



School of Education

**INVESTIGATING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' TRANSITIONS
WITHIN ONE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the potentially problematic nature of transitions and the implications for the way students engage with (and disengage from) the process of learning. Although studies in the field of student experience, learning approaches and transitions have examined the relation between learning and contextual factors, there has not been an in-depth examination of the ways students cope with the changes at personal and academic level they are confronted with at university. This study draws initially upon the theories of Lave & Wenger to develop a theoretical model for conceptualising students' experiences of learning at university. The study is therefore able to provide additional insights into the way individual identity; institutional communities and the interaction between the personal and the social elements can play a role in students' experiences of their transitions to and in university. This is developed with a very specific focus on transitions from first to second year study at university.

In order to explore the nature and range of transitions that students experience, the methodological design of the study is based upon a qualitative methodology including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews of nine undergraduate students along with non-participant observation of two modules within one pre-1992 HE institution. The data are analysed to explore the research participants' perceptions, meanings and practices as these are negotiated and enacted in the various communities before and after their transition to and within university.

The research findings suggest that the process of transitions involves a rich interplay between roles, relationships and participation. As students strive to develop higher order skills and become part of their communities, they seem to be confronted with changes in perceptions, positions and attitudes. These changes can be seen as deriving from the interactions between students and their institutional and wider communities. In essence, therefore, the thesis offers a model for understanding students' transitions to and within university. This model suggests that underpinning students' experiences at university are a range of transitions within various communities that influence the way identities, knowledge, and practices are constructed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Prologue

In this thesis, I explore how undergraduate students experience the transitions from secondary to tertiary education. I suggest that viewing student experiences as a series of transitions is important for understanding the nature and meaning of their university experiences. I am particularly interested in the ways in which social settings affect individuals and their engagement with learning.

In this chapter, I will start by looking at my experiences of learning and the implications that these had on my personal, academic, and social development within and outside HE. This provides an initial exploration of transitions as a generic concept. I then move on to define the key terms in my research, before I describe the context of Higher Education (HE) in the UK in relation to governmental policies and reports. Situating HE against this political backdrop is essential as policies have an impact on the nature and role of HE, which in turn influence students' perceptions, experiences, and interactions with HE. I then focus on the University of Nottingham where I carried out my research.

1.2. My experiences of learning

The aim of this section is to explore my assumptions, beliefs and ideas and the issues that appear to have played a part in my personal and professional development. This will provide the reader an understanding of my own experiences and perceptions of

the learning process, which I believe are variables that can affect the research process.

1.2.1 Compulsory education

Being the oldest of the three children in my family, I was the first to go to school. Retrospectively, I remember feeling responsible for ensuring that any possible negative feelings towards my experiences of school would not have an adverse impact on my two siblings. Living in a block of flats I was socialising with other Greek children of my age who went to the same school. To my mind school became primarily a social place where I was socialising with the other children and learning was part of that. As the school included both primary and secondary education, it meant that I would not have to move to another school. Although I had to work a bit harder at secondary school since I studied more subjects and attended for longer hours, I did not feel different, since I perceived the social environment to be the same.

However, my situation changed when my family and I moved from a big city to a small Greek island because of my father's job. Suddenly, I found myself in new social and school environments. Although, the environment was still the same – linguistically, culturally and educationally – nonetheless, it was on a much smaller scale. In addition, moving to a new primary school appeared to be more difficult, since I was not starting afresh. Having only two years left before I moved to secondary school I was presented with many academic and social challenges. Those things I had taken for granted in the past, such as people, surroundings, and routines,

suddenly changed and I had to start building them all over again. It could be that this change in my social environment, along with trying to make sense of these changes emotionally, might have affected my academic performance, evidenced by my low grades, in comparison to my academic performance at my previous school. Gradually, through relying on the skills and knowledge I had previously learnt and getting to know the people around me, I started to feel more comfortable in my new surroundings.

By the time, I made the move to secondary school I was familiar with my new social school community. I was making friends and creating a social network within the school that appeared to be similar to the one I had previously experienced. It is possible to suggest that my familiarity might have also been eased by my father's acquired status and economic resources. He was a businessman and opened a hotel on the island. Although he had the same credentials as before, in terms of running his own business, these were more visible in the island's small community. Living on a small island, where most of the people seemed to me to be aware of my family, applied pressure in the way I perceived my performance within the school community. Although my father is not a teacher, he knew most of my teachers as members of the local community, whereas I perceived them just as 'teachers', people with authority.

When I was in the last year of my school, I was, like everyone else, preparing to go to university. Doing anything else was not an option that was presented to us or that I had even considered. At the onset, this transition did not seem as frightening as all

my friends appeared to be doing the same thing. Furthermore, listening to the stories of friends who were going to university or who had already been, made going to university seem more exciting. Listening to *their* accounts of university, to an extent, demystified what university was and made me eager to become a part of the university community. However, after two unsuccessful attempts to go to university in Greece, my father offered me the opportunity of going to a university in the UK. This was a semi-imposed decision as the value of having a university degree was highly regarded by my family, my friends and by me. Also, as I had a cousin who was already studying in the UK, the idea of studying abroad made sense. It may be that these factors played a role in my decision to go to the UK.

1.2.2 Going to college in the UK

When I moved to a small town in the UK, I had no social network and no immediate family besides a cousin who also lived in the UK, but in another town. Even though my mother along with my cousin helped me to settle in, with regard to accommodation, once college started I realised I had to rely on my own abilities. This was not an easy process, but a process that was stressful because of my unfamiliarity with the culture and the social community. My father had provided me with the financial resources and my cousin with a degree of cultural awareness based on her experiences and knowledge, but for a number of reasons this was not enough. Firstly, there were academic barriers to do with language, structures and customs, which made me feel distinguishably different in relation to my fellow English students. These had an impact on my perceptions of learning in terms of the skills I had to develop and the learning tasks and assignments I had to complete as part of the learning process. Secondly, social and cultural adjustment and integration was

made quite difficult, especially outside the college, since I was living on my own, which did not allow me to interact with English people other than those who were at the college. Initially, in the UK, I found it difficult to cope emotionally with the pressure of wanting to do well and prove to my family and the college I was academically and personally able. Therefore part of my learning involved understanding and finding alternative ways to cope and position myself in the context of my 'new' home.

1.2.3 Going to university as an undergraduate

It seems that moving to the UK along with my college experiences had an impact on my own sense of self as well as on the learning process. Although initially, I found interacting with a different culture and having to fit in academically difficult, nonetheless, I accepted this as part of the process of moving abroad. Going to university added another layer as it made me think more about my taken-for-granted perceptions towards learning in terms of the way I interpreted the learning activities that were part of the practices of my subject and how I interacted with other people such as fellow students and lecturers. As a result, going to university raised new questions, anxieties and fears. Firstly, the idea of going to university was not unfamiliar to me. It was rather expected by my family evident by their support, financially and otherwise, throughout my compulsory education. Although my parents had not been to university themselves, the idea had been deeply ingrained in me from a young age, since I was repeatedly reminded by my parents and my school of the value of university. At the same time I was unsure of my academic capabilities on the basis of my unsuccessful attempts of going to university in Greece and my A-level grades. Maybe my previous experiences along with my family's expectations

played a part in my thinking about university as being something that ‘other people go to’, which in turn influenced the way I perceived and interacted with learning at university.

More specifically I have approached learning in school in Greece and college in the UK, in similar ways. My approach entailed doing my homework, copying what the teacher was saying and passing exams. Soon I realised that these previously learned strategies could not be applied at university where I read for a degree in Education and History. The expectations appeared to be higher and the learning format was different: in order to pass the class I had to write long essays, go to the library and review the literature, as opposed to just reiterate what I was told in class. I had to be able to critically assess and understand arguments from various sources. Not only did I have no previous background of this, but it also demanded from me ‘originality’ when synthesising the various sources in a coherent and appropriate manner. In addition, I had to demonstrate my awareness of the course’s terminology as well as engage with the appropriate academic discourses. Even though I would work hard and attend all my lectures, acquiring these skills and making sense of the terminology was something I struggled with, especially when I could see that my fellow students seemed to be grasping the issues more easily than I could. These experiences resurfaced my previous anxieties and even though I managed to get my first degree, they had implications for my further development.

1.2.4 Going to work

After I got my first degree, I did not want to follow the pathway of my Greek friends in terms of enrolling on a postgraduate degree straight after graduation or going back to Greece. I decided to look for a job in the UK instead. It might have been the case that my past experiences of working where I experienced the practical applications of learning could have influenced my decision to look for a job. As part of my undergraduate dissertation I had the chance to explore the area of special needs. Although I wanted to pursue this interest further, I could not, as I did not have a teaching qualification. So, I enrolled on a part-time course at the end of which I qualified to teach children with special needs and especially learning difficulties. The course appeared to be both theoretical and practically oriented. This synthesis was something I found very difficult because it provoked me into thinking and acting in more than one role: I was a student, but also I was learning to become a teacher. I was not only learning in class, but I was also learning through my own teaching practices. The bridging of these two communities, the student community and the teacher community, reinforced the different sides of my identity, as I felt that I was an expert (I knew how to be a student) and a novice (I did not know how to be a teacher) at the same time.

My first job in the UK was as a learning support assistant (LSA), first at a primary school and later on at a community college. Working with children with special needs was enlightening and challenging at the same time. The students I was working with would not just accept my point of view, but would question it. This approach was something that was new to me as when I was at school, questioning and challenging the teacher would not be allowed in such an open fashion. Instead, I

followed what the teacher said without thinking further, as a more appropriate way to behave. Working in such environments made me question the nature of learning in terms of the type of knowledge or behaviour that appears to be regarded as normative or dominant and its relation with the context that is situated in.

More specifically, working with students who were labelled by the school or professionals outside the school as 'different' in terms of their personal characteristics and learning outcomes, had an impact on my own understanding of the factors that can influence students engaging with the learning process. What does 'different' mean and how is it expressed in terms of learning? Is 'difference' a result of geographical, structural or personal changes? What role do social structures play in reinforcing or hindering difference? Having moved within the same country and between countries from Greece to the UK, each move involved the need for me to familiarise myself with my new environment. In some of the institutional settings I was able to use my past experiences and resources to gain some awareness of my role and position within them. In these instances I felt a sense of a communal becoming. I was part of the group and the same as everyone else. However, this feeling was not consistent as the use of such resources was not always possible, which reinforced my sense of 'difference'. I could not relate to my social or academic environment and this influenced the perception of my abilities and my learning. For example, if I was not able to participate in the classroom or follow what the lecturer was saying, I would blame it on myself and my inability to adapt to the system. However, the students I was working with would question rather than try to conform to the system. By trying to support them with their learning in a manner that respected their identity, I started questioning the role of institutional settings

such as schools or colleges and their influence on what is perceived as appropriate or valid whether it refers to knowledge, practices or behaviours about learning.

1.2.5 Going to university as a postgraduate

Going back to education and studying was the only way I knew to gain a better understanding of the questions I had regarding learning and the learning process. Applying for a Master's in Special Needs meant that my role was to change again – from a teacher to a student. It is possible that the knowledge I had gained from working in schools provided me with the confidence I was lacking in my previous interactions with my academic communities and practices. Having this pool of resources might have influenced my decision to pursue these questions at a deeper level which was when I decided to enrol for a PhD.

However, it is important to look at them in relation to HE in England as a specific social setting and the HE community in its macro- and micro-contexts. For the purposes of my research I consider the 'macro' context to be the British Higher Education system (HE) in its wider sense, whereas I consider the 'micro' context to involve the relationship and interaction of students and staff within the specific HE institution, which in my research is the University of Nottingham. Placing HE within its historical and political contexts offers us an insight into the changes experienced by students as they are reported by them.

1.3. Higher Education in England

In my research, I am interested in exploring individuals' learning trajectories in relation to their academic and personal development, and their experiences of learning. I suggest that variations in perceptions of their role and knowledge at university indicate the possible influence of time and context. I argue that changes at personal and professional level can be situated within changes in institutional practices and the HE system as a whole. This is supported in the recent work of Bathmaker & Thomas (2009). In their study they differentiate between three interlinked levels of transition: institutions in transition (institutions that aim to reposition themselves within the HE field), transitions in institutions (changes in the structures and physical space of the institution), and students' experiences of transition (staying within the same institution or progressing to a different one). Although in my study I focus in particular on students' experiences of transitions, I also look at the changes in the role of the university and the implications this has for students' experiences.

Going to university is seen within policy texts as part of a national attempt at economic and technological restructuring to ensure that the UK is able to compete within a global market (DfEE, 2001, DfES, 2006). This has implications for the way education is perceived and structured and the subsequent disruption in patterns of transition, for example into and through employment (Leitch, 2006, DfES, 2006). In relation to employment Leitch (2006) states that: "The global economy is changing rapidly, with emerging economies such as India and China growing dramatically, altering UK competitiveness ... The best form of welfare is to ensure that people can adapt to change" (p. 3). Even though this quote does not explicitly refer to the role of

universities, what is implied is the view that economic and personal motivations are increasingly linked to the value of getting a university degree. In this respect, it could be suggested that higher education plays a central role not only in educating graduates, but ensuring the maintenance of a workforce that is able to meet and adapt to the changes of a globally competitive economy. It could be suggested that this argument changes the role of universities from ‘pedagogical institutions’ to ‘businesses’.

From this perspective it seems that HE as a system is also changing. Many different reports (the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (1963), the Dearing Report (1997), the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997), and the White Paper (DfES, 2003)), have over the last decades influenced the development of the HE sector in England. For example, the Robbins Report (1963) attempted to change the prevailing structure of HE by opening new universities and in doing so it “looked forward to a continuing expansion of higher education and envisaged a system not fundamentally different from the previous one of highly restricted access” (Nixon, 1996, p. 5). Even though there was a small rise in student numbers, the main issues relating to greater funding control and accountability remained.

Currently, in the UK there is a range of HE institutions, offering a range of courses (access courses, work-based courses, diplomas, and traditional degrees), a range of modes (full-time or part-time, campus-based or distance-learning) and with greater flexibility in entry routes (access, vocational, or A-levels). This is illustrated by Benn (1995) who considers the changes within HE:

The introduction of the Polytechnics and the Open University in the 1960s led to fundamental changes with increased full- and part-time provision, a widening of the composition of the student body and a substantial increase in numbers but also higher drop-out rates. (Benn, 1995, p. 6)

This dichotomy between the two kinds of universities for example, the polytechnics/new and the traditional/old, implied and reinforced the inequalities and restrictive nature of the HE configuration with its socially stratified student population as the roles, structures, functions and student mix were implicitly continued. The structural, financial and institutional demands made upon students have influenced the nature of the student profile currently attending university.

The expansion of HE can be seen to have had a strong impact on the functioning and nature of HE (Ball, 2003, Ball *et al.* 2000, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, 2000). Also from a global perspective, HE can be seen to extend beyond local and national levels to international contexts. According to this perspective education is seen to be gradually shifting away from the traditional notion of academics and students striving for 'knowledge' towards the notion of HE as a system treating students as consumers who are paying their fees and are expecting 'value for money' services and products (Habu, 2000, Gumport, 2000). The role of HE is seen as meeting the demands for change brought about by policy, funding issues or the diversity of the student body, as well as addressing HE's learning and teaching responsibilities. The way that universities approach changes in their structure and role clearly attempts to

affect teaching methods and the ways students learn, with the introduction of technology or more student-centred approaches to learning such as problem-based learning. Weaving together different aims such as the implementation of new innovations, and remaining true to the scholarship of learning may have implications for both teachers and students (Evans & Abbott, 1998, Hannan & Silver, 2000). The imbalance in priorities is reflected in the Report on the Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003). Funding mechanisms to support teaching and learning in HE were not in place, thus making it difficult for universities to maintain standards and meet the needs of a diverse student body (Trowler *et al.* 2005).

Similarly, Naidoo (2000) points to the tension between the policies for quality and their impact on teaching and learning. She argues that quality frameworks place a strain on universities who have to compete for resources, funding and students while demonstrating their standing in relation to quality frameworks and a national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In order for universities to receive governmental funding they have to engage in a series of activities such as the RAE in which universities have to demonstrate that they are engaging in research activities that will ensure a specified level, whereby quality of research locally and nationally is achieved:

The main purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. (HERO, n.d.)

Emphasis on research and its implied messages in terms of financial rewards in the case of the RAE has profound consequences for the way universities operate and are perceived. Some are more research orientated than others. In addition to this, pressure has been put on universities and subsequently academics to deliver the appropriate skills in relation to future career management for the students to compete successfully in the employment market (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Competing for funding as well as providing new effective teaching and learning approaches, places a burden on lecturers who have to be up-to-date with teaching approaches, technological innovations and learning strategies. Lecturers rely on students to successfully finish their degrees and pass their course in the time allocated and expected whilst ensuring their support to students.

Within the UK university sector there appears to be diversity in relation to the ways the governmental reforms have influenced the nature of their role and work that perhaps adds to the complex nature of this sector. Balancing an increased emphasis on research along with teaching has meant the re-allocation of control in learning from teacher-centred to student-centred as well as ensuring that lecturers stay up-to-date with current developments (Evans & Abbot, 1998). Arguably such a view is not without its resistance as Utley (1997b, in Evans & Abbot, 1998) points out: “Many lecturers are refusing to budge in the face of pressure to step down from the podium and embrace innovative teaching methods that hand authority back to the student” (p. 17). Allegiance to these reforms and initiatives has challenged academics in developing more effective teaching strategies to meet the needs of a diverse student body, whilst at the same time tutors are asked to contribute towards the research ranking of their institution. These reforms are based on the assumption that better

qualified teachers will contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning and hence to the quality of the student experience in HE. This assumption is expressed in the development of Higher Education Academy (HEA) centres and the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). These initiatives illustrate the emphasis now being placed on improving the profile of teaching and learning in HE albeit at an optional level (Trowler *et al.* 2005).

“In pedagogical terms, current government policy is seeking to change fundamentally the terms on which teaching and learning take place in higher education” (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 268). Mechanisms to measure accountability such as the modularisation of the curriculum, the publication of league tables and exam results, as well as the advertising of courses and materials in advance to attract more students, and the introduction of tuition fees have further strengthened the tensions between commercialisation and learning. As part of this commercialisation universities are acting as forces for change aiming to attract more students in order to increase their financial support. This is apparent in DfEE documents (1998b, in Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005) where “universities are expected to increase the total proportion of graduates and equip such graduates with specialised and generic high premium skills including the capacity to innovate and the ability to learn how to learn” (p.268). However, Trowler *et al.* 2005 (see also Hannan & Silver, 2000) point to the manner through which strategies that address different and sometimes opposing policies end up in “policy bundles” (Trowler *et al.* 2005, p. 439) with implications for the kind of framework within which learning and teaching are located.

In terms of teaching and learning, the subsequent reports and strategies reflect the continuous pressure for the development of new and innovative programmes and strategies that aim to increase student participation and access (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, Trowler *et al.* 2005, Bowden & Marton, 2004, Hannan & Silver, 2000, Evans & Abbott, 1998). “The policy and economy-driven changes imposed from the 1970s accelerated the pace of change within the system and within the individual institutions” (Hannan & Silver, 2000, p. 62). Such pressure is further reinforced by an emphasis on the importance of approaches to learning and designing learning environments that are supportive and inclusive of students’ needs (Marton & Saljo, 1976, Ramsden, 2003, Marton & Bowden, 2004).

Whilst reforms may propose recommendations that concentrate on enhancing teaching and learning, they may not necessarily provide detailed guidance about how this can happen in widely differing contexts (Hannan & Silver, 2000). These shifts in the structure of HE can possibly account for the kind of support required for students. The existing variations in students’ demographic characteristics (Becher & Trowler, 2001), the different routes to entering university (Evans & Abbot, 1998) and the nature of the curriculum in HE that can be seen to be part of the expansion of HE, all raise significant questions about the nature of HE. In relation to my research, these questions relate to students’ perceptions of the University of Nottingham and of themselves, the type of knowledge that is promoted during students’ interactions with their various communities, and the effect these have on their transitions.

Students, as the receivers of these innovations, are expected to develop a range of abilities “to be able to critically evaluate arguments, assumptions ... to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution” (QAA, 2001, cited in Gosling, 2003, p.166). In addition, the government has pushed forward an explicit policy to increase participation in HE to 50% of the age cohort by 2010 (Gosling, 2003). This can have immediate implications for groups who have been previously excluded, such as those labelled in the literature as ‘non-traditional’ students on the basis of social class, ethnicity and disability. Woodrow (1999) stresses “the need to examine systemic and institutional factors which act to exclude certain sections of the population” (cited in Bowl, 2001, p. 157). Placing students’ experiences within environments that seem to be operating at different levels invites us to think more carefully about the implications of the changing role of universities within current society. Individuals’ decisions about going to university may be rooted in reasons which might not be those emphasised by current government policies. In addition to this, we need to explore the different ways that individual students can experience university and the levels of importance that they may attach to the various aspects of their experiences.

So far, I have explained key aspects of the changing role of HE in the UK and the possible implications this has for the student experience. I have argued that these changes can be seen to relate to the changing structure of HE in relation to various ‘learning and teaching’ and ‘research assessment’ initiatives. These initiatives appear to have aimed to enhance ‘teaching and learning’ in HE. However, what is noticeably absent is any systematic attempt to explore and analyse the effect that these teaching and learning initiatives have had on students’ experiences. For

example, the writing practices as a means to evaluate students' understanding of their subject can often mask the nature of power and authority dimensions that can often provide a particular university experience. One of the aims of my research is to explore the way that learning is conceptualised, legitimised and situated within specific practices that may have little relevance for the majority of students in a mass HE context. In this thesis I study the nature of these changes as a series of transitions, experienced by individual students as they interact with their academic settings, which in my study refer to the University of Nottingham.

1.3.1 The University of Nottingham

Within a mass HE context the adherence to descriptions of Nottingham being a 'research-led university (Hannan & Silver, 2000) along with the University's ranking position among other British HEIs and internationally (University of Nottingham, 2009), might have implications for the nature of the student body. More specifically, the Sunday Times Good University Guide (2009, cited in University of Nottingham, 2009) stated:

“.....Always knocking on the door of our elite top 10, a place to study at Nottingham remains among the most sought-after in higher education. Teaching and research excellence spans all disciplines with only Cambridge and Manchester boasting more than Nottingham's 33 top-rated teaching subjects”.

The impact of the University's reputation and ranking seems to be reflected on the proportion of international students amongst its undergraduate student population. The total number of the University's undergraduate population, which includes both full-time and part-time students, was 18,953 students with 32% being international students (University of Nottingham, 2008b). I would suggest that the University's claim to address issues of widening participation as evidenced in the take-up of its non-traditional student profile provides some challenges to the notion of support, experiences of learning, and transitions as it suggests that their transitions might not be as linear and sequential. This is highlighted by Foskett & Hemsley-Brown (2002) who point out that such differentiation may in turn structure the universities themselves and hence imply that for certain students the choice of university is limited. In my study I explore the nature of diversity in the student body (as reflected in terms of age, gender, social class, nationality, and disability). I look at its impact on students' experiences of learning and transitions by asking them about their educational experiences. I pay attention to the way that certain values and knowledge appear to be taken-for-granted and dominate their discussions about their engagement with their respective subjects.

The University of Nottingham is a university with a long history in research development and teaching and learning initiatives. According to the University's website, it was not until 1948 along with the merging of the Midland College of Agriculture at Sutton Bonington, the University became formally known as the University of Nottingham. Since then the University has continued to expand its campuses and schools, which to date include five campuses with two international

campuses in Malaysia and China. The University's international reputation is further reinforced in the University Plan (2007):

The University of Nottingham aspires to be among the world's greatest universities and distinguished for its international reach, its commitment to learning and its world-class research (p. 4)

While the importance of these goals cannot be questioned, the underlying assumptions about the way that such goals work on campus and within disciplines have remained unchallenged. These include assumptions about the nature of the student profile, the institutional practices, policies and language with a particular emphasis on their impact on the experiences of students and the assumptions made by lecturers about the 'abilities' of certain students, often referred to within the literature, as 'non-traditional' students, such as students from low socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and students with disabilities. The implications of such practice implies that there is only one university culture that students are required to integrate into if they are to become successful in their studies. In my study, I explore in more detail the degree to which communities and individual lecturers can often attempt to attune their students into the practices of their subjects. And the implications this can have for the way students experience university.

In addition, the university's claims about its commitment to research and learning, nationally and globally, seem to create a framework for the way the university is perceived within the academic world and by students. It has been criticised for its

high undergraduate admission rates especially within specific subjects (HESA, 2004). As a result, factors such as choice of A-level subjects and type of compulsory education can often lead to the over-representation of some groups whilst others are under represented (Gilchrist *et al.* 2003). For example, according to the Halpin (2004) Nottingham's proportion of state students fell by 5 percent, implying that the University continues to select students who are privately educated. This has implications not only on the University's commitment to widening participation agendas, but more importantly on the University's student composition. Thomas (2002) maintains that social networks and relations in terms of the perceived level of support, knowledge and familiarity with the student experience, are important for students academic and professional development. She concludes that students' inclusion in terms of being valued, of establishing better relationships with teachers, and of learning becoming socially oriented, can affect student retention at university. Besides the impact on student retention I would also argue that students' experience of inclusion can affect the ontological aspect of becoming a student at university. In the recent past, Nottingham has made an effort to recruit students from more diverse backgrounds. For example, the University is a member of the Sutton Trust group that aims to increase social mobility by assisting 'non-traditional' students progress to university through the provision of summer courses.

In this section I have described the University of Nottingham in terms of the initiatives and policies in place aiming to enhance and support the student experience along with the financial, academic, and research challenges that face them as an institution. The agendas of accessibility, research innovations, partnerships and lifelong learning are all included within the University Plan (2007) (see also

University of Nottingham, 2008a). While it is clear that the University has provided more support for teaching and learning through a number of research projects and structural changes, it is still questionable how these initiatives are perceived by students who do not seem to fit the pre-determined admission categories, and to what extent it impacts on their experience of learning.

1.4. Defining the key terms of the study

In the previous sections, I have referred to my own individual experiences and to HE in the UK, with specific references to the University of Nottingham, in order to explore the nature of changes within HE as a system and their possible impact on the student experience. For descriptive purposes I will now clarify the concepts of 'transitions', 'learning', and 'communities', which I perceive as a whole to be dynamic and inter-linked. In this section I will provide a brief definition of each of them. My definitions reflect a synthesis of the various conceptions that have been put forward in the literature (chapter 2, sections 2.3-25) and the findings of my research (chapter 4, section 4.3).

1.4.1. The concept of transitions

In my thesis I explore students' experiences at university in terms of a range of transitions. Transitions are about changes in the environment and in social, and educational practices that involve transformation, dislocation, or growth, that substantially, change the way meanings and practices are constructed, and the way they are experienced by the student, in the physical, social, and educational environment. The impact of the transitions varies as they can sometimes be

disruptive (when moving between educational or national contexts, for instance). At other times they can be quiet and insidious (when taking roles and practices for granted, for instance). As a result not all students will react to the transitions in the same way. Some may perceive them negatively while others may view them as a challenging opportunity. Therefore, I suggest that the transitions incorporate the following characteristics: they are continuous, they are part of a process of cognitive, emotional and social changes, and they often involve a sense of reconfiguration in terms of knowledge and self-regard. For analytical purposes, I have distinguished between three sub-categories of transitions: external changes, internal processes and step-changes. Although I will discuss each of these sub-categories in more detail in chapter 4 (section 4.3.2), I will now provide a brief description of each of these sub-categories.

External changes

This is the first sub-category of transitions, and it includes students' experiences and their responses, as they move between various contexts such as family, school, work or countries. These transitions can disrupt, challenge, and/or strengthen learning and form part of a student's learning trajectory. The pattern for these transitions can imply an aspect of straightforward reaction to contexts or events, such as moving from school to work. It can also imply a break from normative expectations, such as going to work instead of university. As a result, this sub-category allows us to look at what individuals might perceive as desirable in terms of goals and decisions and how these are situated within a HE context.

Internal processes

This is the second sub-category of transitions and includes understanding a student as an individual, and the ways in which they make sense of the interactions between their personal and social realities are all part of internal processes. These transitions involve shifts, for example in confidence or in perceptual frameworks, that occur within the individual as they try to make sense or make connections between the different parts of their learning journey, and adjust to the practices of their environment. The process through which ideas, practices, expectations, or surroundings become accepted or rejected and the implications this might have for a students' identity and participation forms part of internal processes. The nature of these transitions bring to the fore questions with regard to the role of groups, such as family, friends, or teachers, dimensions of authority and power, and managing between different and often challenging roles and self-perceptions.

Step-changes

The third, and final, sub-category of transitions, which I perceive as a result of external changes and internal processes, is step-changes. These transitions include shifts that are epistemological and ontological in nature. By epistemological shifts I mean those that relate to students' thinking, conceptions and beliefs about knowledge. Equally, by ontological shifts, I understand those that relate to students' positions, perceptions and views of themselves in relation to the social world. I perceive step-changes to highlight the positive and negative consequences that both of these shifts can imply. By this I mean that these transitions involve moving your standpoint within particular roles and practices. This is an attempt to bring together

and make sense of practices and ideas that are often subjected to different interpretations that are held by students and by academics.

1.4.2. The concept of learning

Identifying and analysing student perceptions of learning as part of their transitions forms an important part of my study. During their learning journeys, students will be exposed to and required to develop and implement a variety of skills, conceptual frameworks and approaches. Some of these skills will be strongly related to their academic courses. The idea that learning involves changes in practices and roles through participation in a community resonates with Lave & Wenger's 'communities of practice' (see chapter 2, section 2.2.4). While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of learning, I have identified a further sub-category of learning: types of knowledge.

