need quite a lot of help with it. Went to the union for a pint

(SE/Male/Statistics/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2)

My tutorial group go out together and go to lectures together. We're all in the same boat. We sort of teach each other. The tutor gives you the background but then we take it from there. I don't think you learn something just in a lecture.

(ER/Female/Management Science/English/research Site 2/ R1, R2, R3)

Students' experiences of taking responsibility for their learning at research site 2 were varied. Many reported that they had become more confident in their ability to tackle academic challenges, had broadened their experiences of living and learning and had revised their ideas about the nature of knowledge and their role as a learner in the process of learning. Others, however, did not share these experiences and felt that they would have achieved more if their own independence as learners had been reduced and they had been given stronger direction.

This point of view is interesting, as the culture of the university is one of flexibility and supported learning, where the structure of many of the courses particularly those in non-traditional subject areas such as management science, are designed to provide students

with both peer support networks and structured contact time. However, such complaints were more often made by students studying more traditional and less career focus subjects such as history than by students studying on science, computing, management science or design courses.

In the lectures they just speak to you whereas at school in a class of 10-12 it was more like a seminar here and we'd ask questions all the time and make sure we understood. Because we all knew each other we were more likely to say stuff. Here no one knows each other. I have chipped in more than most people but I don't feel comfortable. ...it would be better if they were more demanding in terms of written work because it would prompt you to do something. At the moment it's too easy to drift and not do the work you need to.

(CR/Male/History/English/Research Site 1 R1, R2)

Though it was the perception of this student and others interviewed that they were not getting enough help and support and had too few opportunities to get to know each other in fact the provision of an induction programme and core skills classes on essay writing, note taking and other elements of course support meant that these student were offered more opportunities than students at research site one.

The Influence Of Research Site Two On Students' Identities As Learners

The entry qualifications demanded of students at research site two, are not as high as those demanded at research site one. Not surprisingly a number of the students interviewed, had less positive views of themselves as learners at the point of university entry, having either come through clearing or simply not achieved the top grades at A Level (the most widely taken entry qualification at this research site). In many cases A Level results had stimulated students at this research site to reappraise their *learning identity* prior to university entry. In some cases this was a positive reappraisal as they had achieved better results than they had hoped for, but in many others students questioned their abilities as learners.

I wasn't pleased with my results. I got BCDN. My first choice was York but my physics let me down. I'm getting used to it here and everyone I've met is really nice.

(JMcM/Female/English/Management Science/Research Site 2/R1)

I was predicted a B and 2 Cs but I flopped in the exams. I ended up getting 2 Cs and a D and a D for General Studies. I went through clearing and was offered a place here doing Pharmaceutical Chemistry. It's a better course than my original choice, which was biology.

(BH/Male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2)

I got C, B, E and an E for General Studies. I expected a D for maths but didn't expect a B for art, so it balanced out. I got 12 points so it was just right, just enough. [Research Site 2] was my first choice.

(ER/Female/Management Science/English/research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Being at research site 2 gave many of these students the opportunity to change their relationship with learning and to accept a more active and responsible role as a learner. As Elizabeth's comments reveal, many relished the opportunity to take control of their learning and enjoyed the challenges presented to them by their course.

Learning at university is better. It allows me to do what I want to do rather than what has been set. It's all off your own back. ...Putting it all together and learning about things is interesting. It's a new challenge. Getting a good mark at the end just reinforces that you know what you're talking about.

(ER/Female/Management Science/English/research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Though many students used the opportunities offered by the university to reinvent their view of themselves as an effective learner, some students had made an active decision based on the course offered to go to research site 2, even when they had achieved the entry qualifications to attend a university which they perceived to be 'better'.

I applied to X [another university in the city] and to here. I actually got my grades to go to X but preferred to go here. When I went to the open day I found out about the placement year. Because it used to be a polytechnic they're got links with industry. Plus the fact that I found out someone got £17,000 on their placement year from here.

(MG/Male/Maths/Research Site 2/R1, R3)

I got a C in Chemistry, a B in Biology and an A in Psychology. ...I had the choice between X [another university in the city] and here as well. X is the better university in the background. But the only thing was it was a Pharmacology degree and it was a pure academic 3 year course, no work experience. It is a practical based course here and no practical experience is pretty poor. I've got some friends that are in the pharmaceutical industry and they say they won't employ anyone without work experience...Even though it's not a good university, the work experience will cover it. It won't matter if I get a 2:1, which I'm hoping to get – and then good work experience somewhere, I might get a job there.

(CB/Female/English/research Site 2/R1, R2)

For these students the decision to attend research site two was grounded in their notional graduate identity (see chapter 5). Employability through work experience and links with industry was a deciding factor in their choice of course and university. In addition both

these students were originally from the city in which they studied and had limited their own university option by location to the two city universities. Malcolm and Claire, linked their own values and beliefs as future students to those they believed were held by the institution, as the publicity material for this research site places a strong emphasis both on graduate employment and on drawing a large proportion of their student intake from the city and surrounding region (On-line prospectus, 2001).

Research Site Three: A Post-Robbins Campus Based University in Central Scotland

At research site three again a unique institutional discourse to establishes a distinctive culture. This research site unlike the other two institutions is campus based. Though in addition to the main campus, there are two additional campuses, at sites geographically distant from the university town. For students studying at the main campus the existence of the other sites has little influence on their experience of the institution. Though for students studying at satellite campuses the divided nature of the institution poses more of a difficulty (Gray, 2000). Students at the main campus experience a sense of unity of place, which exists across the subject divide.

At research site three the majority of the intake came from Scotland. Despite the high levels of students entering research site three with Higher qualifications there was still a feeling amongst students starting university directly from Highers and their peers from other education systems, that they were too young to take a full part in student life at the institution. Though many of their concerns were manifest within the social rather than

academic sphere, such as feeling unable to join in the socialising and feeling increased levels of homesickness, students' perceptions of their age in relation to their peers also influenced their experience of the academic side of university.

Site three is a Scottish university offering a four year degree programme. The institutional culture perceived here is one of integration and student centred learning though an implicit culture which emphasises the value and importance of autonomous learning also appears to exist alongside the overt public culture of structured and supported study. According to the university's publicity material the institution wishes to, "...break down barriers between subjects taught within different faculties, so that students [are] able to combine subjects from as wide a range of disciplines as possible" (Prospectus, 1998, p.28). According to the same information source, the university also uses mixed assessment and "...has a strong reputation for student centred learning" (Prospectus, 1998, p.28).

Within this institution the significance of Scottish identity goes beyond the structure of the degree programme and is an integral part of the culture of the experienced institution with over 60% of the student intake being drawn from Scotland it retains a strong sense of national identity. However, as has been examined earlier, the concept of national identity is a contested notion for some Scottish students (see chapter 5).

Campus Life

Unlike the other sites, research site 3 accommodates all first year students in the halls of residence on campus. The campus is slightly out of the town centre, about a ten minute bus ride away. The concentration of students in one area is an important aspect of this university's culture as a sense of community is established within the parameters of the campus. Though each of the other two university sites provide accommodation for some of their first year intake, halls of residences and the student flats and houses where they live are dispersed throughout the cities. At research site three they are located near to the main teaching blocks and other campus facilities creating an almost exclusive student community, as this student's comments illustrate,

My first impressions of the university were pretty good. I liked the fact that everything that you need to have a decent time is all here – the shop, the sports hall and the pub. But it does get too much of the same thing sometimes.

(MD/Male/Politics/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R3)

However, Michael's comments also reveal the intensity of the campus experience, which can at times, 'get too much of the same thing'. The students at this research site often talked about the intensity of the relationships established within the halls of residence, a key site of social centrality (Chatterton, 1999). Though these relationships often offered support and opportunities for engagement in social discourses through which key relationships were forged, they also created flash points and pressure points when

students forced into close proximity failed to get on or when anxieties at exam times spread throughout the community.

It gets pretty annoying when you have people screaming round you at night – but on the whole it's good. But at weekends it's very boring – you see too much of your own room – you see too much of the place. There is nothing to break it up really. I have to find things to do otherwise I'd just die of boredom.

(RB/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1,R2)

Despite this, campus life offers a unique opportunity for students to move between discourse settings within the university over short periods of time as Grace's diary extract shows,

29/4/99

English lecture at 12pm.

After lecture I went round my hall putting flyers up for 'Grease' – stressing about ticket sales.

It's a really sunny day so I spent the afternoon 'loch-side' with my friends and read a play for English.

Philosophy seminar at 3pm and then back by the loch before rehearsal at 6.30pm.

(GC/Female/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

The closeness of the student campus community means that halls of residence become even more significant sites of cultural discourse than at other institutions and students who live at home and off campus during their first year can feel distanced from both the institution and their peers.

I don't stay here. I haven't really been through to Z a lot. I've met a few girls. ...I don't really see them away from university. I'm thinking we could do something at Christmas, but at the moment we just see each other in class

(SB/Female/Computer Science/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

Unlike Grace, Sarah finds it difficult to integrate the different discourse settings of the university and to negotiate her desired position on the continuity/discontinuity continua across these settings. She instead focuses on the academic settings of the university, relying on these to provide her with opportunities to establish friendships as well as to negotiate her relationship with learning. Though most students bridge the discourses using as settings for multiple purposes, students living on campus have alternative sites, beyond the formal academic settings, in which to develop social support networks. Cheryl experiences similar difficulties to those described by Claire in attempting to bridge the discourse settings of the university. Added to the difficulties described by Claire are the considerations of distance travelled to the university and paid work, which she feels conspire to exclude her from elements of the university experience. As a consequence she is not able to meet her prior expectations of university in social terms.

Because I live two bus rides away and a lot of stuff takes place here after classes – 7 o'clock at night – so it's a bit of a pain for me, especially with working and stuff. If they were doing something at the weekends it would be a lot better. I wouldn't mind that, coming in. I'll see how it goes. It's just really awkward for me. I've not met as many people as I thought I would actually.

(CT/Female/Philosophy/Scottish/Research Site 3/ R1, R2)

The Influence Of Research Site Three On Students' Identities As Learners

As with all the students interviewed at the other research sites, the influence of this university upon students' identities as learners was individual. However, most students' responses were positive about their experiences of the institution. Many students used their initial experiences of the university to develop their notions of themselves as learners and to transform the way in which they saw knowledge.

It's a lot more analytical than it was to begin with. ...having gone through the final exams last semester I know I've got to really improve my analytical work and put my own opinion in and not just rely on my memory

(AD/Male/Accounting/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Adam's comments reveal a temporal shift in *learning identity*. He has developed a strategy for change located in the university's assessment of his performance.

Jane has also experienced a temporal shift in her *learning identity*. In her case she expresses a desire to integrate the academic and social discourses both at university and at home, however, she feels unable to achieve the integration she desires as she lacks interlocutors willing to participate in the negotiation of knowledge with her.

I learn in a mixture of ways here from lectures and students in tutorials, who interpret information from different angles. You form your own opinion and they challenge it. It's useful. I try to talk about things outside seminars because I like politics and I try to tell my friends, but they just tell me to shut up because they're not interested and my family is the same.

(JL/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Unlike at research site one students at this research site more often expressed difficulty in finding people to talk to about serious subjects which interested and concerned them.

Outside the classroom you're not thinking about learning, you just do it automatically. Sometimes you learn about your course, other times you learn about other people's perspectives on things. I think about learning in a university context as not learning very much because it's single, narrow and channelled not wider learning. I think university

makes people ignorant in some ways. People don't care and I think that's a sign of ignorance.

(KB/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Karen regards learning in broader terms than academic course content but her peers have a more learning = work focus. She attempts to construct her *learning identity* across discourse settings by finding like-minded people and disregarding others who she believes to be 'ignorant'.

The notion of social learning was more often confined to specific tasks as it was at research site two. However, the level of collaboration in learning outside the classroom also varied considerably between subject areas with people on science courses working together more frequently than students studying for essay based subjects.

15/5/99

Ahh, I can lie in bed as there is no 9 o'clock practical. Got up went to friend's room to get help with my physics, did a bit, then went to biology lecture. Picked up 2 lab reports, 2a and 2b, I'm pretty happy with that. Had lunch, checked my emails, came back and finished my physics (with a lot of help), went to the gym and back to watch the Simpsons. Double bill, great.

(HA/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2/R3)

In this chapter the concept of institutional culture as interpreted by students at the three research sites has been explored. Different experiences of negotiating *learning identity* within the context of the institution have been identified and the significance of various discourse settings have been raised. In the chapter which follows I will examine students' experiences within their university departments and discuss further the implications of exclusion and inclusion in academic discourse settings for the negotiation of *learning identity*.

Chapter Seven

Students And Their University

Department(s)

In examining the relationship between students and their departments it is important to conceptualise the lecture theatres, laboratories and seminar rooms, as settings in which discourse is on-going and students *learning identities* are being actively constructed. Across each of these discourse settings students are in the process of negotiating and renegotiating their positions on the continuity/discontinuity of experience continua and attempting to align their location within each discourse setting with their past and present understandings of themselves as learners.

Consequently departmental discourse settings are crucial sites in which *learning identity* is constructed in dialogue with members of academic staff themselves engaged in the discourse of their discipline and employing the language which acts as an identifier of those inside and those outside the community of discourse. Aside from physical dialogue with members of the academic community in these discourse settings, students also engage in internalised dialogue with members of the community through books and papers. When able to forge an understanding of these written texts this internalised

discourse assists students in their struggle to enter the departmental community of discourse through familiarising them with the language and concepts of the discipline. (See chapters 1-3 of this thesis for a discussion of language, thought and making meaning and the link between these and gaining a voice in the discourse).

Section 1: Invisible Colleges And Academic Dialogues

The idea of the 'invisible college' has been put forward by many writers to explain the relationships academics have with their peers from the same discipline (Barnett, 1990). Spanning the globe, members of particular disciplines operate within an intellectual community interested in similar ideas and talking with a particular and distinctive language within a disciplinary climate of thought. It has been suggested that members of academic staff may feel a stronger cultural affiliation with their peers or tribe (Becher, 1989) at a national and international level, than they do with members of staff from different departments within the same institution, despite the unifying effects of a shared institutional culture as discussed in the previous chapter. This may at least be partially explained by the split many academics feel between their own personal research interests and their role as teachers or facilitators within the particular institution to which they belong (Levin, 1999).

According to Dearing (1997) as part of their experience of being a student, individuals should participate in the discourses of their discipline, becoming in a sense, professionalised by their academic experiences at university. Thus students become

historians, chemists or linguists rather than being pupils studying those subjects. For the students interviewed in this study, the relationships with their departments was very important to their developing *learning identities*. Students looked to their departments to mediate the broader culture of the university and to articulate a discipline specific notion of what was 'right, valid or good' (Tenbruck, 1989) within the invisible college they were attempting to become conversant with. The main aim of higher education has been described by McInnis *et al* (1995) as being '...to promote intellectual development in students as the basis for lifelong learning'. However, '...The first year experience ought not be cognitively comfortable, not least because optimal levels of anxiety are valuable for effective learning. Similarly, we take the view that learning at university is, and ought to be different from learning at school, especially in terms of the demands made on students to take responsibility for their learning' (McInnis *et al*, 1995, p.10)

Thus, learning at university is conceptualised as being qualitatively distinct from prior learning experiences, a view reinforced by students' notions of the value of higher education. However, students' search for professionalism through engagement in the discourses of their disciplines, does not necessarily imply that all students are interested in taking their studies further and becoming specialists in their field, as this is clearly not the case. Instead I am merely suggesting that the pursuit of a degree in a certain subject, represents to many students an important shift in their notions of themselves as learners which moves them beyond passive acceptance of information into the active construction of knowledge in a field of their choice. This shift is central to the notions of temporal *learning identity* explored in chapter five.

Section 2: Student engagement in academic discourses

Julie found the move to university to be a liberating experience as she took charge of her own learning and discovered that her opinions mattered. Prior to university entry she had passively accepted the opinions of others, but her engagement with learning once at university, particularly in politics, enabled her to begin to construct a critical and reflective perspective on global events which was drawn from an appraisal of available media coverage.

At school you feel that there is a difference between you and your teacher. They tell you what to learn. At university there is more of a group work and harmony between you and who is tutoring you because they only give you some of the information and say, “Go and see what you can find out and write about this topic”. At school you don’t get asked opinions – you just get told, “that’s the theory – learn it”. At university you find you can read newspapers and watch T.V. and know what they’re talking about and form an opinion, whereas at school learning is not really appropriate to outside life.

(JL/Female/English Studies/Scottish/Research Site3/R1, R2, R3)

Students at the Scottish research sites belonged to more than one department because of the nature of the course structure. Many of the students interviewed at research site two also took outside subjects as part of their foundation course during their first year. This

was particularly the case for students studying maths, science and computing and was less common amongst those students taking design or history courses. The opportunity of studying in more than disciplinary area was regarded by many of the students as being a chance to develop different, yet interconnected ways of thinking and learning in their subjects. The opportunity was regarded by many as fundamental to their wider sense of identity as they gained in competence and expertise in a range of subject areas. As can be seen by comments made by Bill, reported earlier, he is passionate about his study and has a holistic view of learning and life at university which he feels is informed and enhanced by the subject he is reading for his degree.

If you find something that is really interesting to you, you can get quite gripped by it, not an addiction – but you can get really into it and go out and buy a book on it and you get a kick out of it. You feel like you’re doing something worth doing, if it’s a subject you’re interested in. If you consider your learning to be part of your life it’s always giving you something new – you’ve not just learnt it to write an essay. Mindless rote learning has never appealed to me.

(BG/Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

The subject of his study is important to Bill in the widest possible sense. His course has an impact on his wider sense of self and his engagement in constructing new realities. This type of learning he distinguishes from “*Mindless rote learning*”. The distinction is

an important one made by many of the students interviewed who consider learning to be an active process of engagement with ideas as being distinct from “work” which is about fulfilling criteria and achieving grades through the completion of a task. However, in the same interview Bill also refers to the language of the discipline as a barrier to entering the academic discourse of the subject,

Terminology – bloody academic baggage

(BG/male/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

The university department can play an influential role in the ways in which students’ perceive their course of study as ‘work’, or as ‘learning’ and the way in which they view the language through which the discourse of a particular settings is conducted. For Rebecca a conceptual distinction exists between work and learning. She characterises learning as enjoyable and work as a chore. This distinction is important in terms of Rachel’s construction of *learning identity* as she appears to view learning in terms of engagement and active interpretation.

I think you have to aim to enjoy the work because if you’re not interested it’s very hard to get motivated to learn – I’ve found that out this year. If we are told we don’t have to do something I won’t even think about doing it, if it’s not vital. It’s not that there’s a great amount of work to do it’s just getting round to it. If you don’t enjoy it you find your enthusiasm fades away for your course. If you have to learn something you on at it until you know it, but if you enjoy it you can learn almost incidentally.

(RB/Female/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Similarly Lucy appears to be striving for a match between her expectations of studenthood which are focussed around engaged learning and her experiences of learning at university which do not often meet these expectations.

When you've learnt something you end with a feeling of achievement from being able to express your ideas and understand things. It's a feeling of being 'suitable' for university – not being stupid. It's a good feeling but it doesn't happen very often.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

Where students gain entry into the discourses of their subject and become actively engaged in producing and shaping knowledge rather than merely acquiring it, they spoke of feelings of excitement and connection, which reinforce the notions of engagement suggested by Weil (1986) and Mann (2001). Previous research has suggested that students' performance is influenced by perceptions which are conditioned by their previous experiences of learning in their subject (Booth, 1997). Students need to be acknowledged as active learners whose prior knowledge and skills are recognised. Students felt that 'active meaning making' was encouraged within most of the university departments visited. Though students experiences of engagement in the ideas of their discipline were mixed and were in many cases strongly linked to their experiences of teacher attitudes in the subject.

Teaching was perceived by the students as being variable at each of the three research sites and within all the departments studied. However, for those students who could identify at least one tutor who they felt had a sincere and active interest in them and their progress and learning the experience of university was far more rewarding as they felt that they could participate more actively in their university learning. These students also appear to enjoy the challenge of 'making meaning' in the atmosphere of trust experienced in their relationship with that member of academic staff. Such trust makes the risk involved in learning possible (Daloz, 1986, Isaac, 1996). Research by Andrews *et al* (1996) also suggests the importance of teacher attitudes to students and the need to create congruence between teacher and student expectations of learning. As Barnett (1996) points out, the negotiation of such congruence should be focused around critical 'being' rather than 'doing' critical thinking. A feeling endorsed by many of the more reflective of the students interviewed.

It's a lot more up to you. If you've got a problem it's up to you to see the tutor. It's not up to them. You can't turn round and say, "I didn't know what to do". I went to see my media tutor when we were doing an essay because I didn't know if I was writing the right thing. I showed her my draft and asked her if I was on the right lines and she said "yeh – change this and this". She spoke to me straight away actually. But one of my friends – her tutor doesn't even put her office hours up. She's been chasing her for a week and can't get hold of her.

In the lecture some of them go off about stuff you'll never understand. We've had the same lecturer for two books and he just goes on about 'the uncanny' the whole time. He says "Don't you think it's really uncanny?". I've talked to people in higher years and they say he talks about 'the uncanny' no matter what book it is.

(RB/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

In this extract Rebecca reveals her active engagement in the discourse of her subject, both in her discussions with her tutor in which departmental expectations of work were mapped and mediated for her and in her discussion with people in 'higher years' who help her in the construction of her identity as a student in her subject by demystifying the lectures she finds impenetrable. The difference between the positive and more negative aspects of Rebecca's experiences described here appears to be her interaction with the tutor/lecturer within the discourse setting.

According to recent research in Australia, for students unable to find a sympathetic advisor amongst the members of staff teaching them, risking engagement was a more daunting experience which was 'coupled with anxieties about failure. For these students who may have entered university with expectations of autonomous learning being synonymous with isolated learning, these fears are confirmed by their experiences within their departments. Though only a small group of students expressed these feelings, such students comprise the group identified as 'dissatisfied school-leavers' by McInnis and James (1999) who focus upon 'poor feedback, uninterested or

unenthusiastic teachers, and the feeling that ‘no one cared’ or took an interest in their progress’ (James, 2000, p.28).

Similar feelings of exclusion from discourse concerning his own needs as a learner were expressed by this student, whose explanation for his experiences of poor feedback post exam he attributed to the fulfilment of a campus myth,

Not really had any feedback, just the results of the exams. I failed accounts but got the re-sit. I got 2C in Management and Computing. I was a bit disappointed with Management. I thought I'd done better cos I'd done well in the essays. But apparently it must have been the statistics that let me down in the exam...I was expecting to be able to see the exam papers – but we didn't - so I don't really know if it was the stats that let me down. I've been told that they lock them (the exam scripts) up and you don't get to see them – but maybe you can. I don't know?

(IM/Male/Scottish/Computer Science/Research Site 3/R1)

Other students took the philosophical view that ‘no news is good news’ when it comes to feedback from tutors,

They said they would call you up if you were doing badly. They haven't called me up, which I suppose is a good sign

(JMcm/Female/English/Management Science/Research Site 2/R1)

Often the students who raised feedback as an issue were concerned about their performance in a system where they felt that no one was really concerned about their progress or knew them as a person. Many believed that help was only available for those students who had reached the point of course failure and not for those who passed the course, but felt themselves to be underachieving in relation to their prior levels of attainment. In agreement with James' findings (2000) my own qualitative data suggests that these students link feelings of loneliness and isolation from the academic community with a similar feeling of dislocation and detachment from their peers. This, according to my theorisation of *learning identity* is the cumulative effect of being unable to locate themselves satisfactorily in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience across various discourse settings.

Being here, it does like kind of make everything a bit framed. It's like kind of tense. I mean there's people doing essays and also, I think it's a kind of immature thing, but you don't want to be seen to be studying too hard...it's kind of lonely and stressful

(PB/Male/English Studies/English/ Research Site 3/R1)

In contrast to Paul's experiences, Michael was a confident student, who had been able to establish himself socially at university and whom through creating a peer support network was able to overcome the academic setbacks and lack of engagement in discourse with members of academic staff about his learning needs, which he experienced within the department.

I signed my name up for the essay feedback, but I knew exactly what it would be like before I went in. He sat and looked through my essay and basically just read back what he'd written on the side. It was of no use whatsoever. I mean he didn't go over with me the things that I'd done wrong, he just read what he'd already written, asked me if there were any problems and you know? That was it. It was just a waste of time.

(MD/Male/Scottish/Politics/ Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

In the same way as Michael was deterred from seeking future assistance from his tutor other students also reported negative experiences of attempting to engage in dialogue with members of academic staff about their learning. In Claire's case she was able to identify her own needs as a learner and mature enough to accept responsibility for renegotiating her position in relation to learning her subject. However, her attempts were frustrated when she sought help from one lecturer who assumed a level of prior knowledge, which excluded her from discussion and made her feel belittled.

The only thing I think is harder [than at school] is not being able to get to the lecturers. If they don't answer the phone it's really frustrating if you've got a question or something urgent that you need and you can't get in touch with them. I don't think it's their fault. Some of them don't want anything to do with you, but others, I think it's not their fault. They recognise that it's really hard and they've complained about it too.

Some of them you just get the impression that they've done their job in the classroom and you should have understood it or asked a question there – or whatever. It's true –

but sometimes you go home and sit down and think “I didn’t understand that”. I’m pharmaceutical chemistry – but you have to do physical as well and I’ve never done it before and I’m finding it really hard because of all the equations and stuff. I went to see the lecturer and he made fun of me – and I couldn’t believe he’d done that. I thought – I’ve come to see someone to ask and I could have sat back and not done anything and I’d gone to ask a question and he made it sound as though it was so easy. And I was trying to say that I’d never done it before. He expects you to know things and you don’t automatically know things when it’s degree level and you’ve not done it before. I felt put down after it. It put me off going to a lecturer altogether

(CB /Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site 2/R1, R3)

Claire’s experiences with this lecturer, though negative, were at least tempered by more positive experiences gained with other tutors. However, the feelings of belittlement and contempt for her abilities, which she experienced at this tutor’s hands were not atypical of those encountered by several students from across the research sites and disciplines. Such experiences put many of these students “off going to a lecturer altogether”.

A changing system of higher education has introduced increased time constraints for members of staff involved in undergraduate teaching. Despite many tutors experiencing a desire for personal interaction in the teaching relationship, it is almost impossible to maintain such personal involvement in students’ learning within a mass higher education system (Scott, 1995). Though, thankfully experiences such as those described by Claire

and others do not appear to be wide spread within the departments researched, they do emerge as a significant source of dissatisfaction amongst some students interviewed.

As Catherine, Claire and Jade's comments show, many of the students interviewed need personal contact with members of academic staff in order for them to maintain, question or develop their location on the continuity/discontinuity of experience continuum within the academic discourse settings of the university,

I am finding it a bit strange here because you could just drop out and not go to lectures and nobody would notice

(CB/Female/Politics/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

I think there is a lot more pressure on you at university. It's more mentally I think, because you think, "Oh, God, I'm at university, it's bound to be harder". It's not really I don't think, but I'm only in my first few weeks so I don't know. What I think is that everybody daren't ask anyone else because they don't want to look stupid because they don't know anyone that well. You don't want to ask the tutors because you don't know what they're going to say to you. When I was at college it was a bit more like school really, you were treated more as an adult, but if you were stuck with something you just strolled up to someone and asked them what was bothering you. So in a way you're more isolated at university. You're more alone and you have to do it on your own basically

(CB/Female/Chemistry/English/Research Site2/R1, R2, R3)

I think you learn a lot more in the tutorials than you do in lectures – but that might just be the teachers

(JMCM/Female/English/Management Science/Research Site 2/ R1)

These students' experiences are interesting in relation to the findings of Belenky *et al*'s study (1986) which identified the negative impact of being silenced in learning discourses, on students evaluations of themselves as learners. Such notions may also be linked to ideas about the importance of recognition (Honneth, 1992), and reinforce the suggestions made by Levin (1999) that in some instances, teachers on undergraduate courses do not value the students or their learning as highly as they might. Though in Jade's case quoted above, she had achieved a degree of engagement through her experiences with her peers in tutorials which went some way towards mitigating the negative experiences she spoke about.

In quantitative studies academic integration with staff has been found to be a significant predictor of persistence in studies in the US and Australia (Gillespie and Noble 1992, and Tinto 1993, Peel, 2000). West *et al* (1986) found that 14% of students who chose to withdraw described teaching staff as uncaring or uninterested. In research by Peel (2000) students entering higher education defined a 'successful university student' as someone who neither expects help nor needs it with freedom and isolation being seen as two sides of the same coin. However, more positively in Peel's (2000) study as in my own, most students did not describe themselves as being completely isolated learners and had "found patchy, if important, support and interest among their lecturers and tutors"

(p.24). For some students interviewed in this project, the support systems were in place, even if they did not choose to use them themselves instead preferring alternative peer networks of support.

The uni provides extra tutorials, there are a lot of help groups- but I haven't been to them. I haven't felt the need to. I prefer doing it on my own and talking to friends

(ER/Female/Management Science/Research Site 2/R1,R2,R3)

Importantly, Elizabeth's comments illustrate the difference between the academic support offered by the institution which is located purely in the academic discourse settings of the university in contrast to the support she seeks from her peers which bridges academic and social discourses.

Section 3: Making meaning

General understandings of communication are premised on awareness of the context-dependent nature of communication. Oral communication is not a simple process of sender/message/receiver, but rather, it is embedded in the particular discourse community where it occurs, and these have their own value systems (Bizzell, 1989). Thus communication deemed as appropriate addresses different audiences and differs across settings. ...an organisation's internal and external environments shape the community and therefore influence suitable forms of communication

(Crossling, 2000, p.73)

The language used in the discourse of the discipline is important to all involved in the teaching and learning of that subject. By the time that students reach university, most know the type of thinking and communication best suited to them. The notion of a split between arts and social sciences and sciences is reinforced by the findings of this study as it has been by many others (Flett, 1996). However, as students participate in their degree disciplines the significance of the language of the discipline and its effect on the ways in which those involved think and express themselves, becomes increasingly significant in shaping their understanding of the subject (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997, Lee, 1997). Tom's comments illustrate his awareness of this process as he becomes inducted into the discourses of each discipline and develops different ways of thinking which contribute to the transformation of his *learning identity*.

You think in the way that they [the department] want you to think. You use the terminology that they've taught you in your essays. Doing a course like this one where you take outside subjects as well as your main degree subject teaches you to think in different ways for each subject. It's very distinct

(TS /Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Based on her recent research Crosling (2000) has called for oral communication skills to be made part of the undergraduate teaching and learning programmes designed for new students. Peel (2000) points out that such a concern for developing students' oral skills can prevent demoralisation and disillusionment, which he believes can lead to students dropping out of university. However, though assessment policy and practice concerning

oral communication and presentation skills is clearly important, I would argue that informal communication between staff and students is equally if not more significant in encouraging student engagement. Consequently the manner in which students and staff relate to each other and the accessibility and clarity of the language used is important.

Tom identifies the influence of the different languages of the disciplines he studies which he believes provide him with new ways of thinking and 'being', concepts central to the process of being and becoming a student as described by Barnett (1990), which involves the displacing of existing epistemological frameworks in favour of newly constructed ontological perspectives arrived at by students through the course of their study. A similar view is shared by Bill,

I'm not taking subjects that I find difficult. I'm not so stupid as to take a subject that utterly alludes me. I've not got an aptitude for abstract mathematical theorising but I appreciate that maths is just as much a way of understanding the world as natural human language. It's just a different way of doing the same thing. You need to find out how you work best and find a subject area, which compliments that.

(BG/Male/Psychology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Of course not every student makes the correct decision about which subject is suited to them and as a result, not every student finds engagement in the ideas of their discipline either desirable or possible. At the point of the first interview, Fern was struggling with the demands of a course she felt unsuited for as she was unhappy with a view of

knowledge as constructed and sought continuity of experience in relation to her more passive prior experiences of learning.