Types of knowledge

I use this sub-category to explore the kind of learning that might be promoted as important within different settings such as colleges or universities in relation to student transitions into and in HE. For instance, when a student participates in a classroom activity at university, inherent in their perceptions of the activity is knowledge gained from interactions in previous settings such as tertiary education or the workplace. This idea resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of learning from participating in communities of practice. Some disciplines might value and indeed encourage professional knowledge while others might not. Also, this knowledge might be in tension with the way knowledge is constructed within that

particular setting. Therefore, this sub-category enables us to bring to the fore implicit assumptions hold between academics and students about what is regarded as appropriate.

1.4.3. The concept of communities

I suggest that underpinning all transitions and learning are interactions and dialogues, either explicit or tacit, between individuals and social settings. In order to explore the relation between individuals and social settings, I intend to draw on Lave & Wenger's (1991) concept of 'community of practice' (see chapter 2, section 2.2.4, for a more detailed discussion of their key concepts). I understand this concept to refer to the way conceptions of learning and an individual's membership is enabled or inhibited by the practices of the communities individuals encounter. Each of these various communities will have their own structures, rules and expectations and membership in each might push students into different directions. Additionally, within each of these communities the control over knowledge in terms of what is required as appropriate will often change. In exploring the nature and role of communities in students' learning and identity, the data (see chapter 4, section 4.3.4.2) revealed the importance of three types of communities: academic communities, module-specific communities, and student communities.

Academic Communities

These communities locate and situate interactions between students and the university, and the wider socio-cultural context. In my research I pay particular attention to formal support networks that exist within the university such as the role

of tutorials and academic support systems. More specifically, I explore the powerful, and often implicit, way such practices seem to reinforce a particular way of approaching learning at university and the consequences these can have on a student's identity. In addition, I pay attention to informal support networks that exist outside the university such as family and social groups that the students can often turn to in order to make sense of their learning and experiences at university.

Module-Specific Communities

When students read for their degree, they are automatically part of their subject communities, be it History, Psychology or English. Membership in these communities is compulsory and provides individuals with a context for emulating and internalising 'appropriate behaviours' that are specific for that particular module. These behaviours can refer to writing practices, ways of thinking, or relationships with other modules. I use this sub-category to unravel questions about knowledge construction and production within a mass HE context where students as members of multidisciplinary communities may be required to switch between subjects and decode the practices and behaviours that are valid for that particular module.

Student Communities

I perceive these communities in terms of the role of peer interactions. I look at communities that have been artificially created (within the classroom) and those that have been created by individuals (outside the classroom) in relation to the content and support they can provide their members. Although, the existence of these

communities might result from students' interactions with the wider discipline, it can often incorporate elements that are chosen by the students who participate in them.

In this section I have briefly introduced defined the key concepts of my study and their respective sub-categories. I use the above sub-categories as a means to explore in more detail the nature and various types of students' transitions and the different communities they participate in, and their influences on the students' perceptions of learning, self-image, and expectations. In other words, in this thesis I explore the range of transitions and communities that students have described as important, and their influence on the ways students engage with (and disengage from) learning. I argue this contributes to our knowledge of the field of student experience, because it unpacks the nature of students' transitions and the communities they engage with, and the shifts, both positive and negative, that this implies for individuals and their communities. It should be noted that the broad distinctions I have offered do not attempt to erase the positive or negative tensions between and across each of the terms. Instead I use them to highlight the fact that ideas and practices can be blurred, overlapping, confusing and at times difficult to handle.

1.5. Purpose and rationale of the present study

As I argued previously, my research aims to illuminate and explore transitions as these develop through the interaction amongst students and between them and the University of Nottingham. Because I consider the process of transitions to be dynamic and dependent on time and context, I argue that neither students nor

communities can be seen as separate, but should rather be seen as interconnected and impacting on student learning.

More specifically, I suggest that using the concept of transitions to understand students' experiences of learning enables us to focus on the whole person. Researching student transitions into and in HE allows us to explore questions concerning students' perceptions of their roles, understandings, and conceptions of their learning in HE. It can also involve questions relating to thinking about ways of being students. Although this might be seen as part of learning at university, however, the emphasis on transitions helps us to unmask the practices through which social settings legitimise expectations, approaches and views of the world. This means that using transitions to explore students' experiences does not only add to understanding learning at university, but it also raises questions about the process of being a student in HE. Managing the various roles and positions one can take can often be a complex task. This perspective highlights the fact that transitions can often incorporate a range of emotions about what is considered as appropriate and accepted behaviour. Therefore, placing transitions at the heart of the thesis and viewing them as a series of sub-shifts enables us to question the role played by the various communities in the production and construction of knowledge. Hence, for the focus of my thesis I chose to examine students' experiences of transitions and how these develop when situated within different contexts and the factors that are crucial to their experience.

1.6. Framing my research

My research focuses on the process of being a student at university in relation to the range of transitions that students may go through as they interact and participate in a range of communities.

The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community where members are involved in tasks that define the role and development of themselves and the communities, resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) concept of 'community of practice'. In my research, I look at the process of participation within communities of practice as involving a series of shifts. In my own case, for example, going through this conceptual process, made me question the factors I had taken for granted and their influence on my transitions. I questioned the role and meaning of learning and the community that I located myself in, using my own knowledge and experiences as well as those of the literature. This relationship was not easy as it often pointed me in different and frustrating directions. Carrying out the pilot study and later on the main fieldwork, highlighted the complexity of the interactions between students and HE and its influence on the learning process at a practical level. In this respect I started unravelling the nature and influence of context in terms of learning, and many questions surfaced. Is it possible to talk about *a single* context? What are the implications and limitations of applying such theorisations for the research and for the researched? What is my role in this process?

These conceptual questions made me think about the influence of others on my understanding of the learning process. From my own experiences this emerging

perception of learning as a socially situated process within one or more contexts, had an impact on how I perceived myself and how others perceived me within the specific social context I was explicitly participating in. However, hearing fellow students', teachers', friends' or parents' constructions of the same concept, there were a variety of different values, ideas, and perspectives expressed, and they highlighted questions about the notions I had taken for granted. Such notions concern the influence of past experiences, memberships in communities outside of HE, the multi-levelled nature of learning communities and the ways in which these play a part in the construction of learning.

Additionally, as a result of my personal constructions and understanding of the research process, and in conjunction with the data collection, I felt that my own experiences were influenced by my personal characteristics and background in terms of people, places, and the frameworks I have used to make sense of myself. I suggest these factors influenced the type of knowledge, behaviour and values I viewed as important in relation to the various communities I was interacting with. In other words, was my experiences of learning a result of the specific context I was participating in, or do other students experience similar issues in their learning? Essentially, were my experiences unique or shared? Hence, pertinent to this research is the way that transitions and communities interact and how they both influence learning. To sum up, the three key concepts that I have used in developing my thinking are:

- Individuals are likely to enter HE with a variety of backgrounds, qualifications and conceptual frameworks, and these may influence the way they experience learning at university.
- Learning is fundamentally a socially situated process.
- The interaction between individuals and the various HE institutional communities is dynamic.

Inherent in the above is how the process of being a student at university involves attempts to become familiar, to negotiate, and to make connections between events, perceptions about knowledge and one's self-image. These shifts, which I have termed transitions, result from participation in practices within various communities. Such communities often have their own ways of thinking and behaving which are not universal, but can be contested and potentially conflicting with other communities. Equally, I consider the process of learning as the product of the interactions between individuals and communities. This relation can bring to the surface the often complex manner through which individuals make sense of their transitions within communities that have their own particular learning practices. The complexities of these processes become apparent when we explore the nature, development and direction of interactions between students and their respective communities, as each (individuals and communities) carries its own claims to knowledge and learning.

Some vigilance is essential when describing the parameters of my research. Firstly, my research is a single study taking place within one HE institution. Hence, it is

limited to the practices not only of the particular institution, but also to those of particular departments, disciplines and practitioners. Secondly, the participants in my study are not representatives of the whole university or the departments from which they were selected. Therefore, I am not claiming to find out about the experiences of students as a whole but rather to explore in depth the issues that emerged from the participants in my study. Another concern, which is linked to the previous one, relates to the accounts of these students and the justifications they present as influential in their learning and transitions. The intention is not to validate or evaluate their accounts, but rather to use them as a means of making sense of student transition into and in HE, and to highlight the complexity of student interactions within the particular context.

Before exploring this framework further along with a deeper exploration of the research questions in relation to the literature (in Chapter 2, the Literature Review), I will provide a brief overview of each of the chapters in my thesis.

1.7. Organisation of the thesis

The thesis aims to analyse students' transition experiences into and in HE. In order to present this analysis I have organised the thesis in six chapters.

Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter where I use my own learning journey of moving through countries, roles, and positions and the impact these had on my self-image and relationships between and within different communities. I then start to present the complexities of the HE institutional community for students and teachers

alike paying particular attention to the University of Nottingham where I conducted my research. I also provide a brief definition of the key terms of my study and the respective sub-categories, before I present the purpose and rationale for the study and the construction of the research questions.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature regarding the way that transitions, learning and communities have been conceptualised by paying particular attention to students' experiences of post-compulsory education. In order to explore the relation between these terms I use the theories of Lave & Wenger to further unravel the interplay between transitions and their role in learning. I conclude the chapter with a presentation and justification for the conceptual framework for understanding students' experiences of transitions that I have adopted in this research.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological considerations that guided the data collection and the methods I have used. More specifically, I situate my research within the interpretative tradition in order to portray the differences that appear to play a part in the accounts of the participants. I have used a case study framework in order to provide a detailed account about how different individuals in different contexts appear to experience transitions.

Chapter 4 provides the analysis of the empirical data using case studies. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section I present case studies of the experiences of five students, while in the second section I explore in more detail

student transitions, the ways the students engage with learning and the factors that influence their engagement.

Chapter 5 discusses critically the way in which the conceptual framework can help us in understanding the experiences of the students that participated in my research. The chapter presents the findings of the thesis and the arguments I have made throughout the thesis, before evaluating these findings in relation to the cited literature.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with particular attention to the thesis's implications for practice. It provides an evaluation of the framework I have developed in relation to students' experiences at university, and details of the claims to knowledge and contributions to the HE field.

1.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the key focus of this thesis – a case study based analysis of students' experiences of transitions within the University of Nottingham. I explore the nature of students' transitions as evidenced in the research data collected. I started with myself and the multiplicity of my roles as an individual, learner, teacher and a researcher and the ways in which these interact when participating in HE communities at a personal and social level. In addition, I situated my experiences within HE, its communities and my relationship to HE as a whole and the way in which my interactions in different communities have had an impact on my experiences and development at a personal, social and academic level.

I also argue that – in line with ongoing debated about the nature and roles of HE – HE over the last 30 years has undergone changes in its structures, aims and roles. Although these might be a result of negotiating and meeting the needs of different stakeholders with different agendas, these have implications for the way the university is perceived by students and academics. Arguably, these perceptions vary between universities, departments, disciplines and individual teachers. Not everyone will share and hold similar expectations and understandings. Therefore, in chapter 2 I will begin by reviewing pertinent parts of the literature. I will argue that although past research has offered some invaluable insights into students' experiences in HE, nonetheless, there is a need to question the nature of the ways in which learning practices have been conceptualised and the implications for student transitions into and in HE.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

In this thesis I aim to understand students' experiences at university as transitions. This kind of conceptualisation I believe to be pertinent, because it brings together all the different personal, institutional and social elements in understanding students' experiences at university. I pay attention to the construction and application of knowledge used by individual students in their interactions with their respective communities; the role and influence of institutional structures in enabling or inhibiting their use; and the implications of these interactions for students' personal and professional development. This process is situated within various communities with often conflicting practices. Making sense of and coming to terms with these practices can involve decisions that can be painful or bear little relevance to the majority of the students. In this respect, in some communities students will be core members, whereas in other they will be more at the margins. In addition, this process is further complicated by the fact that communities overlap, clash and can pull a student towards different directions.

While acquiring new skills and knowledge can be one aspect of learning, however, resolving conflicting knowledge (or learning to live with it) can be complex, and it might require various shifts which students often find very unsettling. The student who succeeds in this kind of synthesis can develop a repertoire of written and verbal tools, and can appreciate the different ways of communicating within different communities. This is a transition that involves a number of subtle shifts from

tolerating, to appreciating the diversity of perspectives and discourses, and the uncertainty that initially comes with it. It is part of a student's internal processes and core to becoming a 'member of the university'. In exploring the nature, relationship, and influence of communities on students' experiences, I am drawing on Lave & Wenger's (1991, also Wenger, 1998) key concept of 'communities of practice' (this will be explained in section 2.2.4) that aims to explain the changes in practices and roles when students find themselves in new influences and environments. This is important because it will allow for a detailed exploration of the ways that transitions are located in and bounded by the narratives of individual agency and social structures.

Having briefly outlined the over-all aim of the research, in this chapter I will:

- Explore the main concepts of the study in relation to past research and formal policies.
- Look at the theories of Lave & Wenger by paying attention to the aspects of their theories that are relevant to this research, and
- Propose a model to understand students' experiences at university.

2.2. The main concepts of the research

The concepts of 'transitions', 'learning' and 'community', and the way they are perceived by students during their university career, are central to my research.

Although in my research I pay attention to the interactions of a specific group of

students within a particular institution, it is important to situate their experiences against the changes in the student profile, the HE, and the wider socio-cultural context. I will now turn to explore each of these in relation to governmental reports about HE and past research in the area. I will also explore the gaps in the acknowledged perspectives and trends.

2.2.1. Diversity in the student profile

Governmental strategies that address the expansion of HE have been based on economic motivation and widening participation that encourage the development of a more inclusive system of HE by providing extra funding to institutions (DfEE, 1998), and by setting up mechanisms to assess and monitor the effectiveness of their ‘widening participation’ policies (DfEE, 2000). The aim is to increase the number of students participating in HE. Originally it was hoped that “by 2010, 50% of young people will have participated in HE by the time they are 30” (Thomas, 2002, p. 424). This figure has now changed to 40% to include not only those aged 18-30, but a much bigger student body with a range of qualifications. Ecclestone (2009, see also Quinn, 2009, Quinn *et al.* 2009) notes that underpinning ‘widening participation’ policies is the notion that if the transitions that some students go through can be better managed and supported, this will have an impact on the type of graduates universities produce, with implications also for the level of drop-outs and withdrawals associated with the transition to and from university.

Other studies have questioned the extent to which developments for ‘widening access’ are accessible for everyone by pointing out that HE stratification further

reinforces the structural, financial and academic inequalities experienced by the targeted group of students (Quinn *et al.* 2009, Bowl, 2001, Reay *et al.* 2005). From this perspective, there is a linkage between participation and the various initiatives in place that highlights the inequalities in the educational context. I argue that by focusing on what students bring to university, in terms of their experiences, interests, perceptual frameworks and tools, as well as the ways in which these are likely to be moderated and altered during their course of study, there are implicit differentiations between those who will be guaranteed high status and willingness to invest in education and those who will not. This understanding is critical as it highlights the power imbalances between institutions and individuals, which can affect the pattern and conditions of their transitions. This is particularly so for these groups who are unfamiliar with the practices and discourses operating in HE as it implies that they may be less familiar with such practices with implications for their identities and participation in HE.

More specifically, the studies of Archer (2001), Ball *et al.* (2002) and Bloomer & Hodgkinson (1999, 2000) analyse the multiple and complex processes of interaction between different stakeholders in the construction of identities. These studies, using Bourdieu-ian concepts of 'habitus' and 'capital', criticise the 'taken for granted' assumptions that obscure gendered differences and structural inequalities, and portray the young people as passive recipients of education. For Ball *et al.* (2002), these obscurities have always existed and need to be understood within the contingencies of the individual's experiences rather than treated as theoretical abstractions. In my research I also aim to highlight what has been accepted as normal

by individuals and communities, by focusing on individual's learning trajectories and constructions of what it means to be a student at university.

The choice of university for some groups, namely those that are referred to in the literature as 'non-traditional', further highlights the impact of students' socio-economic background (Furlong & Forsyth, 2003, Ball *et al.* 2002, Archer & Hutchings, 2000, Reay *et al.* 2002, 2005); or ethnicity (Shiner & Modood, 2002). The above studies (see also Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2001, Fuller, 2007 for mature students) maintain that there are different participation patterns for 'non-traditional' students in terms of the choices they make, the type of institutions they perceive as accessible and the type of subjects they choose to study. For instance, Reay *et al.* (2002) found that 'non-traditional' students tend to be located within 'post 1992 or new' universities and tend to choose universities in terms of their sociocultural environment and student intake. Leaving the view regarding criteria for choice unchallenged contributes to the social and cultural reproduction of the class system. Similarly, Reay (2002) stresses the link between home and school/college context as influencing individuals' choices. She argues that fear of alienation and of being at greater risk of social exclusion at university are pressures faced by these groups on a daily basis. This is largely a consequence of having different self-perceptions, coming from different social classes and also, possibly, of financial constraints - all or some of which might lead individuals to feel out of place at university implying that social structures influence the way individuals conceptualise studying at university, their perceptions of universities, and their individual aspirations.

From this perspective, it seems that students, who do not have the necessary linguistic or material resources, will perceive certain universities as more accessible to them than others. In this line, Bowl (2001) explores the experiences of “primarily women from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds” (p. 143), as they enrol to full-time and part-time courses at university. For the students in her study who came from different cultures, social classes and ethnicities, it appears that university life is experienced in terms of frustration, struggle and difference. For Bowl these experiences are described by the students as results of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds that impede their learning. Due to a lack of formal and informal support and guidance, her students felt different within their new environment.

This difference was further highlighted in the classroom by the perceived imbalance between new knowledge and prior knowledge. Bowl maintains that the students in her study expressed difficulties not only in fitting in within HE, but also in understanding what new knowledge is, in terms of expectations as well as in terms of the low value others attached to their own prior knowledge. Bowl (2001) concludes that even though there was evidence of commitment from the students, such commitment was negatively influenced by the institutional, financial, and structural barriers the students experienced. Although Bowl’s study concentrated on students’ first year at university, she pays attention to the interrelation between background characteristics and economic, institutional and cultural factors and the ways in which these affect the experiences of students at university. This is something I also intend to look at in my study by focusing on the experiences of second-year students.

Archer & Hutchings (2000) point out the influence of social class, gender and race in exploring the constructions of HE for FE students and the factors that influence them. The authors argue that the ascribed characteristics of these students place them at a disadvantage in terms of risk and costs compared to their middle-class counterparts. Access to university for Archer & Hutchings's non-participants is differentiated in terms of cost such as finance, time and access barriers, and localised value in terms of expectations from others. While at university, the students who were 'new' to the university environment, when describing their experiences of university, they focused more on the importance of social networks and the cultural capital, than just the academic benefits. Even though participation at university was perceived generally in terms of "economic, social and personal terms" (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p. 561), it was not equally distributed across the participants. For example, students from ethnic minorities value the importance of social participation stronger than white participants who were fearful of "losing" their identity (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p. 570) through participation in HE.

Overall, Archer & Hutchings (2000) highlight the impact of vocational qualifications, age, financial resources and feelings of 'other' as differentiating participation to and within university between and amongst students. Additionally, their study describes young working-class people as positioning "themselves 'outside' of HE (e.g. constructing HE as a white, and/or middle-class place), placing themselves as potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as "owners' of it" (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p. 570). This conceptualisation portrays students who come from less favourable backgrounds as the outsiders, which is apparent in the distinction made in terms of ownership.

The impact of disability in participation in HE is illustrated in a number of studies (Weedon & Riddel, 2009, Ralph & Boxall, 2005, Holloway, 2001, Tinklin & Hall, 1991). Under ‘widening participation’ and supporting legislation, for example the ‘Disability Discrimination Act’ (DDA), institutions are expected to ensure that disabled students are better supported. Despite the current legislation, in their study Ralph & Boxall (2005) question the availability of materials and support to disabled students before arrival to university. They argue that when recruiting students less emphasis is placed on provision for disabled students. As a result, Ralph & Boxall argue, students with disabilities in some universities remain less visible than other groups of students such as students from ethnic minorities. The authors suggest the need to move away from the ‘traditional’ image of a university student by taking into account the diversity of the student population and the needs of that population.

In addition, Holloway (2001) explores the experiences of six disabled students in HE in identifying positive and negative practices. Her study concentrates on disabled students’ experiences from an individual perspective, for example access to course information; financial support; departmental access and support from teachers, as well as their collective experiences of being part of the institution. She concludes that although there were attempts for inclusion expressed in statements and admission strategies, however “students experienced marginalisation and disempowerment” (Holloway, 2001, p. 612). These experiences, the author argues, stem from a deficit approach to disability. As a result, the six disabled students in Holloway’s study reported high levels of stress and anxiety in accessing course material and resources because of the lack of provision and co-ordination between departments, administrative staff, support services, library and disability units.

Furlong & Forsyth (2003) argue that for groups from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘fitting in’ and feeling at ease with their institutional environment is influenced by cultural and structural factors. In their study they explore the factors that facilitate and impede on “the minority of disadvantaged young people who do actually enter HE” (Furlong & Forsyth, 2003, p. 2). They assert that factors such as school qualifications, social, cultural, and academic awareness as well as financial resources are important in terms of progression and participation in HE. The majority of the students in their study came from heterogeneous backgrounds where the degree of familiarity with HE varied. Although on the surface the students were able to access HE, the degree of opportunities, knowledge, and resources available to them was limited. The authors conclude that disadvantaged groups are likely to face a number of barriers that not only may inhibit their transition to HE, but also may impede their participation and success in HE. Such a view highlights the way individuals and institutions perceive each other and the impact of these perceptions on their interactions with HE.

Additionally, Ball *et al.* (2002) argue that the choices students make are gendered, classed and raced which in turn influence and underpin perceptions of the self and the institutional environment. In that respect, the authors maintain, the process of self-identification is an on-going process of powerful constructions and reproductions, which are cognitive (part of the individual) and socio-cultural (part of the institutional context). The authors argue that students classify certain choices upon “perceptions of what is unacceptable or inconceivable” (Ball *et al.* 2002, p. 66) in terms of the actual university, student population and their university membership. They conclude that background characteristics as well as knowledge and evaluation

of the institution act as factors that frame the choices and judgements people make about university. Included in this equation is the institutional context that makes its own social, cultural and academic judgements in relation to the student intake.

In the same light, there is a body of literature that considers the role of compulsory education in supporting students' progression to university as influencing students' construction of studying at HE and their perceptions of HE (Hodkinson & James, 2003, Bloomer, 2001, Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000, Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999). More specifically, Bloomer & Hodkinson (2000) use the Bourdieu-ian concepts of 'habitus' and 'capital' to describe students' dispositions to learning through participation in one FE college. By dispositions, they refer to the nature and role of their engagement in terms of relationships, meaning making and development. The existence, the authors maintain, of a variety of perceptions and discourses and the ways in which these are positioned in their personal and social interactions is crucial in shaping students' identity within that context.

Further, Haggis & Pouget (2002) investigate the learning perceptions of 13 'average' students in an access initiative course in a UK university. They highlight a link between students' school experiences and their new context. The students felt their school had not equipped them effectively to cope with the learning demands and the workload of their university in terms of perceptions and skills, which in turn made them feel inferior and alienated. From this perspective, social networks within and outside HE, play a powerful role in the way that identities are shaped, evidenced in individuals' engagement with learning and the construction of knowledge.

In relation to identity, Wetherell & Maybin (1997) argue that: "To define oneself is also to define the nature of social reality" (p. 245). The authors maintain that identity is entwined with, and is part of the social reality that one constructs through belonging to a group or a community with whom one shares common characteristics such as language, experiences or interests, and through one's interaction with that group and with society as a whole. By identifying oneself as part of a group, it also distinguishes one from other groups. However, identifying who you are and where you belong is ephemeral as values and identities are not always clear cut within individual and group memberships (Wetherell & Maybin, 1997). Weeks (1999) argues that the identity process is complex, as there are conflicting values and relationships that need to be taken into account when trying to balance "our collective needs as human beings and our specific needs as individuals and members of diverse communities [...] the universal and the particular" (pp. 88-89). In that respect identity is not fixed, but rather it is fluid; it is locally situated; it changes and grows along with the individual and it is in a continuous dialogue with oneself and with others (Valimma, 1998, Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Thus far, in exploring the literature I have discussed the ways in which background characteristics in terms of age, ethnicity, social class, and disability, relate to and influence students' choice and perception of university (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, Reay, 2002, Shiner & Modood, 2002, Bowl, 2001, Holloway, 2001). In all of these studies, it was shown that decision making processes and choices were classed, gendered, and raced. It was also shown that students' participation in HE was strongly influenced, often negatively, by institutional cultures. However, as important as factors such as gender, race, disability, and social class, can be on how

choices are perceived, Schuetze & Slowey (2002, see also Baker & Brown, 2007) raise a point of caution when interpreting and applying terms such as ‘non-traditional students’. The authors maintain that such terms are socially constructed and underpin notions of “equality of opportunity” (p.312), or the “life-cycle” (p.313) stemming from the massification and expansion of HE as depicted in formal reports and policies. These terms ignore a number of social, economic, academic and cultural barriers that are understood and applied differently not only by individuals, but within and between institutions and countries. Hence, the authors argue that taking class, ethnicity or age as factors for distinguishing between types of learners is inadequate, as students’ choices are not as linear as these characteristics may suggest. The authors offer “...educational biography, entry routes and mode of study” (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 315) as a more holistic alternative, which treats these learners as lifelong learners. In my study while I am not ignoring the importance of social class, ethnicity, age and disability, I also pay attention at differences in the students’ learning journeys in relation to their values, aspirations, and perceptions of knowledge and themselves.

Even though ascribed characteristics can influence students’ self-perceptions and the choices they make, there are further subdivisions within and between each of these groups (e.g. ‘Asian’ and ‘Indian’ students get better results than ‘Afro-Caribbean’ or ‘black women’ students), which add to student diversity. Besides differences between groups, there is a tendency to view students who come from these groups negatively and in need of support to adapt and integrate into the practices of the institution. Portraying students in this way can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy that students themselves and institutions tend to reinforce. In my study, I look at

students' experiences in relation to the way they negotiate and balance the various shifts in their thinking, conceptions about learning and their environment. These, which are key aspects of students' transitions, can influence the choices and positions they take as learners, writers, or professionals during the course of their degree and the manner in which they interact with their social environment. The concept of transitions is explored in the next section.

2.2.2. Conceptualising transitions

The Oxford English Dictionary (2005) defines transition as '(noun) the passage or a period of changing from one state or condition to another'. Undergoing change at different times and at different places may be a step that is not experienced and perceived in the same way by everyone. In this section I will argue that transitions into HE not only involve a sense of transfer from one educational context to another, but more importantly an understanding of the impact that multiple and unfamiliar practices might evoke to students knowledge about learning at university and of their self-regard.

Much of the literature in relation to transition in the UK (Cook & Leckey, 1999, Lowe & Cook, 2003) and in Australia (McInnis *et al.* 2000, McInnis, 2001) has presented the process of moving from school to university in terms of a mismatch between pre-existing perceptions and new knowledge developed at university, a gap between staff and student expectations, and a general lack of abilities and skills. For example, McInnis & James (1995) analyse the transition to university for a group of first year students and point to the importance of commitment and focus, the lack of

which were seen as a reason for discontinuing their studies. So it should not be surprising that studies have also shown increasing rates of student attrition and drop-out (Anagnostopoulou *et al.* 2009, Peelo & Wareham, 2001, Yorke & Knight, 2004).

Yet the non-linear nature of the transitions is often ignored within governmental reports (HEFCE, 2001). For example, looking at the transition of various groups of students within HE institutions some reports (Dearing, 1997) have striven to indicate precisely where failings within the current system are occurring, and to suggest how these might be rectified. From this perspective, transitions are seen as a linear progression from one educational context to the next and any failures observed can be resolved through funding or the development of courses that make personal and institutional expectations clearer and straightforward. Ecclestone (2009) points out the dangers of this perspective as: “this creates normative expectations that people must be motivated to make successful transitions through the pathways, structures and expectations framed by policy and achieve measurable outcomes” (p. 19).

In relation to changes, Furlong *et al.* (2006) distinguish between linear and non-linear transitions:

[L]inearity involves a fairly smooth and straightforward transition in which there are no major breaks, divergences or reversals [whereas] non-linear transitions are defined as sequences that do not involve straightforward progressions. (pp. 230-231)

The characteristic of linearity in transitions, in terms of controlled progression has been criticised by Crossan *et al.* (2003). The authors, focusing on learning careers, argue that these are “frequently complex, and multi-dimensional, just as learning identities may be extremely fragile and vulnerable in sudden changes in the learner’s immediate social milieu” (Crossan *et al.* 2003, p. 65). Other studies that focused on the link between ‘career’ and identity have also placed the range of transitions within the social environment that students, individually and collectively, find themselves in (James & Bloomer, 2001, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000, Pollard & Filler, 1999). Such transitions might have resulted from the interaction within a social setting in the process of becoming somebody: a ‘student’, a ‘professional’ and so on. For instance, when a student tries to make sense of their learning, this generally implies not only a cognitive exploration of what they ‘know’, but also an exploration of how they see themselves. This exploration might result from their interaction with their surroundings or from trying to negotiate between existing and emerging practices and ideas. They involve a complex and dynamic process of negotiation, discovery, and re-discovery of oneself, or what Mercer (2007, p. 21) refers to as a “re-negotiation” of the self. This aspect of the transition implies something more than moving between contexts. It illustrates further the cognitive, personal, or emotional effect it can have for the individual, which in turn can influence their participation with their communities. This is something I will look at in my study.

During this process of self-development and negotiation of meanings, individuals can feel quite vulnerable especially when the learning process can be simultaneously positive and negative. As a result, they may find themselves in what Palmer *et al.* (2009) call the ‘betwixt space’. According to Palmer *et al.* “students can be

suspended between one place (home) and another (university), which can result in an 'in-between-ness' – a betwixt space – which in turn creates this lack of belonging or sense of placelessness (Van Gennep 1909/1960)" (p.38). This is true for those who are returning to HE or those who are unfamiliar with the institutional context. This re-balancing act can leave students feeling vulnerable and fragile, especially if the new discourses and practices are not mastered. As a result, I will argue that such internal processes are inherently associated with ontological learning.