Maybe I should have done a science degree. That's like school. I do one science subject and for that you just learn it like you do at school. Politics and Geography I've got to think about it and how I'm going to argue it...I'd rather have more structured things that you have to do. It would probably suit me better because I've got more of a scientific mind and I don't like waffley subjects – which politics has turned out to be...Half the time I think, "What's the point in thinking about these things? There's more important stuff in the world" I'll drop it as soon as I can.

(FM/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Comments such as those made by Fern bring into sharp focus the necessity of the student's desire to become engaged in the ideas of the subject they are studying. In moving away from a student deficit model of transition the personal responsibility of each student for their own learning and involvement in the course, must not be lost. If students do not wish to enter the academic discourse of their discipline, any number of opportunities and supportive contact time offered by staff will not make any difference if the student fails to see the point in thinking about such things.

The lectures are good. I don't particularly like the tutorials. It's just having to speak or something. I don't enjoy that. If you really don't want to speak you don't have to. But they sat that you do get a worse report if you don't

(GM/Male/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

They usually ask you to do some reading before hand. But they should like...With this essay, they just gave us a sheet saying the essay questions. It would be better if they said, "Do this. Read this book". You just don't have a clue where to start to find out about the Industrial Revolution. It's just shit. I feel hard done by. Maybe that's what they're trying to get? Maybe they want you to go and research it yourself? It's just a waste of time and it really gets you down because you don't know if you're doing it right and you never get any feedback. You never know how well you're doing and what's going on

(LL/Male/History/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Engagement in the academic discourses of the university requires student's to 'find' a voice in the dialogues of their discipline, rather than be given one. Opportunities to talk and think offered within the structure of the university timetable are reliant upon the student's desire to develop ideas to talk and think about. Much of the success of such contact time depends on the work done by individuals outside the classroom. The independence of thought and learning demanded, many students found initially challenging. For a number of students self- motivation remains a continual battle and the inability to focus on developing an understanding of the topics explored throughout the course can make opportunities for discussion a redundant exercise.

For some students assessment focused work is the only effective stimulus to learning,

It seemed like quite hard work demanding on your own time because we only have 7 hours of lectures, so the rest of the time it's tempting to stay in bed. It would be better if they were more demanding because it would prompt you to do something

(CR/Male/History/English/Research Site 2/R1)

Notions of what constitutes learning were perceived as differing across departments with some subject areas asking students for active engagement in the construction of knowledge and other disciplines adopting a non-negotiable view of learning. Students with different views of their own learning identities wishing to locate themselves differently in relation to their experiences of learning appeared to find it easier to belong to one academic 'tribe' or another. When asked to adopt a different view of knowledge and learning in each subject area, some students struggled,

Some of the subjects, like my education course, we're supposed to do a lot of background reading. I haven't done much yet. There are so many books on the list. I'll really have to read some of them. I've been looking back over lecture notes they gave us and taking points out of that.

Lectures tend to be just sitting and listening for the whole hour and copying things down. At school the teachers explained things and then just left you to get on with it and set you questions and things. It can be boring sitting and listening for an hour, especially in the computer class. They give you copies of everything they've got on screen, so you've got nothing to write down. Seminars in maths are basically just

working. They set you questions. The education is basically just talk I think. We read a paper to go into class and then we sort of discuss it. ...In the discussion everyone is putting their own points of view in. At school they just told you something and you said, "okay". I don't really talk that much...If I know what I'm doing it's okay. It's cos there's not really an answer, there are only points of view. I'm a wee bit hazy about things like that. I like things that have got an answer – this is right, this is wrong. I've decided to drop education.

Maths is quite easy at the moment. I'm understanding it. We get worksheets in the tutorial for the week. So I suppose it is kind of the same as school. They tell you how to do it and give you a question to answer.

(SB/Female/Computing and Maths/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

Section 4: Continuity and Change

As can be seen from this and previous chapters, transformations in *learning identity* occur through a number of processes and are interrelated to wider issues of personal growth and development. The student" narratives illustrate the complexity of negotiating *learning identity* which is different in the case of every student. At the same time I have been able to forefront examples of transformation and develop ideas about the manner in which they can be best interpreted and understood within the relationships students negotiate between themselves, institutions and individual members of academic staff.

Changes can be best understood when seen against the student's explanations of their educational background, and perceptions and evaluations of their current environment and their role within it. As has been seen, some of these theorisations of self and learning developed by students may have evolved over a long period of time while others happened relatively quickly in response to specific demands or events. However, the temporal and shifting nature of *learning identity* should not be forgotten. Over time, student's views and experiences change shifting their perceptions of themselves and events. Such shifts can occur gradually and almost imperceptibly or may be more dramatic and erratic. Never, stable continuous and cumulative, students' learning identities should not be regarded as linear, but as a process of constant negotiation between points of perceived continuity and change.

Among the students interviewed nearly all had high expectations of their ability to succeed within the higher education system and were determined to overcome initial difficulties in adjusting to the new style of work or direction. Though many did initially struggle to come to terms with the increased level of autonomy demanded of them by the institutions despite the fact that they were expecting it.

There is a lot more pressure to do the studying and find out the information for yourself. At school you could just sit back in class and now you have to research. I suppose it's just what I was expecting

(GM/Male/Scottish/Politics/ Research Site 3/R1, R3)

By concentrating on positive elements of the transition experience and feelings of coherence rather than fragmentation many of the students experienced an increased feeling of control over the parameters of changes they were experiencing than had been reported by prior studies (Weil, 1986, 1989, Wall, 1991, Entwistle, 1997). This meant that the possible negative impact of a strongly conflicting institutional culture upon the individual was only evident in a few cases. Where conflicts did arise by the time of the second interview these had either been resolved, were on the way to being resolved or as in one case, the student had decided to leave the university. Through the negotiation of identity the majority of students in this sample ultimately experienced high levels of "... coherence, continuity, integration and wholeness" (Weil, 1986, p.224). This student's comments also support Mac Intyre's notion of the significance of setting in establishing role and temporal identity.

I'm more of a free agent. I have the chance here to learn in the way which helps me most and not just how people tell you, you should. It's empowering

(CB/Female/English/Politics/Research Site 1/R1 ,R2, R3)

For most of the students interviewed the ability to maintain an individual sense of continuity was important when attempting to negotiate transition and passage through the life course. The perception of continuity of experience resulted in an increased sense

of empowerment. Where it existed students' *learning identities* are not undermined but reinforced and life narratives could continue without the forced revisions that can induce feelings of fracturing and dislocation (Weil, 1986). Indeed by focusing on aspects of the institutions culture which fit past experiences in other settings where the students had had positive experiences, differences were more readily confronted, evaluated and incorporated into a revised and transformed *learning identity*.

Though at first many students may have found the demands of the institution challenging they were able to see more similarities than differences between their prior educational experiences and the new demands of university study. Where differences in teaching methods and work demands bore less similarity with school or college experiences, many students saw this as a welcome challenge.

I like the freedom of going into areas you want to go into. You don't have to follow a National Curriculum

(AR/Male/Politics/English/research Site1/ R1, R2, R3)

Learning at university is better. It allows me to do what I want to do rather than what's been set. It's all off your own back...I don't like being told what to do. You do get told in a certain way, but it's up to you to get out and do the research and get it done. I do more work now than before. I just know what I've got to do and that I've got to go to lectures

(ER/Female/English/Computing and Management Science/Research Site 2/R1,R2,R3)

It's different. It's exciting. It's hard work. I just came with an open mind I think

(GB/Female/Scottish/Accountancy and Finance/ Research Site 3/R1)

I love the independence that you have to learn what you want, to read books, watch videos, use the internet. I like the fact that it's off your own back and you can take it as far as you want to. At college I did what they told me to and that were it. Here I feel like I've achieved something, something clicks.

(JB/Female/Maths/English/Research Site 2/R1, R3)

As the comments above reveal these students saw change in a positive manner, as it was congruent with their expectations of becoming a university student. The negotiation process and perception of differences between systems and past and current learning demands were accepted. Indeed, because the transition experience was not seamless and students had to work to re-establish their identities within a new context many felt that they had a greater insight into their own learning and were taking increased responsibility for themselves in all areas of their lives. The majority of the students interviewed were able to reassert control over events after only a brief period of adjustment to a new setting and to look for points of stability and continuity of experience within different discourse settings.

Chapter Eight

Negotiating Learning Identities Within Peer Learning Communities

In the previous chapter contact sites within the university department such as the lecture theatre, laboratory or seminar were conceptualised as discourse setting in which students actively negotiated their *learning identities* with members of the academic community. This chapter discusses contact settings in which students can talk to each other about their academic needs as other discourse sites in which students attempt to position themselves in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience within the university context. Students relationships with each other in peer learning communities emerged from the data as being as if not more important than their relationships with members of academic staff in shaping individual *learning identity* and the process of negotiating a relative position on the continuity/discontinuity continua.

The influence of peer learning communities on student persistence and integration at university has been explored in both the American (Tinto, 1993, 2000) and the Australian (Terenzini *et al*, 1994, Crosling, 2000) higher education contexts. These studies have highlighted the significance of students' peer relationships within the

formal educational settings of university such as lectures, seminars and laboratory practicals in influencing students' experiences of engagement at university.

The findings of these research projects suggest, that students who experience greater levels of coherence and continuity, in both the academic content of their courses and the cohort of students who form their classes, are more interested in and committed to their subject of study, and more satisfied with the experience of learning at university. In addition it has been found that students experiencing a sense of 'learning community' are more likely to form supportive social and intellectual relationships with other students in their teaching groups. Mc Innis and James (1999) note that 'the social nature of the university experience has the potential for contributing positively to academic performance and more generally should influence the individual's sense of competence' (p.47). They go on to suggest that it is important for students to be 'socially connected with the university through friendships' (Mc Innis and James 1999, p. 47). Research by Evans (1999) and Peel (1999) also found that problems associated with transition are exacerbated by '...failure or inability to engage with and become part of student conversation and interaction'.

Despite international interest, the study of students' experiences of peer learning communities has received little attention within the UK, beyond adult education (Thorpe *et al*, 1993). However, the analysis of the data gathered for this research, has revealed the significance of 'learning communities' in influencing students' perceptions of both their temporal *learning identities* and their immediate experiences of learning at

university. This chapter examines students' perceptions of peer relationships in academic settings and highlights aspects of the international literature which relate to the experiences described by the students sampled at the three research sites in the UK.

Learning communities as conceptualised by Tinto (2000) are deliberately constructed by the institution. Students are grouped together on linked courses with an organising theme, which encompasses modules from across disciplinary boundaries. This allows students to undertake a co-ordinated programme of shared study and offers students the opportunity to develop social networks within their academic classes as the students remain together throughout the first year.

The notion of peer learning communities examined here differs in many ways from the constructed learning communities described by Tinto (1993, 2000). Within the context of this research, the 'learning communities' described are not consciously constructed by the institution instead learning communities are conceptualised as the random group of students with whom students find themselves in lectures and seminars. However, institutional degree arrangements such as the provision of single or multi disciplinary courses, and departmental course structures does appear to influence students' perception of learning and peer support. In previous studies the modularisation of courses has been found to encourage feelings of disconnection and fragmentation amongst students (Tinto, 2000). It has been argued that this can lead to students experiencing higher education as isolated learners whose learning is separated from those around them, a finding, which was to some extent borne out in this research.

Although on its own, this does not fully explain the complex dynamic between structure and agency, which contributes to each student's experiences of separation and connection at university.

Sometimes it's helpful to talk to somebody, not even to get their ideas, just to clarify your own. But that can be difficult when you change groups and don't live with people on your course. You don't really get a chance to get to know people well enough.

(JD/Female/English Studies, English Research Site 3, R1, R2)

Within the UK institutions studied, constructed inter-disciplinary learning communities as described by Tinto (2000) did not exist, however, within each institution, department and faculty, students were offered opportunities to develop peer learning networks. These opportunities were shaped by the structure of the courses students were taking and the manner in which these courses inter-related or failed to inter-relate. Students felt that these differences affected the ways in which they engaged with their peers in terms of the development of academic support networks. Cross disciplinary differences in the extent and nature of the academic support networks described by students were also identified. In the context of this research learning communities are understood to be the peer groups with whom students mix in the formal educational settings of the university, rather than being a constructed group which is institutionally structured in order to provide opportunities for student engagement in linked interdisciplinary courses. However, some of the students interviewed had experiences which were closer

to Tinto's (1993) model than others. The management science, chemistry and maths students at research site two were involved in a common first year with students of other disciplines, which resembles the peer learning community Tinto (1993) describes. This course structure was however not always popular with these students in the way in which Tinto's research (1993, 2000) would suggest.

We did a lot of science in the first semester, which I didn't like very much because I hate science... I really didn't like the science we did, because we didn't seem to be doing much maths

(KR/Female/Maths/English/Research Site 2, R1)

It's not huge (the seminar group) but it's quite big. Sometimes we're just going over things I've already done because this bit of the course is common to all maths students and all the other people on the introductory course. We've got one lecture a week which lasts 2 hours and that's just Chemistry Chemistry. It's for the Chemistry students. But the rest is like, for everyone. I feel it's repetitive but I suppose people just think it's revision.

(GM/Female/Pharmaceutical Chemistry/English/Research Site 2,R1, R3)

These students express a particular view of what they believe studying a certain subject at university should entail and resist attempts to widen the base of their learning

experiences. Similar feelings were shared by some students at the Scottish research sites where the study of additional subjects was mandatory.

Despite the obvious differences between Tinto's model of a learning community (1993) and the way in which the term is being used in this study many of Tinto's findings can provide insights into the data collected for this research. Though the students' comments above, report certain negative experiences of shared first year courses, in many cases students benefited from increased opportunities to form friendships beyond those established in halls of residence (the major site of social centrality reported by the students). According to Tinto (2000), students in learning communities provide a self-supporting group whose support extends beyond the classroom. Those within a learning community group spend more time together than those students on traditional courses, and the time which they spent together was seen as being supportive and felt that this support allowed them to continue at college despite difficulties. Those involved in the learning community also became more actively involved in classroom learning, even outside the class (Tinto, 2000).

I live with and learn with the same group of people. It's really a close knit course. We all go out together, we all talk to each other at university. The whole course, we're all friends. There are about 50 of us and everybody sticks together

(JB/Chemistry/ English/Research Site 2/R1,R3)

Tinto's findings (1993, 2000) have important implications for both the ways in which course structure can influence students' learning experiences and the ways in which students' *learning identities* are shaped by their relationships with members of their peer learning community. For the students interviewed at the three research sites included in this study, the peer group had an important influence on their experiences of learning at university. Amongst the students interviewed, experiences ranged from those who had a positive sense of involvement, integration and support within the peer network of the course, to those whose experience of university was one of isolated and disconnected learning (Mann, 2001).

These experiences seemed dependent upon the students' position in relation to experiences of continuity and discontinuity in multiple discourse settings at university and where the student wished to be positioned in the settings most significant to them. For many students continuity in their sense of self in relation to their ability to form friendships was paramount during transition. All the students interviewed placed social connection with their peers high on their list of priorities.

An aspect of establishing themselves socially within the academic discourse settings of the university was for some students, locating themselves in relation to others in terms of academic attainment.

That's the thing – you don't really discuss your essay grades. I don't know how other people are getting on.

(RB/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

For Rebecca the experience of being unaware of her place in relation to others on her course in terms of attainment was problematic, as she had expected to know of her relative position in the peer group through the external signifier of grades and was surprised to discover that grades were not discussed. With this external signifier removed some students felt insecure about their own abilities as they readily attributed others with greater intellectual prowess than they believed themselves to possess. For Rebecca this made forming friendships in academic discourse settings problematic for some students in ways not evident in the social spaces of the university. The peer learning community remained for them an unknown group. With little or no social contact beyond the formal settings of the course these students found it difficult to talk about work or discuss ideas in seminars.

Other students spoke of a more negotiated and mutually supportive relationship with their peers and actively constructed a peer learning community for themselves. When asked to reflect on his experiences of learning over the first year of his course, Niall was able to articulate the way in which he had established a group of friends from his course who offered each other mutual support in relation to learning as well as in more personal aspects of their lives at university in a manner similar to that described by Tinto (2000).

I'd have to say you learn most from your classmates. There is always someone in a particular class whom you befriend who is really good at that particular class. You learn most from them because you spend most time with them and its much easier if you're friendly with the person, to pass on information. It happens all the time in Computer Science and AI because they're such broad subjects. AI includes aspects of Philosophy, Psychology, studies of the brain, all kinds of things and it's unlikely that a person will understand all of them. Quite often you'll have an assignment due and it will be on something like Philosophy, so you'll find someone good at Philosophy as say, 'please explain it to us' – and it happens quite often the other way round as well.

...It's hard at the start of uni but you quickly establish a group of people who you get together with on each assignment because you learn what each person's weakness is and what each person's strength is. You can form a group, which has all the necessary components to actually get the assignment done. It seemed to just happen, but I suppose it must have been something more complicated than that. I know lots of people that I met in the first few weeks that I know their names but I don't ever see them again. You'd try working with them and, no that didn't work. So you basically feel your way around and find people that you need and need you.

Niall's comments reveal his awareness of his need as a learner to establish a supportive group of friends with whom to tackle new experiences in relation to learning. In his description of the manner in which this group was established he talks about an informal selection process in which he temporarily included individuals in the learning community through working with them, before deciding whether or not the working relationship was mutually rewarding. In this process certain students are deselected and others selected. Ultimately he has been successful in seeking out people to form his personal peer learning community without the intervention of authorities in shaping and structuring contact time between students and consciously providing them with opportunities to create such communities (Tinto, 2000). Niall's description of the learning community to which he belongs reveals the centrality of his relationships with his classmates to his experiences within the academic discourse settings of the university, though the strategic way in which he established his group was less typical among other students.

Drawing on each other's 'strengths' and being aware of each other's 'weaknesses' has enabled this group of students to effectively negotiate their positions in relationship to continuity and discontinuity of experience with each other. Niall's comments later in the interview, suggest that all the members of his peer learning community are interested in positioning themselves towards the continuity end of the continuum in relation to their perceptions of themselves as effective learners as previously established

in other educational contexts. However, the excitement with which Niall describes his course and the new challenges which are part of it, reveals his own, and possibly his peers', desire for discontinuity of experience in relation to meeting the challenges presented to him.

In a less self conscious way other students also describe the manner in which they have been effective in constructing a personal learning community of supportive friends,

There are lots of us doing philosophy and 3 of us doing English, so quite often we talk about work. That's quite good because you don't feel like you've got to stick it out on your own, especially when you're writing essays.

(GC/Female/English Studies/English/Research Site3/R1,R2,R3)

Grace speaks about the security she feels in being part of a peer learning community. However, Grace's experiences of a group of peers studying on the same course and helping each other through the demands of that course was quite unusual amongst students interviewed who were studying essay based courses, particularly English. Such collaborative working practices were more often described by students taking maths or science courses where written tasks focused around question and answer sheets rather than the production of a sustained piece of personal writing.

The nature of the task appears to influence both the ease with which group work is possible and the extent to which students desire to collaborate. Students described essay

writing as being a more individual task. The discussions of ideas involved in essay writing exposes more about the student as a learner and as an individual than group work on tasks which require solutions. This means that students felt that a different kind of relationship was necessary between peers before they are willing to risk exposure and discuss concepts and attitudes. Other subjects were thought to require a less personal, problem-solving response which students believed to lend themselves more easily to group work.

I'm pretty surprised because we're not doing much maths. We're doing experiments like Microbiology and Physics and Chemistry which didn't really have anything to do with maths. Some one was helping me through the Physics and the Chemistry that was in the group that I was working with.

(CO/Male/Maths/English/Research Site 2, R1, R2)

We help each other with our work - ask people's points of view. The people I live with – quite a lot do Biology and Environmental Science. It gives you more confidence if someone else has got the same idea

(KB/Female/English/Biology/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

However, some students did talk about the ways in which they circumvented difficulties in discussing personal writing. Though ultimately individually responsible for their own learning, some students managed to reduce their feelings of isolation by meeting

together to 'brainstorm' prior to completing essay questions and through this process gained support from their peers which reduced feelings of isolation and the anxiety associated with the individual responsibility of an essay.

Lucy managed to seek out peers with whom she could share ideas and interests. She forms a close knit learning community of her own, similar to that described by Niall.

...it's up to yourself if you want to learn something. It's a personal choice. You can always find someone that's interested in something. We look out for one another. If we're doing an essay we'll all sit together and brainstorm first. We all start off together and then it's up to us how far we take it. I think that it's a subject thing as well. We can't really work together in English – but in Management it's figures and it's really easy to work with someone else.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

A common theme running throughout all the examples of students establishing peer learning communities is the active engagement and responsibility of learning which they demonstrate.

For other students, such peer support and academic task focused contact time outside the classroom was difficult to achieve, though many of these students recognised their own need to belong to such a supportive group of peers.

I don't really talk history with my friends. Sometimes we talk about essays but we're usually doing different things anyway. I don't live with anyone that does history and I don't hang around with historians all the time

(LM/Female/History/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

According to work done by McInnis *et al* (1995), 'A higher proportion of students with academic marks between 50 and 70 per cent 'almost always' or 'sometimes' worked with other students on areas with which they had problems. In contrast, students at the top and bottom of the self-reported grade point average were less sociable with respect to their academic work' (McInnis, James, McNaught, 1995, pp.48-49). A similar pattern was evident in this research, though clearly for the majority of the students interviewed, in most areas of study, a combination of personal and group work was preferred. For students unable to link into a network of academic peer support the transition to university can be more daunting and isolating, as well as in some cases being less academically successful.

There are loads of interesting things to do at university, but if you don't have anyone to go with it's a bit daunting

(PB/Male/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/R1)

Crosling's research in Australia (2000) highlights the importance of the role of oral communication in the undergraduate curriculum. She suggests that it is important for a number of reasons including issues surrounding the concept of gradueness and future employment, facilitating transition and achievement in university studies and assisting students in their ability to develop social networks, all of which are important in helping students to identify with and integrate within their institution. Her research has shown that all of these factors are positively linked with academic achievement through the incorporation of oral communication development in the undergraduate business curriculum at Monash University, particularly at the first year level.

Research by Mc Innis and James (1995) found that university students whose average scores were below 50 per cent almost never worked with other students on areas of study to discuss problems and subjects. This indirectly indicates the value of informal learning communities for students' academic achievements, though equally it could show a general low level of commitment and achievement. However, for the students in this sample this latter interpretation did not seem to be the case and many wished for more contact and greater opportunity for discussion. This was particularly true of those students who were, in their own perception struggling, even if the institution did not perceive their performance in this way.

I don't think I'm doing as well as I could be doing but the tutors don't really know what I was like before so they don't say anything.

(PB/Male/English Studies/English/Research Site1 , R1)

For the students interviewed, the lack of innate or learned oral communication skills played a role in some students' negative experiences within the formal educational settings of the university. Many students expressed their uncertainty about speaking in seminars, fearful that they were unable to express their ideas in a way acceptable within the discourse setting. This area of transition has received little attention and students appear to be unprepared for the demands placed upon them once at university. Universities expect that students will be able to express themselves orally (Crosling, 2000). The ability to do so is a fundamental skill in the development of interpersonal networks in both formal and informal academic contexts and in social contexts (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella *et al*, 1983) and is integral to students' ability to articulate and address personal study difficulties.

Beyond the important informal peer support structures, students had concerns about their interactions with their peer group within the academic settings of the university. Institutions, academic staff and peer groups create diverse cultures with shared norms and values that can undermine the active participation in learning which is the aim of higher education (McInnis *et al* 1995, p.39). Socially shared values can create distinctive climates of learning which can shape students' engagement with learning and which can create boundaries for student success. 'Non-participation of students in class discussions is one of the most common complaints of university teachers, and, in turn, the cause of anxiety for students (Rudduck 1978)' (McInnis, James, McNaught, 1999, p.48). Such notions can be linked to Belenky *et al's* (1986) research, which emphasises

the importance for learners to find a voice in academic discourse. Confronting challenges and overcoming certain levels of anxiety are all part of the process of achieving intellectual independence. However, for some students speaking in the relatively public and sometimes formal context of a university seminar is more difficult than for others as Jane and Emma's feelings on the subject show,

I think as well, that there are a lot of people who are self conscious in a tutor group. There are people who sat through my school and said nothing in class and now they're expected to sit in a tutorial group and give presentations and they just don't like it and they don't want to do that

(JL/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

I don't really learn much with my tutorial groups because it's a bit stilted. I'd say you can't learn properly unless you're comfortable and my politics tutorial I'm not really comfortable with the people there. I'm not comfortable with saying things. I've never done the subjects before and I'm not confident in my knowledge. I'm worried I could say something completely foolish and really embarrassing...other people don't say stupid things

(EMcG/Female/Politics/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Emma emphasises the importance of knowing people within a seminar group if she is to be able to actively engage in negotiated learning in this setting. Her comments could be

read in terms of the importance of an atmosphere of 'trust', which makes 'risk' and therefore learning, possible as suggested by Isaacs, (1996). Without trust amongst peers in academic discourse settings students are unwilling to risk exposure and fearful of engaging in tentative talk. As a result they cannot develop a negotiated understanding and are left to rely on their own theories. If considered in terms of continuity and discontinuity of experience establishing a secure learning environment in which talk is possible allows students to reposition themselves more securely in relation to change. In contrast, lack of trust and feelings of insecurity can make the move towards a negotiated position of discontinuity of experience more difficult, as Lynne's concerns about other people's perceptions of her reveal.

I'm not someone who blurts out my answers in seminars. My seminars are just like my lectures really, I just sit there and take notes. I never feel that what I would say is right. They say it doesn't matter if you're wrong but it does. I think they might think it was easy and I should have known it.

(LM/Female/History/English/Research site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Rachel contrasts her experiences in different tutorial settings in terms of the extent to which she regards them as being a positive learning environment.

In philosophy lectures have been good but the seminars have been awful. They'll all sit there and no one will answer any questions. You feel kind of sorry for the tutor – but you just don't want to be there. My English

one is good, but that's because everyone does join in. Media you've usually got a little task to do, so it's not bad.

(RB/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

Her experiences of successful tutorials have a positive effect on her self-efficacy beliefs in terms of learning. Her willingness to 'risk' speaking in these seminars reflects the positive and inclusive learning environment she experienced in these discourse settings. In other seminars she feels that no such opportunities for talk exist.

Continuity and discontinuity of experience within discourse settings are closely associated with feelings of comfort and discomfort. Though discontinuity may be uncomfortable it can still be positive in terms of the learning opportunities students are offered. School appears to be important in providing students with the experience of expressing and communicating ideas orally. However, as Crosling (2000) acknowledges '...entering the new and perhaps daunting environment and culture of a university, students may need to redefine themselves and so may experience loss of confidence' (p.71). Both these aspects affect students' ability to relate to people and communicate orally. McInnis and James' (1999) study found that 26 per cent of school leavers felt uncomfortable when asked to participate in group discussions, during the first year of university.

I was nervous in tutorials before, thinking, "Everyone's going to laugh...". I was quite paranoid about my voice so I was a bit scared of talking, but now I really enjoy it. I love the English discussions, they're really good because everyone's got the same interest in it. I like to get my

ideas across and if someone says, you know? "That's right" you feel really good. You meet a lot of people through tutorials as well.

(LD/Female/English Studies/Scottish/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

In this extract from the transcript Lynne traces her feelings of anxiety in speaking in front of an unknown audience to a position where she is no longer self-conscious with the members of her group. The trust developed in the seminar situation allows her to take the personal and academic risk of expressing her ideas and in doing so she opens up the possibility of becoming a part of a peer learning community which extends beyond the academic discourse settings of the university.

According to Tinto "learning communities enabled students to bridge the divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterises student life. They tend to learn and make friends at the same time" (p.51). Participation in the learning community, also seemed to enhance the depth and quality of students' learning. Students involved in the study (Tinto, 2000) reported that collaborative learning settings offered them the opportunity to participate more actively in the learning experience and to take increased responsibility for their own learning and the learning of others within the group. From the students' comments above it is clear that such collaborative learning in seminar situations is happening for some but not all the students interviewed at the three research sites.

In a study by Terenzini *et al* (1994) it was observed that residential students found it easier to establish a social network within and beyond the classroom and support each other through the process of transition. According to Terenzini *et al* ' The co-operative nature of the passage was evident in students discussing class work together outside class, making sure too much fun did not interfere with getting... work done, and reminding each other in subtle ways that academics was the first priority' (p.69). This was also evident in some of the students' descriptions of their learning patterns in the current study.

We were put into groups and we tend to revise together because it's a mixture of girls and lads. The girls say "Stop prating about" and that, so it's helpful

(GS/Male/History/English/Research Site1/ R1, R2, R3)

The time I get most work done is when other people have work to do as well. I hate it when you're trying to work and you can hear everyone nattering on and watching T.V. - so you go upstairs and join them. At the moment everyone has got exams so it spurs you on. I would have gone home if I was the only one with exams because I would have got no work done

(LM/Female/History/English/Research Site 2/ R1, R2, R3)

Research by Crosling (1999), Tinto (2000) and Pascarella *et al* (1983) has proved significant in terms of the theorisation of student integration into the academic discourses of the university explored in the initial chapters of this thesis. Language and identity are intertwined and the ability to express thoughts and ideas within multiple settings is an important aspect of the transformation of *learning identity* for many students. As discussed in the last chapter, students' relationships with academic staff in their department and the ability to adopt the language of the discipline of study are important generative notions in students' identities as learners and subject specialists. Crosling's research (2000) reveals that these ideas are equally significant within the academic peer group. The findings of this study support this contention.

In this chapter I have discussed the peer learning community as an important discourse community within which students can negotiate their *learning identities*. The students involved in this study stressed the centrality of their relationships with their peers in negotiating their position within the academic settings of the university. Kramsch (1998) offers an understanding of discourse communities, which raises many of the ideas discussed in this chapter and which help to determine which students are inside and which outside, their peer learning community.

The participants maintain this verbal coherence by observing a principle of conversational co-operation, that prompts them to align their expectations onto those of others playing various participant roles.

All these actions by the participants are finely attuned to the cultural

norms and conventions of the group they belong to and its attitudes and beliefs

(Kramsch, 1998, p.23, emphasis added by Davies, 2001)

In the following chapters I will be moving away from the academic discourse settings of the university to begin to develop an understanding of the ways in which students develop their *learning identities* within the social discourse settings of the university and beyond in negotiation with friends and family. As Eckert argues,

Ultimately the social life of variation lies in the variety of individual's ways of **participating in their communities their ways of fitting in**, and of making their mark – their ways of **constructing meaning in their own lives**. It lies in the day-to-day transformation of linguistic resources for local purposes, and its **global significance lies in the articulation between these local purposes and larger patterns of being in the world**.

(Eckert, 2000, p. 1-2, emphasis added by Davies, 2001)

The ideas raised by Eckert are key concepts to take forward in reading the chapters which follow. Eckert emphasises the importance of participating in social communities, fitting in and constructing meaning of life experiences, all of which are important to the understanding of the concept of *learning identity* discussed.

Part 5

Entering the Social Dialogue:

Students and their Peers

Chapter Nine

Negotiating Identity In Social Discourse

Settings

In chapter three the concept of 'sites of social centrality' (Chatterton, 1999) was introduced and has been revisited subsequently as a way of exploring the data collected and the emergent theory of *learning identity* in transition developed in this thesis. It is a concept of particular importance in this chapter which explores the social discourse settings of the university and the ways in which students negotiate their *learning identities* as an aspect of the process of re-appraisal involved in the construction of individual students' identities in social settings. 'Sites of social centrality' are described by Chatterton (1999) as the,

... 'espace de jeu' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1993) in which the students learn certain dispositions which enable them to know and recognise the laws of the field through practical experience within it.