However, postmodern and feminist perspectives question the extent to which the transitions that individuals go through result from processes of 'being' and 'becoming' that are orchestrated by specific incidents or 'critical points'. Instead they argue that the transitions are classed, subjective, and located in privileged, one-sided discourses (Colley, 2009, Quinn, 2009). Ecclestone (2009) argues that "such perspectives illuminate transition as something much more ephemeral and fluid, where the whole life is a form of transition, a permanent state of 'becoming' and 'unbecoming', much of which is unconscious, contradictory and iterative" (p. 13).

So far I have argued against the portrayal of transitions as involving linear and clear-cut progression in favour of a perspective that acknowledges the link between individuals and social structures and the cognitive, emotional, and social implications such interaction can have for the individual's sense of self. Some studies have looked at the implications that different settings, such as the professional setting, can have for an individual's self-efficacy (Colley, 2006, Carson, 2001 cited in Savin-Baden *et al.* 2008). For instance, the way that the young nursery

nurses in Colley's study talked about their role "...revealed a vocational culture of detachment in the workplace which contrasts somewhat with the nurturing ideal that is officially promoted" (Colley, 2006, p. 15). In contrast, the female academics in the study by Carson (2001, cited in Savin-Baden *et al.* 2008) did not perceive the tension between their feminine and professional selves as demoralising. Instead their identity shift enabled them to see their roles in a different light. Even though in my study I look at students' experiences at university rather than the workplace, I argue that students can often experience a similar degree of alienation when confronted with contrasting discourses and perceptions.

The concept of 'alienation', which seems to stem from the interaction between two contexts, one which is familiar and another which is unfamiliar, is highlighted by studies in the USA (Alfred, 2003) and the UK (Pollard & Filler, 1999, Lam & Pollard, 2006, looking at primary school students, and Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000, James & Bloomer, 2001, looking at FE students). Each of the above studies highlighted the successful and problematic nature of individual's transitions on their self-descriptions. More specifically, it was argued that the way the students described themselves related to what they perceived as successful ways of being into particular contexts. The degree to which, these constructions can or cannot be transferred into different contexts, can often influence the level of success.

However, linking the different contexts is not always straightforward as Rickinson (1998) argues, as there are often tensions between and within them which can be eased in the progression to some institutional settings, such as from school to

college. Watt & Patterson (1997) argue that within the nursery, primary and secondary sectors of education, teachers themselves can ease students' adjustment on the basis of written records, but when moving to university there is not such a bridge in roles, which could have an impact on how students, on arrival at university cope with what is expected of them and what is taken for granted.

In relation to progression to first year at university, Booth's (1997) study looks at the experiences of first year History students and their progression to university. Although some students during A-levels may have approached learning in a factually based manner, at university there is a different academic discourse where students are invited to explore learning in a more analytical and critical manner. This is an interesting observation as the differences in terms of skills and the variety of discourses may be new for some students for whom knowledge about educational practices is not part of their repertoire and thus can present them with challenges. Booth (1997) argues that lecturers view newly arrived students as not sufficiently prepared to study in HE in terms of skills, abilities, perceptions of learning and knowledge about the subject. Students on the other hand, although motivated to study their subject, can have little awareness of the context in terms of discourses, expectations and roles and as such the role of the tutor is crucial. The tutor, in Booth's study is perceived as an expert in knowledge, who is enthusiastic, passionate about the subject, motivated and can support and encourage them in their adjustment to university.

Baker & Comfort (2004) in a project entitled 'The Transitions project' focus on issues of widening participation and transition from the learners' perspective exploring issues of retention and progression from levels 2 and 3 at FE and year 3 at HE. The aim of the project is:

to contribute to an understanding of the factors which influence learners' progression and ... to inform the identification of best practices in widening participation and raising the achievement of learners in further and higher education institutions. (p. 11)

For Baker & Comfort (2004) progression into learning is perceived as a type of transition. In identifying the factors that enable this transition, they distinguish between individual and institutional factors, although they recognise the dialectical relationship between the two. The authors argue that at a personal level, background characteristics like gender, ethnicity, social class, academic qualifications and special needs, can influence the process. The authors maintain that these concepts as a whole and their influence on the process are also complex since they depend on the perceptions of the stakeholders as not everyone defines and interprets them in the same way. At an institutional level, the creation of predetermined categories and labels, the authors argue, will have implications in terms of entry criteria, access, outcomes and perceptions of what is considered as valid knowledge.

Additionally, Cook & Leckey (1999) pay attention to the differences between compulsory and post-compulsory education. They maintain that in compulsory

education the relationship between teachers and students is generally more supportive, less independent and locally situated. The university environment implies a loss of this locality, a move towards academic and individual independence and more freedom of choice and decision making. The degree of expectations and uncertainty is higher when compared to previous educational sectors. Equally, Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) argue that this tension is apparent especially when entering new settings and moving to and within much broader communities.

Interest in the conceptual changes a student undergoes during the course of their study, led to the development of the 'threshold concept' perspective. This concept which was introduced in a seminal paper by Meyer & Land (2003) arose from a UK national research project entitled 'Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses' (Cousin, 2007). In their seminal paper the authors describe threshold concept as:

... akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1).

The authors tentatively attribute five characteristics to threshold concepts, namely they are transformative (they can contribute to significantly altering a student's perception of a subject), they are probably irreversible (the change is not forgotten), they are integrative (they can highlight links that were previously obscured), often

bounded (the possibility of the student moving outside the territory of the particular discipline), and they are often troublesome (they can appear unfamiliar, difficult to understand and incoherent). In the process of identifying and discovering the discipline specific concepts, they use examples from various disciplines to show how such concepts underpin particular learning tasks or activities, which challenge students existing learning frameworks, strategies and constructions of knowledge. Failure to understand, the authors maintain, threshold concepts and their role in the practice of the discipline may confine learners to a “state of liminality” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p.13) whereby understanding is reduced to a kind of mimicry of others. In other words, threshold concepts are conceptualised as specific disciplinary concepts, the understanding of which is seen as essential for understanding the practices, thinking, and discourse of that specific discipline, what McCune & Reimann (2002, cited in Meyer & Land, 2003) have termed as “ways of thinking and practicing” (p.12). The interrelatedness the authors attribute between threshold concepts and the discipline correlates with Lave & Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘community of practice’ where learners’ identity and community membership is a process of sharing, negotiating, and understanding meaning that result from participation in practice.

From the threshold concepts perspective, it appears that more emphasis is placed on the epistemological nature of the concept in terms of what lecturers in various disciplines consider as threshold concepts. Meyer & Land (2003) acknowledge that such concepts can be more readily identifiable in some disciplines (such as Mathematics or Economics) than in others (such as History). Other authors (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007, Gourlay, 2009) have offered useful modifications to the concept.

Lucas & Mladenovic (2007) in their study of undergraduate Accountancy courses, propose using threshold concepts as an analytic framework that helps to question established expectations (either explicitly or tacitly) as evidenced in lecturers' views. Reviewing the use of threshold concepts in this sense, the authors argue, reinstates our attention "...on the social construction of disciplines and disciplinary knowledge and the nature of student understanding in relation to those bodies of disciplinary knowledge" (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007, p. 245). This framework can assist the review of the curriculum and lecturers' professional development in an organised manner. Similarly, Gourlay (2009) in her study of a group of nine undergraduate students' experiences in a post -1992 university, suggested the term of "threshold practices" (p. 189) as a more useful term to explore the role and impact of writing practices into students' identities and transitions.

Some authors (Kember, 2004, Todd *et al.* 2004, Ramsden, 1992) have described the role of assessment, workload, and the nature of the learning environment, in influencing students' participation at university. For example, Todd *et al.* (2004) use the dissertation process to illustrate their argument. The authors argue that although students view the outcomes of the process in terms of the value, skills, and experiences positively, the students also struggled with the synthesis between old and new ideas, between structured (classroom) and unstructured (dissertation) support, and between dependence and autonomy. In exploring these changes further, the concept of 'dissonance' (Boulton-Lewis *et al.* 2004, Hazel *et al.* 2002, Severiens *et al.* 2004) has been used to point to the difficulties involved when bridging concepts and tools that at first might appear alien to students and especially when familiarising themselves with the structure and language of their degree. These

studies seem to point to the ways in which skills, and consequently perceptions of learning depend not only on the learner's ability, but also on the interactions with their communities. I suggest that through their interactions with their communities, there are implicit elements that appear to influence students' understanding and conceptualisation of their roles.

Some of the above studies highlight the changes experienced in perceptions and knowledge during students' external transitions that arise from the interaction between students and their disciplines. For instance, in Merrill's (2001) study, the mature learners in her study described their experiences in terms of an initial struggle to "learn the ropes" (p. 16) of their new context before being able to participate in it. It seemed to be a struggle for them since some of Merrill's learners realised the difference between their "idealistic views of what they thought university study would be like and play the undergraduate game" (Merrill, 2001, p. 16). This quotation highlights the perhaps implicit shift that Merrill's students experienced in studying at university emphasising factors such as departmental culture and the academic rigour expected at university as influencing the difference in their attitudes and self-perceptions.

Although certain skills and strategies may have been already developed, however, locating them within the particular context of their discipline had an influence on how they experienced university life. Such factors highlight the importance of knowing and being familiar with what is considered as appropriate within the context of the students' disciplines. From this perspective, learning implies an increased

awareness and evaluation of how previously constructed perceptions and claims can or cannot be transferred to the current context. In my study I will argue that this transformation which involves adapting one's standpoint in relation to particular practices is a characteristic of the transitions.

In this section, I have argued that the transition to university can be a challenging experience due to the cognitive demands of learning as well as their social adjustment to the environment. When students enter HE, they may have an idea about what being an undergraduate student may entail, but they may be unfamiliar with their new context. Such transitions seem to be associated with the amount of support, knowledge and preparation available. Once they have become more familiar with their context, they may use that familiarity in their interactions with their communities and with learning. However, this adjustment can present challenges as it might reinforce the superiority of institutional practices over their own. As a result, there appears to be a possible mismatch between individual perceptions and institutional practices (Macaro & Wingate, 2004, Lowe & Cook, 2003, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000, Cook & Leckey, 1999, McInnis & James, 1999, Booth, 1997).

Although identifying possible disparities between pre-existing knowledge and new knowledge as practised at university is important, it provides us with only half of the picture. We need to further understand the nature of the external and internal changes that students' are likely to experience at university and the implications of these for students' academic and personal development. I argue this is an essential part of the process of understanding students' experiences at university. In other words, it is

essential to take into account the different directions that prolonged engagement with learning at university may present to students.

2.2.3. The concept of learning

I start from the premise that every student is brought up and exposed to different types of knowledge, which has an impact on the manner in which one thinks about oneself and the world. This knowledge which forms part of a student's identity can be classed, gendered, and raced and influenced by participation in different contexts such as school or the wider socio-cultural context. Understanding the relationship between them and conceptions of learning, is important because it considers the changes in learning and the way individuals talk about themselves, the decisions they make, and the positions they take in their interactions with their communities.

Within the last two decades, student learning at university have been dominated by the "students' approach to learning model" (SAL) (Marton & Säljö, 1976, 1997). Briefly, the SAL model highlights the interrelatedness between students' conceptions of learning and the approaches they use, and how this affects the quality of their learning outcomes. The underlying rationale behind these and other phenomenographic studies is that people rather than being separated from the phenomenon, in this case learning, they act according to the way they interpret that particular phenomenon. However this approach has been criticised for underplaying the social aspects of learning in the meaning making process. I will now turn to look at the SAL model in more detail.

2.2.3a The SAL model for learning

There has been a considerable amount of research work carried out to investigate the impact of students' approaches to learning. Broadly speaking this strand of work aimed to identify the way students reported to go about their learning in terms of their conceptions, strategies, and outcomes of learning. It was argued that different 'approaches to learning' lead to qualitatively different learning outcomes.

The concept of approaches to learning came from the seminal work of Marton & Säljö (1976, see also Marton & Säljö, 1997, Marton, 1986). In their early work, the authors used student interviews to examine the way students approach the same learning task, reading, looking at the relation between the ways they experienced, conceptualised, and perceived the task, the approaches they used, and the effect on the learning outcomes. They identified two distinctive approaches to learning: a 'surface' or 'reproducing' approach to learning and a 'deep' or 'meaningful' approach to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1997). They argue that surface learners perceive learning in a mechanistic manner where memorisation and the acquisition of large quantities of factual and other information are key characteristics of this type of information processing. In contrast, the authors continue, students who employ a deep approach perceive learning as an attempt to understand and engage with a body of knowledge in order to be able to argue critically and relate to the learning material. Finally, they maintain that these approaches are based upon different understandings of the relation between the learning task and the learning outcomes. For example, when writing essays students are more likely to adopt a deep approach whereas when studying for exams, a surface one is likely to be perceived as more applicable. The validity of these approaches was confirmed in other studies

(Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) where it was found that different students would use different approaches depending on their perceptions of the learning environment.

Biggs (1987, in Zeegers, 2001) in a study looking at the learning approaches of students between their first and third year, finds a decline in the consistency and use of various approaches. This decline, the author asserts, is largely attributed to the learner's experience and interpretation of the phenomenon that varies on each occasion. Later on, Biggs (1993b, cited in Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) examines the relationship between learners' behaviour, their motivation and the learning outcomes. He developed the presage-process-product (3P) model of student learning (Biggs, 1979, 1987, 1990, 1993, cited in Hazel *et al.* 2002). According to this model, learning is conceptualised in terms of the way that previous knowledge, perceptions or approaches in students and the teaching context can affect current engagement with learning (presage), the approaches that students use during the process of learning (process) and the learning outcomes (product).

In other words, this model suggests that besides the approaches to learning, there is also a link between prior and current learning experiences, between "the act of learning and the things they are learning" (Marton, Beaty & Dall'Alba, 1993, cited in Bowden & Marton, 2004, p. 69). For example, Ramsden (1984) notes that the approach taken by a student is affected and related to personal and contextual factors such as prior knowledge, discipline, time, assessment, teaching style, workload, and learning outcomes. He maintains that even though a course can eventually aim to develop students' deep approach to learning, students' perceptions of their context

act as a mediator to the approach they adopt. Case & Gunstone (2003) identify some gaps in Ramsden's approach when using interchangeably "a dualistic and non-dualistic stance" (p. 58) to explain variations in students learning. The authors maintain that on the one hand Ramsden acknowledges the relational nature of the teaching context on students' understanding of the learning process (non-dualistic). On the other hand, when viewing students' perception of learning and context as distinct entities (dualistic), he underplays the interrelatedness of the two.

In accounting for variation in students' reported conceptualisations of the learning process and the influence of the environment, Bowden & Marton (2004) argue that how variation is perceived is a key aspect in students' constructions. They argue that: "experienced variation can come about in two ways: either there is a varying environment that is perceived or we vary our way of dealing with the environment and perceive variation in that way" (p. 51). In this respect, the approaches a student would use to learning, is situational since it depends on the interaction between the individual student and the learning environment. Therefore, the authors emphasise the "by-product" (p. 57) nature of learning, which is a result of this interaction. Additionally, the authors argue that though students might use a variety of approaches, through participation and membership in this environment, students will become familiar with their environment. As a result, they will develop and acquire deep approaches to learning that will enable them to function within that particular environment. Bowden & Marton's (2004) study draws upon an individual student's perception as well as the nature of the environment. This perception is examined across individuals, students and teachers (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), but also for the

same individual in different learning environments (see Wilson & Fowler, 2005 for a comparison between conventional and action learning environments).

For Prosser & Trigwell (1999) learning is identified as being situational and context dependent. The key idea is that of awareness of the purpose of the educational context (the equivalent of perception for Ramsden, 1984, cited in Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), which is based on Marton & Booth's (1997) use of the term whereby the demands made by the context govern prior experiences and current approaches to learning. Prosser & Trigwell argue that students enter university with a variety of understandings and conceptions that may or may not be related to the context of their discipline. However, as they go through their studies, the authors continue, their experiences might change as a result of the experienced differences in their conceptions of learning. "There is a variation in what is in the foreground and what is in the background of students' awareness and this variation relates to how students are situated in the context" (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999, p. 81).

The authors use examples of pairs of students who use different approaches in one educational context, but suggest that both of them would use deep approaches when exposed to contexts that encourage the use of such approaches. Crucial to Prosser & Trigwell's (1999) argument is that by manipulating the learning environment to enhance deep approaches to learning, it is possible that all students can adopt such approaches and therefore achieve higher learning outcomes. In other words, a student's perception of learning is situated in the specific context and her awareness of both the context and her position in that context. Conceptualising the context in

this respect is, however simplified, since it only takes into account the ‘academic context’ rather than the ‘student context’.

Trigwell & Ashwin (2004) explore further the concept of situated conceptions of learning by looking at the relation of perceptions, approaches and learning environments. By studying undergraduate students in 17 University of Oxford colleges, they found a high correlation between students’ approaches to learning and motivation. In particular they looked at motivation in terms of a student’s ability, interest, and value of the task in relation to their environment. They suggested that students who appeared to be highly motivated and perceived their environment as supporting their learning, they were more likely to change their approach to learning and adopt a deep approach.

In a more recent study, Trigwell & Ashwin (2006) question further the nature of situated conceptions of learning and its relation to approaches to learning and learning outcomes. The situated conceptions of learning, the authors argue, refer to these conceptions that are evoked by the specific context, in this case the Oxford tutorial system, and the broader context, which is that of Oxford. Trigwell & Ashwin conclude that the learning environment is crucial in changing the learner’s motivation, approaches and outcomes if the context is perceived to be supportive as well as challenging and if students’ expectations match the ones outlined by the specific and the broader context. This is what they refer to as “an aligned situated learning conception” (p. 249). Thus, from these two studies there appear to be strong

links between perceptions of and approaches to learning and of the learning environment.

Other studies have further explored the impact of the learning environment in influencing the approaches adopted by the students (Ramsden, 1984, 1992, Case & Gunstone, 2003, Bowden & Marton, 2004). There have been specific studies which have looked at a variety of disciplinary contexts, for example Hazel *et al.* (2000) in biology, Prosser *et al.* (2000) in physics, Case & Gunstone (2003) and Case & Marshall (2004) in engineering. In all of these studies there are either further redefinitions of the characteristics of the surface-deep model or additional approaches are added that seem to stay within the 'approaches to learning' framework. Although Case & Marshall (2004) by drawing on the work of Booth (1992) and Drew *et al.* (2002, both cited in Case & Marshall, 2004) maintain that the two approaches – the conceptual and the procedural – that Case & Marshall have used are “identified from the data using grounded theory rather than imported as a priori assumptions” (Case & Marshall, 2004, p. 608). They conceptualise learning within a continuum of approaches. This approach, the authors argue, are contextual rather than innate or developmental, which is a key feature of this theory. In other words, students do not move from one approach to the next, but rather these are evoked by different intentions and strategies that are linked to their perceptions of the learning environment.

Research that has concentrated on the approaches to learning model has maintained that aspects of the teaching-learning environment such as curriculum, teaching

styles, workload, and assessment, can influence the ways in which a student perceives learning at university, and that, it is argued, can affect the quality of students' outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Hence, these studies have looked at ways to support students to develop high quality learning through modifications to the curriculum or courses that promote high quality learning by making sure there is for example, a 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999, cited in Kember, 2004) or an 'aligned situated conception to learning' (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006).

Entwistle (1998, cited in Entwistle *et al.* 2002) expanded on the SAL model by relating the approaches to the concept of 'understanding' which is seen as deriving from personal meaning and contextual demands, which the authors argue may create confusions for students. More specifically, Entwistle *et al.* (2002) recognise that in HE where "much of the academic discourse remains implicit within the early years of undergraduate study" (Entwistle *et al.* 2002, p. 4) achieving any kind of understanding is complex. Although the authors recognise that the SAL model provides strong links with students' perceptions of learning, they assert that there is a need to expand on alternative approaches. Studies on different cultures (Boulton-Lewis *et al.* 2001, Mugler & Landbeck, 2000, both cited in Boulton-Lewis *et al.* 2004) argue that cultural differences and practices provide a different set of understandings that might be in tension with the construction of learning and knowledge considered as valid. For some students, this construction might evoke a process that might question the type of understanding promoted by the institutional contexts as valid or desirable.

In this respect, Gipps (1994) asserts that understanding is about thinking about learning, a metacognitive process that helps the learner to construct, plan, evaluate, relate and control their learning through a variety of self-awareness processes. Again the kind of understanding perceived by a student as valid and the degree to which they have adapted cannot be generalised, but rather it is part of a number of complex factors. According to Haggis (2003) this is where the problem lies with the models of learning that equate perceptions of learning with approaches, outcomes and context. Each of these elements is complex. Haggis argues that by attempting to unravel these concepts using models that reinforce rather than question disciplinary understandings is likely that the learning process will be seen in terms of cause and effect relationships (if the student does not adopt a certain approach/strategy to learning, then they will get poor results) that tend to oversimplify them and ignore the differences between students and within disciplinary contexts.

Evaluation of the SAL model for learning

The SAL model of learning seems to define learning in terms of students' reported understandings of learning in their subject and their discipline. Arguably, there might be considerable variations in terms of how outcomes or environments are described and evaluated as significant. However, in all of the studies it was assumed that if students perceive their situated environment as supportive, then they are more likely to adopt a deep approach to learning, which will lead to higher learning outcomes. From this perspective, learning becomes strongly associated with students' perceptions of approaches, environments, and outcomes. A further link was made between situated conceptions of learning and broader contexts, that if perceived as successful it can lead to what Biggs (1996, cited in Hazel *et al.* 2002) refers to as

‘constructive alignment’. Case & Gunstone (2003) maintain that the majority of this body of research on student experience has its roots on the phenomenographic tradition, whereby the emphasis is on the variation a phenomenon such as learning, is conceptualised, perceived, and described.

Overall, the phenomenographic approach focuses on “the qualitatively different ways that people experience phenomena” (Marton, 1988, cited in Boulton-Lewis *et al.* 2004, p. 93). In relation to student learning, phenomenography pays attention to the way in which students experience the phenomenon of learning, rather than learning itself. In making sense of the relationship between subjects (individuals) and objects (learning, reading etc), it distinguishes between ‘dualistic’ and ‘non-dualistic’ views. While a dualistic view attempts to look at objects and subjects as separate from each other, a non-dualistic view, as adopted by phenomenographers, implies that they are not independent from each other (Marton & Booth, 1997). In other words, for phenomenographers to maintain that there is not an ‘objective reality’, but that this reality can be described in terms of relations, is essential.

Although the ‘approaches to learning’ model has offered a context within which to examine the variations in the meanings that students attribute to tasks and activities, it seems to have dominated the way that student learning is conceptualised, experienced and understood. This model, and phenomenography, has also faced strong criticisms (Webb, 1997, Malcolm & Zukas, 2001, Haggis, 2001, 2003). For example, when analysing students’ subjective relations with the world, little attention is paid on the fact that knowledge and experiences are socially constructed

phenomena. In other words, if conceptions of the world are seen as the integration between prior and new knowledge that result to meaningful understandings, then phenomenography appears to underplay the influence of the socio-historical environment in individuals' constructions. Indeed Ashwin & McLean (2005) argue that phenomenographic approaches tend to focus on variations at the individual level of how the world is experienced while ignoring the effect of structural factors such as social class. Further, Mann (2001) explores the link between the use of learning strategies and approaches and its impact on students' identity. She concludes that lack of engagement with the learning process made the students feel alienated from the process of learning, which in turn had an impact on their engagement with learning.

In addition, the aim of phenomenography is to identify particular, usually limited in number, categories that describe how students, on reflection, experience the world (Entwistle & McCune, 2004). Some researchers (Haggis, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, Case & Gunstone, 2003) have expressed concerns regarding the narrowing of the complexity of the process into straightforward and hierarchical categories. For example, Haggis (2003) questions the relevance of the deep approach, as favoured by academics and institutions, to a mass HE context. She suggests that this approach may reflect the elite goals and values of the academics rather than the students. Such association, I argue, is ignoring the diversity in students and their aspirations, and within and between disciplines that form part of the HE field. Case & Marshall (2004) argue that in doing so, "learning may not capture some of the nuances and subtleties in students' learning experiences" (Barnett, 1990; Volet & Chalmers, 1992, cited in Case & Marshall, 2004). Later on, Entwistle *et al.* (2002) identify the

importance of factors such as “self regulation (Schmunk & Zimmerman, 1998) and ‘emotion’ (Volet, 2001), but also on ideas coming from social psychology and sociology stressing ‘learner identity’ (Mentowski, 2000), collaboration in learning, and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998)” (p. 6).

These studies acknowledge the importance of a variety of personal and structural factors that highlight the existence of alternative pathways and perceptions. In other words, they reject the argument put forward by the SAL model that accepting similarities will override differences, which relate to individual experiences and presupposes general principles that are applicable to all. Such a variation is likely to challenge the ways that individuals, such as students who I focus on in my study, perceive their role as well as patterns of behaviour (e.g. power relations and interdependence) within the learning environment. In this sense learning is not seen as static, hierarchical, or developmental, but rather a student’s experience is likely to follow a number of directions, intended and unintended, that are likely to influence their experiences of learning.

Equally, how these are understood and negotiated within the context of the particular discipline, will also play a role on the way students make sense of their self and learning. The nature of these directions can vary and as Taylor (1987, cited in Haggis, 2001) argues: “as well as perceiving a pattern in student descriptions which involved ‘disorientation’, ‘exploration’, ‘reorientation’, and ‘equilibrium’, identified ‘emotionality’, ‘intuition’, ‘relational quality’ and ‘politics’ as dimensions of ‘the experience of learning for self-direction” (p.2). This is not a matter of ‘different but

equal' either as the way knowledge is constructed and produced can often incorporate negotiation between normative expectations and personal aspirations. Failing to acknowledge the influence and power of contexts and individuals, within and outside HE, to legitimise certain approaches over others, reinforces the process through which dominant values are left unchallenged. It is important, therefore, to draw on students' experiences formed before and during their interactions at university as well as to the ways in which these factors are hindering or encouraging the external and internal changes they experience. These processes, which I aim to explore in my study, are seen as part of relations that link students and communities.

Besides the epistemological concerns with the majority of the studies looking at students' conceptions of learning, there are some methodological considerations. One such consideration relates to the use of inventories. For example, Entwistle & Ramsden (1983) designed the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) and Biggs (1987, cited in Entwistle & McCune, 2004) developed the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ). The use of inventories and large scale questionnaires is problematic since it presupposes that learning can be measured and controlled within predetermined categories that do not leave room for other variables such as emotional factors (Entwistle & McCune, 2004). In addition, Boekaerts (1996) asserts that "such prompts are geared to consistencies in student behaviour rather than context sensitivity" (Boekaerts, 1996, p. 399, cited in Lonka *et al.* 2004, p. 312). However, later studies have adopted a mixture of questionnaires and interviews when exploring students' perceptions of learning and of the learning process in specific disciplines (Hazel *et al.* 2002, Case & Gunstone, 2003, Case & Marshall, 2004, Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006). By concentrating on specific disciplines these

studies show that learning perceptions do not seem to develop as a whole, but rather different aspects develop at different times in different ways to serve different purposes.

Another criticism concerns the interviewing process and the subsequent analysis of data. Marton (1994) points that the interview is seen as a dialogue between the participants and the phenomenographer that aims to explore learning as experienced and understood by the students and not the phenomenographer. This implies that the phenomenographer's beliefs, conceptions or understandings of the phenomenon must be left out of the process. Webb (1997) questions the role of the phenomenographer and the extent to which he can remain impartial when interviewing and later on when analysing the data by 'bracketing' his preconceived ideas. He suggests that researchers might need to identify their beliefs or any other factors likely to influence the process in advance, rather than assume impartiality.

Even though the importance of students' characteristics, perceptions, and a range of contextual aspects have been examined, these are done in general terms. By general terms I refer to the inclusion of mostly cognitive factors that students are aware of and how these relate to the process of learning at university either as a whole or within specific disciplines. Cognitive factors are important, but provide only part of the picture. Opening the field to include and acknowledge aspects such as structural factors or sociocultural practices in terms of the manner in which they can reproduce existing practices, can offer alternative ways of looking at student experience (Ashwin & McLean, 2005, Case & Marshall, 2006, Lea & Street, 1998, 2000).

In this section, I have argued that literature on how students learn is situated within the phenomenographic tradition and the SAL model (Marton & Säljö, 1997, Bowden & Marton, 2004, Prosser & Trigwell, 1999, Entwistle *et al.* 2002, Trigwell & Ashwin, 2004). Even though these studies look at the relation between learning and students, this has been examined in hierarchical terms that tend to reinforce normative expectations in approaches or practices. However, when looking closer at the relation between individuals and disciplines, there are other structural and contextual factors that can offer an alternative explanation to the variations in the way students engage with learning and their communities at university. Therefore, understanding the intricacies embedded in the construction of knowledge, the nature of power and authority apparent in the construction and production of learning, and the different interpretations attributed to the process, are important because they highlight the taken-for-granted practices, values, and ideas. These issues are central to the model of 'Academic Literacies' (Lea & Street, 1998, 2000, see also Lea, 2005).