(Chatterton, 1999, p.120)

In chapter three, I suggested that the need to belong within 'sites of social centrality' such as halls of residence and other shared student accommodation, and the bars and clubs frequented by students, may at least partially be explained by the need for group cohesiveness and the desire to build supportive friendship networks. I also argued that establishing an identity within particular student subcultures is part of the process of identity formation for students in transition. In the data chapters of this thesis the re-conceptualisation of the student role as a process of negotiating an individual profile in relation to experiences of continuity and discontinuity across discourse settings, and the resultant re-evaluation of prior views of studenthood in relation to this profile, has been put forward as a means of conceptualising students' experience of identity formation during the transition process. Central to this process is the active demarcation of a student's own role in relation to particular friendship groups within the social discourse settings of the university.

The routines and habits a student develops may to a large extent depend upon the social group to which he/she belongs (Festinger, Schachter and Back, 1950, Hogg, 1992). These routines and habits help to shape students' perceptions of their identity in relation to others in the discourse setting or 'site of social centrality'. McMillain and Chavis (1986) suggest a general theory of 'sense of community' which can be used as a way of understanding interactions between students in social discourse settings. They describe a sense of community as, "...a feeling that the members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). These inter-related

elements identified by McMillain and Chavis (1986) to explain 'community', I wish now to explore in relation to students' conceptualisations of friendship networks.

The students who participated in this research all spoke of their need to form friendships and establish themselves socially, as being a major priority in the initial weeks of university. Many of the students interviewed differentiated between 'acquaintances' and 'friends' and spoke of their need for friendship and the security which friendship offered (Wall *et al*, 1991). The student comments concerning friendship referred to notions of trust and loyalty based on a reciprocal relationship founded on the mutual exchange of personal information and the building of shared experiences as reference points in the friendship.

Such notions of friendship were important to students in terms of identity formation as they provided them with a group of people who were able to reinforce positive images of them, when they questioned their own constructed sense of self. Friends also provided a sounding board against which students were able to articulate their thoughts and feelings and acted as 'agony aunts' when things went wrong. Shared experiences offered by the transition to university, assisted students in the process of forming friendships, and in many cases helped students to negotiate a collective understanding of the experiences they were having at university.

The following extract from the interview I conducted with Lucy illustrates many of these friendship issues,

We just end up talking. We used to go out all the time but the last few weeks we've just been sitting around talking in the afternoon because we've had a lot of work to do. We had about a three hour discussion on how to handle people and what to do in different situations and stuff. It was quite in depth.

We've talked a lot about death as well and how to cope with it because someone knew someone who committed suicide here. So we talked a lot about that and what drives you to do it and stuff. Sometimes university is a bit scary. It's good to address your fears and come up with a consensus on how other people deal with it. You are completely left on your own with work and if you don't hand something in, it's "goodbye", that kind of finality about it.

If you fall out with someone, you're on your own, you can't go back to your old friends. We've talked a lot, especially about safety things as well. We heard that someone got attacked in the halls across from us. We were walking back one night and someone was following us and so you're worried about personal safety. There are so many trees and bushes around anything could happen and no one would know. So we stick together.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/ Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Lucy talks about various ways in which the friendships she has established with people in her halls of residence have helped her to deal with the transition to university. The range of ways in which her friends support each other is extensive and seem to be concerned with the process of managing discontinuity of experience within different settings. For example, Lucy talks about being involved in a discussion about how to manage people. She begins her response with a comment, which reveals the change in her relationship with her peers over time as they move beyond a relationship focussed around social events to a deeper level of friendship based on the sharing of personal opinions and fears. This awareness of a qualitative difference in friendships occurring over time was echoed in many of the student comments.

If I didn't have any friends here then I would leave. It's really important to me. No matter how much I like learning and doing well it's a bit worthless to just come here and not do anything else. There is more to university than just a structured academic experience.

(G.C./Female/English Studies/English/Research Site 3, R1, R2, R3)

Lucy also spoke of the potentially isolating experience of university and the pressures which drive people to suicide. These fears she describes as being “*good to address*” “*...and come up with a consensus on how other people deal with it*”. According to theories of group cohesiveness (Hogg, 1992), group identity is fostered in the convergence of language, tastes and ideas. The process of negotiating a shared understanding of experiences as described by Lucy between her and her friends, would appear to suggest the establishment of such a group identity within the social discourse

setting of the halls of residence which creates a sense of community as described by McMillain and Chavis (1986), which offers students the opportunity to form a negotiated understanding of their experiences.

Later in the extract Lucy also refers to her feelings of separation from her old friendships outside the university context, “*you can’t go back to your old friends*”. This feeling of distance from people outside the university who used to help individuals maintain their sense of self, “significant others” (Mead), is also common in the interview data collected for this study. Distance, be it physical, emotional or experiential (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999), from previously supportive “others” makes the friendships formed at university still more central to new students.

According to Ainley,

The informal curriculum of the campus... teaches students most of the lessons they learn at university.

(Ainley, 1994, p.77)

Building supportive peer groups has been identified by a number of other studies as being a significant factor in students’ learning (Tinto, 2000, Entwistle, 1997, Wall *et al* 1991) and their experiences of university (Silver and Silver, 1997). Social transition underpins the successful transition to university. The development of a friendship network is a major factor in this process (Kantanis, 2000). As can be seen from the extract from Lucy’s interview, friendship groups are very important in easing the transition to university and managing change and disorientation in relation to both new

academic and social experiences. The first few weeks of university are focused on establishing the self socially and finding a group of people with whom to relax with and rely on. Once this social network is in place students are in a more secure position from which to tackle the other challenges of university, secure in the knowledge that they have met at least a few people on whom they can rely for help and support.

In chapter 3 of this thesis, the role of social interaction in the learning process was explored in terms of the significance of alternative social language repertoires distinct from the language of academic discourse. These discourses were found to have an important oppositional role for students in the negotiation of identity and the formation of student roles and sub-cultures. Language acts as a means of symbolising differentiation from and conformity to established cultural patterns of behaviour (Billington, 1998).

The concept of an identifiable student culture was suggested based on the work of Bourdieu (1977), Kumar (1997) and Chatterton (1999). It was argued that student cultures are negotiated within 'sites of social centrality' (Chatterton, 1999). In these sites, the rituals of student life are negotiated and played out. Personal transformation is combined with evolutions in social structures and as a consequence learning takes place (Wenger, 2000). Wenger (2000) theorises social learning as based on competence and personal experience and suggests three modes of belonging in relation to social learning; engagement, imagination and alignment. However, these do not need to be

demonstrated through total conformity and students are able to maintain an individual identity whilst still belonging to the social learning community.

In her study of students in transition Kantanis (2000) speaks of “the need to belong” as being “one of the core desires that shapes human behaviour”, and stresses that “for adolescents this need is magnified” (p.103). Without friends students have fewer resources available to them to cope with the demands of starting university. This can undermine their sense of self, inhibiting their development of social and communication skills prevent students from receiving and giving emotional support and guidance to their peers and reinforce negative feelings about the institution, themselves and other students (Kantanis, 2000). However, adjusting to university takes time, as does developing friendship networks, and though initial difficulties were reported by some students, ultimately most of the students interviewed for this study, achieved some level of integration and support from their peers. As McInnes and James (1999) argue, social integration has been shown to influence academic achievement.

...the social nature of the university experience has the potential for contributing positively to academic performance, and more generally should influence the individual’s sense of competence. It is also the case that social involvement can undermine academic outcomes, and likewise reinforce negative views of competence. The nature and extent of social involvement is meaningful in its own right as part of the process of personal development and identity formation

(McInnes, and James, 1999, p.47)

I will now move on to explore students' stories of transition and their experiences of social interaction, in relation to the learning process, through the narratives of resident and non- resident students. In doing so the significance of various sites of social centrality such as halls of residence and social venues as social discourse settings where students develop friendships, will also explored.

Section 1: Building Friendships, Negotiating Identity and Living away from home

The importance to students of talking about the shared process of transition with peers has already been touched upon as being a major factor in the process of negotiating identity and forming friendships at university. Students living away from home in halls of residence or shared accommodation, have extended opportunities to access social discourse settings such as shared kitchens and other people's rooms in which experiences of transition are being discussed and students are actively positioning themselves in relation to others and temporal notions of themselves through the process of negotiating a shared understanding of feelings and events.

An aspect of the ways in which students described their use of social discourse settings to help them to understand the experience of becoming a student is in the alignment of

their sense of identity at home and at university. This Lisa describes as having, '*two lives*'.

We were saying the other day how brave we must have been to come to university. I'm from a little town in Wales and I've come to a big city where I didn't know anyone and with a whole new life style, and I've done it. I was so nervous of doing it and it's great. It's so different from my life back at home. I've got two lives now. It's a bit strange when you're trying to fit back in, but it gets normal after a while, wherever you are.

(LM/Female/History/English/Research Site 2/ R1, R2, R3)

Lisa uses discussions with her friends to confirm her own experiences of transition and to explore the difficulties she faces in moving between home and university. This could be considered as evidence of the fragmented identity of the student as suggested by Hird (1998). However, I would argue that process of alignment which Lisa is attempting between her sense of self at home and at university is not evidence of the postmodern fragmented self (Gergen, 1992) but the awareness of oneself in different contexts which, '*gets normal after a while, wherever you are*'. Lisa uses the social discourse settings of sites of social centrality to negotiate an understanding of the feelings of dislocation and displacement she feels in terms of where she thinks that she belongs, with others involved in a similar process.

I can go home most weekends or whenever I need to. I'm from just outside Glasgow... When you're in the 6th year you look forward to it, but when you're leaving you're a bit sad because you realise that there are quite a lot of people you're not going to see again. There are people that you'll keep in touch with. But even going back to see your friends it's really changed, because whereas before you could talk for hours about nothing, now you've got to really struggle and there are lots of strained silences. Some of them have gone away themselves some have stayed. It's strange because you start to feel like a stranger in your own home town... All the things you knew, you're seeing it all for the first time again.

(NF/Male/Scottish/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

As has been outlined in the introduction to this chapter, many studies investigating the transition to university, have identified the importance of students' relationships with their peers in defining the extent of feelings of integration, belonging and fitting in at university (McInnes and James, 1999, Tinto, 1993, Wall, 1991). The findings of this research support those of earlier studies in highlighting the significance of social integration in students' perceptions of the transition to university. Friendship networks offer students the opportunity to see themselves as belonging to and 'having a voice' (Belenky *et al* , 1986) in important social discourses. This helps the new student to establish themselves as a member of the student community and enables them to help to construct that community through discourse. The concept of 'gaining a voice' is an important aspect of the debate about structure and agency, which suggests that agency is

not possible unless individuals have the right to participate in the discourse. According to Honneth's theory of the politics of recognition, failure to be recognised as part of a community can have damaging effects on identity and self-efficacy. This notion is reinforced by the anxiety students expressed about not belonging at university. In Jade's case she was not only apprehensive about being able to become part of the student community, but also questioned her desire to belong to that community.

I was worried about not settling in, not liking the people you live with.

(JMcm/Female/English/Management Science/Research Site 2/R1,R2)

Every student interviewed regardless of gender, social background or institution mentioned 'making friends' as being an essential part of the university experience and initial concerns and worries about transition were often focused around fears of social isolation rather than concerns over the expected academic demands of their courses. Social integration plays a key role in academic satisfaction and engagement within the academic discourses of the university as the reported findings of this study relating to the significance of the peers learning community, (chapter eight) and involvement with the institution and the department (chapters 5 and 6) have revealed.

It was just the worry about not settling in – being homesick and not making any friends. Worries about not being able to cope with work too.

When you come you discovered it was all right.

(IM/Male/Scottish/Computer Science/Research Site 3/ R1)

However, for the majority of students initial concerns about not meeting people and settling in were allayed once they arrived at university and had had time to adjust to the new environment and discover a group of people to whom they could relate. However, the process of establishing a supportive network of friends took longer.

It wasn't too bad because everybody was in the same boat, talking to each other, especially on the first night. So you got to know people quickly.

(SR/Male/Chemistry/Northern Irish/Research Site 1/ R1,R2)

Halls of residence and shared accommodation provided students with 'ready made' groups of people to be with. It was only later that these groups were realigned and defined by the students themselves rather than being the structurally imposed group of the corridor or flat.

I didn't know anybody when I came and I just met so many people. It was the people from the corridor that I live in and from my hall and other people from courses that I do or friends of friends that I've met.... It was quite easy to meet people because most people were in the same boat and only knew 1 or 2 people – so they were happy to be nice to everyone.

My social life is busy. I come from a little village and there is nothing to do. I go to the cinema more here – you can't do that at home.

(LD/Female/Scottish/Biology/Research Site 3/ R1, R2)

The importance of halls of residence as discourse settings managed to override initial impressions about their physical characteristics as the people within the site of social centrality became more important.

The first impression of halls was a bit bad. It's just like a cell block that you walk into basically. But it's warm and everything – it is good. I didn't have a clue what it would be like. I knew it would be different. It's good, I'm glad I did it because I was thinking of just staying at home. I'm glad I didn't do that now. It's good because of the freedom – get away from your parents and um, it's good to be with your friends and stuff.

(IM/Male/Scottish/Computer Science/Research Site 3, R1)

For the majority of students interviewed, the initial experiences of socialising at university were enjoyable and provided the opportunity to meet a wide variety of new people. However, many students also reported moments of anxiety and insecurity, times when they questioned the extent to which they fitted in, and longed for the close friendships they had established with their friends from school.

In many studies these moments of anxiety have been described as homesickness (Fisher, 1994), however, as Lauren's comments reveal the emotions associated with forging new friendships in unfamiliar circumstances away from support networks is more complex.

I felt for a while that everyone had friends except me and I think looking back it was a big attempt by people to cling on to people. Nobody really had friends at all. But I think if you let it get to you, you get past the stage where you're actually able to do anything about it and you get stuck in a situation where you don't know what to do. I kept telling myself, "Don't worry – you'll meet people – you will". One of my flat mates felt that everyone knew each other and she didn't really do anything about it and now she's stuck.

(LW/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1R1,R2)

Lauren, like many of the students interviewed felt the pressure of isolation and anxiety and the resultant desperation to make friends immediately when she started university. However, she was aware that the friendships she was making were initially not founded on much besides necessity and the desire to be accepted. This awareness made her question the extent to which her friendships were genuine as she felt an outsider amongst a group of strangers who had all gelled instantly. It was only in hindsight that she realised that, "*Nobody really had friends at all*". However, she was also acutely aware of the importance of being seen to be friendly and making the "effort" to fit in. Using the story of her flatmate as an example of the way in which individuals can "get

stuck” in a situation where they are isolated and friendless if they fail to join a group in the first few days and weeks after transition. When experiencing moments of isolation and insecurity Lauren had reassured her self that she would meet people with whom she could connect and form friendships, which she did.

Jane’s reflections were similar to those described by Lauren, when she looked back at the initial weeks of university.

I feel better this semester. Last semester it just took a bit of getting used to, and you try to impress everyone when you first come. Now I know who I like and who I don't have to bother with because I'm not that friendly with them anyway. I feel better now, more confident.

(JL/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

Jane had also experienced the doubts and insecurity associated with the challenge of finding and establishing a network of supportive peers. In the initial weeks of university she had actively been trying to take control of other’s perceptions of her and to assume an identity and her perceived role as a student.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Lizzie, in her assessment of the process of making friends at university,

There have been times when it's hard and you wonder if people like you or if they're just being friendly for the sake of it. That changed really last term because you went away and came back and found that you still got on with them, even better than before. I figured out who I really liked and who I didn't, that's really helped a lot. Proper friends that you feel you know – it's really nice to feel that you've got proper friends. It's easier to admit to yourself if you don't get on with somebody. You'll allow yourself not to like people. If you do that on a first meeting you think you're just being judgmental, but if you go away and come back and they're still irritating you it's different. You can get a lot more out of university if you've got people to rely on.

(LW/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

Again Lizzie focuses on the need for time away in order to re-assess and re-negotiate friendships. She actively re-negotiates the friendships she has established as a result of her increased sense of self understanding and confidence which allows her to distance herself from those in the social discourse setting whose friendship she does not value.

Through her experiences within the social discourse setting of the halls of residence Lucy is also able to be proactive in her self reconstruction, actively making the decision to change her behaviour in the light of a growing understanding of her own and other people's identities.

Social skills in halls. You really have to learn to tolerate other people. It's not easy. I'm having a good time but I'm having to learn to tolerate people for who they are. One of the most important things I've learnt is not to be judgmental and talk behind people's backs.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

The fracturing of the structurally imposed group and the realignment of those in the social discourse setting of the halls of residence is illustrated by Jenny,

It's okay actually. The kitchen is a bit of a nightmare it's just generally a mess really – but I don't spend a lot of time in my kitchen really. A few people on the corridor, a few of us, don't get on particularly well – so I sit in someone else's kitchen and that's all right. We tend to just avoid them – you know – when it's rush hour in our kitchen you don't go in then. We were friendly in the beginning and then a few people had a few too much to drink and they haven't recognised it as that's what it was. Nobody could recognise that it was people had had too much to drink. I wasn't drinking so I recognised it as that.

(JD/Female/English/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2)

Jenny is aware of the importance of the kitchen and corridor as settings for social discourse but prefers the alternative discourse setting of other people's kitchen in which to engage in the negotiation of identity, aligning herself with a different group and

regarding herself as holding the privileged position of being the only one able to identify the cause of the breakdown in her structurally imposed group.

Lucy, Jane and Lizzie, though attending different universities were all in halls of residence. However, students at research site 1 and 2 were offered a range of different accommodation options as the limited number places available in halls of residence meant that not all first years had the option of this traditional form of accommodation. Shared flats and houses rented by the university and private landlords formed a substantial proportion of the accommodation available. For students this resulted in a mixture of experiences associated with forming friendship networks.

Although being in a flat is really good. It also hinders the amount of people you meet because you're not choosing to meet other people, because it's easier, whereas people in halls have to go out. I've met a lot of people from going out.

(LC/Female/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1, R1, R2)

The perception of nearly every student interviewed, whatever type of accommodation they were in, was that being placed with a group of other new students had helped them to make friends. However, as Lizzie's comments reveal, for her, being in a flat had made her a little complacent about meeting other people. The flat had provided her with a small group of people who she had got to know really quickly, and this had reduced her need and desire to widen her social circle beyond her flatmates. Lizzie believed that

had she been in halls it would have forced her to make the effort to meet new people. However, she was content with her social circle and felt that support was there if she needed it from the friends she had made.

In shared flats as in shared halls the breakdown of structurally imposed groups was evident in many of the students' comments,

I've met so many people that I can't remember their names....You get confused...Generally you make close friends with people in your flat. You make a few friends on your course as well...I don't know it may be easier on small courses? My course has 350 people on it, so it's very difficult to make any sort of friends. I mostly go about with flat mates. There are a couple of people who live down stairs who are a bit strange. Two of them are rather psychotic – in a bad way. Because someone borrowed one of their frying pans they went round with a hammer and threatened to nail him to the floor. They were serious. The guy cleaned the pan very quickly (laughs).

(NF/male/Computer Science/Scottish/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

Despite such difficulties, accommodation provides the main source of opportunity for meeting people and establishing friendships. Isolation in the initial weeks of university life can have serious implications for students.

MISSING

PAGES

NOT

AVAILABLE

Part 6

Negotiating Identity Beyond The University

Chapter Ten

Renegotiating Identity In Relation To The Family And Financial Responsibilities

In the previous data chapters of this thesis I have focused upon discourse settings within the university as sites in which students are in the process of negotiating their *learning identities* and establishing themselves in discussion with multiple interlocutors. In this chapter I wish to go beyond the university setting in order to explore some of the other key discourse sites in which students are negotiating their *learning identities* and individual roles as students. From the data collected it became evident that students' position within the family and their responsibilities outside the university were also important sites for the re-negotiation of identity. The transition to university forces a re-negotiation of students' relationships with parents, siblings and other family members and often brings with it new additional responsibilities associated with the financial burden of being at university.

Section 1: Family support for students in transition

The position of each new student within their family is of course, unique however all the students interviewed spoke of transition as being a point at which this position was re-negotiated in relation to other family members. In the student narratives tensions were

spoken of between the student's prior position within the family which was often one of resident child and adolescent and their new role as resident, or non-resident adult student. The students interviewed often showed great sensitivity to their parents' points of view and showed self-awareness in recognising the need to redefine their relationships at home. Many were also aware of the influence, which this process of re-negotiation had upon their perceptions of themselves, the university, the department and their peers.

The family plays an important part in student stories of transition, both in preparing the young adult to leave home and in on going support once they have started university. As Bill's comments show, parents and families provide encouragement to students to attend university and to persist and succeed whilst there (Terenzini *et al*, 1994). Bill's view of his role as a student and his conceptualisation of knowledge are wholly self-constructed in negotiation with interlocutors in various settings. Unlike many of the students interviewed who became gradually more aware of their ability to redefine their perceptions of studenthood in their own terms during the course of the year, Bill came to university with this understanding. The ability to recognise the *freedom of opportunity* offered to him through being at university he attributes to his relationship with his mother and the environment in which he grew up,

My Mum is a key figure. The environment she created meant that if I required help or criticism she was there. Without that university wouldn't represent freedom of opportunity to me. I learned long before

that you don't need people to tell you what to do and how to do it. If you feel like you've got something important to do you don't have to have the support of their institution to do it.

(BG/Male/Social Anthropology/English/Research Site 1/R1, R2, R3)

Other students mentioned the fact that going to university was something which their parents wanted for them and in many cases, expected them to do. Students often seemed to rely on the opinions their parents have of their abilities and whilst at home had constructed their own identity in relation to their parents and their siblings. For many of the students the graduate role was modelled to them in the life choices of their parents and as a result of this was expected both of them and by them to be a choice that they would make.

My mum was really glad that I decided to come to university. She wanted me to do it. She'd done social science. It was something I always expected to do.

(LD/Female/English Studies/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Similarly, Eva's story reveals the guided nature of her decision to go to university. In her case she is concerned that she will follow her mother's student pattern if she defers her decision and prefers to fulfil the responsibility she obviously feels to her parents, and go to university straight from school. Parental advice was clearly a major reference point for her at the time of application.

It was kind of expected that I probably would go to university. It wasn't forced on me but it was expected that it was something that I'd probably choose to do. They were quite happy with that. My dad went to university, my mum was meant to – but she took a year out and never went back. I'd rather get this out of the way now and then do something else before I work. I thought if I was to take a break now I'd probably just get out of the habit of work.

(EA/Female/Accountancy and Finance/Scottish/Research Site3/R1, R2)

For Michael, parental approval and a secure place within the family are also important. He wanted to succeed in order to fit in with the expectations of his parents and the achievement pattern of his siblings, and puts pressure on himself to do so.

I just want to pass this year... keep the parents happy and that sort of thing. Problem is I'm the youngest of four and the other three have all graduated and graduated well, if you know what I mean? My parents definitely want me to get a degree and you know? At a level of qualification accepted as high enough. I think I put a bit of pressure on myself. My sister graduated from Cambridge... I think I just think about that too much. I'm kind of the lost one from the bunch... Mum and

Dad were just happy I was going somewhere rather than just sitting at home.

(MD/M/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 1, R1)

Aside from practical and financial changes in students' relationships with family, many students also experience a status shift. For first generation students this appeared to be more pronounced, however, nearly all the students reported experiencing this to some degree. The transition to university means that the new student becomes the family 'expert' within their field of academic studies and can prompt a change in the relationship between the student and their parents. For some students this shift in intellectual status occurs at a much earlier point in their academic career, but for many the move from school to university marks a qualitative shift in parental perceptions of their child's understanding and subject expertise.

My parents are very proud of me. I'm the first person in my family to come to university... My dad, in fact, when I got my exam results through, (and you know it tells you like, if it's a good mark or very good) mine was in the very good category, and he said "I can see you getting a degree. We'll have to have a party". I said, "It's years away Dad, give me a bit of time!"

(JL/Female/Politics/Scottish/Research Site 3, R1, R2, R3).

Section 2: Living away from home

It was interesting to note that although the new students interviewed were dealing with the challenges associated with transition which have been explored in earlier chapters, many were concerned about the effect of their university attendance on their parents and other family members. This was most particularly the case for students who had left home in order to go to university. This is the position, which Tom was in at the time of this interview

I suppose like your parents, especially if you haven't got older brothers and sisters, they're going to miss you quite a lot. You can easily forget that your parents are losing a child – which sounds really melodramatic, but moving out is really going to hit them bad. I'm the youngest, but I think with the first it's a bit of a shock. It's a really big thing for you, but it's a big thing for them as well.

(TS/Male/Politics/English/Research Site 1/ R1, R2, R3)

In this extract from the first round interview transcript Tom shows an awareness of other people's life trajectories and personal identities in relation to his own which reveals the reassessment process which all his family members were going through at the time of his transition to university.

Some of the students interviewed appeared to be disappointed to find that their parents' lives go on despite their absence, preferring to believe that they were at home waiting for their sons and daughters to call.

I was totally worried about my mum now that we've all gone. But I rang the other day and she's gone away all this week.

(HA/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

Hannah's recognition that her mother has moved on to a new phase in her own life was a point of slight regret for her, though it was evident from the rest of the interview that she looked upon it pragmatically. Both she and her mother were in the process of redefining their identities apart from each other.

Students in the sample quite frequently mentioned that they were "missed" at home. This appeared to be important to them, even if they themselves were not missing home and family, as they needed to know that there was still a place for them within the family unit.

I get the impression that my little brother is missing me quite a lot

(WJ/Male/Package Design/English/Research Site 2/ R1, R2)

I think they [my parents] were quite sad I was leaving, but at the same time it was something that I had to do and that they wanted me to do.

They know I'm not too homesick, so that's okay. We're keeping in contact because my dad had email at work and my mum has got it at home, so we're chatting all the time, so I think they're okay about it. But my sister misses me. She's 12.

(LM/Female/Research Site 2/ R1, R2, R3)

I know my Dad misses me – I've always been a daddy's girl.

(TD/Female/Biology/English/Research Site 3/ R1, R2, R3)

In retaining a place within the family these students were able to maintain a key point of continuity in their construction of their identities, at the point of the transition to university. They were able to use internalised representations of parents and siblings views of them to reinforce notions of themselves brought into question through transition and received reassurance from those still at home that they were important to them and missed by them. As Lauren comments, distance and separation force re-negotiation in a more complete manner. As far as she is concerned, having moved out changes the relationship she has with those at home more comprehensively than for those students able to return home frequently or who still lived at home.

I think my mum misses me quite a lot. It's like being thrown in at the deep end. I've got friends who've gone to London and they've been home three or four times. So maybe they haven't moved away in the same way that I have.

(LW/Female/English/ Research Site 3, R1, R3)

Lauren positions herself in terms of discontinuity of experience and acknowledges the changes in her relationships which the transition to university, have prompted. In contrast Simon focuses on the continuity of his relationship with his family and does not see the transition to university as being an opportunity to establish an altered relationship at home.

I don't really see it as living away from home because it's only a ten week term and then you're back. I see it more like going away for a while and coming back, even though I'm spending more weeks of the year here.

(SR/Male/Chemistry/Northern Irish/Research Site 1/R1, R2)

In the construction of his individual identity as a student, Simon limits the parameters of change defining studenthood in his own terms, as being a temporary phase in his identity.

Initially other students shared Simon's concerns about discontinuity in relation to their family position, however, their experiences once at university made discontinuity a less daunting prospect and the re-negotiation of their role within the family became possible and even desirable.

I've stayed away from home but this is like the first big step. It's pretty much how I expected. I mean I'm not sort of "Oh, no! I want to go home". I thought I'd miss home more than I do really. I'm too busy to be sitting around thinking and worrying.

(ZQ/Female/English/Research Site 2/R1, R2, R3)

Niall's view of his changing relationship with his mother and father demonstrates his awareness that both sides are negotiating a new position for themselves in relation to each other. Though he is surprised to find that he appreciates the continuity and security offered him through his relationships at home which allows him an alternative place to return to when university becomes too much. He appreciates that his departure from the family home offers parental freedom and opportunities in a similar way to his own experiences of beginning university.

Most of the time you get on and quite enjoy it (living in halls) but towards the end of the semester you've had enough and want to get back home. I never thought I would look forward to going back to my parents'... I knew I was looking forward to moving away because I was getting sick of living with my parents. I was getting really annoyed because they were doing my head in after a while. Where I lived when I was 16, 17 years old you had to rely on buses, so I like living here, living away from home. I really enjoy it... They were glad to get rid of me. I get on with my parents but we spend a lot of time arguing, I think that most people do. They were quite glad to see the back of me I think. I mean it gives them more freedom, and it gives me more freedom.

(NF/Male/Computer Science/Scottish/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

From the interviews with the students in this sample it became apparent that many students were using their parents as reference points in attempting to establish their

identity at university. As the reported comments show, some students desired continuity in their family relationships, others discontinuity, but the transition to university forced some form of reappraisal for all those involved. Individuals needed to work out their own balance between continuity and discontinuity of experience in their relationships and to re-negotiate where they now stood in relation to one another.

Section 3: Going Home

A significant point in the re-negotiation of identity within the family was, for many returning home for a weekend or vacation.

One of the biggest things I've learnt is how to cope with being at home most weekends and coming back. I've learnt how to deal with my mum because she still sees me as living at home. So I've learnt to tolerate not being able to do what I want at home as well.

(LD/Female/Scottish/English Studies/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

Lucy is conscious of the need to alter her behaviour as both an adult and as a student when she returns home at weekends. She does this in response to her mother's needs on a temporary basis. However, her mother appears to regard this negotiated position as Lucy's permanent identity as a student. Returning home forced the students interviewed to test their understanding of their roles and relationships within the family and often results in the need for modification and compromise as in Lucy's case.

Other students returned home in order to re-establish their sense of identity within a familiar context and in negotiation with family members who offered them key points of continuity and stability at a time of change and discontinuity.

There are quite a few people that are homesick who are living away from home. One of my friends gets upset and she's got a lot of work to do at the moment. She goes home every weekend.

(GB/Female/Scottish/Accountancy and Finance/ Research Site 3/R1)

However, in most cases the students interviewed sought both continuity and discontinuity in their relationships with the family. They desired the freedom to construct an alternative student identity away from the family home whilst at the same time valuing the elements of the renegotiated relationships within the family which remained continuous. Nevertheless, a tension existed between being at home and being at university for some students which made them question where they really belonged? Catherine's comments exemplify this,

Before I lived with my mum and dad at home, so it's just really the freedom and the independence that I notice the most ...I thought it would be more scary than it actually was. We talked about it back home with my friends before we came and everybody was really nervous... But I suppose it's just getting away from home... I think that I was just ready to move out of home and most of my friends were doing it... I've got two

older sisters and one of them moved away to Liverpool, so I don't think that they thought this was bad. This was closer. They knew I wanted to move out and it's not too far to go home at the weekend. I've been home twice this term. That's not a lot compared to my friends who go home every weekend... I was looking forward to my freedom. I don't get homesick. I am enjoying it. It's really weird because I don't feel like I fit in at home anymore. But I'm not completely settled here yet. It's like "where do I fit in?"

(CB/Female/English/ Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

In a minority of cases students expressed the desire to remain at university and not return home in the vacations.

I know from my parents being away for a holiday that I'm all right on my own. Going home at Christmas is going to be interesting. I fight with my little brother quite a lot. I like being on my own. I'd rather just get on with it.

(EA/Female/Accountancy and Finance/Scottish/Research Site3/R1)

Section 4: Living at home

For students who remain at home the re-negotiation of their position within the family is equally if not more pressing than for students who move away. Staying at home and studying at university requires a more explicit reappraisal of family relationships on the part of both parents and students. Though still living at home, students are moving into

a different social and academic world where rules about the balance between social time and work are up for negotiation (Chatterton, 1999). This can pose problems when seen in the context of established family rules and routines as can differing understandings of the nature of adulthood.