2.2.3b The 'Academic Literacies' approach

The 'Academic Literacies' perspective views learning as a social practice (Street, 2004, Lea & Stierer, 2000, Lea & Street, 1998, 2000). It pays attention to the link between learning and disciplinary variation. According to this view learning is "...embedded in the values, relationships and institutional discourses constituting the culture of academic disciplines in higher education" (Lea & Stierer, 2000, p. 2). Additionally, Lea & Street (2000) argue that understanding the meanings and processes that students engage at university involves the exploration and negotiation of complex and specific writing practices. Embedded in this process are implicit

relations of power and authority in terms of what is regarded as valid knowledge within particular contexts. By looking at students' perceptions and writing practices in two universities, the authors found variations in the way students managed switching between previously learnt general writing practices and meeting the requirements of particular tutors and settings:

They [variations] are constituted both in the linguistic form of the texts – the written assignments and the accompanying feedback – and in the social relations that exist around them – the relationships of power and authority between tutor and student (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 42)

This approach draws on their earlier work (Lea & Street, 1998) where the authors describe the variations in student writing in particular, in terms of three models: study skills, academic socialisation, and academic literacies. The authors are quick to point out that each model is not perceived as separate but it builds on the insights of the previous model. According to the 'study skills' approach, writing is seen as learning a number of skills which can be communicated and transferred to a number of contexts. These skills consist of learning to master technical and general rules about writing. Failure to acquire them often resides with the student, which ignores the diversity of the student profile, of the programmes offered at universities, and of the academic context in terms of disciplines and genres. The 'academic socialisation' approach sees learning and writing as mediated by the tutor who introduces students to the academic culture. Although this approach takes into account variations in the learners and differences in departments, the authors argue, it does not sufficiently

acknowledge the existence of various cultures, the effect of inequalities in power and the intricacies of the writing discourse.

The third perspective, the 'academic literacies' approach takes a socio-cultural approach. More specifically, it sees learning and writing as demanding a number of epistemological and ontological shifts that may seem alien to students. This approach acknowledges that institutions are not homogeneous where one idea, practice, or discourse prevails, but rather they are contested sites with various disciplines, fields, discourses where power is unequally distributed. In other words, what is considered as valued and appropriate in one setting might not be the same in another setting. This demands students to develop a repertoire of skills and awareness of the practices involved in each setting and to be able to evaluate the knowledge and practices that are considered as appropriate for that particular context. Such continuous shifts in practices, social meanings and behaviours can be emotionally and ideologically challenging. As a result a student might feel confused, threatened and become resilient to the changes that are required from her.

In line with this theoretical approach Baynham (2000) proposes the need for a "practice-based approach" (p. 18) to highlight the heterogeneity between disciplinary communities and the influence of disciplinary practices on students' writing practices. By concentrating on the influence of 'new' work-based disciplines such as nursing, he suggests that learning at university is influenced by the way writing is presented with the disciplinary communities and the way students engage with them during the course of their study. Focusing on examples of written assignments, he

argues that students take up different positions according to the type of knowledge they think it is perceived as valid by their discipline. Even though students may use one or a combination of different types of knowledge, such as knowledge stemming from the academic community, knowledge built up from personal experience, and knowledge that is professionally based, the value of each will be constituted differently by their disciplines and tutors. As a result, students will learn the framework within which they can position their 'voice' during the essay writing process. Baynham argues that taking up such positions, which can often be contested, depends more on an awareness of the options available within each discipline rather than on being socialised into the discourse. He therefore maintains the need for 'embodied readings' which "... read[s] the text as an embodiment of the disciplinary politics within which it is produced, and as an embodiment of the processes of subject production at work as learner writers engage with the writing demands of the discipline" (Baynham, 2000, p. 31).

Highlighting some of the issues Baynham (2000) poses in relation to students' writing practices, McMillan (2000) sees writing as the vehicle that allows students to successfully make sense of the various and contradictory roles they take in their professional, personal and academic settings. She argues that meaning-making and negotiation depends on the inter-relationship between personal and social contexts and the learning roles that they develop to deal with the barriers and tensions that such synthesis brings.

Following the work of Lea & Street (1998) and Gee (2005, cited in Case & Marshall, 2006) Case & Marshall, put forward a 'Discourse model' whereby discourse not only refers to language acquisition, but to "the combination of language plus the actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing etc" (Case & Marshall, 2006, p. 2). The emphasis is not on how students develop as learners, but rather on their reflections of their interactions and the identities they acquire as part of this interaction. The authors identify two discourse models: "the no problem Discourse' model and the 'face it Discourse' model" (Case & Marshall, 2006, p. 5). The difference between the two models, the authors argue, refers to the way students talk about uncertainty and challenge in relation to themselves and learning. While in the 'no problem Discourse' learning is described positively and any unsettling events are overcome relatively quickly, in the 'face it Discourse' model learning is described in negative terms in response to events which are seen as essential for initiating further reflection and thinking. The authors conclude that although the two models may present similarities to the surface-deep model, they add to the field by emphasising the role of identity and the importance of social communities other than the academic one. In other words, they maintain that what students have previously acquired from their home and social communities in terms of perceptions, resources, beliefs or values may be more difficult to change and can account for differences in their interactions with learning.

This strand of research (Lea, 1998, 2005, Lea & Street, 1998, 2000, Street, 2004, Baynham, 2000) focuses on the variations in students' conceptualisations of writing practices across and within various disciplines when studying at university. They suggest that understanding the factors embedded in the relation between knowledge

construction and production, is important because it emphasises that underpinning students' experiences of learning are issues of identity, power and practices within various contexts. These aspects are relevant to my thesis as my aim is to explore the way different goals, ideas, and values are articulated, exchanged, validated and negotiated between students and communities at university. These are not static, but may change as students interact and move between and within communities. These interactions in turn can impact learning in terms of the perceptions (ideas, thoughts, and beliefs) and applications (use of tools, documents, and vocabulary) that are practised and valued. As such, I consider students' experiences of learning to be a process that is subjected to individual perceptions, conceptions of knowledge and to knowledge that is considered as institutionally appropriate. In the next section, I will discuss the concept of communities in more detail.

2.2.4. Understanding the role of communities

Students as individuals have their own characteristics, past experiences, aspirations and taken-for-granted frameworks that result from their social interactions. In addition, university consists of various communities with complex structures, practices and perspectives that vary between disciplines, departments, and individual teachers.

As part of their learning, students will come into contact and interact with other students, teachers and other university staff. Each interaction will provide them with alternative frameworks to construct, negotiate and evaluate their learning. This does not mean I view frameworks as being objective in the sense that they are universally

agreed upon. Rather they are part of a complex web of interactions stemming from various aims and objectives. For example, when a student comes to university, she might have a particular understanding of her role and perception of learning at university. She might use these understandings to make sense and deal with the practices of her discipline. During the course of her study and through interactions with others such as students, lecturers or support staff, she might re-think, alter or develop her understandings in ways that make sense to her and to her communities. Exploring the nature of the interaction between students and communities and the ways in which this relationship can influence their development and decision making processes is an important aim of my study.

In order to make sense of how these elements work together, I draw on the theories of Lave & Wenger (1991). In this section I will explore Lave & Wenger's concept of 'community of practice' and 'legitimate peripheral participation', before evaluating the usefulness of their concepts when applied to the context of HE.

2.2.4a Lave & Wenger's situated learning model

In their analysis of the situated nature of learning, Lave & Wenger (1991) explore the manner through which 'newcomers' become members of their work-based communities by participating in practices and activities that are socially constructed and shared. Arguably the learning that takes place within HE differs from the kind of learning that Lave & Wenger (1991, also Wenger, 1998) refer to in terms of the role of instruction and abstraction found in HE. By emphasising the situational nature of learning they pay attention to the construction of knowledge that result from the

activities of particular practices that define the roles and practices of individuals and their communities.

Drawing on informal learning at the workplace, Lave & Wenger (1991) view learning as a process that is inherently linked to identity, membership and interpersonal relations. Central to their theory of learning is an approach which "...place[s] more emphasis on connecting issues of sociocultural transformation with the changing relations between newcomers and old-timers in the context of a changing shared practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). In other words understanding how newcomers gain their professional identity, the relationship between newcomers and old-timers and the way practices and approaches are constrained and enabled by the communities, is at the heart of their theory. As a result, they claim that learning is dynamic and relational in that it defines each other and is defined by them through participation in the practices of their communities.

Communities of Practice

The concept of 'community of practice' is central to their argument. They broadly define it as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98). In distinguishing between everyday communities and communities of practice, Wenger (2006), states that communities of practice have three characteristics: the domain, which is the area of interest, a community that is formed by the relations of its members, and the practice, which is the outcome in the form of tools, resources and documents of the members' participation in practice. In

other words, a community of practice is formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning and have a shared area of interest:

A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge. ... Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98)

Baker *et al.* (2005), contrast between learning communities and traditional classrooms in terms of its impact in the communication between teachers and students. Learning communities are part of a programme that is offered by universities in the USA to “help first-year students make the transition to college life” (p. 26). In operationalising Lave & Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘community of practice’, Baker *et al.* (2005) emphasise the social and academic opportunities that a learning community offers to students as opposed to traditional classrooms in terms of familiarity not only with the others students and their environment, but also with their teachers. The participatory nature of learning is emphasised in the strategies and tasks employed by the students in these communities. Lave (1991) acknowledges that participation within classroom environments is inhibited by the perception of knowledge as a “commoditized activity” (Lave, 1991, p. 78) in the sense that learning is controlled through grades and academic discourses which may generate negative perceptions of the learning process.

The nature and types of ‘communities’ university students participate in is an important aspect of my thesis. Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2004) argue that “the claim that a community of practice is an intrinsic condition for learning has greater significance than any definition of what a community is” (p.169). Equally, for Savin-Baden *et al.* (2008) interest rather than practice becomes a key point in their understanding of a community. They state that: “it would seem that the term ‘Community of Interest’ would fit better ... since it reflects the idea of a group of people who share a common interest or passion” (p. 224).

My understanding of a community refers to understanding how individuals come together to exchange, discuss and reflect on ideas that are important to them, how tacit and explicit meanings are articulated and explored, and how the individuals position themselves within particular roles and practices. Even though there are a number of communities that students are likely to interact with during their university career, in my thesis I differentiate between *externally based communities* and *student based communities*. The first type of communities refers to communities that exist already such as academic communities, disciplinary communities, and subject communities. The latter refers to communities that are created by the students themselves. I do not see each of them as separate but interlinked.

Also, there are further variations in each of these two types. For example, not all subject communities are the same, for example History is different than Law in terms of the teaching structure and activities that form part of the subject, which in turn can influence the kind of knowledge, frameworks, and practices of the subject-specific

community. In addition, some student-based communities may be artificially created as these that involve peer-interactions within the classroom.

An important concept in Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, which "refers both to the development of knowledgeably skilled identities in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 55). The authors use this concept to explore not only the way through which individuals become members of their community in terms of the roles, positions and perceptions they employ, but also the impact this ongoing membership has on their self-perceptions and understanding of social practices. With regard to university students, when they start their course as newcomers, they are explicitly and implicitly introduced to the culture and practices of their subject. They are explicitly told in their lectures and seminars about the type of learning at university they should engage with. They might then try to adapt to this culture and its practices by mimicking what others such as lecturers or advanced students are doing. As peripheral participants they do the activities through which their knowledge and skills develop and through which they start to build an initial picture of the university culture.

Lave & Wenger argue that "[t]he practice of the community creates the potential "curriculum" in the broadest sense – that which may be learned by newcomers with legitimate peripheral access" (p. 93). This 'curriculum' includes learning about people, resources and artefacts as well as ways of behaving and thinking. This process, the authors argue, is not set in stone, but rather evolves and changes through

participation in the activities, the practices and the social culture of the community. Such process is not without its challenges. As newcomers progress and become more involved in their communities they might acquire new skills and knowledge. This knowledge might demand a sense of reflection and might not sit well amongst 'older' and 'newer' forms of knowledge. How students deal with this aspect of their transitions is an important part of my thesis.

The emphasis on 'practice' lies in the situatedness of learning within the particular context where experts and novices interact. By actively participating in the practices of the academic community learners construct, interact and move from "relative incompetence to competence within a particular situation of practice" (Resnick, 1991, p. 6). They become social apprentices. Apprenticeship, according to Lave (1991), is a process whereby novices learn the skills of the trade through their participation in activities that lead to production. This process is individual and collective since identity formation and learning is situated and supported by more knowledgeable members who pass their skills and ideas to newcomers (Parker, 2006). Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that through participation learners who have acquired legitimate membership move from the 'periphery' as novices, to the 'centre' of the community as experts, which demonstrates the mastery of knowledge and skills within the community. "The social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Learning, therefore, is seen as participation in a community of practice where learners, over time, change positions and roles through their interaction with the social context as they move from the periphery to the centre. In this sense becoming a member of a

community of practice implies the re-production of the practices and activities of that community.

Furthermore, the authors argue that a community needs to be examined in terms of the specific and broader contexts within which it is situated, of the social relations that form part of the community, and through time, in order to understand the way it shapes and is being shaped by those forms:

In any given concrete community of practice the process of community reproduction – a historically constructed, ongoing, conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among practitioners – must be deciphered in order to understand specific forms of legitimate peripheral participation through time. This requires a broader conception of individual and collective biographies than the single segment encompassed in studies of “learners” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56).

The authors use identity, knowledge and skills to distinguish between ‘newcomers’ and ‘old-timers or full participants’. They argue that the issue of ‘legitimacy’ of resources, relations, and knowledge is of prime importance to viewing learning as a form of apprenticeship. That is not to say that students, for example, who have learned to use calculators to solve complex mathematical equations or who have understood the meaning of philosophical concepts, as useful as these might be, are becoming full participants. Such participation, the authors argue, requires engagement with the history of the practice and the cultural and epistemological artefacts that are part of that community.

Also, Smith (2003) distinguishes between ‘newcomers’ – students who are new to university – and ‘old timers’ – students who are in the middle of their degree. Smith argues that there are differences in the construction of identities, perceptions of the learning process and interaction with their communities between newcomers and old timers. These are situated within different sets of values, viewpoints and outcomes. Although they may all be engaged in a legitimate apprenticeship of learning, the perceptions attached are not the same for everyone, which highlights the relational nature of transitions as depicted in the degree of individuals’ adaptation to external and internal changes in the context of their communities.

Evaluation of Lave & Wenger’s model

In the previous section I have presented key concepts of Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning. Their theories have contributed to the field of learning by arguing against the individualised and de-contextualised nature of learning. Instead they proposed a model that takes into account the way that social relations, participation in practice, and communities can affect the way that learning does or does not take place. By seeing learning as a collective practice situated in specific contexts of participation, the authors explore the manner through which members become more involved into the practices of their communities. Therefore, they argue, that a community of practice becomes inseparable to (individual and social) identity. Wenger (1998) reinforces this point when he argues that communities of practice are characterised by a negotiation of meaning, a mutual engagement in joint enterprises and a shared repertoire of symbols, activities and artefacts. Underlying this is the minimisation of individual attributes and experiences as one learns by

becoming part of a community of learners through active participation and exchange of ideas.

However, the extent to which Lave & Wenger's (1998) concept of 'community of practice' as they understand it, can be applied to a formalised educational context has met considerable resistance. There is a body of literature that argues against their notion of shared participation since it does not emphasise strongly enough the contested nature of roles, resources, and opportunities available to each member (Parker, 2006; Fuller *et al.* 2005; Fenwick, 2000; Lea, 2005; Gurlay, 2009). Fuller *et al.* (2005) note that: "the power to set and relocate boundaries which extend or deny opportunities for learning is unevenly distributed throughout the membership of a workforce (community)" (p.54). Though Lave & Wenger recognise the influence of diversity in status, power, interpretations and positions, they maintain that having shared goals and a collective engagement will result to the reconciliation of such inequalities.

When looking at students interactions with lecturers at university, Gurlay (2009) questions the notion of shared goals. This diversity in individual perceptions and experiences often incorporates different degrees of acceptance of interpretations depending on an individual's aspirations or perceptual frameworks and how these might, explicitly or implicitly influence their engagement with their communities. Some learners might fully engage with their community while for others such engagement might invoke a process of academic and professional re-negotiation. This is an important part of my thesis.

Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2004) question the concept of community of practice on the basis of spatial proximity and the link between learning and community. They argue that spatial integration is apparent in the examples provided by Lave & Wenger (1991) and by Wenger's (1998) vignettes. Yet it seems that the notion of community is more linked to the epistemological and cultural practices than spatial proximity. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that the idea of mutuality/reciprocity is strongly embedded in the trajectories of the community and its participants to the extent that the community as a whole becomes more important than the individual trajectories.

Socio-cultural perspectives (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, Rogoff, 1990) do not concentrate on the specific contexts of the classroom, or the family environment, but rather they see learning communities as open and interacting with communities that exist outside the periphery of the specific community (Renshaw, 1992).

Further, the assumption that individuals become part of their communities as they move from the 'periphery' as newcomers to the 'centre' as experts implies a linear transition. Lea (2005) questions the taking of positions (from the margin to the centre) as an indication of an individual's membership. She argues that some individuals might prefer to stay in the periphery as it "... may be one way in which students retain power and maintain their own sense of identity in the learning process" (p. 190). Similarly, the distinction between an individual as a person and as part of the community becomes somewhat fuzzy. For example, Wenger's (1998) references to Ariel, a cypher, portray her as being represented by her community

membership, rather than by what she brings as an individual to the community. Such view takes little account of the role and status of an individual's agency by assuming they have little to contribute to the practices of their communities. As I will argue in chapter 4 (section 4.3.1) it is the individual's personal aspirations, prior experiences and how these form part of the way they interact with the practices of the communities they engage in, that are fundamental to the way they construct their identities and experiences during their university career.

To sum up, in this section I presented Lave & Wenger's (1991) model that sees learning as a deepening process of participation in informal and workplace contexts. Through interacting with more knowledgeable others and engaging in the production of tools, resources and documents, individuals can become part of their communities and develop their professional identities. This transition is a result of individual's active participation within a community of practice, a process of being a student at university.

2.3. Towards developing a model for understanding students' experiences of transitions in HE

The concepts of 'transitions', 'learning', and 'communities', are at the heart of understanding students experiences at university. I understand 'transitions' to depict changes in the construction of knowledge and identity that result from students' interactions and participation in different communities. In exploring the range of transitions I distinguish between *external changes* which include a sense of progression/movement between contexts, such as from college to university, and

internal processes, which involve more subtle and complex shifts in identity and positions.

Equally, I understand ‘communities’ to involve groups of people who have come together to share, reflect, and discuss concerns or activities. Understandably there are different types of communities that students will become members of and I have distinguished between *externally based communities* which exist already such as subject communities, and *student based communities*, which are created by the groups of people around some particular concerns or activities. Students bring to each of these communities their own experiences, perceptions and ideas that structure their behaviour within them. As a result, in some of these communities they may be core members, while in others they might stay at the margins. Equally, communities are part of the social milieu and as such have their own social arrangements, ideas and practices within which learning is contextualised.

In order to bring the different individual, institutional, and social elements together I developed a model (see Figure 2.1).

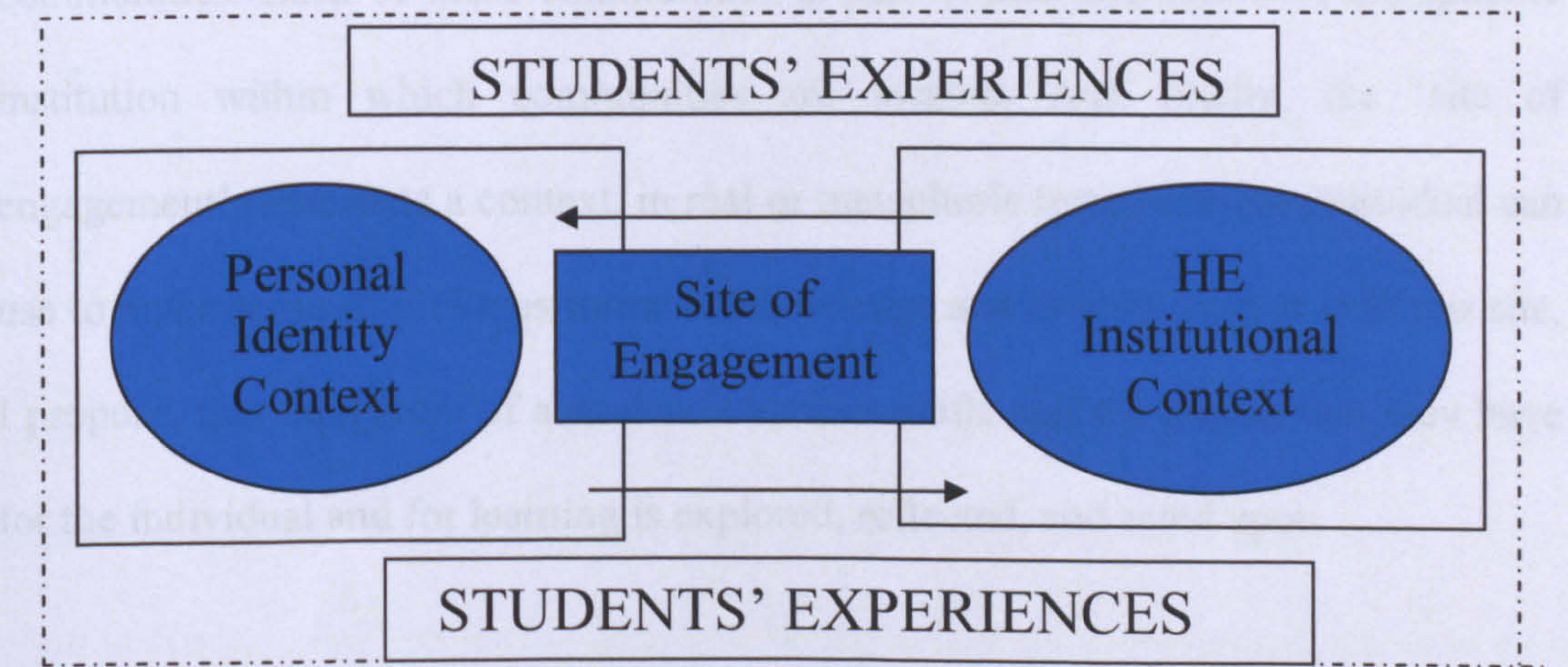


Figure 2.1 A model portraying key contexts in students' experiences in Higher Education

The above figure outlines a model portraying key contexts often involved in the way a student experiences Higher Education. I propose to use this model to explore the nature and role of each context, the way students' experience them and their impact on students' engagements within different contexts. All of these aspects, the 'personal identity context', the 'HE institutional context', and the 'site of engagement' underpin students' transitions.

More specifically, in the above figure, the first circle – the personal identity context– represents a student's self-perceptions and the different factors such as ascribed characteristics, family and friends that the literature points as influencing an individual's sense of self and of the world. In turn, the 'HE institutional context' represents different 'communities of practice', that is a social setting whereby learning results from being actively engaged in a shared enterprise (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There is not just one community operating at university, but there are various communities. Each of these communities is part of and interacts with the specific institution within which communities are located. And finally, the 'site of engagement' represents a context, in real or metaphoric terms that the individual can use to make sense of previous forms of knowledge and current ones. It is in this site, I propose, that the nature of a student's various shifts and the impact that they have for the individual and for learning is explored, reflected, and acted upon.

This synthesis is not without its challenges. Students, during their university career, will come across a number of different perspectives, practices and discourse that will serve different aims and purposes. Some of these perspectives and practices might be tacitly accepted as part of the norm, others might be questioned, and others might be refused. Inherent in all of them are transitions which highlight the process that students undergo during their learning as part of their engagement with their communities. Finally, I view the personal identity context, the HE institutional context, and the site of engagement as situated within a wider context, which in my study refers to the university. The university is represented by the dotted lines of the square in Figure 1. The dotted lines reflect the openness of the model, to indicate interactions with external communities outside the university.

I view the interaction between the above three elements as dynamic since it emphasises interconnections between individuals, learning, and communities. Like Rogoff (1995, cited in Alfred, 2003) I consider these three aspects as crucial for understanding students' experiences at university. In other words, I propose that this model can help us understand students' experiences at university, by bringing together three key, interrelated, aspects:

1. Individuals' prior experiences and background characteristics are important in the formation of their roles and positions.

Understanding students' experiences at university requires understanding the individual student. The personal development is highlighted by Marton *et al.* (1993, cited in Haggis, 2003, p. 99), who argue "coming to an understanding of learning as

being able to ‘see things differently’ or ‘changing as a person’ is not typical for students at university”. Understanding in this sense questions the meaning of change and its role on an individual’s sense of self and construction of knowledge. This construction is the result of moving between various communities. The way they perceive them will result from the positions they take and the changes in the practices and approaches they see as essential in enabling them to interact with their communities. In turn other people such as parents, teachers, advisers and friends, can play a powerful role in the way that knowledge, learning, identity, are constructed. So, the individual student can be understood as the amalgamation of different factors. These factors include: a) their ascribed characteristics such as social class, ethnicity, gender or nationality, b) individuals’ own aspirations and conceptions of their role and identity, c) the role of others, and d) the influence of the home, compulsory education, or the workplace.

2. Learning is seen as a socially situated process.

Besides students’ personal characteristics, the social context, which includes the HE institutional context and the wider socio-cultural context, is also important in understanding the decisions students make and the choices they perceive as available to them. In this respect I regard learning as a socially situated process. By this I refer to the importance of communities in influencing students’ conceptions of themselves and of the process of learning. Such communities have their own characteristics in terms of structure, discourses and practices that vary between universities, departments, disciplines and individual teachers. In turn, the ways in which individuals conceptualise them and position themselves in relation to these roles and

practices will influence their own understanding of the self and the transitions they go through.

3. Interactions between students and the various communities at university are dynamic.

Understanding students' experiences at university is influenced by structural, financial, social changes resulting from interactions between students and the various HE communities. The way that interactions are experienced at different points of the students' university career, are also affected by students' perceptions and evaluations of previous frameworks and the degree to which these can be applied to understand the practices of their current subject. Hence, I argue that understanding students' experiences in HE involves the synthesis of personal, institutional, and social factors that arise from interactions between individuals and their social world.

2.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I conceptualised students' experiences at university as transitions by paying particular attention to the social context and its impact on learning. I consider students' experiences at university, and in particular their learning experiences, to be a result of students' own aspirations, dispositions and identities and their interactions with the various communities at university. By their interactions I am referring to the ways in which individual students and participation in various communities at university can contribute to students' personal and academic development. I explore this development through the concept of transitions, which I conceptualise as a process characterised by changes in positions, knowledge, perceptions and self-

descriptions. While I focus on individual transitions I situate them within the specific HE institution and the wider social context. I argue that transitions are contingent in time and space.

To this end, I put forward a conceptual model, which takes into account three interlinked aspects: a) the ‘personal identity context’ that focus on individual students’ characteristics and experiences that have contributed how they perceive themselves, b) the ‘HE institutional context’, which for my research is situated in the discipline of arts and humanities and, c) the ‘site of engagement’ where I view the nature of interactions between individuals and their communities, which I understand of as being dynamic and relational. This model derives from the theories of Lave & Wenger (1991). More specifically, perceiving learning as taking places within various communities, following Lave & Wenger’s conceptualisation, locates transitions and students’ experiences of learning within a social context that influences the way they perceive themselves. Therefore, central to my model are the way through which practices, structures and rules become legitimised and the implication such a process has on the way students experience learning at university.

The ways in which I framed and explored these interactions in practice is reflected in the choice of methodology, which I will present in the next chapter.

3. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented the conceptual model for understanding students' experiences at university as transitions. I suggest that students' experiences are not purely individual, but they are influenced by their social interactions evidenced in students' memberships in various communities within and outside the university. In order to understand students' experiences and relationships at university I have used a case study approach for conducting my research.

I have situated my research within the qualitative tradition to explore in detail the type of transitions and communities that students might experience and what these might look like in practice. The research methods that I used to collect my data are semi-structured interviews combined with the use of magnetic board, document analysis and non-participant observation. The aim of these research methods was to explore in more detail students' accounts of learning before and after coming to university and with being a student at university. Therefore, in this chapter I provide details of the fieldwork, which includes the pilot study since it was essential in developing the questions during the interviews that were carried on later and recruiting the students that participated in the main research. Finally I discuss the choice of the research methods, data analysis processes and the role of the researcher.

The chapter is structured as follows:

- Firstly, I explore the philosophical tradition within which I locate my research;
- Secondly, I present the ethics of the research followed by the rationale behind the research design, the research methods, the fieldwork process and my role in the research process; and,
- Thirdly, I describe the data analysis processes I have used.

3.2. Locating my research

In this section, before exploring the tradition within which I position the research, I will concentrate on the assumptions made by different philosophical traditions regarding the nature of reality and its implications for the way research is conducted and the conclusions that are made. Discussion relating to these traditions will point to issues such as the nature of knowledge and inquiry, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the claims made and the transparency of aims and objectives. I will use examples from the literature regarding student experience to illustrate the points I am making.

My own research is located within an interpretivist tradition where the focus is on ‘multiple realities’. Interpretivism questions the notion of independent reality and argues that “objects of thought are merely words and that there is no independently accessible thing constituting the meaning of a word” (Cohen *et al.* 2003, p. 5). This perspective argues that the same laws, logic and references cannot be applied to the

study of social science since the aim is to understand and explain the actions of the actors. Interpretivism derives from Max Weber's *Verstehen* approach which is about understanding rather than explaining human behaviour (Bryman, 2004, Cohen *et al.* 2003). In particular, emphasis is given to the interaction between the observer and the observed and the implications this has for the individual. Scott (2000) argues that this research tradition enables the researcher to reflect and question the research process and one's role. Questioning, problematizing and analysing further the discrepancies and differences in the accounts of both parties, leads to the self-questioning of values and ideologies. Such a position recognises a degree of reflexivity that implies an awareness of the researcher's assumptions and positions and the way these have underpinned understanding of the topic, was of conducting the research and the conclusions I produce at the end. I am not an outsider to this process but rather my own experiences and interests work together to provide connections for understanding and explaining the social world. Embedded in this process is the acceptance of the dialectic nature of reality in that it pays attention not only to the nature of relations between individuals and communities, but to the processes that such relations tend to be produced in, rationalised by and acted upon.