I had considered going to Aberdeen but I decided eventually that it would just be cheaper to stay at home. I decided that I could probably just about cope with living with my mum. Just about (laughs)... It's not too bad apart from the distance. Mum doesn't bother me if I don't get back until 7 o'clock in the morning. You know, she's happy with that, and on the whole we get on pretty well apart from once a month or something... The other people I know from school are still living at home we're clustered round the same sort of area. I'm thinking of moving out... it's partly to get away from travelling to the uni because it's too much hassle to get home.

(PMcL/Male/Scottish/Research Site 1, R1)

Peter found that compromise between his own and his mother's needs were possible. However, for Malcolm living at home proved to be more difficult, though he wished to remain there.

I've got an attic at home. It's financially better to stay at home but it's difficult because I've got a little sister. She's only ten and comes into my room a lot. I've got a job as well and because I live a bit out of the city it

makes socialising difficult. But I want to stay around here. I don't want to move to the other end of the country from my girlfriend.

(MG/Male/Maths/English/Research Site 2/ R1, R3)

Malcolm expresses the tension he feels between his desire to remain near to his girlfriend and the need to gain access to social settings in which he can develop a negotiated understanding of his experiences. This tension was common amongst students remaining at home whilst studying at university and in some cases led to their decision to move out. In Gemma's case her decision to leave the family home was the cumulative result of the tension between her needs as a student and as an adult and the constraints of family life and her expected position within the family unit.

The biggest thing I've done since the last time I talked to you is to move out of home. It was okay at home but I like to study in the evening and that was difficult when I had to have tea at a certain time and the telly would be on. Since I've got my own room in my own place I can study until 2am if I want. At home I couldn't because I shared a room with my sister. It's much easier now.

(GN/Female/English/Research Site 2, R1, R3)

Section 5: Money and the Family

Though the last section has focused on the experiences of students living at home whilst at university, for the majority of the students interviewed starting university was coupled

with moving away from the family home and living alone for the first time, albeit often in shared, university managed accommodation. Thus starting university was a time of increased domestic as well as academic independence, marking the transition into to adult hood as well as studenthood for many of these new students. Though autonomy did not usually manifest in complete financial independence.

Researchers such as Ahier and Moore (1999) have noted that the financial inter-age transfer of funds remains increasingly with the parents' of young adults for longer periods than in previous generations. Ahier and Moore (1999) have also noted that this inter-age transfer is increasingly the privatised burden of the family rather than the state. This is particularly the case for young people entering higher education who have to find financial support for day to day expenses from places other than the grant or benefit system, as well as having to find funds for tuition fees. These circumstances increase the moral pressure on young adults entering university to make the most of their opportunities as it is likely that their parents will be making financial sacrifices in order to allow them to go (Walters and Baldwin, 1998). This financial dependency results in an extended period of transition into adulthood compared with that experienced by previous, more financially independent generations.

The students interviewed were extremely conscious of their perceived obligations to their parents in terms of the financial investment and sacrifices their parents were making for their university education. The perception of a moral obligation to succeed academically influenced students in the construction of their identities as students and

affected where they desired to position themselves in terms of academic achievement on the continuity/discontinuity continua in a range of social and academic discourse settings. As Lisa points out, she feels it necessary to prioritise achievement over learning at university as a consequence of the obligation she feels to her parents. Attitudes towards money can be seen as part of the negotiation of student identity.

University is for doing a degree, but learning is not the most important thing to me. Your parents pay such a lot of money for you to go away and do a degree, so you've got to make the most out of what you're doing here, and you're conscious of it. ...I think my parents expect me to succeed now because they're paying so much money. I'm the first one from my family to go as well, but I'm not too worried about it – it's my first year

(LM/Female/History/English/Research Site 2/ R1,R2,R3)

A similar view was expressed by the majority of the students interviewed including Tom who describes both his own sense of responsibility in not wasting the opportunities offered to him and his parents' attitude towards student debt and the financial cost of university. Tom appreciates his relatively privileged position in relation to money and parental support and acknowledges the moral responsibilities which come with it.

My parents were quite adamant that I should go somewhere and do something that I really wanted to do because of the cost. I didn't want

to go somewhere and then drop out because I'd picked the wrong course... Money is everyone's main worry, but it doesn't seem to stop anyone too much. I've got nice parents. I've not got a loan. They said that when they went to college, they both went to university, they didn't have to pay for any of it. So they didn't want me to end up going overdrawn and having a huge debt. I mean we haven't really discussed it but I presume I'm going to pay them back as opposed to paying the bank... I'd feel quite bad if I don't because it's a lot of money isn't it?

(TS/Male/English/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

Amongst the students at research site one, a greater proportion had graduate parents than at the two other research sites. These students spoke of their parents concern to accept responsibility for bearing the cost of their education by comparing it with the state support which they themselves had received as undergraduates. Other students with non-graduate parents also expressed the desire to bear the burden of debt for their children even when they were in a less financially secure position than Tom's family and were less able to manage such costs.

Darren's struggle to convince his parents of the acceptability of a certain amount of debt, in the form of student loans, is typical of these students' stories.

They thought when I said like, the grants are going out and I'm only going to get £810 and the rest is going to be a loan. Mum had visions of loan sharks coming after you saying "I want the money. Where is this week's rent?" They [my parents] were a little sceptical at first. But it's

probably the best thing for me to go off to university, and they did want me to go to uni and get a good education. But in the other part of their mind they're thinking, "How on earth is he going to afford it?" and "How are we going to afford it?" But when they got the letter through from the council saying, "you don't have to pay any tuition fees because you don't earn enough". That settled them a bit. Although they did eventually pay for some of my meals - I got a meal package here that they paid for. They also send me up some money each month – not much you know.

(DH/Male/Computer Science/English/Research Site 3/R1)

Despite not being in a strong position to help Darren financially his parents still contributed what they could to cover his expenses, making sure that his meals were paid for and sending him what they could each month.

Amongst students whose parents were shouldering a large part of the financial burden the desire to pay back the debt was commonly spoken of. There appeared to exist a tension within the families, concerning whose debt the cost of university education was. Students perceived the debt to be their own and parents often thought of the debt as being theirs. The struggle over money and financial responsibility created a sense of moral obligation in many of the students interviewed. This affected both their relationships with their parents, as they could not be fully independent adults, and their view of studenthood as they felt a responsibility to negotiate a particular student role at university in order to fulfil their moral obligation to their parents.

I'm quite well off because I was supposed to be going on holiday over the summer but a lot of people pulled out. My parents are paying my tuition this year. I've got a student loan. I don't have to worry too much about paying it back because my parents have put money aside for it – but I will pay some of it back. I was told by my mum and dad not to take out a loan and they would get one. But they would have to pay interest – so I was told to take one out in the end.

(EA/Female/Accountancy and Finance/Scottish/Research Site3/R1, R2)

For students in the fortunate position of not having to worry about repaying their parents a range of attitudes towards debt could be seen. Tim regarded it as their responsibility not to incur debt as their parents were paying for them to leave university without the encumbrance of student loans, whilst others like Michael, saw studenthood as the opportunity to make money if possible from the system.

I haven't got time for a job here. Money is okay at the moment because I had a good birthday in October. I've got a meal card, which means I get evening meals, so I don't really have to spend much on food.... Money is fine I haven't got into debt. Everyone else I know has got debt or overdraft or something.

(TE/male/Chemistry/English/Research Site 1 R1)

Student loan wise – I’ll get one every year because it’s virtually free money. As soon as you leave university and get a job they’ll give you a loan with 16% APR and mine was 3% - so if you put it in a 7% savings account you make £300. So I don’t see why anyone doesn’t take all their student loans out...I don’t really mind getting in a reasonable amount of debt because I’ll have my degree and earning power...

Most people are kind of embracing debt. They are thinking “I’m going to be in debt, so I might as well just go for it”. I don’t think it’s possible to come out of university without debt now. So I think they’re expecting it.

(MD/Male/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 1, R1, R2, R3)

Amongst the students interviewed only a small proportion had taken a term time job in addition to their university studies. However, a larger proportion of the cohort were in the process of looking for employment or planned to get a job in the near future. In the previous section, students’ need to go home at weekends was linked to their desire to gain support and continuity however, for other students the need to return home was more closely linked with the financial imperative of having a job.

A lot of people are actually home at weekends because a lot are from Scotland. In some ways it’s quite good being able to go home because I don’t have to worry too much that I haven’t been able to find a job here. I think it certainly would have been difficult if I couldn’t.

(EA/Female/Accountancy and Finance/Scottish/Research Site3/R1, R2)

Throughout this chapter I have been interested in demonstrating the ways in which students' views of their position within the family helps to shape their concept of themselves as students. The notion of conflict between parents' and students' view of debt and the student role, have been raised, as have the lifestyle conflicts which existed for some students living at home and studying at university. Whether returning home at weekends or vacations or living at home, most of the students interviewed recognised the need to reposition themselves within the family context in order to gain alignment between their view of themselves as a student and their role at home. Establishing such a sense of alignment was complicated for students in the sample, by their financial dependency on their parents and their resultant feelings of a moral obligation to succeed, which helped to shape their notions of studenthood.

Part 7

Bridging The Academic And Social Discourses

Chapter Eleven

Bridging Academic and Social Discourses: Drawing Together the Strands

The theory of *learning identity* developed in this thesis offers a re-conceptualisation of the experience of the transition to university for the students in the sample. Beginning from a theorisation of the university as a set of interconnected academic and social discourses (chapter 3) and an understanding of the centrality of language and talk to the temporal construction of identity (chapters 1-3) I was able to develop the theory of *learning identity* further as a result of the collection and analysis of the data from this project. The concept of *learning identity* arrived at goes beyond the original theorisation (Lather, 1991), recognising the individual agency involved in developing a sense of *learning identity* and offering important insights into transition which may prove useful in understanding the experiences of other groups of students at the point of university entry.

The theory of *learning identity* arrived at is underpinned by notions of identity as a temporally constructed narrative (Giddens, 1991). Through out the discussion of the

data collected I have used the stories students tell about their experiences to illustrate this temporal process of identity formation and the negotiated understanding of events and circumstances. In revisiting ideas about story telling and identity (Kehily, 1995) the use of narrative in the explanation and construction of a situated sense of self remains central as do the concepts of meaning making through talk (Merriam and Heuer, 1996) and interaction within discourse communities in various settings.

The point of transition creates contexts for such discourse and opportunities for revising prior notions of the self. Individuals' life trajectories (Harris, 1987) include them in the construction and negotiation processes which help to shape their own and others' identities within the discourse communities of the university. In the data chapters which precede this section I have offered examples of different discourses settings such as the seminar group and shared residential accommodation, in which students are negotiating their *learning identities* in relation to prior notions of themselves, internalised views of significant others, including parents and teachers, and dialogue with interlocutors involved in the discourse community of the settings, such as the students' peers and tutors.

Learning identity is thus conceptualised as an ongoing process reliant on individual agency and the active positioning of self in relation to experiences of continuity and discontinuity within communities of discourse. In this study, students' perceptions of their profile and position across discourse settings and within discourse communities

was found to shape their experiences of university and define the extent to which they felt engaged or alienated from the institution and its members.

In this, the final chapter of the thesis I would like to highlight the holistic way in which many students perceive learning at university and examine the ways in which students prioritise certain discourse settings as sites in which to negotiate their holistic sense of *learning identity*. For some students interactions and involvement in the academic discourse communities of the university are paramount. For these students feelings of engagement and agency within the seminar or laboratory are critical. It is experiences in these sites which they prioritise in their construction of a narrative of identity. For other students the social discourse settings prove critical in terms of their construction of identity. Within these discourse settings students' experiences of continuity and discontinuity and their perception of their ability to actively negotiate their relative position, influence the extent to which they feel they have control over the transition process (Van Gennep, 1960). The concept of control over experiences is important as it appears to equate with notions of effective agency. This being said, the discourse communities which students prioritise were shown to change over time in response to their current academic and social needs.

The following student comments are included to illustrate the various ways in which students position themselves within the academic and social discourse communities of the university and so experience a holistic sense of themselves as learners in higher education.

Lucy expresses a view of learning as empowerment which reaches beyond the institutions which offer formal contexts for learning.

...I think when you first think of learning you think of going to school and university and getting qualifications – but I remember my history teacher always used to say that education and learning gives you a tongue. It gives you more confidence. You can hold your own. It's not power in a negative way but in a positive way.

(LD/Female/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

In her interview, as the extract shows, Lucy raised ideas about the importance of having a voice in the academic discourse in order to participate actively in education and life beyond the institution. These ideas return to the initial focus of the concept of *learning identity* and the importance of language and talk in learning (Belenky *et al* 1986). For Lucy and the other students interviewed, language acted as the public and private medium through which they were active in making and remaking their social realities (Miller and Hoogstra, 1992). The conceptual was perceived by them as being inextricable from the linguistic (Lee, 1997) as students' developed their understanding of modes of making-meaning (Merriam and Heuer, 1996) in discourse settings within and beyond the university.

Like Lucy, Jane offers an insight into the ways in which she has successfully negotiated an identity as a student within the context of the university and gained a voice within the

academic and social discourse communities. In this extract from her interview transcript she uses the concept of learning as a notion with which to position herself within the various discourse communities in which she is an interlocutor.

Learning is really important, all kinds of learning, because that's all we do every day, all day. Even if you're not studying you're absorbing lots of changes and information and it's all learning. There are lots of people who are learners who aren't students. But I would say that most students are learners. Being a student is about having fun, becoming independent, just learning how to deal with the world and getting a degree. It's loads of stuff. It's a big part of your self-esteem if you feel you're doing well academically. If you weren't doing well you'd feel that there was no reason to be here, no direction...I still see myself as a learner in all the things I do, which I think I've always done. The way I think about the process is the same, but because of the way the course is being taught you have to learn differently, and I'm enjoying that

(JH/Female/Chemistry/Scottish/Research Site 1/R1, R3)

For Jenny her perception of herself as a learner is a primary concept in her identity both within and beyond the university setting. Jenny reflects on her past view of herself in relation to learning and her current view, revealing the temporality of the process of reflection in which she is involved in trying to make sense of transition. Continuity in her perception of herself as a successful learner is important to Jenny, 'It's a big part of

your self-esteem if you feel you're doing well academically' however, once this sense of self has been negotiated with interlocutors in the formal academic discourse settings of the university she is able to embrace discontinuity of experience in relation to the tasks demanded of her *'The way I think about the process is the same, but because of the way the course is being taught you have to learn differently, and I'm enjoying that'*. Jenny prioritises her academic success at this point in her university experience, though she also values the learning experienced within peer communities (Wenger, 2000) in social settings, *"Even if you're not studying you're absorbing lots of changes and information and it's all learning"*.

Jenny's description of her identity as a student shows the alignment between her desired and realised position in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience within different discourse settings. She has been able to achieve alignment between her internalised view of self and the relative position she has negotiated with interlocutors in different discourse communities at university. *'Being a student is about having fun, becoming independent, just learning how to deal with the world and getting a degree. It's loads of stuff'*. Her notion of studenthood reveals that socially she is personally secure as well as being academically positioned to her satisfaction. However, identity is never a finished construct (Bauman, 1993) and in order to retain her sense of alignment between her experiences and her view of herself Jenny must constantly re-negotiate her position within the various discourse settings and communities.

Experiences of alignment and alienation in relation to learning at university, as explored by Mann (2001), were in this study closely associated with the students' profiles across discourse settings, as exemplified by Jenny's transition narrative above. Students' profiles were conceptualised in terms of their relative and their desired positions in relation to continuity and discontinuity of experience within discourse settings. Lucy offers a less successful example of the process of aligning the internalised self with experiences within social and academic discourse settings. Like Jenny, Lucy uses her sense of self as a learner as a key construct in the negotiation of her identity. However, she has been unable to position herself as a successfully as a student within the academic discourse settings of the university, which was for her a priority. This misalignment in discourse settings which are important to her force into question her position within other areas of her life. In order to reposition herself academically she finds she must also reposition herself socially and change her routines and habits within 'sites of social centrality' (Chatterton, 1999).