In reviewing the literature regarding students' experiences, there are differences regarding the methods that researchers have used to conceptualise students' perceptions of learning, approaches to learning, and the influence of learning environments. Previous studies that have relied on theoretical reasoning devised concepts and typologies such as "deep/reflective/elaborative vs. surface/serial-reiterative/rehearsal" (Entwistle & McCune, 2004, p. 333), that position the individual student as the main agent of learning who can reflect and interpret her

actions in relation to how she interprets her interactions with her communities. Some researchers have relied on quantitative methods such as surveys and questionnaires as exemplified and verified in the use of inventories such as Vermunt's (1996) ILS (Inventory to Learning Styles), in Vermunt, 2005. Other researchers have relied on the use of qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and observations. Although each approach has contributed significantly to the literature of student experience, in my research I perceive reality as a dialectic process. To this end, there are studies (Haggis & Pouget, 2002, Haggis, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, Lea & Street, 1998, 2000) that move away from phenomenographic frameworks of learning to highlight the influence of practices and knowledge construction in students' experiences of learning at university. Such studies provide an alternative framework to the area of student experience by emphasising the interpretation of meanings and accounts based on participants' life histories and biographies rather than on classifications which tend to be more of a 'scientific' nature. My aim is not to offer generalisations or a list of typologies in learning, but rather to explore how students experience learning at university and the changes at personal and professional level that such processes imply.

Moreover besides looking at the relationship between the researcher and participants, these studies point to the role of time and language that can influence meanings, interpretations, and understandings. This was highlighted by Ball (1983) who notes that: "It is misleading to suppose that a school is 'the same' at all times of the year, or that school is experienced by its teachers and pupils as being the same at all times" (p. 81). Murphy & Dingwall (2003) alert researchers to the nature of the research context, when referring to the observation of real, authentic behaviour with

the possibility of minimising any external or internal influences, which can lead to misleading perceptions and understandings. They argue that it is impossible to represent reality as it is, since that reality will be influenced by the actors and researcher's claims and values which interact with the way reality is later on produced and interpreted.

There are also debates surrounding the application of criteria for evaluating the validity of accounts. Validity refers to the truthfulness of the claims of the research and can be achieved through the gathering of large amounts of data which provides the researcher with 'rich' data that is representative of the population. Yet, perceiving learning in terms of the exploration of measured factors which continue to reinforce the use of typologies and classifications is misleading. Although the concept of validity is pertinent since it imposes criteria for evaluating research and knowledge, we need to ask different questions. Indeed, Aguinaldo (2004) asserts: "in moving away from foreclosure through binary oppositions, we change our validity question from 'Is this valid research?' to 'What is this research valid for?'" (p. 130). Such rethinking can be applied to understanding students' experiences in HE as a process of continuous questioning and reframing allowing a dialogue in what can be described as 'thinking outside of the box' by allowing invitations for contradictions and criticisms. In that respect, I agree with Aguinaldo (2004) in that: "... we must conceive of validity that actively negotiates these practices and makes them known" (p. 130).

The same could be said about the way we research students' experiences in HE. Murphy & Dingwall, along with other authors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Bryman, 2004, Silverman, 2004, Cohen *et al.* 2003) warn us of the validity of the data collected as it would not necessarily reflect *the* reality of the participants since this reality is influenced by issues such as subjectivity, role of the researcher and the researched. In line with the interpretive tradition and my own philosophical beliefs, rather than relying on my own assurances about the validity of the study, I have provided extensive descriptions of the five students I am focusing on, so that the readers can evaluate and interpret the text for themselves. As Murphy & Dingwall (2003) put it: "They allow us to identify the stock of knowledge, formulations, theoretical strategies and so on that are available to people in different contexts" (p. 30). This means that rather than focusing on the outcome of their experiences, we must concentrate on uncovering the mechanisms that have allowed for actions and practices to be taken-for-granted.

So far, I have discussed that the way that social reality is perceived is based on assumptions about the nature of knowledge (epistemology), the relation between reality and actors (ontology) and the use and application of methods (methodology). Past research has focused on different classificatory approaches, epistemological and ontological in nature, that emphasise different parts of the relationship between actors, knowledge and the world. Even though there have been attempts to reach greater clarification and simplification in representing complex inter-relations, for example through the use of inventories, because of the complexity of the issues, representing them in planned categories with specified variables is not as clear cut. There are other factors impinging on the process, such as the role and identity of the

researcher and the relationship between what is already accepted and taken-for-granted and what is considered as new knowledge. These have implications for the conceptualisation of the research design that is influenced by my epistemology.

Arguably, locating my research within the interpretive tradition that pays attention to analysing the various accounts and narrations that participants use to shed light on their experiences, can present us with a picture that is complex. In the past, there seems to have been an adherence to and an over-estimated attachment to the use of questionnaires and inventories. Although such methods can provide researchers with valid and general results regarding the practical aspects of students' experiences, nonetheless they often fail to pay attention to individual variations and interpretations. Such variations lie in the meanings individuals attach to understanding their experiences. Overall, students may have a positive perception and be motivated to come to university and learn. However, the ways in which they experience university is far from straightforward in terms of the effect their transitions have on their own sense of self and perception of learning. Therefore, by using a qualitative framework my research aims to provide a rich, empirical description of students' experiences of transitions as portrayed in their interactions with their communities.

3.3. Research Ethics

Since I am interested in exploring students' experiences of transitions it is important to be aware of my own values as well as how I as the researcher engage and treat individuals who may agree or disagree with my own epistemological and ontological

position. Respecting the pluralism of experiences and opinions brings to the foreground the issue of ethics in terms of what is perceived as 'right' and 'wrong'. Arguably, this process raises some ethical dilemmas relating to the nature of the relationship between researcher and participants, the amount of information disclosed to the participants and the degree of debriefing that arose during the different stages of the research (Malone, 2003, Bryman, 2004, Murphy & Dingwall, 2003). As Bryman (2004) points out, although these dilemmas cannot be resolved, going through the process made me more aware of the decisions and choices I was making.

Firstly, before I was able to carry out the research I had to make sure that my research followed the guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2004) and the ethical requirements of the University of Nottingham (see Appendix I). Having the research approved by the university's ethical Committee in 2004 meant that my research should be conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham's guidelines on ethical conduct and data protection. To ensure my research met the ethical guidelines set by the University, I arranged a meeting with the School's ethical co-ordinator where the aims of the research, suitability of consent forms, research methods, and dissemination of findings, were discussed. In other words, such a process made me aware of the need for transparency in the aims and objectives of the research, the application of appropriate and effective measures in place to ensure that the rights of the participants were protected at all times, and my ethical and moral duty to carry out the research with integrity and as objectively as possible.

Secondly, and related to the above point, there were questions such as how I should respond and treat the participants that concerned the nature of the relation between myself and the participants (Bryman, 2004). Several authors (Punch, 2000, Cohen *et al.* 2003, Robson, 2002) remind us of the inequalities in power and status between researchers and participants and the potential physical and emotional risks it can underpin. This relates to the kind of research environment I created, especially during the data collection. As I was interested in participants' learning trajectories, it was vital that I established and sustained an environment of trust, respect and support. Only in this environment the participants could feel safe enough to speak freely about issues that perhaps were sensitive or uncomfortable for them. As a result, I paid attention to the consent letter (see Appendix III), the construction of questions and the amount of information about the research and myself that I was disclosing to the participants and to the course convenors (see Appendix II). I also paid particular attention to the way I phrased and asked questions during the interview process.

Moreover, throughout the research process the participants were reminded of their right to ask questions or to avoid answering questions that they did not feel comfortable with. Overall, the students who participated in my research and those who I observed were informed of the general aims of the research. It can be suggested that the participants' willingness and decision to carry on with the research from the pilot stage through to the main data collection, acts as evidence of the nature of the relationship I had established. To increase the validity of the research and to ensure that the participants' views were accurately represented, I offered the participants a copy of their interview transcript and asked them whether they were

still in agreement with what they had said, but all of them chose not to read their interview transcripts.

Finally, another question I was concerned with related to issues such as confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the research, and anonymity that I was careful to address early on during the research process. More specifically, I assured the participants of complete confidentiality. Essentially this means that the participants were assured that access to the data collected and any other personal information would be restricted to me and my supervisors. To this end, I reassured them that tapes and transcripts would be kept locked in a drawer for a period of six years. As I will discuss later on (section 3.7) participants were selected on a volunteer participation, they were made aware that they could withdraw from the research at any point and that their withdrawal would not affect their student rights. In terms of assuring their anonymity, it was important to mask the identity and any other personal data of the participants so that it would not be possible for the University, or its staff and students to recognise them. However, I was aware that participants' factual information in terms of degree, year of study and disability could not be fully anonymised. I compensated for this by changing their names using English pseudonyms since they were all reading for courses in the University of Nottingham. In addition, participants were informed about the dissemination of findings. They were aware that the findings would be primarily part of the PhD thesis.

Bryman (2004) alerts researchers to the issue of informed consent. Before the interviews I explained to the participants the aims of the research and asked the students who had agreed to participate to sign the consent letter (see Appendix III). All the participants that took part in the study did so. Besides conducting individual interviews I also observed a couple of modules. Even though I was aware that I was asking for a whole class rather than an individual to consent, such consent was verbally agreed. In addition, the presence of the lecturer who introduced me to the students may have influenced their decision to agree to participate in the study, even though I clearly informed the students of the aims of the research along with the opportunity to raise concerns at any point of the research. Equally, my presence at the site of the research may have influenced students' behaviour, since they were aware that I was recording their actions, behaviours and other elements of their learning during their classroom interactions with their peers and lecturers. In addition, before carrying out my observations, the module convenors were informed. The aims of the research were clearly outlined to them both in an e-mail as well as in a one-to-one meeting.

In this section, I have argued that carrying out a research project is not a clear cut process as I, as the researcher, faced some ethical questions regarding the disclosure of information about the study, the nature of the relationship between myself, as the researcher, and the participants, and the handling of the data. As part of the interpretive tradition, there were inevitable conceptual and practical changes that resulted from carrying out the research as I was becoming more familiar with the participants' views and experiences. The manner in which I have represented and constructed the participants' accounts is open to interpretation. This means that there

is not one representation of truth or reality, as researchers are part of the sociocultural environment within which they are operating. Indeed this tradition can inform researchers about the whys and hows of peoples' actions and in this way it allows us to expand on the theories that attempt to explain such behaviours.

3.4. Rationale for my research approach

In the previous section, I have examined the ethical questions within which the choices and decisions I made are situated. These questions arose partly from the philosophical position within which I have situated my research. This choice is based on the strong links between the chosen epistemology and methodology. In this section, I present the rationale behind the research approach chosen. This rationale relates to the model that I have developed in chapter 2 (section 2.3). The model prompts us to consider certain questions regarding the inter-relations between individual students and communities. These questions concern the possible effect of the status of the institution, for example if it is a traditional or a new university on the type of student population. My research is located within the University of Nottingham.

I previously argued (chapter 1, section 1.3.1) that the University of Nottingham is an old university with a long history of research and an international reputation. I consider that understanding the participants' experiences at Nottingham lies in the construction of meanings found in their day-to-day interactions within the various communities at the university. These interactions explore the intricacies of practices and ideas that students are confronted with as individuals and when working together

as a group, and the ways in which these are articulated and shaped when interacting with the various communities at university. Such intricacies, I believe to be part of an ongoing process of negotiation, reflection, and transformation of the self in relation to the demands about the construction of knowledge and being a student at university. Therefore, the use of qualitative research addresses the similarities as well as the 'idiosyncrasies' (Miller & Glassner, 2004) of individual students. I argue that the ways within which the participants are likely to experience university are dependent upon a number of factors that partly stem from the formation of their identities as individuals and partly from their interactions with others during their study at university. In addition, by situating these interactions within the university and the relevant departments and disciplines, I explore their role and influence on my participants' experiences of learning.

To enable the relational similarities and differences of the participants to emerge as they interact with their various communities at university, I have chosen a qualitative approach focusing on undergraduate students' experiences of learning at the University of Nottingham. Whilst they are studying at Nottingham, individual students carry with them experiences of learning and knowledge as practiced in a variety of contexts within and outside the university that can, in turn, influence the way they see themselves while at university. When I write of interactions I refer to students' interactions with the various communities such as disciplines, departments and classrooms as well as interactions in other social settings within the university. In addition within these communities I also consider their interactions with peers, lecturers and other university staff. These interactions are not limited to the specific context, for example, the classroom or the module, but rather they are open to

include interactions with their discipline or with other disciplines. It seems, therefore, reasonable to suggest that during their interactions with their communities, students will be confronted with various practices and ideas. These might influence their beliefs, perceptual frameworks and conceptions of learning at university. They also might influence the way they see their role and their identities at university, changes which I refer to as part of their transitions. I suggest that by presenting students' experiences as a series of transitions, it can allow us to examine the way that students cope with such changes.

To sum up, the reasons for choosing a qualitative approach relate to the research questions:

1. How do undergraduate students' backgrounds and individual experiences influence their perceptions of learning?
2. What is the nature of the students' transitions?
3. What factors affect or have affected individuals' perceptions of learning and of their transitions?
4. How do communities influence constructions of learning at university?

These research questions draw on my own experiences of being a student, my perceptions of undergraduate students' experiences at university and the reading of the literature. I use also the research questions to bring together three interlinked aspects. The first aspect addresses the effect of students' goals and aspirations as

formed by past experiences, on perceptions of learning before entry to HE (Research Question 1). The second aspect looks at students' experiences in terms of the transitions that they have to work through, negotiate and resolve as they interact with the various HE communities (Research Questions 2 & 3). And finally, the third aspect involves exploring the range of communities that students might encounter and their role on identity formation, perceptions of learning, and relationships within these communities (Research Question 4).

3.5. Adopting a case study framework

In the previous section, I have outlined the application of the interpretive approach to address and explore the participants' perceptions, meanings and practices as these are enacted in the various communities, paying particular attention to their experiences at the University of Nottingham. This position asserts the importance of interactions between students and communities and the ways in which these affect experiences of learning at university, at individual and collective levels. Consequently, I have situated such interactions within a case study framework that aims to unravel the nature of these interactions. At an individual level, I pay attention to the research participants' formations of their identity, perceptions of learning and their impact during their course of study at university. The nature of these interactions, the influences they exert upon students, in relation to learning, and the roles they occupy within the various communities, are particular for each student, even though there may be some degree of similarity between students. In addition, I do not view students as separated from the social world, but as part of it. Therefore, at the collective level, I explore the research participants' memberships with various communities in terms of their interactions with their peers, academic staff and with

the structures of the university. So, embedded within the individual case studies, are changes that derive from a student's individual trajectory and their subsequent developments through studying at university.

A case study is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1994, p. 23). It is a bounded entity restricted to the issues, dimensions and complexities that the selected methods bring to the surface and allows the researcher to interpret, make connections between and establish underlying relationships between the domains within the case: the respondents, the settings and the outcomes. “It aims to study in an open and flexible manner social action in its natural setting as it takes place in the form of communication or interaction and as interpreted by the respondents” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 193). It can be seen as a study on a single case such as an individual, an object or ‘a methodology’ (Merriam, 1988, cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 61). The researcher can either place the case within a specific environment or within the wider context. Furthermore it can be “single or collective, multi-sited or within-site, focused on a case or an issue” (Creswell, 1998, p. 62).

It follows that what is considered the unit of analysis of the research will have implications to the design of the case study. For example, if the focus is within the case in itself then the case is characterised as ‘single’ Creswell (1998) or what Stake (1998) defines as ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’. By ‘intrinsic case study’ Stake

(1998) refers to the researcher's interest in understanding a particular phenomenon for its own sake, whereas by 'instrumental case study', he refers to the researcher's interest in a case based on a phenomenon or a theory that is linked to the case. In other words, for both the intrinsic and the instrumental case studies, the study is built within the case or 'within-site'. In contrast, the 'collective' or 'comparative' case (Punch, 2000) refers to more than one case aiming to find out more about the external factors that are linked to the case. As such, it can take place within and across cases and it can be 'multi-sited'.

My reason for choosing a case study framework motivated by my aim to explore and unpick the complexity that emerges, when exploring and understanding the variations in students' experiences of learning. More specifically, my research concentrates on interactions and relations between individual students and the various communities. I explore the ways in which interactions and relations affect students' participations, experiences, and roles within their communities. Therefore, my case's unit of analysis is the way individual students experience, work through and adjust to changes at personal and academic level and their influences on their identity and engagement with their communities. By locating their experiences and the subsequent external and internal changes within a variety of communities, I explore the ways in which a student's current and developing identity shape experiences of learning and is shaped by the communities' practices and discourses. In other words, I am focusing on understanding the way that students cope with changes that result from their participation in various communities. As a result, one of the aims of my research is to develop a theoretical model that brings all the different elements of studying together.

To sum up, in this section I have outlined my understanding of a case study and the reasons for adopting a case study framework. I have identified the unit of analysis in the research that relates to the transitions model and the aims of the research. This is important because it locates the research within a specific context and acknowledges the boundaries of this positioning for the research and the researched. By exploring the ways in which the research participants reflect on the influence of such interactions, I explore the impact of these on the participants’ decisions, formations and shifts. Having established the reasons for locating the research within a case study framework, the next aspect of the research concerns the methods I used to facilitate and allow for understanding of student experiences to occur. The research methods I employed are presented in the following section.

3.6. The Research Methods

In this section, I will firstly provide justifications for the way in which my research methods are appropriate for answering my research questions developed through my conceptual model. Then, I will discuss in greater detail the methods that I used to collect the data, namely semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation.

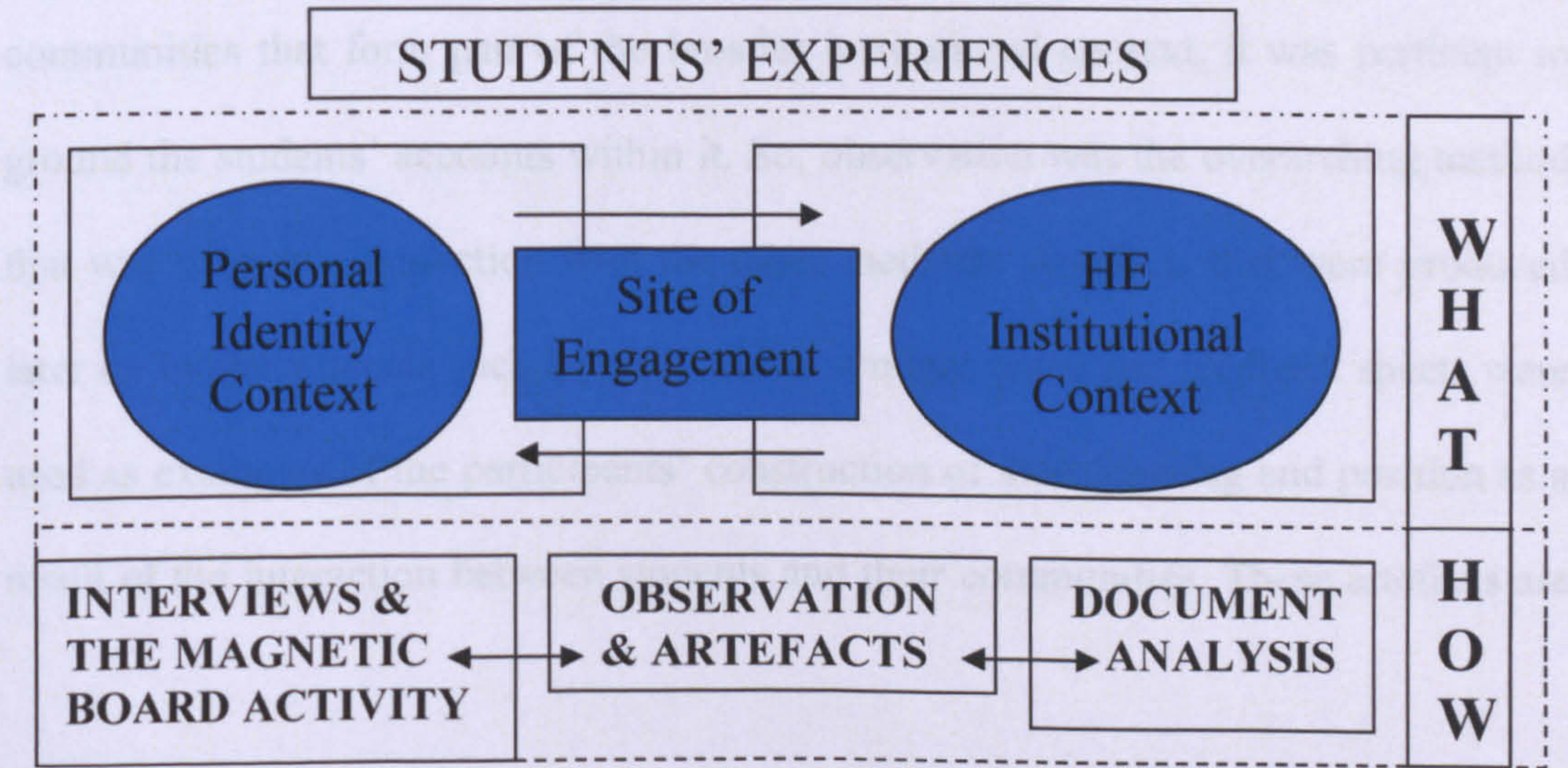


Figure 3.1 Combination of the research methods during data collection

Figure 3.1 shows how my research methods support data collection for the different elements of my conceptual model. The conceptual element refers to the ‘what’ of the research or in other words the ‘personal identity context’, the ‘HE institutional context’ and the ‘site of engagement’ aspects of the model. The research methods refer to the ‘how’ of the research or in other words the ways through which I have explored each of the conceptual elements of the model. More specifically, the ‘personal identity context’ refers to the students’ accounts of their experiences as reflected in the use of interviews and the magnetic board activity. The ‘HE institutional context’ refers to the various communities that students encounter at university, which I consider to influence students’ accounts. In order to explore the range and role of communities I used various formal documents such as mission statements, university policies, course, and module handbooks. Finally, the ‘site of engagement’ refers to the ways that the other two contexts can often be present in the interactions between students and their respective communities.

Since I situate students’ experiences and perceptions of learning within their subject communities that form part of the broader institutional context, it was pertinent to ground the students’ accounts within it. So, observation was the overarching method that was used in conjunction with the other methods. Artefacts that were produced later on by the students such as essay notes, seminar notes and feedback sheets were used as examples of the participants’ construction of their learning and position as a result of the interaction between students and their communities. These artefacts are

treated as informal documents and thus are subjective to the agenda, aims, and scope of their authors, which emphasises the synthesis between the subjective (agenda) and the objective (aims and scope as outlined for example by module assessment criteria). This stresses the nature of the interaction in terms of knowledge and skills. The two-way arrows indicate that I do not perceive each of the research methods as separated from each other, but rather as interlinked.

3.6.1. Interviews

In this section, I will present the different types of interviews and justify the selection of using individual semi-structured interviews that link to the transitions model. I will then describe the role of the social environment before finally discussing the aims of the interview schedule.

The interview has been described as a ‘conversation’ that is “initiated by the interviewer for the specific purposes of obtaining research-relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation” (Cannel & Kahn, cited in Robson, 1993, p. 229). Cannel & Kahn draw our attention to the characteristics of the interview that they perceive as being driven by the researcher’s aim in analysing and examining the interviewee’s responses whilst placing them into the specific context in which they occur. More recently, Murphy & Dingwall (2003) expand this view by drawing our attention to the way that the context can influence the claims made. Rather than claiming to understand participants’ reality, the authors stress the need to examine the positioning of different ideologies and the way these are contextualised in terms of

what people do and say. Equally, Miller & Glassner (2004) argue that interviews can be deceptive when they are interpreted as “representative of some ‘truth’ in the world ... [as] they are context specific, invented, if you will, to fit the demands of the interactive context of the interview” (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 125, see also Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). This is not to say that the content and value of the data gathered should be discounted, but rather it alerts the researcher to the issue of authenticity and quality of accounts.

There are different types of interviews (Patton, 1980, cited in Punch, 2000). The framework of the structured interview is thought through and planned in advance, leaving no room for the researcher to add any complementary questions during the interview. The disadvantage of this type of interview is that even careful planning might leave ‘gaps’. The semi-structured interview is more flexible, allowing the researcher to add and modify the interview schedule as the interview progresses. It enables the researcher to ask additional questions or to clarify meanings. The researcher “is free to modify their order based upon her perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the ‘conversation’ (Robson, 1993, p. 231). For this research I carried out individual semi-structured interviews. By using individual semi-structured interview methods, there is the opportunity and the choice to expand, clarify and ask additional questions based on the participant’s story that will allow for a deeper and better understanding of the participant’s experiences. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were tape-recorded. The interviews lasted between one to two-hours.

The reason for using this kind of interview rests on the transitions model, especially in relation to the personal identity context and the site of engagement aspects of the model (see chapter 2, section 2.3). Building up a sense of dialogue and trust whereby participants could talk freely during the interview about their experiences was important in “provid[ing] insights into the narratives they use to describe the meanings of their social world” (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 134). This consequently mirrors the interpretive and social process whereby stories are not transmitted, but rather are co-created and meanings are communicated. In the interpretive tradition, the interviewee is an active constructor and communicator of knowledge with his/her own views (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004).

This links to the nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Building trust and familiarity with the participants allowed me to approach sensitive issues such as parental divorce, bullying and difficult relationships, as well as to allow space for expressions of possible misunderstandings of meanings between myself and the participants. In addition, there were negotiations regarding the time and place of each interview to allow for convenience for myself and each participant. With regard to time, where possible, I conducted two sets of interviews. The location of the interviews varied to meet the needs of the participants. For example, for the two students with disabilities, the interview took place at their halls of residence. For the rest of the participants, the first interview was conducted in their respective departments whilst the second interview took place in a private room in the library.

The two sets of interviews differed in nature and in aim. In the first set (see Table 3.1) the interview was more ‘biographical’ in nature to allow for reflections of accounts and conceptual frameworks (see Appendix IV). In this sense, narrative accounts allowed me to start building a picture of the nature of the interactions and transitions between students and communities, which are contextualised and part of a long-term process (Wetherell & Maybin, 1997). Life-histories can themselves be seen as involving transitions, as the writer reconstructs events and issues where the focal point is not static, but depends on where the individual is positioned at the time.

The timing of the interview was not the same for all the participants. The first interview for the participants that I recruited in the pilot study was at the end of their first year. The participants that I have recruited during the main data collection were interviewed 2 months after they started their second year. This influenced their responses as for some the interview was more reflective since they were recollecting their experiences. Sarantakos (1998) makes this point when he states that, “During the story-telling step the respondent offers a complete reconstruction ... of a certain topic ...” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 253), within which the respondent can unfold the link between the past and the present and reconstruct as they recall and remember it. The responses of the group that had their first interview in the second year consisted of a mixture of reflection of past events and more recent events. Table 3.1 below presents the interview questions and their aims and the patterns that started to emerge.

Interview Questions	Aims of the interview	Emerging patterns
Prior experiences at secondary and tertiary education; Personal goals	To situate participants' self images in relation to their personal aspirations and the role of family	Information about individual's backgrounds and experiences
Influences of family and school ethos to going to university	To examine the role of the participants' identity constructions and their interactions within their school communities	Role of compulsory education
Decisions and choices about pre-entry to university	To explore choice of degree and going to university	Going to university
Perceptions of University in terms of learning, teachers, and social interactions	To investigate participants' perceptions of learning during their first year at university	Learning and Teaching at university
Changes in self-image and perceptions of learning at university	To tease out the type and role of the communities in participants' development and experiences of learning	Reflections on the experience of being a student at university

Table 3.1 An Outline of the aims of the first interview schedule

As I have argued, the aim of the first set of interview questions was to explore participants' past experiences and constructions of conceptual frameworks based on the participants' reflections at the time of the interview. In addition to this aim, I was also interested in understanding students' experiences while at university in terms of progression, conceptions of learning and the meanings they attach to these experiences.

Therefore, I conducted a follow-up interview (see Appendix V). Once more, the timings of the follow-up interview varied. For the students I recruited during the pilot stage (see section 3.7), the follow-up interview took place 4-6 months after their first one, whilst for the students I recruited during the main data collection took place after 2-4 months. For both the aim of the follow-up interview was to draw upon the issues that were raised in the first interview and explore them in relation to their experiences at university beyond their first initial encounter (see Table 3.2). Table 3.2 shows the follow up interview questions, their aims and the patterns that began to emerge.

Follow-up Interview Questions	Aims of follow-up interview questions	Emerging patterns
Reflections on first year; and learning within their modules	To explore the process of module selection and its influence on participants' interactions with their communities	Choice of module
Aim of specific learning episodes and participants' expectations of them	To explore the way(s) in which their participation in their communities influences participants' understanding of learning at university	Interactions within the classroom
Aim of and approach to specific tasks and practices	To examine the nature of and influence of the various tasks and practices on participants' interactions with their communities	Learning approaches and strategies
Cognitive and social aspects of learning	To analyse the ways through which participants construct their identity and interact within their communities	Constructions of learning and roles within and outside the classroom

Table 3.2 An outline of the aims of the follow-up interview schedule

At the heart of the follow-up questions, aims and patterns are the way through which students' interactions with their communities can influence their experiences of learning and their self-regard. In the research, I perceive interactions as depicting internal and external changes that are associated with perceptions and constructions of learning and being a student at university. I do not view learning as a straightforward process, but rather as a process that implies becoming familiar with, negotiating, balancing, and synthesising different ideas and practices. Some of these practices might be unfamiliar for individuals who have little or no experience of HE. Therefore, underpinning the aims of the follow-up interview was firstly to explore the nature and characteristics of the student transitions, and secondly, to explore the range and role of communities that students can encounter, and their influence in practice on students' experiences at university.

In conjunction with the interview, I presented each participant with a board of magnetic hexagonal pieces. The first piece is a representation of the 'Self' in its physical essence and as such is placed at the centre. The rest of the pieces represent factors relating to the question asked for example factors that have influenced the research participants' perceptions of learning at university and are placed at various distances from the 'Self'. The aim is to place them in relative proximity to the 'Self' in order to represent their perceived significance. The value attached is indicated (see Appendices VI and VII for examples of the use of the magnetic board).

This method is illuminating for three reasons: firstly, the focal point is shifted from the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, to the participant. The

participant is free to construct and prioritise the concepts that are considered as important. Secondly, it was a useful indicator of the strategies used by the student when approaching a task with some participants being more verbal and going through the significance of each factor or grouping them all together and then disseminating them. Through this reflection a better and deeper understanding of the information given in the interview is gained, highlighting the key factors of high importance to the interviewees in relation to what seems to be important to them, be it people, resources or events, while studying at university. I used the data from this activity to further explore and situate the nature of the participants' experiences during the follow-up interview. This is a significant part of the research as it highlights the type of context that was described as influential on the participant's construction of meaning making. And thirdly, as the aim of the research is to present a more holistic picture of students' experiences at university, I used it as a tool to allow the participants to reflect on their previous experiences in relation to their current experiences. Through this it is possible to highlight perceptions, tasks or people that participants thought had played an influential role in their development.

To sum up, in this section I have presented the use of individual semi-structured interviews. I conducted two sets of interviews. Firstly, I wanted to explore the nature of participants' past experiences, conceptual frameworks and the extent to which these affect students' perceptions of their roles and of learning within the HE institutional context. Thus, the first interview schedule is more biographical in nature. In the follow-up interview schedule, I consider interactions between participants and their communities, and the ways in which they influence participants' constructions of their identity and participation in their communities,

the discourses used and the opportunities available to them. As such, the aim of the second interview schedule is to highlight the nature of the interactions at personal and social level. The interviews were complemented by the use of a magnetic board exercise.

3.6.2. Observations

Much research inquiry involves some kind of observation into examining a variety of human aspects of behaviour and interaction in an attempt to identify, interpret and analyse actions and perceptions. On this level, it allows research to be carried out in the most natural way (Punch, 2000, Silverman, 2004, Robson, 1993, 2002), observing not only the behaviour or the actions of the research participants at an individual level, but more importantly the ways that these are situated and enacted within the institutional context. In addition, it supports the observation of the ways in which these are shaping participants' development, relations, interactions and shifts. Besides the students' roles and position in this context, I was interested in exploring the nature of the social environment, whether a lecture or a seminar, in terms of its effect on the participants' participations and interactions.

In conjunction with the interviewing process, I observed two undergraduate modules within one academic year: one in the first semester and one in the second semester. The modules I chose to observe rested on the modules taken by the participants I had interviewed during the pilot study (see section 3.7). In each of the modules, I observed students during both lectures and seminars. Although there was only one lecture group, there were different seminar groups. The seminar groups I chose to

observe depended on the ones that the participants were taking. Overall, I observed 10 lectures and 10 seminars for each module. There were variations between the modules in terms of the time, duration and location for lectures and seminars. For the first module, the lectures were weekly one-hour sessions taking place in the school of Psychology, whereas in the School of History the seminars were two-hours long and took place every fortnight. For the second module in the second semester there were 10 one-hour long lectures and 10 one-hour long seminars. Both lectures and seminars were taking place in the School of History.

Since I did not want to influence the interaction between the participants and their respective modules, I was restricted to the confinements of being a 'non-participant observer' (Silverman, 2004, Murphy & Dingwall, 2003, Sarantakos, 1998). In other words, I did not participate in any of the group discussions occurring in the seminars, but rather I was taking notes regarding the structure, aims, content and function of the specific module, whilst paying attention to the ways in which the participants were interacting with their context. During their seminars the participants often had to take part in group discussions. Gaining closer access, however, to such group discussions was limited due to the nature of my role, which restricted the degree of my immersion whilst I was observing. As such, participants could not be interviewed whilst they were being observed. Rather the aim of the observation was to provide a descriptive picture of the interactions taking place 'within site' or between the participants and their peers or lecturer within that particular module. Although I recorded each of the classroom observations in a field diary, which formed part of the data I collected, I did not devise an observation grid. Rather, the observation

notes were based on the issues that the participants had raised during the first part of their interviews.

After each observation, I went through the field diary and I added my own reflections, thoughts, questions and ideas of the module I had observed. Creating and maintaining a data logbook where a series of evidence is reported in terms of personal reflections, questions and frameworks, is pertinent (Sarantakos, 1998). The observations complemented the interview data in two ways. Firstly, I used the data I had collected from the first interviews to guide the observations of some of the participants who were reading for the module I was observing. Therefore, the observations provided me with a context to situate students' earlier interview accounts. And secondly, the observations helped me to construct the questions for the follow up interview schedule, the aim of which, as I previously mentioned, is grounded in the nature of interactions between students' and their subject communities.

The observations supplemented the overall data I collected by providing evidence relating to the ways that perceptions and meanings about learning are enacted in practice as well as the degree of interactions between individuals and communities, and the epistemological and ontological changes that such interactions are likely to present individuals with. Observations thus provided me with evidence relating to research questions 3 and 4 (section 3.3). In considering the factors that affected the process of learning and transitions – research question 3 – data from observations pointed to the importance of factors such as mode of learning, learning tasks, and

assessment (for a detailed analysis, see chapter 4, section 4.3.3). Also considering the various communities that students are likely to encounter during their course of study – research question 4 – I questioned the nature, role and direction of these communities on influencing students' epistemological and ontological shifts (for a detailed analysis see chapter 4, section 4.3.4).

In this section I have presented the rationale for using observation, which was to understand the nature of interactions between students' and their communities, how knowledge and practice becomes validated, and the challenges and changes it presents for students. Since I was a non-participant observer my observations within site, which were based on early findings from the first part of the interview data, were descriptive and thus helped me to locate and contextualise participants' reflections and accounts of their experiences within their respective communities. I used data collected from observation to ground the questions I asked in the second set of the interviews. On the whole, the observations added to the data because they allowed me to contextualise the stories of the participants during the interview process. Additionally, they provided me with documents such as module handbooks, power point presentations and information about learning activities that allowed me to evidence the ways that learning was structured in these particular communities. Finally, they enabled me to ask questions regarding the nature of interactions and the ways individuals perceived and used these interactions, highlighting thus the complex interplay between the personal identity, the HE institutional context and the site of engagement aspects of the conceptual model.

3.6.3. Document Analysis

Organisations such as businesses, companies and educational institutions produce and use written records that enable both insiders and outsiders to form an overall picture of the aims, objectives and procedures of their work and to prepare themselves for audits and inspections (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, Bryman, 2004, Murphy & Dingwall, 2003). Such records are not static, but are amended and negotiated reflecting the organisation as situated within an ongoing process of development:

These are all among the techniques and resources that are employed to create versions of reality and self-representations. Over and above these institutional documents there are also documentary records that embody individual actions, interactions and encounters (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, p. 57).

Formal documents outline the ways in which an organisation constructs reality. They cannot be treated as objective facts or reality, but rather as representations of the lived experiences and the procedures according to which the particular organisation functions. They do not depict one reality, but are part of that reality. "They often enshrine a distinctive documentary level of social reality. They have their own conventions that inform their production and circulation. ... Documents are used and exchanged as part of social interaction, for instance" (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, p. 59). Whilst here the authors highlight the nature of documents, a further distinction can be made in relation to formal and informal documents. Arguably both types of documents represent different versions of reality as perceived collectively for

example, course objectives or mission statements and individually for example, diaries or essay notes. In describing document realities, Atkinson & Coffey (2004) talk about 'distinctive levels of representation' indicating the selective focus and particularity of documents.

In my research, documents, whether informal or formal, offer an interpretation of the institutional reality as articulated in the interactions between individuals such as students, lecturers, and support staff. Their interpretation might be particular to meet the needs of the specific subject community, such as course handbooks or seminar presentations. In addition, they are part of a general HE reality indicating the openness and interactive nature of systems and communities. For example, a course handbook is part of practices and discourses of the specific discipline, subject matter, department and individuals. It is also part of the specific institution. Therefore, I consider the use of documents to emphasise the nature of interaction within the broader institutional context and between disciplines, departments and individuals. By relevant documents I am referring to course documents, for example, course handbooks and course handouts, governmental reports, and institutional documents, such as module handbooks, policies and strategies of the University of Nottingham. Such documents express the complexity and influential role of the institutional context in the formation and practice of learning at university.

While observing the modules, I collected various formal documents relating to the specific course, such as the module handbook, individual handouts or power point presentations. These provided me with the modules' framework, which I regard to be

part of the way that learning is constructed within the participants' modules. This framework consists of aims, objectives, skills and assessment criteria that the participants are asked to demonstrate either during the module or by the end of the module. In addition, during the interview process some of the participants brought along informal documents, such as essay notes, notes from various reading sources and feedback sheets regarding their assignment. These documents that the participants used as examples to answer some of the interview questions about their understanding of their learning tasks, presented me with a distinctively different view which is subjective in nature since it reflected individual participant's experiences. I suggest that this aspect of learning in terms of trying to make sense between individual perceptions and module's requirements is one of the aims of my research. As a result, I was beginning to form a picture of the way the participants made sense of the formalised learning as depicted through formal documents and the ways in which these were perceived and brought together by the participants in the form of their own work.

The use of formal and informal documents is significant in my research since it allows me to develop a rich understanding of what being a student at university means in practice which is part of the third and fourth research questions (section 3.3). These questions explore the influential role of the various HE communities in relation to the learning activities such as group and individual presentations and assessment practices that form part of the written records for the two specific modules I observed. These can influence students' engagement with learning at university. The use of official documents such as mission statements, teaching and learning strategies, and module handbooks as well as the participants' informal

documents for example, individual presentations and lecture notes, provided me with a better insight into each module's organisation and structure from the perspective of the specific community and the individual student.

3.7. The pilot study

In this section I will briefly outline the importance of carrying out a pilot study and how it contributed to the development of the main study.

Carrying out the pilot study before the main fieldwork I consider, on reflection, to be essential for selecting and developing the methods I was going to use for the main data collection. It contributed conceptually and methodologically to the development of the main data collection. In addition, during the pilot study I started recruiting the students that were going to participate in my research.

More specifically, in the pilot study, I observed part of a postgraduate module that was taking place in the summer as part of a summer school programme operating at the University of Nottingham. As the module had started before I carried out the pilot study, I was only able to observe the last two days of the particular course. Before starting the observations, I had gained access to the course convenor, the lecturer and the students. The students that took the particular module I observed were all postgraduates, but diverse in terms of their gender, ethnicity, nationality and professional roles. As it became obvious through my observations, the students were explicitly asked to draw from their professional experiences and use their experiences within the classroom. Moreover, the format of the course was different

than traditional undergraduate modules in that the students were there for the whole day. In addition, the course combined aspects of lectures and seminar discussions when the students were working in small groups on a number of tasks created by the lecturer.

The aim of the observation related to the nature of my role and the degree of my involvement in students' interactions with their peers and the lecturer. In other words, it allowed me to reflect on whether I would be a participant or non-participant observer and the barriers these placed on the exploration of the research topic. More specifically, within that course when students were working together in small groups, I was confronted with the question of where I would position myself and whether I would pay attention to one or more groups. During this particular module, in order to avoid causing any unnecessary disruption, I decided to observe one group and sit at the same table as the group I was observing. One of the group members asked my opinion concerning the task they were dealing with. After replying to the question that was put to me, another student in that group expressed vocally her objections to my overt participation with the group. Her objections related to the nature and aim of my presence and its influence on the way the members of the group interacted with each other. Her reaction allowed me to reconsider a number of issues such as the type of observation I had chosen to do, the influence my role had on the participants and the implications for the research process.

I decided not to include the data I collected from this observation for two reasons. Firstly, the aim of this observation was to evaluate the use of this research method

and the potential shortfalls I would need to address before the main data collection. And secondly, this was a postgraduate summer school and my research aims to explore undergraduate students' experiences of learning at university.

Another aim of the pilot study was to recruit and interview participants for my study. For this reason, I thought it important not only to observe an undergraduate module, but also to recruit some undergraduate students to participate in my research. As I carried out the pilot study near the end of the second semester, most of the undergraduate modules had finished and the students were preparing for their exams. However, through emailing the convenors of modules in the Arts and Humanities, I got access to the last one hour lecture session of one undergraduate module. The aim of this observation was to recruit participants for interviewing as well as to explore the nature of this particular community as depicted in the interaction between individuals and their lecturer. At the end of the lecture, as agreed with the lecturer, along with providing the students with a handout, which explained the aims of the research, I verbally explained the research in more detail and asked for volunteers to participate in the study in terms of being interviewed. One student (Jim) agreed to participate in the study and be interviewed. In addition, I recruited and interviewed the remaining six undergraduate participants through emailing the information sheet to some of the tutors who agreed to give me access to their exam revision classes (see Table 3.3).

Students	Age	Research Stage	First Interview (x1)	Total	Transitions
Evren	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (May 2004), Year 1	1	From Northern Cyprus to UK
Jim	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (May 2004), Year 2	1	From Year 1 to Year 2
Lisa	21	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (June 2004), Year 1	1	From taking a gap year to university
Lucy	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (June 2004), Year 1	1	From taking a gap year to university
Michael	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (June 2004), Year 1	1	From work to university
Sarasi	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (June 2004), Year 1	1	From college to university
Steve	20	Pilot stage	Semester 2 (May 2004), Year 1	1	From taking a gap year to university

Table 3.3 Information about the research participants during the pilot stage

The table above includes information about the participants that I recruited during the pilot stage. All the participants, apart from Jim who was in his second year, were in their first year at the time of the interview. Although all the participants were interviewed once, the timings of the interview varied. Half of the participants were interviewed in May and the other half in June. In addition, as it emerged during the interview process, the students experienced different transitions before coming to university, such as taking gap years, changing countries, and contexts. As I was interested in the way that the participants reflected on their experiences before coming to University and during their first year at university, I decided to include the data I collected from the pilot study. It was important that I was able to contextualise the stories of the participants that I had already recruited and interviewed. In other words, the pilot study allowed an initial establishment of some cases. Therefore, these were included and developed further in depth in the main study. In addition, the pilot study provided a model for developing the research methods from the main study.

On the whole, going through the pilot study, although time consuming, was rewarding as it raised some interesting questions that I needed to consider before carrying out the main data collection. These questions concern the influence of my presence during the modules I was planning to observe; the methods, which were most appropriate to explore the questions I was raising in terms of the type and role of transitions and communities on students' experiences of learning at university; questions about ethics and access; and the format of the information I was presenting to participants. In other words, carrying out the pilot study made me realise the differences between 'research on paper' and 'real life research' (Robson, 2002).

Additionally, it allowed me to recruit the students that were going to participate in my research. By observing and interviewing participants, the case study approach emerged out of the pilot study. In addition, concepts and themes began to emerge that revealed the complexity of the process in terms of formation of questions, data collection, analysis, interpretation and role of the researcher.

3.8. Research setting and participants

3.8.1. Selection of the setting and the participants

Literature in terms of student experiences of learning at university has pointed to the importance of the characteristics of the university which is seen in terms of institutional policies and procedures, the distinction between 'old' and 'new' universities, and response to governmental documents. Particular attention to both governmental documents and research studies has paid attention to the choice of university. In particular, it has been argued that the choices a particular group of students, who have been described as 'non traditional', make are classed, gendered, and raced (Reay *et al.* 2005, Ball *et al.* 2002, Bowl, 2001, Thomas, 2002), which in turn influence their experiences in HE. In this section I will go through the processes I selected the University, the discipline and the research participants that took part in my study.

Punch (2000) mentions selection of sampling in terms of institution and participants, timing, location and access, as issues that need to be considered before setting up the research methods. Through using criteria such as status and tradition of the university (in terms of 'old' and 'new'), geographical location, reputation, and access

I selected the University of Nottingham in which to carry out the research. I selected the University of Nottingham because it was easy and convenient to recruit participants since I was a student at the University. In addition, as I outlined previously (see chapter 1, section 1.3.1) the University is claimed to attract a typical student population, but I was more interested in the diversity of the students (in terms of age, gender, social class, nationality, and students with disabilities) and how these can impact on students' experiences of transitions.

The criteria I used to select the participants were based on two factors. Firstly, disciplinary characteristics in terms of the nature of the discipline were important. Since my own discipline is in Arts and Humanities, I felt this familiarity would allow me to understand their accounts better. I did not, however, select students from the School of Education since I felt that I could be perceived by the students as an expert because of my background. Also, I did not select students from science based disciplines, because of my lack of knowledge about the subject matter. Secondly, students were selected based on the nature of their degree (undergraduate students) and structural characteristics such gender, age, and disability, as these can influence the ways in which the participants experience learning at university.

Having established the criteria for the participants' selection, I recruited the students by attending exam support sessions, activities offered by the academic support staff, and emailing heads of the Schools of Arts and Humanities. I recruited the 2 disabled students in the study by attending the 'Headstart project' organised by the Academic Support office. This project under the banner of widening access and participation

offered 8 students with different disabilities, such as students with visual or hearing disabilities, learning disabilities or students with mobility difficulties, to start the term a week in advance. The project aimed to provide academic and social orientation for students with disabilities through existing students who acted as mentors and buddies. In participating in this project myself, by acting as a buddy – two of the students with disabilities agreed to participate in the research.

As I described previously (Table 3.3) I recruited 7 students during the pilot study. However 3 students (Evren, Jim, and Steve) dropped out after the pilot stage. The remaining 4 students (Lisa, Lucy, Michael, and Sarasi) agreed to take part in the main study. During the main study I recruited 5 more students (Baris, Becky, John, Rose and Sam). In total I followed 9 students who were diverse in their age, gender, type of degree (Table 3.4 below).

Students	Age	Degree	Key Characteristics
Baris	18	Business & E-commerce	Overseas
Becky	18	Classics & Archaeology	Visually impaired
John	20	History and German	Visually impaired
Lisa	21	History and Latin	Gap year
Lucy	20	History	Gap year
Michael	20	History	University transfer
Rose	36	Psychology	Mature student
Sam	20	History	Gap year
Sarasi	20	History	Ethnicity

Table 3.4 Information about the research participants

This table shows the diversity amongst the participants in terms of gender, age, and degree. I have previously stated that the majority of the participants, besides Rose and Baris, were enrolled in courses in the Arts and the Humanities. I recruited Rose through a student who was studying one of the history modules I was observing. Baris, who was studying in the Business department, was a friend of Evren who participated in the pilot study, but later decided to drop out of the study. Their key characteristics point to the way in which their diversity is likely to influence the way

they experience learning at university. Such characteristics refer to information relating to access, disability, nationality, ethnicity and progression from FE to HE (these will be explored in more detail in chapter 4, section 4.2).

I have changed the name for the 8 out of the 10 participants and used pseudonyms, which I have selected on the basis that they are students in an English university. For two of the participants, namely Baris and Sarasi, I have chosen pseudonyms that reflect their nationality as during their interviews it emerged that their ethnicity was part of the broader context that played a role in the way they constructed their identity and perceptual frameworks. Inherent in the decision to use pseudonyms are some ethical dilemmas, which I discussed earlier (section 3.3). Besides the diversity in students' age, gender, and type of degree, there are additional factors that might have influenced the construction of their accounts, such as the range of transitions that they went through which appeared to further add to the process of being a student at university (see Table 3.5).

Students	Research Stage	First Interview (x1)	Follow up Interview (x1)	Total	Transitions
Baris	Main	Semester 1 (February 2005), Year 1	Semester 2 (May 2005), Year 2	2	From college in the USA to university in the UK
Becky	Main	Semester 1 (March 2005), Year 1	Unable to contact her	1	From college to university
John	Main	Semester 1 (February 2005), Year 1	Deferred second year	1	From gap year to university
Lisa	Main	<i>Semester 2</i> <i>(June 2004),</i> <i>Year 1</i>	Semester 2 (March 2005), Year 2	2	From Year 1 to Year 2
Lucy	Main	<i>Semester 2</i> <i>(June 2004),</i> <i>Year 1</i>	Semester 1 (January 2005), Year 2	2	From Year 1 to Year 2
Michael	Main	<i>Semester 2</i> <i>(June 2004),</i> <i>Year 1</i>	Semester 1 (November 2004), Year 2	2	From Year 1 to Year 2

Rose	Main	Semester 1 (February 2005), Year 1	Deferred second year	1	From working full- time and studying part-time at college to being a full- time university student
Sam	Main	Semester 1 (November 2004), Year 2	Semester 2 (May 2005), Year 2	2	From Semester 1 to Semester 2 in Year 2
Sarasi	Main	<i>Semester 2</i> <i>(June 2004),</i> <i>Year 1</i>	Semester 2 (February 2005), Year 2	2	From Year 1 to Year 2

Table 3.5 Information about recruitment and data collection

This table shows details regarding the stage at which the participants were recruited, the interview timings and the number of times the students were interviewed, and the range of transitions they experienced. There is variation not only in the timings of

the interviews, but also in the number of times the participants were interviewed. As I discussed previously (section 3.7) 4 of the participants that I recruited during the pilot study agreed to take part in the main study. I have provided in italics the timings of the first interview for these participants. On the whole, 8 out of the 9 students who participated in my research were in their first year. Only Sam was interviewed while in his second year at university. Similarly, 5 out of the 9 students were in their second year during the follow up interview. Besides Baris who was in his first year during the follow up interview, I was unable to interview 3 of the participants (Becky, John, and Rose) for the second time. Two of them (John and Rose) deferred their second year and one (Becky) did not want to participate in the research further. It is important to take such variations into account especially when contrasting between their experiences and learning trajectories as a group.

This is especially the case in relation to the range of transitions the students went through. Moreover, as the aim of my research is to explore the interactions between students and learning at university, it is possible that such variations may have influenced their responses. Even though these unanticipated variations will impact the data and subsequent data analysis, it is important to take into account that such changes are part of doing qualitative research. In addition, such variations added depth when analysing between each case, although my intention was not to compare the cases, but to unpick the subtleties and complexities in each case.

3.8.2. Access

Before carrying out the research it was important that the research was aligned with the codes of practice outlined in the School of Education as well as following the ethical guidelines as set by educational research associations such as BERA (see section 3.3). I regard access as being twofold in nature. Firstly, there is the official access through the university staff. The criteria that I applied for the selection of the department were linked to the pilot study. Since I decided that a) I would include the undergraduate participants from the pilot study, and b) the majority were reading for the same degree (History), choosing that school seemed to be the best option. Secondly, there was the informal, but equally important, access permission from all the students taking the modules I was observing. As I previously discussed (see section 3.3) it was important to ensure that all the students had given me their consent for observing their learning interactions in these modules. With regard to departmental access, a detailed letter (see Appendix II) was sent to all the module convenors. Further verbal information was provided to the module convenors who had agreed to grant me access to observing their modules.

3.8.3. Limitations beyond the scope of this research

Before discussing my role in the research it is important to acknowledge the limitations such as access, time management and implementation of the research schedule and dealing with students who dropped out during the pilot study that I encountered in carrying out this study. Presenting the limitations here is necessary because they have influenced the analysis of the data in terms of what is included and what is omitted.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, considerable effort needed to be paid regarding access and time at all stages in the research. The time spent in negotiating access with the participants who agreed to take part in my study was an important part of this process. Time was crucial to the quality and depth of the data since it created inconsistencies regarding the data collected. For example, the aim was to follow students' progression from one year to the next or within one year. However, because of delays in accessing modules and students, it meant that the type of transitions each participant went through (see Table 3.5) during data collection varied.

In terms of the interview process, the aim was that all participants would be interviewed at least twice. Due to the workload of their degree, some of the students who had initially agreed to take part in the research and had been interviewed once, dropped out from the study. I decided not to include the data gathered in the overall research, because as it was their decision to withdraw from the study, I did not feel it was right or ethical for me to use the information they provided. In addition, as I discussed earlier (section 3.8.1, Table 3.4) I was unable to interview all participants at the same time or twice as I hoped to. This was due to changes in some of the students' personal circumstances (two of the four students deferred their course at the time I was carrying out my main data collection), as well as respecting participants' privacy after some of them did not reply to emails.

3.9. Role of the researcher

In the research I had more than one role. I was the researcher and the designer of the research tools. In addition, my previous role as a teacher was evident not only in the data collection, but also during the interpretation and analysis of the data. This alerted me to way in which I placed myself in terms of what I included and excluded in the analysis as well as to the way in which I became part of the thesis. I actively located myself within various learning communities with contextual and structural features similar to those I researched. As such, my presence, background characteristics, biases and agenda influenced the way that the research process was conducted and the way in which I analysed the students' experiences. The way that the story was collected and presented by me as the researcher was restricted to the aspects that I wanted to focus on. Others may interpret it in a different way (Wallace *et al.* 1998, Riessman, 2002) thereby reflecting the perception of reality and truth not as homogeneous but rather heavily dependent on the research process.

My identity, aim and scope of the research are pertinent to the quality and amount of data collected. These include the degree to which my identity and the aim of the research was open to all, some or none of the participants; the extent to which I was a participant or a non-participant to the data collection and subsequent interpretation; and "what the orientation of the researcher is" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 111). With regard to my orientation, in some of the modules the process varied with the lecturer knowing in advance my role, aim and scope of the research. Therefore this process was negotiated between the lecturer and me. In addition, not all of the students might have been present at the beginning of the first lecture when I introduced myself. The degree of their awareness and clarifications about my role

and identity was crucial in the interactions during the learning process. In some modules, because of the familiarity and consistency of my presence I was treated by the students as a participant and I was being asked questions about the nature of the topic and the learning activity, whilst in others I was seen as a non-participant.

Miller *et al.* (2004) alert the researcher to the social distance between the interviewer and the interviewee in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, status and its influence on the kind of information revealed or withheld within the course of the interview. Besides, awareness of the subjective nature of the interaction and the relationship between the context and its actors contributes towards and underpins the formation of accounts, knowledge and reality. The ways in which these are enacted within the interview context are part of what the research is aiming to highlight. This is emphasised by Miller & Glassner (2004) who argue that: “Knowledge of social worlds emerges from the achievement of intersubjective depth and mutual understandings” (p. 133). The creation of an environment in which familiarity, trust, acceptance, and the freedom to ‘talk back’ (Miller & Glassner, 2004) are in place further enables the emergence of such knowledge.

3.10. Stages of data analysis

This section will provide information about data analysis and interpretation which followed distinct but interlinked stages. During all the stages of data analysis, my aim was to become familiar with all the data I collected from early on and look for patterns across and within the cases. This means that the way I analysed the data was grounded within a circle of idea generation, planning, collection, analysis,

interpretation and evaluation that fed to and form part of each stage of the data analysis. In order to allow for the findings to emerge I started to present the stories of the participants in the format of case profiles. The stories were firstly constructed in relation to the main time periods that seem to run within each case and were later contrasted across all the five cases.

As I have argued previously, the issue of eliciting in-depth accounts of the learning process has been presented along with the difficulties that highlight the essence and trade-offs of adopting a qualitative framework (Murphy & Dingwall, 2003, Punch, 2000, Bryman, 2004). Since my chosen framework is situated within a naturalistic setting depicting rich and complex cases, these cases could be analysed and interpreted using a variety of techniques. "There is variety in techniques because there are different questions to be addressed and different versions of social reality that can be elaborated" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 14, cited in Punch, 2000, p. 199). This upholds the notion that as a qualitative researcher you cannot know what the research process will reveal.

Indeed, Miller *et al.* (2004) suggest that: "Qualitative researchers approach settings or phenomena without assuming that they know in advance what will turn out to be important" (p. 329). In other words, even though I had an idea of what I was looking for based on the aims of the research, during the data collection these evolved further as I began to explore the participants' views and beliefs about their learning experiences. In fact this is part of doing qualitative research, as there can be many different conceptions that can be classified as learning, but in my research I paid

attention to the nature of interactions between students and the HE communities and the tensions that such interactions can imply. This contextualisation was pertinent, and in line with the interpretive tradition, as it allowed me to situate their experiences within their social world, in this case the various communities at university. Denzin (2002) states that: "Contextualisation locates the phenomenon in the personal biographies and the social environments of the persons being studied" (p. 359). This means that the methods of data collection and analysis were not seen as separate but as interlinked.

Essential in this analysis process is the criticality and reflexivity of the researcher, as there is a variety of meanings and perceptions of reality and knowledge. Such variations found in myself, as the researcher, and the participants further emphasise the complexity in understanding the learners' experiences. This follows Holstein & Gubrium (2004) who note: "Qualitative inquiry's analytic pendulum is constantly in motion" (p. 483). Indeed, when analysing the data one must consider the data generated across all the methods whilst going backwards and forwards rather than taking each method on its own. This process is essential not only in terms of the final stage of interpretation when all data has been collected, but most importantly throughout the research process. This means that accounts and therefore realities are co-constructed based on the researcher's and participants' agendas, perceptions, beliefs and intentions. In this sense, it was crucial that before the analysis started I was aware of my own ideas and values, before being able to explore the perceptions of the participants. My own views look at students' experiences as situated in their social contexts, and thereby linking their previous experiences of learning with their current experiences at being a student at university. This synthesis along with its

positive and negative consequences lies at the heart of their transitions and the meanings these have for each student. As a result, my aim is not to examine whether students' accounts are true or not, but rather to explore their experiences in depth through illuminating the intricacies, particularities and the complex nature of the process.

When I gathered all the data together, from the pilot study and the main data collection, I ended up with a large amount of data in terms of transcripts, field notes, and documents. The data includes:

- observation notes from two undergraduate modules;
- the interview transcripts of 9 participants along with photocopies of some of the participants' magnetic board representations;
- documents I collected from different sources, such as lectures and seminars in terms of course handbooks, handouts and power point presentations. In addition, during the interview process some of the participants brought along examples of their work in the form of lecture and seminar notes, diagrams and notes they made from reading books, and assignment feedback sheets.

In order to analyse the data, I used Yin's (1994, cited in Tellis, 1997, p. 9) four principles as a framework:

- Show that the analysis relied on all the relevant evidence

- Include all the major rival interpretations in the analysis
- Address the most significant aspects of the case study
- Use the researcher's prior, expert knowledge to further the analysis

I have divided the process into 3 stages of analysis. Stage 1 refers to the initial overview of the data. Stage 2 refers to the further analysis of the data that led to the narrowing of categories into themes that are grounded in the data. And Stage 3 describes the final formulation of sub-themes according to which I discussed the findings of the thesis (chapter 4, section 4.3).