I was lazy and then I was ill so I thought I'd better do something. I've been going to the gym and eating a wee bit healthier. So I'm starting to change my habits too. You get more time and just things like cleaning your room – it's something you put off but when you've done it there is no excuse not to work and you're proud of yourself that you've done something today. I think if you're positive you can work – otherwise you just stop doing things.

(LD/Female/Scottish/Politics/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

Though Lucy has not yet negotiated her desired position within the academic discourse community her decision to alter her behaviour reveals her belief in her power of agency to change her situation and profile and to renegotiate her experiences and *learning identity*.

In contrast to Lucy and Jenny, Karen prioritises her experiences within the social contexts of the university over the negotiation of her identity in academic discourse settings. However, her concerns in relation to her own *learning identity* and the *learning identities* of others she comes into contact with, are still focused around conceptualisations of learning, though in this case learning in social settings.

Outside the classroom you're not thinking about learning, you just do it automatically. Sometimes you learn about your course and other times you just learn about other people's perspectives on things.

...there is always something that I feel I should be learning about – so many books I should read about history and politics. There is so much information in the world and I feel that I should find out about it. I read a lot of alternative media and I think it is important to get an alternative perspective. Amnesty and other groups are more important to me than the course side.

(KB/Female/English/Biology/Research Site 3/ R1,R2,R3)

Karen prioritises her work as an activist over her studies but finds it difficult to find people to engage in dialogue with about the issues which matter to her. Her understanding of learning like those expressed by Jenny and many of the students interviewed is a holistic one which spans the academic and social discourses within the and outside the university and which is not confined to institutionally constructed opportunities for engagement in learning.

To end this section examining the ways in which students bridge the academic and social discourses and position themselves in relation to experiences of continuity and discontinuity in their negotiation of *learning identity* I wish to discuss part of the second interview conducted with Bill. Bill's comments exemplify the thought and consideration which many of the students interviewed had given to their experiences of transition and their understanding of learning.

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Why is education seen as being separate from life? Why do you go to an institution to learn things? Segregating education segregates learning as being something you do and then you stop doing. I can't understand divisions within subjects it's a regimented way of seeing things...I like Psychology because if you want to you can get something out of it. It's a bridge and has fingers in all the pies. I feel like I'm on the edge of something.

I feel there is a way through to a wider understanding...Psychology is a good medium for exploring life and it's something you can bring a lot to...I don't see that you have to 'do' your university course and 'do your outside interests and see it all separately. I want to see Psychology as a basis for other aspects of my life. (It's very hard to talk about this without sounding like a pain in the arse). I know I've talked about subjects as specifics, but you can still be holistic about it. The truth is that most people make a distinction between what they learn and the rest of their lives. I suppose I've been lucky in finding something that does have a significant impact on the way I live my life.

I think of myself as a learner – but only now you've asked me. I would never describe myself like that. Words like pupil and student have a lot of connotations but not very much to do with learning at all. Learning is what you do as a person. If you don't learn you don't go anywhere. From wherever consciousness starts you're building your brain from the inside.

When you start doing something with a goal in mind I think you learn simply through the process of committing yourself to it and as a result acquire a different way of doing things. The process of doing that forces you into situations that wouldn't have happened before. So not

only are you increasing your knowledge – you're increasing your skills at getting knowledge.

(BG/Male/Social Anthropology/Research Site 3/R1, R2, R3)

Bill's comments are particularly interesting as he appears to embody the notion of being 'inside the learning society' (Ranson, 1998). To Bill learning and living are the same experience. He does not associate learning with institutional confines and demands but acknowledges the opportunities which engagement in academic discourse communities offer in shaping his life experiences and the construction of his temporal *learning identity*. His excitement about the agency he feels as a result of his study is evident and "*has an impact on the way [he] lives his life*". Bill clearly believes that there is space for conversation in which he is an influential interlocutor and that his insights and understandings matter (Barnett, 2000).

Bill is however, resistant to the notion of being a 'learner', 'student' or 'pupil' which he believes to be passive roles which would limit his active engagement in the construction of knowledge and silence his voice in critical discourse settings. Instead of accepting the role of student he believes to have 'connotations but not very much to do with learning', he prefers to negotiate his own role as a student. This process of developing an individual notion of studenthood has been revisited throughout the discussion of the data generated in this study. It is a central concept in understanding the notion of learning identity as a unique profile of negotiated positions within discourse settings and communities. In making sense of his transition experience, Bill asserts control by

making an active commitment to becoming a 'student' in his own terms. With this 'goal' in mind, he is able to meet the challenges of discontinuity of experience with which he is confronted. Facing new challenges and situations are perceived by him in a positive light as being opportunities both to develop knowledge and to develop his ability to generate knowledge which contribute to the on going process of *learning identity*.

Thus the concept of *learning identity* allows a greater understanding of the ways in which students construct their narratives of identity and re-write their stories of the self over time in negotiation with interlocutors from different communities of discourse. This theorisation is not stage related in the way in which Perry (1970) conceptualised student transition, development and maturation, nor is it focussed upon specific tasks and skills like the approaches to study inventory based research (Biggs, 1993, Entwistle, 1983, Flett, 1996) neither is it gendered in terms of 'ways of knowing' as described by Belenky *et al* (1986). The theorisation of *learning identity* proposed here allows for the unique experiences of each individual in transition and encourages a holistic perspective on learning which goes beyond the formal academic settings of the institution. Similarities between students experiences within various discourse settings have been highlighted through out the discussion of the data collected, however, no two students will have the same profile across discourse settings or in fact wish to attain the same profile.

Alienation (Mann, 2001), is not the result of a single misalignment between a students' desired position on a continuum of continuity and discontinuity of experience, and their realised position, but the result of multiple misalignments across a number of discourse settings. The concept of the fragmented or saturated self (Gergen, 1991) does not answer the feelings of misalignment reported by some students in this study as it is the attempt to align experiences with an essentialised view of the self which makes students feel dislocated or connected at university. This understanding of alienation is important as it provides a way of theorising students experiences reported in other research (Kantanis, 2000) in which the examination of students' experiences have revealed an association between feelings of academic and social connection and persistence at university.

The transition to university is a unique personal experience, but one which a growing proportion of the population are encountering. Consequently the idea of *learning identity* outlined here may be useful in understanding the experiences of mature and non-traditional students once they have gained access to the university system. Through interviewing students about their sense of agency within the structurally determined discourse settings of the university and the social discourse settings negotiated with other students, a new understanding of the barriers to integration experienced by some adult learners could be explored (Thorpe *et al*, 1993).

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Appendix A

Table of figures pertaining to the three research sites drawn from league tables 1998

	ENTRY STANDARDS	FIRSTS AND UPPER SECONDS	STUDENT-STAFF RATIO	TEACHING ASSESSMENT	RESEARCH	LIBRARY SPENDING	COMPUTER SPENDING
RESEARCH SITE 1	25.3	75	10.3	21.1	5.05	482	533
RESEARCH SITE 2	16.0	49	12.6	19.8	0.98	311	255
RESEARCH SITE 3	19.4	62	13.0	20.8	3.59	390	342

ENTRY STANDARDS:

Average A and A/S level point scores of first degree students on entry across the institution in 1995-96

FIRSTS AND UPPER SECONDS

All degree qualifiers gaining first and upper second class honours degrees in 1995-96 as a proportion of all first degree honours graduates.

STUDENT-STAFF RATIO

Average ratio across the institution for first degree full-time equivalent (FTE) total numbers known to be non-franchising courses and total teaching only plus teaching/research staff in 1995-96.

TEACHING ASSESSMENT

Based on all TQA subject scores across the institution as published by the funding councils

RESEARCH

Average RAE score per member of staff based on the 1996 exercise. All staff were counted and scores calculated on a seven-point scale.

LIBRARY SPENDING

Spending on academic services: central libraries and information services per FTE student numbers in 1995-96. Includes expenditure on all libraries and learning resource

COMPUTER SPENDING

Spending on academic services: central computer networks per FTE student numbers in 1995-6. Includes expenditure on all non-administrative computer

Appendix B

1996 Research Assessment Exercise Figures for Departments involved in the current study

Research Site 1

Department	1996 Rating	Category A Research Active Staff (FTE)
<i>Psychology</i>	3a	15.5
Chemistry	5	38.0
Computer Science	5	80.2
Social Anthropology	4	16.5
Politics and International Studies	4	14.0

Research Site 2

Department	1996 Rating	Category A Research Active Staff (FTE)
Business and Management Studies	3b	28.0
History	4	8.0
Art and Design	4	30.5
Chemistry	Not submitted	
Maths	Not submitted	

Research Site 3

Department	1996 Rating	Category A Research Active Staff (FTE)
Biological Sciences	3a	22.0
Computer Science	3a	10.0
Politics and International Studies	3a	7.0
Accountancy	4	11.0
English Language and Literature	3a	19.8

Appendix C

HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS BY AGE: DEGREE

AGE	1998	%CHANGE	
		1994-99	1998-99
UNDER 18	7537	18.84	0.11
18.0-18.11	138976	24.56	-0.88
19.0-19.11	56378	33.81	9.17
20.0-20.11	17369	36.57	12.02
SUB-TOTAL	220260	27.72	2.74
21.0-21.11	9049	28.08	6.96
22.0-22.11	5963	5.62	-3.82
23.0-23.11	4138	-9.15	-2.10
24.0-24.11	3446	-10.56	-8.36
25.0-29.11	11548	-13.61	-6.62
30.0-39.11	12748	-3.23	-3.24
40+	5188	0.13	2.14
SUB-TOTAL	52080	-0.89	-2.00
TOTAL	272340	21.28	1.84

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

AVERAGE DISTANCE TRAVELLED BY HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS, BY AGE: DEGREE

AGE	1998	%CHANGE	
		1994-99	1998-99
UNDER 18	54.54	-10.37	-3.41
18.0-18.11	74.33	-14.45	-2.20
19.0-19.11	71.02	-15.63	-2.13
20.0-20.11	59.68	-19.74	-3.15
SUB-TOTAL	71.66	-15.12	-2.50
21.0-21.11	51.27	-25.42	-5.60
22.0-22.11	47.66	-28.68	-8.10
23.0-23.11	46.39	-23.51	-4.33
24.0-24.11	41.18	-29.24	-6.63
25.0-29.11	35.25	-24.10	-4.48
30.0-39.11	23.19	-17.85	-8.40
40+	20.97	-11.87	-2.81
SUB-TOTAL	36.16	-22.40	-5.36
UNKNOWN DISTANCE	19217		
TOTAL	272340		
AVERAGE DISTANCE	65.02		

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS BY SEX: DEGREE

SEX	1998	%	% CHANGE	
			1994-99	1998-99
MALE	127265	46.73	13.86	0.90
FEMALE	145075	53.27	28.49	2.66
TOTAL	272340	100	21.28	1.84

AVERAGE DISTANCE TRAVELLED BY HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS BY SEX

SEX	1998
MALE	67.28
FEMALE	63.05
UNKNOWN DISTANCE	19217
TOTAL	272340
AVERAGE DISTANCE	65.02

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS BY SOCIAL CLASS: DEGREE

Social Class	1998	%	%Change	
			1994-9	1998-99
I Professional	36848	13.53	4.68	1.10
II Intermediate	107695	39.54	15.87	0.31
IIIN Skilled non- Manual	32476	11.92	23.48	2.27
IIIM Skilled Manual	39503	14.51	12.00	1.06
IV Partly Skilled	20343	7.47	25.84	1.18
V Unskilled	4604	1.69	22.30	3.63
Unknown	30871	11.34	96.72	8.75
TOTAL	272340	100	21.28	1.84

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

HOME ACCEPTED APPLICANTS BY ETHNIC ORIGIN: DEGREE

ETHNIC ORIGIN	1998	%
WHITE	216882	79.54
TOTAL BLACK	7979	2.93
TOTAL ASIAN	23538	8.64
OTHER	4213	1.55
UNKNOWN	19728	7.24
TOTAL	272340	100

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

AVERAGE DISTANCE TRAVELLED TO INSTITUTION IN EACH REGION: DEGREE

Institution region	1998	% Change	
		1994-9	1998-9
England	67.16	-13.81	-2.87
Wales	63.53	-15.29	-2.33
Northern Ireland	-	-	-
Scotland	50.64	-6.64	-0.30
Unknown distance	19217		
Total	272340		
Average Distance	65.02		

Data drawn from UCAS Widening Participation Statistical Bulletin (2000)

Appendix D

The student sample Research Site 1

Subject area	Gender	Student initials	Nationality	Entry Qualifications
Social Anthropology				
	F	LC	E	AAA
	F	LW	E	AAAA
	M	BG	E	AAAA
Politics	F	EMCG	E	AAA
	F	CB	E	AAAA
	F	SH	E	AAAA
	F	FM	S	AAAAA SYS - A
	M	AR	E	AAAB
Psychology	M	PMCL	S	AAAAA SYS- AB
	F	SH	S	AAAAA
	M	TS	E	AAAA
	F	KS	S	AAAAB SYS- BA
	F	RB	E	AAAAA
Chemistry				
	M	TH	E	AABB
	M	JMW	E	AAAA

	M	SR	NI	AAB
	F	JH	S	AAAAA SYS-AA
	F	SO	E	AABBB
	M	TE	E	AABBB
	F	CMCK	S	AAAA SYS-CC
Computer Science				
	F	AG	E	AABBB
	M	MP	S	AAAAA
	M	BO'L	I	AAAAAAA
	M	KC	S	AAAAA SYS-AAC
	M	NF	S	AAAAA
	M	KC	S	AAAAA SYS-CC

Entry Qualifications - A Level, SYS, Highers, GNVQ, Irish Leaving Certificate Results
Nationality- English (E), Scottish (S), Northern Irish (NI), Irish (I)

The student sample Research Site 2

Subject area	Gender	Student initials	Nationality	Entry Qualifications
Art and Design				
	M	WJ	E	ACCE
	F	NB	E	GNVQ Merit
	M	AB	E	BTEC
	M	SP	E	ABD
	M	SG	E	AC
History				
	M	CR	E	BBCC
	F	ZQ	E	ABC
Maths				
	F	KR	E	CCCC
	F	HM	E	BBCDE
	M	CO	E	(1) DEN (2) BDDE
Chemistry				
	F	GN	E	CCDE
	M	SK	E	BBD
	M	MG	E	BCC
	F	JM	E	AACE
	M	BH	E	CCDD

Management Science				
	M	SE	E	BBCC
	M	PMCM	E	ABBC
	F	ER	E	BCEE
	M	MS	E	ABU
	F	JMCM	E	BCDE
	M	AP	E	CCD

Entry Qualifications - A Level, SYS, Highers, GNVQ, Irish Leaving Certificate Results
Nationality- English (E), Scottish (S), Northern Irish (NI), Irish (I)

The student sample Research Site 3

Subject area	Gender	Student initials	Nationality	Entry Qualifications
English				
	F	JD	E	AABC
	F	RB	E	AAB
	M	PB	E	AAC
	F	LD	S	ABBF SYS-B
	F	EC	E	ABBC
Accountancy				
	M	AD	E	ABCC
	F	LH	S	ABCCC SYS- B
	F	EA	S	CCBAAAA
Politics				
	M	GM	S	AAABBB
	M	MD	S	ABBCCDD
	F	GB	S	ABBBBC
	F	JL	S	ACCB SYS -B
	M	TD	E	BBC
	F	CT	S	HNC

Biology				
	F	KB	E	AABB
	F	VI	S	AABBCC SYS-BC
	F	TD	S	AAABCC
Computer Science	F	HA	E	AACD
	F	LD	S	AABBCC
	F	SB	S	ABBCCC SYS- C
	M	DH	E	ABBD
	M	IM	S	ABCCU SYS- U

Entry Qualifications - A Level, SYS, Highers, GNVQ, Irish Leaving Certificate Results
Nationality- English (E), Scottish (S), Northern Irish (NI), Irish (I)