Stage 1 – an initial overview of the data

Although data was collected at different points during the pilot study and the main data collection, it was essential that the analysis and the collection of the data happened at the same time, as it allowed me to develop an increasing understanding of my data. This overlap between data collection and data analysis is highlighted by Glaser & Strauss (1997, also Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Murphy & Dingwall, 2003, and Cohen *et al.* 2003) who see the process of data collection and analysis as a joint one. Posing questions such as ‘What am I learning?’ and “How does this case differ from the last?” (Eisenhardt, 2002, p. 15) allowed me to familiarise myself with the data. For this reason I conducted a preliminary analysis of the data I collected from the pilot study, such as interview transcripts, documents and observation notes. I applied this ongoing content analysis on each piece of data in order to tease out emerging or interesting points, which were then followed up in the main data collection.

With regard to carrying an ongoing content analysis, after I conducted each interview, my aim was to transcribe it as soon as I could while the 'conversation' was fresh in my mind. After I transcribed the interview, I went through each transcript making notes in the margins and looking for early patterns or questions that seemed to run through it. I then compared the notes I made with the ones I made during the observations and documents I collected from the modules I observed. I repeated the process for the subsequent data I collected during the pilot study and the main data collection. I then re-read the transcripts looking for similarities and differences in the stories of the participants. This process led me to the development of broad categories that allowed me to build an initial picture of the data as a whole. However, as I was still gathering data, I was careful not to draw any preliminary conclusions stemming from my own beliefs and assumptions that would jeopardise the research process.

Stage 2 – developing the categories into themes

Having decided to start the analysis of the data at an early stage and constructed initial categories, I was then concerned with the type of questions that I was asking myself when analysing the data further. These were: what types of transitions a student can go through? What are the characteristics of such process? So an important aspect of this part of the analysis was to construct an initial picture of what a student's learning trajectory might look like. Through reading each student's transcript I started picking out the headings, such as 'compulsory education', 'going to university', and 'going to work' that appeared to appear across all the cases.

Another question concerned developing a rich understanding of what being a student at university means. In other words, I wanted to explore the range of the different communities that a student can encounter while at university and their influence on students' accounts of learning. For this reason, I used the formal documents I collected along with my observation notes of the two modules to build up a picture of the specific and broader institutional context that can influence students' experiences of learning. In addition, such data allowed me to situate students' interview accounts against the backdrop of formalised learning as depicted in module handbooks. In addition, the observation of the two modules allowed me to explore the way that meanings and practices were negotiated during their classroom interactions.

Although both of these questions allowed me to familiarise myself further with the data and to build up initial transitions trajectories of individual students, it did not allow for the further analysis of these concepts beyond a superficial categorisation of what appeared to be important either for individuals or for the institution. Therefore, the next step was to look at each case in relation to the nature of interactions between students and communities and the ways in which these can influence their experiences at university. For this reason, I used students' magnetic board representations to further pick out the way that students perceived their role at university, the challenges they faced, and the tools they used, be it people, material resources or perceptual frameworks, to make sense of learning at university. In other words, combining the way students talked about themselves (in the interviews) along with their picture drawings (use of magnetic board) and how their perceptions of roles and self-image were embodied in practice (use of formal documents) allowed

me to present a balanced picture of the data analysis without overplaying the negative or positive dimensions of students' experiences of transitions. This highlights Yin's second principle of data analysis.

In this way I wanted to move away from presenting a simplistic and homogeneous picture of their experiences by providing a list of categories. Rather, I was interested in highlighting events and behaviours that would explore the intricacies, subtleties, and changes this can have for the individual student in terms of their self-regard and social relations. I depicted them in terms of how they were understood, applied and constructed as 'real' for the participants whilst interacting with their particular communities. In order to achieve this I used students' informal documents such as lecture and seminar notes and my observation notes. I wanted to firstly contextualise each case individually, to find out what events, behaviours and incidents signified to the people involved and then examine them in relation to inter-cases (the collective or institutional context) in the form of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategies and mission statements.

Stage 3 – Forming specific sub-themes

As I was collecting data from the different sources – interview transcripts, documents and field notes - I developed my data analysis in further depth in order to get a first sense of the data at an individual level (intra-cases) and a collective level (inter-cases). An initial reading of the data revealed emergent categories. As these were getting too broad and difficult to manage manually, I needed a tool to help me with the process of organising and narrowing them down. I used the computer

package, NVivo, to analyse and collate the themes from all data into the specific sub-themes that formed part of this stage of the analysis (Table 3.6 below).

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
Demographics	Gender	Structural factors (e.g.
	Age	disability)
	Ethnicity	
	Nationality	
Individual Characteristics	Personal development	Personal goals (e.g.
	Feelings	travelling)
Compulsory Education	Type of school	Significant groups (e.g.
	Role of family	teachers)
	Role of teachers	
	School culture	
Transitions	Transitions as progression	External changes (e.g.
	Transitions as changes	changing countries)
	within	Internal processes (e.g.
	Transitions as	changes in confidence)
	epistemological and	Step-changes (e.g.
	ontological shifts	dependent vs. independent)
Learning	Learning at school	Types of knowledge

	<div>Learning at work</div> <div>Learning at university</div> <div>Social learning</div>	
Influences on the construction of learning	<div>School and class size</div> <div>Teachers and teaching style</div> <div>Assessment</div> <div>Language</div> <div>Perceptions and expectations</div> <div>Motivation</div>	<div>Modes of learning (e.g. lectures and seminars)</div> <div>Learning tasks (e.g. essays)</div> <div>Assessment (e.g. learning outcomes)</div>
University	<div>Sources of support</div> <div>Learning and Teaching</div> <div>Peer interactions</div>	<div>Academic communities (e.g. support networks)</div> <div>Module-specific communities (e.g. students and lecturers)</div> <div>Student communities (e.g. inside the classroom)</div>

Table 3.6 Developing categories and themes during the stages of analysis

Table 3.6 presents an overall picture of the initial categories, generic themes, and specific sub-themes that emerged from each data analysis stage. It is important to

note that the data analysis was gradual and increased in depth, and was not confined to the last stage of analysis but rather reflects the patterns and categories that emerged throughout all three stages of the analysis. As the analysis of the data was going on, the initial categories I derived from my first reading of the data (stage 1) were narrowed down to more specific themes (stage 2) that eventually led to specific sub-themes that could be applied to the individual participants as well as when looking at their cases collectively (stage 3). The specific sub-themes that I constructed during the last stage of the analysis formed the framework for presenting the findings in the next chapter (chapter 4, section 4.3) In addition, the dotted lines in the table indicate that the data analysis stages were interconnected and building on each stage.

3.11. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the methodological framework of my research. I have first considered the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of previous research frameworks and the way I positioned myself in these debates.

I have discussed the research design I adopted and how that related to the aim of my research, which is to explore the nature of students' experiences at university in terms of their interactions within various HE communities. As a result, I located my research within a case study framework to explore the similarities and intricacies between intra-cases and inter-cases.

Following a pilot study I explored students' experiences and interactions at university, within a qualitative framework that focuses on the use of semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and documents. Next, I have provided information about the participants and the institution in which I collected data and have discussed the arising issues of access and unforeseen constraints during the data collection. These have been discussed along with considerations of my own values, ethics and role in the research process. Finally, in the last section I have presented the way I analysed the data I collected by describing each of the stages of analysis and how I used and analysed each of the research methods.

Having discussed the methodological underpinnings of the study, in the next chapter I will present the findings of the research.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 3, I presented the research methodology. In this chapter I will analyse the data I collected and present the findings of the thesis. I will firstly provide a detailed description of the learning trajectories of five of the participants. I will present their stories as case studies, which will enable the reader to follow their experiences and contextualise them within their narrative contexts. This will also allow me to look in depth at how these students cope with the changes they are confronted with and examine the issues that seem to be highlighted by each of them.

Overall I will argue that their experiences can be seen as part of the way in which individual students engage with the HE institutional context. By analysing further the range of their transitions, and the effect that these have on their identity and learning, I will show how the process of becoming a student at university is relational, situational, and part of a web of complex interactions. This is important because it provides us with a set of tools that allow us to explore the similarities and differences between their stories in different contexts. The analysis is based on combining different sets of data through a 3-stage analytical content analysis as described in Chapter 3 (section 3.10). I will use this analysis to explore further the similarities and differences in research participants' perceptions and understandings of the transitions they go through during their learning journeys.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part (section 4.2) I will provide a detailed description of the trajectories of five students in the form of case studies. In the second part (section 4.3) I will analyse the findings from the case studies. Finally, in section 4.4, I will provide a summary of the findings from all the cases before concluding the chapter.

4.2. Case Studies: Students' Trajectories

As I discussed previously (chapter 3, section 3.8) nine students agreed to take part in my research. In this section I will present in detail the learning journeys of five out of the nine participants. When choosing the participants who will form the individual cases, my selection was based on two factors. Firstly, I wanted to ensure that all the case studies could be seen as representing elements that were described as important by all the students who participated in my study. Secondly, I wanted to provide an in-depth analysis of individual student's trajectories that would allow identifying and describing similarities and differences in relation to their personal characteristics, their experiences, the communities they engaged in, and their transitions. In other words, I did not want to focus on extreme or opposite cases, but rather to present a holistic picture.

So the participants I chose are Baris, John, Michael, Lucy and Rose. In choosing which participants I was going to focus on, my criteria rested on the diversity of the students (such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class and disability), year of study and degree, and related experiences of transitions. I will now describe the trajectories of each participant according to the stages identified through the data analysis. These

stages are specific to each individual, but also share key components which will become clear from the description and analysis of the different trajectories.

4.2.1 – Baris's Learning Journey

Baris is an 18 year old international student reading for business and computer science. He has completed the first year of his degree. After he finishes his degree he wants to continue his academic career and study for either a Master's degree or a PhD in the USA.

Compulsory education

When asked about his compulsory education in Northern Cyprus, Baris began by locating his education as part of the social community. He went to the same public primary school as everyone else in his town. Although he said he did not find the learning particularly motivating, he emphasised the influence of the school's headmaster on his academic development:

He had a big influence on me in like showing, in that little age [...] we have a path to choose. (Interview 1)

Baris described the influence his headmaster exerted on him by providing him with direction, encouragement and support. Influenced by his headmaster's help and his own goal of continuing his studies in the USA, he passed the entrance exams and attended the only secondary school in the country that was following the English

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curriculum. During college, he chose to specialise in physics and computer science. When asked about the choice of his subjects, he reported that he knew what he wanted to achieve and was looking for the best ways to achieve his personal targets.

In terms of going to university, it appears that this was an automatic decision for Baris since he saw university as helping him to achieve his personal goals. Baris expressed his determination not only to go to university, but to a university in the USA. Through discussions with his physics teacher, with whom he maintained a close relationship throughout his compulsory education, Baris was aware that in the USA he would have to attend college first before going to university.

Going to college in the USA

Baris went on to describe his experiences of moving from Cyprus to the USA in terms of the social, academic and overall educational philosophies, across the two educational systems. He began by outlining the similarities between the two systems by concentrating on the social aspect of his experiences. He pointed out that the small size of the college, which catered for 1200 students from mixed geographical backgrounds, enabled him to get to know the other students and feel comfortable within the college environment. He also identified the support he got from his lecturers as another factor that enabled him to become familiar with his environment. This was expressed in his description of the classroom interaction between his lecturers and himself:

If I did not understand anything, they [the lecturers] were like 'I am sorry, let me think of another way of telling you'. I was shocked. You could see them and go to their offices and stuff. I felt he is not any higher than me. He is at the same level. (Interview 1)

Baris noted that he did not expect the lecturers to be as approachable and respond to the students' needs in this manner, especially when some of them were of a high status. Additionally, he described the variety in the module activities ranging from presentations, group projects, individual research projects, to essays and quizzes. In order to meet the various tasks, he spent a lot of time in his classes. As such Baris felt that his learning was more collaborative than independent, which motivated him to become more involved. As a result, he felt there was a great deal of support from his fellow classmates, the teachers and the environment as a whole:

When they saw you, that you want to learn, they helped you and said 'we are here to help you to learn, not to give you to learn something'.

(Interview 1)

Baris became aware that this particular level of 'support' was also reflected in the college ethos to learning interactions, particularly between students and teachers. He pointed out that interaction amongst teachers and students was a key element, and extended outside the classroom environment. Further, he felt that the group discussions assisted him to expand his learning and develop his critical thinking, by exploring different views and perceptions. In such an environment, Baris noted a

sense of competition amongst the students. Although he described all the students as being motivated and encouraged to learn, he saw a considerable difference in the level of skills and abilities amongst the students, which challenged him further, to better himself.

Baris also pointed out the differences in teaching and learning between the two countries, Cyprus and the USA, and the impact these differences had on his understanding of being a student at university. Even though Baris perceived his experiences at the college as usefully scaffolding his learning, he did not, however, feel that his experiences provided him with the freedom and flexibility he was used to, which made him reflect on and question the value of learning from different sources. He particularly distinguished between learning by studying, which he referred to as 'hard core' and learning by travelling:

Studying the hard core and not having the chance to go anywhere in America, maybe I would in the following years, but for the time I was thinking 'is it worth it or not?' (Interview 1)

While he reported that the college was supporting and encouraging students to learn, Baris considered this approach as clashing with his perceptions of learning. He described learning as the combination of learning from the academic community and from outside the university environment. Baris said that he perceived the social aspects of learning in terms of being valued and establishing good relationships as important for his development. He said that the college did not meet his needs and

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after completing his first year, Baris decided to transfer to a university in the UK. He knew the area he wanted to specialise in, and after selecting the top universities in his area, he chose to go to the University of Nottingham. In justifying his decision, Baris repeated the importance of being exposed to different sources of learning within and outside the university environment.

Baris described how his decision to transfer back to the UK was met with resistance from his immediate environment, such as family, friends and teachers. They all emphasised the difference in status between the two countries and the subsequent implications such a transfer would have for his career. Baris stated that he was aware of their concerns, but he felt it was important to him to return to what he thought would meet his personal aspirations of travelling and learning within the classroom and by talking to other students.

The first year at university

When talking about his first year at university, Baris contrasted his experiences of teaching and learning at the USA with those at Nottingham. He pointed out the differences in teaching between the two institutions:

Here [Nottingham] to be honest, I don't think they [the teachers] are teaching us. They come to the class, they put on some slides, which I think they are 5 years old [...] I mean I can do that myself, get a book, go to my room and read it. (Interview 1)

During his first year at Nottingham, he found that the majority of his lecturers tended to reiterate what was in the provided course reading list. Perhaps being influenced by his experiences at the college, he did not consider this style of teaching as useful, especially when resources, were available, whether these were teachers, books or other colleagues. He described most of his teachers from the US college as experts in their fields and also interested in challenging and supporting his learning as reflected in the level of their expertise and the resources they were using. However, he felt the close proximity and the long hours he spent in the classroom at college to hinder his independence and freedom of learning and thinking.

When asked to give an example of an ideal scenario of what he considered as a 'good' teaching session, Baris emphasised the importance of the teacher's clarity of information, transfer of knowledge and the use of a variety of examples. He also acknowledged the importance of subject knowledge, especially in modules where he did not feel he knew enough about the subject area. In these modules, he expected the lecturer to make the unfamiliar familiar by focusing on areas or concepts he did not understand. For Baris this was the essence of learning at university:

Understanding about things that I did not know, acquiring new knowledge about something so that you could go to the next level [...] gaining more insight into the world. (Interview 1)

When elaborating further on what he meant by learning he described it as having the following characteristics: 'understanding', 'acquiring new knowledge', and 'gaining

insight'. During the interview it became evident that for Baris learning was seen as a developmental process that combined the theoretical and practical applications of learning. He said he preferred this kind of learning, rather than doing group projects where he had to negotiate and manage learning as part of the group dynamics.

During the second interview, Baris was half way through the second semester of his first year. When asked if he found any differences between the two semesters, he noted he felt more comfortable and familiar with his surroundings in terms of the structure of the teaching and learning, the environment and the expectations.

In terms of the teaching, he said he approached lectures and seminars in different ways. He admitted that during lectures he still expected the teacher to provide him with an overview of the key theoretical concepts, and to situate them, using practical examples that would enable him to make the connections between the theory and the wider context. Baris went on to explain that the aim of the seminars was different in that they focused and teased out the 'real' elements of the module, which he previously identified as crucial in learning at university:

We had two seminars and they were the case studies of real, important issues and I think they helped us to understand a lot better in the module. (Interview 2)

In describing the role of the student and the lecturer, he saw it in quite clear ways. The lecturer would provide him with a framework which he, as the student, would

then use as a starting point to extract the information that he thought as relevant to his learning. Baris mentioned reading as an important element in enabling the interaction between the student and the lecturer. He initially admitted that reading before the class was an integrative aspect of the freedom and autonomy he spoke about previously. However, there seemed to be a dissonance between his perceptions and actions:

I didn't study for the things we did in the lectures until the seminars so I have been to one of the seminars and it was like, I am lost. I don't know what I can talk about because I don't know the subject.

(Interview 2)

Baris's feeling of being 'lost' (because he did not do the reading in advance) placed him at the periphery of his interaction with his module-specific community. This position could be a result of his awareness that the first year's results did not contribute to his degree or his perceptions of the role of his teachers. However, he pointed out that whilst this approach was sufficient for his first year, he needed to change it in his second year by being more 'organised':

If I am organised I can do a lot more things like [...] I can process more and learn and understand easily the whole thing rather than rushing and doing everything the last minute [...] I would like to concentrate on what I like, not what the Prof or whoever wants me to learn. (Interview 2)

Interestingly, in this quote, Baris seems to add another layer to his perception of learning. While previously he talked about the difference between learning within and outside university, in this instance he perceived his interaction within the classroom in terms of being self-directed and following his interests, which appear to be aspects of learning that are important for Baris. This perception of seeing learning as a synthesis between his personal capabilities and the social environment was reflected in data collected from the magnetic board activity (see Appendix VI).

In this drawing Baris seems to describe learning as an amalgamation of different elements. Firstly, he described the importance of various resources such as those that result from the module-specific community ('writing' and 'Computer Science' modules), and outside it ('library' and 'internet'). Secondly, he paid attention to the resources within the wider institutional context (high school teacher and friends at college). And thirdly, his personal interest (travelling) and approach to learning (visualisation), appear to be factors that he said to perceive as important, although they are placed at a further distance from him on the magnetic board.

When asked to describe the learning environment in relation to his modules, Baris focused on the nature of the learning tasks and in particular the value of group projects. He contrasted the changes in his learning style when working with other people. To illustrate his point, he used the example of working on two different group projects. During the first group project, he explained how his unfamiliarity with the other people in the group and the task had an impact on the perception of his learning and his self-regard. He said that rather than resolving the clashes between

the group members, the group decided to work individually. It was only in the last minute that the project came together and they worked as a group so that they could complete the task. He reported how different his experiences were, when working in the second group project for a different module. Baris emphasised the negotiation of ideas, and working together from the beginning to achieve the learning task. While he reported that on various occasions he would take the initiative and help the members in the group, he found that through helping others his learning became more assured, and contributed to a better understanding of the topic.

It seemed that for Baris the familiarity with the topic and his sense of being part of his module-specific community was revealed not only by interacting with his classmates, during group projects or seminars, but also during class. His expressed reluctance to attend lectures seemed to have implications for his linguistic understanding, as evident in the use of appropriate theoretical concepts, terms and language:

That was a bit hard to understand the language and all the details of how to use [...] and to understand the concepts and work with it.

(Interview 2)

Baris was convinced that an important part of his learning was the ability to apply, contextualise and select the learning that he felt applied to different contexts. This perception was challenged during the different learning activities. Baris noted he liked essays and individual tasks as they gave him the opportunity to take

responsibility, explore areas of interest to him and develop the framework that he thought appropriate. However, when dealing with group projects or collaborative tasks where there seemed to be conflicting interests within the group, Baris appeared to be reluctant to situate himself as part of the group where he had to accept sharing and negotiating learning with and between the members of his discipline.

To sum up, Baris's learning journey seems to involve a number of different changes. Some of these changes are external in nature in terms of moving between countries, programmes, and degrees. Other changes seem to incorporate decisions and reactions that are perhaps partly directed by his personal orientations and perceptual frameworks, and partly by his interactions with his communities within and outside the institutional settings he engages with. In some of these communities he seems to engage fully with the topic and others, while in other communities (such as some group projects) he appears to stay on the margins. The way he deals with and relates to the university environment as evidenced by the range of positions he takes in his subject communities, suggests somewhat ambivalent positions where he moves between being at the core and placing himself on the periphery of his different communities. These changing levels of community membership seem to illustrate his perceptions of his learning and what and who helps him to learn remain in flux and are due to both personal choices and preferences as well as group-factors such as group composition, membership and interactions.

4.2.2 – John's Learning Journey

John is 20 years old, from the UK, reading History and German. He is in his first year. He is visually impaired. When he finishes his degree he wants to work for the BBC.

Compulsory education

When John began talking about his experiences of compulsory education, he focused on the impact his disability had on the choice of schools. He joined his mainstream primary school, but found it academically and socially challenging. In explaining this aspect of his experiences in more detail, he noted that the school was not prepared or equipped to deal with his disability:

They [the school] did not know how to deal with me as a person. For example, my special needs assistant would either molly-coddle me and take me round and do everything for me, or she would pretend not to be there and actually be there watching me [...] and I was not integrated with the students effectively. (Interview 1)

Lack of staff training in Braille and awareness of his disability, were reported by John as important obstacles to his inclusion and sense of confidence. Although he noted that the teaching at his primary school gave him the grounding he needed in terms of knowledge and academic skills, he said his social and personal exclusion impinged on his overall education. He said he would be excluded from lessons,

which seemed to have an impact on his self-perception and understanding of his disability:

I felt that it was my fault a lot more than it actually was and I did not really talk to my mum or anyone else about what was going on and how I felt because of how young I was, I did not really understand why things were going as badly as they were. (Interview 1)

John pointed out the difficulties he had in understanding and dealing with his disability, developing the strategies to cope with it and how others perceived and treated him. Struggling to establish a social network within and outside the school environment and blaming himself for his reported unhappiness, he moved to a specialist school. Although he described his move to the new school as challenging, he reflected on the positive influence the knowledge of the staff had on helping him to deal with his disability at a personal and social level:

Very challenging at first because I took all my bad behaviour with me [...] but because of the better training that the staff had there, they were able to identify the causes from what I was doing. (Interview 1)

When I asked him to explain what he meant by the “better training” of the staff, John talked about the school ethos and atmosphere, the approach to learning and teaching, and staff awareness and understanding of various disabilities. As a result, he considered the school to be better equipped to meeting his personal, academic, and

social needs. He then went to distinguish between the different emphasis in learning at the two schools:

I think learning in primary school enabled me to learn in knowledge [...] but I was not really growing as a person [...] and going to [secondary] school was a positive pleasure and I found that I really do like seeking knowledge. (Interview 1)

John also realised the impact the school had on how he perceived and dealt with his disability. He pointed out the sense of belonging he felt from being socially included and part of an institutional context that understood in theory and in practice what it meant to be visually impaired:

I felt a lot safer because of course everyone was visually impaired although there was not a reason for everyone not to accept everybody else [...] but of course when everyone was there for the same reason, doing the same thing, there are no distractions and the environment is such that you could get about easily. (Interview 1)

It is possible to suggest that feeling part of the environment in terms of being able to identify with the school community as well as with the individual students, helped John to feel more comfortable with his disability, which in turn allowed him to concentrate on his academic development.

Part of developing academically was the decision to go to university. John described going to university as an automatic expectation that was embedded in the lessons:

The careers lessons in the sixth form, once you were gone into A-levels, were very much geared into the next step, which was university.

(Interview 1)

John pointed out that his school was a beacon school and the idea of pursuing A-levels and going to university was presented as essential in terms of the career pathways and choices available to students. Although he wanted to go to university, he noted his struggles in deciding what he should study at university. When asked to elaborate further on his decision-making process, he said his starting point was his personal aspirations. He knew he wanted to pursue a career in journalism and broadcasting and discussed his options with various people in the field. He noted that the outcome of these discussions was not on the choice of the subjects he would study, but rather to ensure he did a Masters afterwards.

When choosing a university, John emphasised the importance of high entry requirements, the role of the Academic Support office, and visiting the universities during open days, as factors that helped him to select between the universities he applied for. During his visits to the selected universities, he made sure that he talked to course convenors and the support services to evaluate the university's policies and services they provided for disabled students. In the end he was offered and accepted a place at the University of Nottingham.

Taking a gap year

Having been offered and having accepted a place at the University of Nottingham, John deferred his place for a year in favour of taking a gap year, which he claimed he needed in order to rescue his desire to learn and motivation to carry on at university:

I think that if I went to university then I would not be able to make the most of the opportunities and I would end up basically dropping it just through stress. I found [it] really hard to motivate myself in year 13.

(Interview 1)

During his gap year, John discovered he had to change the activities he had planned to do, as his initial plans (translating a German book, going to Germany, and getting a job) failed to materialise. So he found himself doing voluntary work, directing a play at his secondary school and assisting with the teaching of German in sixth form. Through engagement in such activities, John maintained his links with his secondary school, which further enabled him to become more involved with the school and develop as a person. He regarded such development as beneficial in terms of his confidence and social abilities.

The first year at university

Going to university meant re-integration into mainstream education and John described how daunting aspects like the physical environment, time, format of resources, and being disciplined appeared to be. This was evident during semester 1. In terms of the academic aspect of his enculturation to the university environment

and particular to his subject, in one of the modules I observed, the difficulties in coming to University were acknowledged in the first pages:

The aims of the module are therefore:

- *To encourage more effective learning in history;*
- *To bridge the transition from school or college to university;*
- *To prepare students for more advanced work, in the discipline in the later stages of the degree;*
- *To enhance the skills listed below. (Module Handbook, 2004-2005, p.1)*

It appears that learning for this module is described in terms of the acquisition of skills, abilities and competences. While it is noted that it is important to provide links with school or college, there seems to be a clear distinction between college and university. This difference is expressed not only in relation to the skills that the students are required to develop, but also to the work that they will engage in during the course of their degree, which seems to provide a specific framework for the way that learning is perceived in theory and in practice within that module.

Additionally, such learning seems to derive from an emphasis on gaining membership of various communities such as the student community, the module-specific community, and the academic community. When talking about his subject, he described his role during the seminars where he emphasised aspects such as doing

the reading in advance, voicing concerns and engaging with his fellow students as important parts of the seminar. In doing so, he also seemed to attempt to echo the notion of ‘active participation’ emphasised in the module handbook:

The learning and teaching methods employed in these modules are based on the view that the most effective way to learn history is by active participation. (Module Handbook, 2004-2005, p.2)

This was further reinforced by the assessment tasks that included essays and exams as well as group activities, independent projects and presentations. John appreciated the variety of the tasks and especially the opportunity to exchange and discuss ideas surrounding particular concepts or issues that were raised during participation in his module-specific community during exam revision:

It is nice to talk over concepts, bounce around ideas, explain things to other people, if I got that far, and also it makes it feel less work because you are talking with same minded people. (Interview 1)

John seemed to appreciate the sharing of knowledge and feeling part of the group. However, when talking about individually led tasks such as essay writing, he pointed out the difficulties this aspect of his learning presented him with. More specifically, John highlighted the importance of the format of the resources and the impact any delays had on his performance, learning and confidence:

There is a lot more to manage I think as a disabled person at university; you have to be more organised than other people because there are more stages involved in getting materials. (Interview 1)

In this excerpt, John describes the effects of his disability in practice. In the first instance, he identified the need to develop generic skills such as time management and organisation that would help him meet the demands of his course. In addition to these skills, John also pointed out the need to find ways that would enable him to work with the academic community in a manner that was effective and conducive to his learning. For example, he described how this applied to practice in the form of choosing an essay question:

Here [at university] I have to pick an essay title that sounds interesting, get materials photocopied and talk to academic support ... by the time they have done all that there is not really much time for me to change my mind so picking an essay title it is much more of a gamble. (Interview 1)

John reported a much greater need for monitoring the relationship between his own needs and that of the various people he needed to contact to ensure that the process of learning, in terms of resources and developing his skills was done on time. However, this was not always possible, leading to a sense of frustration in terms of the limitations of the level of adjustment required:

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It is more about how the system works and how I can work within that system. It is all about organisation, self-discipline and time management. (Interview 1)

It would appear that becoming familiar with the standards required by the academic community in terms of the format of resources and working with the support services to achieve this, was part of John's learning that was different to the experiences of the mainstream student group. Managing such a co-ordination as well as developing a sense of discipline and self-awareness seemed to imply a re-configuration of his role and self-regard:

I really need to put the brakes on to manage the time I have effectively, and to balance things, otherwise I would be swept away with one thing and neglect all the others. (Interview 1)

Time was something that John struggled with especially when preparing for presentations or planning his reading. For example, on one occasion I observed John in the library looking for reading materials for his essay. He had a note-taker with him to help him with browsing books, going through the contents and deciding whether the book was relevant or not. When I asked him about it during the interview, John described it as part of the process that he had been accustomed to since coming to university. He said he struggled to manage his time and he often felt the need to frame his learning in order to avoid going into more depth to the detriment of his other tasks.

When talking about learning, he distinguished between different types of learning:

I think it [learning] is obviously registering and retaining knowledge but I think it almost describes a way of life. It is lifelong because you are always learning but learning and growing and personal development, are very closely inter-related concepts. (Interview 1)

It appeared that for John, learning is about the importance of academic development and personal development. He noted the importance of establishing a relationship with the wider institutional context, be it the support services, the various departments and the course convenors of the specific modules he was reading for.

When I emailed John to arrange a second interview, I found out he had deferred his second year as he had not managed to submit all of his first year's essays.

4.2.3 – Michael's Learning Journey

Michael is 20 years old, from the UK and reading History. He is in the second year of his degree. He has an older brother and an older sister who have been to university. His parents have also got university degrees from prestigious universities.

Compulsory education

When asked about his experiences during compulsory education, Michael described the influence of his parents and siblings not only on the choice of school, but also on

his perception of education and the role of teachers. He said that going to the same school as his siblings made him feel more confident. In terms of the teaching, even though he said he enjoyed his learning at school, he appeared to be cynical about the education process which he felt was driven by assessment. His attitude towards learning seemed to change at A-levels:

At A-level you wanted to learn and he [the chemistry teacher] was someone who really knew his stuff. (Interview 1)

In further describing this change, Michael pointed out the difference between learning at school and A-levels, which he attributed to teachers' higher expertise, the smaller class sizes and the better relationship he had with the teachers. However, the change in the classroom structure, the detailed discussions and the generally higher expectations at A-level when compared to his earlier school experiences, also highlighted Michael's struggles about learning and self-perception. He did not regard himself as intellectually able and he considered dropping out of school. But he said that the idea of going to work did not appeal to him and he decided to carry on with his A-levels. He described the positive influence of his siblings on his decisions and he would often consult his sister about her A-level experience:

She [his sister] actually said to me that you can do well in it if you are willing to learn the stuff and do the work. (Interview 1)

Michael said that he often spoke to his siblings about their experiences as they gave him the confidence he felt he was lacking when structuring his essays and other learning tasks.

First attempt to going to university

In deciding whether to go to university or not, Michael described the role and influence of his siblings and parents. As they all had been to university, university was seen as part of a natural progression:

Because my sister [...] and brother had gone, it was the logical thing that I would go. (Interview 1)

Michael applied to a number of prestigious universities focusing mainly on the academic rather than the social profile of university. He accepted a place at the University of Manchester, but he described the lack of a social group he could identify with as negatively affecting his adjustment to university. Although he dropped out after 6 months, he said he was determined to go to university. He reapplied to universities and got offers from all of them. He said he chose Nottingham, as the close proximity to his family and friends made it a 'safer' option. During the 6 months he spent in reapplying to universities, he opted to work in a warehouse.

Going to work

He initially described working in the warehouse as an enjoyable experience. He particularly liked the social aspect of the job. He felt that meeting and interacting with people from different cultures, religion and nationalities, expanded his views about life and the world. There were also aspects of the job he did not like:

It's quite draining but it's also quite tiring because of all the physical work [...] You would not have the opportunity [to do something different], you just, you would often just go to the pub after work for drinks and stuff. (Interview 1)

Even though he claimed to be certain in his mind of the temporary status of the job, the physical demands of the job along with what he perceived as limited time for further development, seemed to further reinforce his decision to go back to university.

Attending the University of Nottingham

Going to the University of Nottingham was seen more positively, especially when he compared it to his previous university experience. In describing the university, he paid attention to the self-sufficient profile of the campus:

The campus is so, it's almost like its own little world and you can spend weeks without going off if you wanted to, you've got the halls, your food, you've got your friends around... (Interview 1)

Michael seemed to portray a picture of the university campus as a series of communities, such as the academic community, the social community, and the module-specific community. The value and impact of these various communities on his learning and personal development became apparent before the end of his first semester. Half way through his first semester, Michael described an occasion where he helped out a fellow student and friend with serious health problems. It seemed that this experience had a big impact on his perception of learning, personal development and his general perspective on life:

Before, I used to be concerned about grades a lot, I still am, actually Christmas I was quite stressed about exams, but this time so much has happened in the last 5 months that I think it put things into perspective more, actually. (Interview 1)

It seemed that for Michael helping a friend or taking part in community programmes were examples of the multifaceted nature of learning that he saw as part of his university education. When asked to elaborate on this, he made a distinction between learning instances that he saw as non-academic, such as helping a friend, and academic, such as going to lectures. He considered non-academic learning incidents

as essential since he felt they contributed more to his academic, personal and social development, than the academic learning incidents did.

In terms of academic learning, Michael expressed the important but fragmented nature of such learning. He said that advance preparation, independence, and being self-directed, were skills he needed to acquire early in his learning journey:

You are so much more relying on yourself [...] you can get notes from seminars and lectures and top those up if you can, but those essays come from ... [a] lots of wider reading. (Interview 1)

Michael portrayed this development as difficult and risky due to the considerable mismatch that he felt existed between previous perceptual frameworks and the new environment. This was especially the case with the early modules that concentrated on the philosophical and contested nature of history, which Michael found difficult to relate to and draw from his earlier knowledge. He admitted he would often lose motivation, and identified personal interest, the learning task, and the module's learning outcomes as important factors in keeping him focused and framing his learning.

Michael realised that the freedom and flexibility he was given at university, in regard to module choice or reading time, often demanded the development of a self-disciplined approach. This approach to learning became more tangible in one of his modules where the aim was on exploring the philosophical nature of history.

Although he pointed out how uneasy he felt initially with the module, towards the end he expressed the benefit of his uneasiness to developing a better understanding of the subject. More specifically, he said that the module pushed him outside of his ‘comfort zone’ by being exposed to specific and often contested terminology and ideas. Such ideas challenged him to think about his role in relation to his subject and the relevance of his beliefs and ideas with the subject matter and his community.

This became more apparent when talking about his role in lectures and seminars. Generally speaking Michael emphasised the practical side of learning where he saw coherence, structure, and being focused, as contributing to his ability to understand and engage with the subject discourse. Such discourse also seemed to demand the development of a different set of skills, to understand and make sense of the information presented:

I think it is thinking a bit more about stuff, it is questioning things, and it [is] the applying. (Interview 1)

At the end of the first interview and using the magnetic board, Michael was asked to describe how he perceived himself in relation to the academic community and the resources he felt were important to his learning (see Appendix VII).

The way Michael positioned himself in relation to his communities seemed to focus on the value of the social aspects of his module-specific communities, be it books or people in guiding his learning development and understanding of the subject.

Interestingly, there seemed to be a variation in terms of the proximity of the social aspects of his communities to his interests or priorities. For example, he appeared to regard the library, lectures and seminars, as more central to his interests than people, be it lecturers, personal tutors or friends. That could be a result of the value he seems to attach to the material resources as providing him with a more viable and valid framework to guide his learning than relying on people's opinions which could be subjected to various interpretations.

The second year at university

When talking about the second year, there was a clear emphasis on the shift from the first year, in terms of the expectations, the level of independence and the number of modules he had to attend. As a result Michael noted he had become more selective in terms of attendance and resources. Further, Michael seems to perceive the assessment practices as an indicator of the different interpretations of learning and this seemed to make him feel uneasy about his attitude to learning, as evident by the emphasis on his weaknesses:

*I always find writing essays confusing, particularly in this two modules
[...] this semester I don't really know much about the topic. Last year I
had [a] more of an understanding of the topic or it was easier to come
to it than before. (Interview 2)*

Michael's confusion with having to come to terms with different approaches and interpretations that can be subjected to particular individuals and subjects seems to

be exemplified during his interactions with his module-specific community and the learning tasks. Such interactions appear to bring to the fore feelings and questions about his self-worth. When asked to illustrate his point further, Michael used as an example one of his modules where the abstraction and lack of interest with the particular subject content made it more difficult for him to engage with the discourse and the community:

I had found that their [the two lecturers'] particular interests is very - I just don't care about the size of plots in Winchester in 1250 [...] At the same time, if you are not enjoying something you want to sit in, participate in the groups, pass the tests whatever to move on to something else. (Interview 2)

The high degree of abstraction along with his lack of interest seemed to act as a sieve through which he evaluated his engagement with the module-specific community. It seemed that the transition towards developing his sense of understanding and a learning framework carried a great deal of uncertainty and risk. In attempting to construct his approach and deal with this uncertainty, Michael referred to the relation between learning and relevance to the assessment, especially exams. His approach appeared to be guided by the emphasis he placed on 'getting it right' which made him question the validity of his learning either when taking notes or writing essays, or progressing through each module:

I suppose I am looking at it at the wrong way, that's what my parents told me, they are saying if you are arguing a case there is not a right or a wrong way as such, so maybe I should think, have more faith in myself or be more independent when it comes down to it, not please the lecturers. (Interview 2)

Michael's lack of self-esteem and confidence was reflected in his questioning and continuous searching for reassurance that he was on the right path. Instead of developing his own voice, he tried to become a member of his module-specific community by adapting to the kind of learning framework presented by each lecturer. However, the unfamiliar terminology, the depth of analysis and the style of the texts, presented Michael with new challenges which he described as follows:

...it takes hours because it is long, very obscure, academic, and mentioning terms that you have never come across before. (Interview 2)

In making sense of the subject's discourse, Michael said that he would firstly try to familiarise himself with the module's language and concepts by turning to the lecturer, whom he regarded as the main source for defining and analysing the particular concepts. Michael would then try to make sense of the module by explaining and simplifying the language used, in the same manner as the teachers did at school. Although moving away from the lecturer, and developing and practicing higher levels skills such as criticality, reasoning, and abstraction were skills that

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Michael said he was keen to develop further, he considered this aspect of his learning problematic as it is subjected to various interpretations. This hesitation extended to not trusting or using the knowledge of the other students during seminar discussions or group presentations. This was especially so when preparing for a group presentation in one of his modules:

The seminar tutor divided the class into 4 groups and each group was given a topic to debate during next class. Michael's group, after talking about the topic for a few minutes, chose to focus on three aspects of the topic. Each aspect was given to a member of the group to research, write and present. (Observation (Week 1), Year 2, Semester 1)

When Michael was asked about the process of the group presentation, he reported that the group would briefly meet during the week and they would practice the final version of their presentation the morning of the class. He pointed out that even though as a group they covered all aspects of the topic, he considered he was insufficiently prepared to answer an exam question in detail due to the lack of insufficient depth and knowledge:

... you can tell from what people are saying, you cannot be an expert on the stuff, you cannot grasp everything, you cannot grasp the nuances of the Toronto school...unless you have studied it for years.
(Interview 2)

It seemed that Michael would use the various tasks and activities set by the lecturer, as a means to situate and evaluate his learning, which in turn had an impact on his role as a student. His perception of his student identity appeared to be further divided in terms of the task in hand to that of a 'writer', 'presenter' or 'listener'. For example, while he said he felt more confident as a presenter, he noted that he often struggled with his identity as a writer especially during essays as this implied developing a more independent approach that might not be regarded as appropriate by the assessors. As a result, Michael appeared to adjust to the changes in the construction of learning by mimicking the lecturer's approach, especially when revising for exams:

I will email the course conveners and say, just to extract some information, and say that 'I was thinking of revising on these topics with these particular emphases on this one, what [do] you think?'

(Interview 2)

In exploring learning in his second year, Michael focused on the different way he perceived learning at university. On reflecting on his first year he noted the holistic and explorative nature of learning in terms of becoming more familiar with subject terminology and approaches to learning and writing. During the second interview, Michael appeared less confident of his skills and writing strategies and felt uneasy with the whole construction of learning. Although he appeared to be aware that the emphasis for this year was to developing his theoretical framework and voice, it is possible to suggest that his questioning of his abilities and knowledge was due to his

lack of confidence. Such confidence would require learning to tolerate the uncertainty in knowledge and the existence of conflicting and contested discourses. Michael appeared to find working through this learning transformation difficult.

Overall, it seems that Michael's engagement with the various communities at university brought to the fore a sense of confusion and scepticism. This could have been a result of his self-perception in relation to his skills and abilities as a novice that placed him on the margins of his interaction with his module-specific communities. It is possible that his reluctance to move away from the safety of the lecturer's position, towards seeing himself as a historian limited his engagement with the module.

4.2.4 – Lucy's Learning Journey

Lucy is 20 years old, from the UK, and is reading History. She is in her second year. For her third year she wants to study for one semester in Australia and then come back to Nottingham to complete her degree. When she graduates she would like to take up social work. She has an older sister who has also been to university.

Compulsory education

Lucy described her positive experiences in compulsory education in terms of the atmosphere, the academic and social reputation of the school and its teaching and learning. When choosing her secondary school, she said she wanted to move away from her sister:

We went to separate senior school and actually it was probably the best thing because it allowed me to develop and become the person I wanted to be. (Interview 1)

She considered this choice as giving her the freedom to construct and develop herself which had a positive impact on her learning. Although Lucy would seek her parents' support and advice, she said she wanted to be in charge of her education in choosing her school. Besides the academic environment, Lucy felt also the other students were conducive to her learning. She said that being exposed to and interacting with people who expressed a similar independent attitude towards learning, as contributed to her working harder. Through her interaction with the students and the learning environment Lucy believed she was acquiring and practicing the skills and knowledge that would further enhance her learning.

Lucy decided to stay in the same school for her A-levels. She described her interaction with the learning environment during her A-levels as being influenced by the teachers and their style. For Lucy the size of the class, and the teacher's personality and ability to engage people, were seen as important characteristics of her interaction. As such, she described learning not only as the acquisition of knowledge but developing a closer relationship with her teachers. She considered this sense of familiarity as important because it increased her knowledge of the learning community, which subsequently influenced her self-confidence:

I knew the teachers, I knew what the school system was like, I knew what was expected of me, I was happy in that environment. (Interview 1)

In terms of going to university, Lucy was aware that her school not only expected her to apply to university, but to a particular type of university:

My school was, it was very much you go to the red brick, traditional ones and not that polytechnic business. (Interview 1)

Lucy felt that through the career's office and access to information regarding universities, the school encouraged and supported her during the process of applying to universities. Although she wanted to go to university she described her uneasiness with conforming to the structured process of the application: from looking at university's prospectuses, and filling in the UCAS form, to writing a personal statement. Lucy also identified another sort of pressure, with regard to the mechanistic approach to learning in terms of the structure of the exams. She said this approach de-motivated her and had a negative impact on her self-perception. She described how she changed from being passionate and excited about learning, to becoming stressed and disheartened with the educational process. Lucy also felt there was a high value attached to getting a degree. She was aware that going to university was just the beginning, since she believed she had to top up her degree with more qualifications such as a Masters. After applying, visiting and being

offered a place at the University of Nottingham, she decided to defer her place and take a gap year.

Taking a gap year

When talking about her gap year, Lucy pointed out how important it was for her subsequent development and decision making, especially in regard to how she saw herself:

Having that gap year was quite crucial and that sorted me because should I have gone straight to university I would have been kind of like 'oh I don't want to work'. (Interview 1)

Lucy described how her gap year contributed to regaining a sense of her identity that was lost when she was at school, where she was preoccupied with being part of the school's community. She reported the need for change as expressed in deferring her place at university, which underpinned a desire to reconnect with what she wanted to do. In order to fulfil her own goals, she decided to go to Brazil (travelling) and do voluntary work (social action).

She also claimed her gap year gave her the opportunity to reflect on her experiences, and evaluate the transferability of what she had learnt by applying it to a different context. It seemed that going away, especially to an unfamiliar environment such as Brazil, enabled her to contextualise the 'value' of her compulsory education:

Going to Brazil, it is just being out of education, being away from it all made me value actually what it was, made me value how good my school ha[s] been. (Interview 1)

Lucy contrasted the two environments, school and Brazil. She appreciated the role her school played in allowing her to develop as a learner. In Brazil, she said she practiced the skills she gained from her school when interacting with a different culture and having to work as part of a team. She said that the combination of the two contexts contributed to her personal awareness and growth, as well as to finding out what she was looking for when going to university. Whilst in Brazil, Lucy reported having second thoughts about going to university, which can be seen as a need to balance her own personal aspirations with the merits of getting a degree. It appeared that when faced with the dilemma of staying in Brazil (familiar) or going to university (unfamiliar), the value of university education prevailed.

The first year at university

Lucy described going to university as an expectation from her school as well as her family. Lucy's father and sister had been to prestigious universities. As such, when she was applying to universities, Lucy reported how her family's experiences and perceptions of university and friend's knowledge of Nottingham, assisted her in building an initial picture of what university would be like before her transition.

However, it seemed that her perception of the university was coloured by the social rather than the academic aspects of university life:

For the first year the academic side, that was not the thing that bothered me. It was more the social one. (Interview 1)

In describing her first year at university Lucy focused on the challenging aspects of learning, motivation and module content. She was aware that the aim of her first year was to get a general introduction to university life in terms of the environment and the requirements of being a university student. Lucy considered her interaction with the environment as assisting her with becoming familiar with the new identity at university:

The whole ethos of learning here [at university] is very much self-taught like you are supposed to go to the library, take the books out and read the books and make notes and prepare for the seminar. (Interview 1)

With regard to learning, she contextualised her academic duties and responsibilities within a specific set of practices that she said had an impact on her participation, especially with her module-specific communities. For example, when talking about her approach to essay writing as opposed to revising for exams, there was a sense of a different kind of skills she needed to use:

When I do an essay I don't really learn it because all the papers are in front of me [...] my aim is not to learn it but my aim is to evaluate it, analyse it and assess and write about that. (Interview 1)

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When she was asked to describe her approach in more detail, she reported that she used the title along with the lecture notes and reading of texts, as her guiding tools. Although she regarded essays as being more focused than exams in terms of the level of detail and analysis required, she regarded them as also carrying a sense of uncertainty in terms of what the argument would be. She said that before starting her essay she would have a rough idea about the structure or the argument, but that would develop and change during her interactions with the essay's outcomes and the tools available to her. She reported that this interaction would enable her to situate her approach and tease out the theoretical and practical aspects of her learning. Another resource that she used to frame her learning was the tutorials and especially the feedback she got afterwards:

... [talking to the tutor] is quite useful because they will chat you through what you have done wrong and that is more useful than the handout with the comments because you know [...] what you have got to do next time to improve it. (Interview 1)

Lucy perceived the interaction with the teacher as a better tool than reading the module handbook. She said the tutor would help her gain a better understanding of the topic and develop her learning approach. Therefore, she considered it important to establish a dialogue with her tutor in order to improve her thinking, by paying attention to the areas she needed to work on. Besides the academic community, Lucy considered the value of the student community in terms of talking to people who

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were living in the halls, her seminar group and making friends with people around her university. This had an impact of her perception of learning:

I think learning is something that you do throughout your life and it expands your mind, it develops your character, it develops who you are, it develops your understanding of the world, I suppose, of the society, it gives you a more critical and analytical look of life.

(Interview 1)

Lucy saw learning in terms of developing as a professional by acquiring skills to enable her to think critically, meet deadlines, to be responsible and work as part of a team. Additionally, she emphasised the lifelong nature of learning that expanded beyond the academic field to include knowledge and skills that would assist her in her future development after she has graduated. She reported this ‘lifelong learning’ framework along with her interactions with other people and her surroundings, enabled her to feel more comfortable at university and it eased the transition to the second year.

The second year at university

In her second year Lucy reported that her perceptual framework changed in nature and in scope. This was reflected in the choice of the modules, a process she felt she had more control of. She appreciated the specialisation, focus, and depth she had to go in the modules, which she saw as part of the continuation from the first to the second year:

... [the module] kind of looks at social constructs of masculinity and it is a lot more abstract concepts that you have to get to grips with.

(Interview 2)

She also reported changes in her writing approach to reflect the higher standards and expectations of the second year. For example, she claimed she spent considerably more time in formulating a more detailed and critical argument when writing her essay. While she would use the lecture's notes as the basis for her outline, she would go in more depth by breaking down the topic into smaller parts that she thought were interesting and yielded a greater depth of analysis.

When talking about her module-specific community and how she engaged with it, she focused on how she used the various learning tasks such as group and individual presentations, debates and forums to interact with the activities and become part of her community. In exploring the nature of the interaction in more detail, she claimed to focus not only on reading and answering the prescribed questions, but more importantly on thinking about what was being said within the class and subsequent group discussions, and formulating an opinion. This was evident within the context of the seminar where she argued that her role was more involved in that:

... you are processing and digesting the information, and whilst you are discussing ideas you are not only cement[ing] your understanding in your head but you are actually start[ing] to formulate your own ideas.

(Interview 2)

Lucy described the benefit of the student community when talking to her classmates within and outside the classroom, which she used as a resource that added to the development of her ideas. For example, when elaborating on the role of the student community, Lucy referred to the positive influence of the seminar group, especially in exploring, negotiating and explaining ideas from different perspectives. It appeared that social participation played an important part in developing her voice and skills and thus allowing her to become more involved with her specific-module community and with the discourse (history).

Another aspect that Lucy expressed as assisting her to becoming part of the module-specific community was the role of the lecturer and the type of resources the lecturers would use to present the overall picture and structure her knowledge:

I guess maps are quite useful because you can see where everything is and you can picture them in your mind [...] I remember the photos are quite distinctive and because I remember that I remember the argument. (Interview 2)

When asked to describe the relation between these resources and her learning, Lucy talked me through the notes she took in relation to the essay she had to submit in a month's time. She said that when trying to make sense of all the reading she had done, she would initially mimic the lecturer's approach. She would use different types of arrows, along with different colour highlighters, and bullet points when taking notes as a way of organising her thoughts. She said she would use the

different colour highlighters to prioritise between the different arguments. This would help her to start building a picture of the topic by grouping the different elements involved and trying to establish possible connections. Any questions that emerged during her synthesis she would either pose during the seminars or would discuss with her classmates later on during class, if the task was group presentations.

Additionally, she saw her engagement in the seminar discussions as being affected by the atmosphere within the classroom. She found that in some modules the environment was more relaxed than in others and believed that the personality and approach of the lecturer could enable or hinder the class discussion:

He would get us in smaller groups within the seminars, and within the smaller groups people would talk. But then when it came back into a big group, there would be absolute silence. (Interview 2)

Lucy attributed the 'silence' in the perception of the teacher as the 'expert', which accounted for the shift in her membership from taking a central role in the small groups, to a peripheral one in the whole class discussion.

When she was asked about learning at university, Lucy contrasted learning between the first and second year:

I am learning what different historians have said about things and I am a lot more aware, rather than last year - I did not have as much knowledge. (Interview 2)

Lucy considered her first year as enabling her to adjust to firstly being at university and secondly to her discipline by familiarising herself with the standards required in each of the modules she took. She saw her second year as engaging more with the practices of her modules. It is possible to suggest that this is part of her ontological shift in terms of how she thought of herself and the position she took in her module-specific community either during the group discussions or in the various learning activities such as essays or debates.

Overall, Lucy's learning journey appears to consist of a series of shifts, placed within a lifelong learning framework. Some of these shifts appear to be conscious and generated by her own perceptions of learning and personal goals, whereas others are implicitly developed and practised through her engagement with the practices of her discipline and module-specific communities. She appears to use group presentations, essays, and tutorials as tools for furthering her knowledge and self-regard in relation to these practices. As a result, during her second year at university she appears to work through and negotiate in a confident manner her position with her subject, but not to the detriment of the wider socio-cultural setting as depicted by her personal goals and aspirations.

4.2.5 – Rose's Learning Journey

Rose is a 36 year old mature student from the UK, married with two children. She is reading Psychology. She has completed her first year, but has deferred her second year. She has a younger brother who has been to university and runs his own company.

Compulsory education

Rose started narrating her learning experiences at her comprehensive school. While she described most of her experiences as positive, there were two events that she appeared to focus on. Firstly, the choice of transferring to a grammar school not very far from where she lived, which she rejected. And secondly, half way through her schooling she found herself placed in the top set which again she did not like:

It was not academic pressure but more social pressure definitely [...] I felt segregated. I didn't like it because it made me feel I was not part of the norm. (Interview 1)

Even though on reflection she was aware of the effect both of these decisions had on her academic progress, she acknowledged that at the time feeling part of the school and being surrounded by her social community were factors that made the school environment more familiar to her. However, during secondary school, she did not perceive the school's ethos as conducive to her learning. As a result, when she was 16 she left school with no qualifications and went to work.

Going to work

When asked to elaborate further on her decision to leave school, Rose pointed out a number of factors, such as the school ethos, her immediate environment and her lack of focus, which influenced her decision to leave school and not go to university. She did not consider the career's office helpful in terms of giving her practical guidance by inviting various professionals to talk about their experiences. Therefore she claimed she did not see any benefit in staying at school:

Nobody ever spoke to me about getting [a] professional [career] or getting academic skills or how to develop. (Interview 1)

Going to university was not seen as part of her family's priorities as her father did not go to university himself:

I think if he [her father] had done university it would be an automatic expectation. (Interview 1)

She commented upon the effect that her father's decision not to go to university, along with her parents' separation and the absence of a mother figure, on her learning path. On reflection, Rose described the important role of parents in constructing their children's future. Influenced by her decision to go to work and the implications of coming to university late, Rose highlighted the pressure she would put on her children towards going to university. Interestingly, her younger brother

did not leave school but went to university. Rose attributed this difference to her brother's self-awareness and her own interest in moving to the job sector.

Having left school and without any qualifications, Rose started working as an assistant in the retail sector. Although she pointed out it was not a field she was interested in, she worked hard and within a short amount of time she was up for a national managing and directorship promotion. However, Rose's trajectories changed again when she got pregnant with her first child. Rose described the strain that the long hours and the demanding nature of the job along with maintaining a family, placed on her. As a result, Rose decided to quit her job and opted to work with her partner as a retail manager.

In describing her experiences at work, Rose emphasised the difference between the nature of learning in the formal (compulsory education) and informal (workplace) sectors. Even though she acknowledged that her secondary school provided her with the basic theoretical grounding, she felt there was a lack of focus on the practical application of knowledge. She noted this practical aspect of learning was important in the workplace:

If you have not got the life experience you cannot always expect to go into management...because in theory you probably do [know it] but in practice it is a completely different thing. (Interview 1)

She found that at work she was able to draw more on her life experiences or other practical knowledge when dealing with difficult situations than she could do at school. Rose also noted that at the workplace she was able to focus herself and find something that interested her which she claimed she lacked at school. It appeared that her focus, along with her life skills and her father's knowledge, offered her the freedom to use the experiences she had gained to progress in her career.

She then got pregnant again. Rose said that the disruption that her pregnancy caused in her personal and working life acted as the decisive factor that enabled her to re-evaluate her circumstances and future:

I knew I was not doing what I wanted to do career wise [...] my goal is to be in the right job, doing the right thing by 40. (Interview 1)

Rose described going back to education as an opportunity for getting a better job as well as providing her with a sense of financial and personal security that she thought would be beneficial for her and her family in the long term.

Returning to formal education

Having decided to go back to formal education, she enrolled for an NVQ with the Open University (OU) to do a foundation degree in psychology. Rose described her experiences at OU as challenging. She said:

[At school] you don't have to do any reading and all of a sudden I am thrown in with a lot of text books, the information is in there, this is your essay question, do it. (Interview 1)

When asked to elaborate further on her experiences, she pointed out the differences in the structure of learning, the expectations, and their impact on how she perceived herself. She quickly discovered she could not apply the same techniques she used to at school when learning. She had to familiarise herself not only with the independent nature of learning, but the terminology and language used at college. It appeared that developing her own voice and framework of learning, were not part of Rose's perception of formal education.

While studying at college, Rose continued working full-time. Trying to balance being a student with her other commitments along with an apparent clash between Rose's previous expectations of formal education and her new college experiences, proved difficult to manage. As a result, Rose made another change to her circumstances. She turned to full-time education:

My partner was very supportive of me because we were losing a full time income [...] but he has accepted it because long term I will benefit by doing what I am doing. (Interview 1)

Rose admitted that this decision was not easy. She noted the personal and financial implications of her decision to become a full-time student and continue her education

at university. Although both she and her partner were aware of the financial pressures of her decision, she found the motivation and emotional support from the college and her family reassuring. Having that confirmation, Rose went ahead and applied to universities. In the end, she was offered and accepted a place at the University of Nottingham. It is possible to argue that getting pregnant with her second child along with changes in her self-perception, age, and long-term personal and professional aspirations, pushed Rose into a different direction. They also highlight the changes in her identity and perception of education.

The first year at university

Transition to the University of Nottingham and to being a full-time student proved to be more challenging than Rose had initially expected. She admitted that entering university through an alternative route rather than A-levels and the prominence of her status, age, and her life experiences, appeared to be factors that stood out especially when Rose described the student profile in her modules. She said that, with the exception of a couple of students similar to her, the majority of her fellow students were much younger, from different socio-economic backgrounds, and with different priorities. In addition, although she welcomed the high status and reputation of the university, however, she noted her discomfort with the high expectations. When asked to give an example of the challenges she faced, she talked about the difficulties in organising her timetable whilst trying to find her way round the campus. What made matters worse for Rose was taking a push chair with her, which could be suggested it made her distinguishably different than the other students. This, along with the reality of the induction process, had an impact on her self-confidence and perception:

I just thought I can't cope with this. I cannot do this amount of hours, and I cannot, I am not good enough. (Interview 1)

Besides being a newcomer to a community that had its own rules, expectations and assumptions, Rose also had to balance her new student identity with her various roles outside the university: a mother, a partner, a wife, and a student. Rose felt that this multiplicity, along with how others perceived her, labelled her more than her abilities did. Although she found the course motivating and her interactions with her tutors challenging, coping with the needs and demands of each role created tensions in between her other roles:

Like this week I had an assignment to give in for yesterday, I have got a child off sick. What do you do? My priority has to be my children followed by my study. But luckily I have got my mother in law who came and sat and looked after my baby while I am on the computer writing the assignment. (Interview 1)

There was a sense of discomfort and guilt when Rose talked about the pressures of being a mother and a wife, especially when she was trying to balance that aspect of her identity with her being a student at university. When asked about how she perceived herself, she used the term 'mature student' and pointed out how this allowed her to draw on her life experiences in terms of life skills. Rose also saw her maturity as a disadvantage in terms of perceiving it as her responsibility to re-adapt to a system that she considered catered mainly for 18 year olds:

I think it is probably easier as an 18 year old who comes straight from education because your brain is already got that exercising. (Interview

1)

When asked to elaborate further on what she meant by this, she used examples of the time it took her to read a book, process and apply the knowledge, to illustrate her 'unfitness'. She later on described the practices of her module-specific community during the first semester, and especially the learning activities as enabling her to becoming fitter and to start seeing herself as part of the module-specific community.

Managing such changes did not always seem possible, and Rose highlighted the need for support not just from the academic community but also from the student community. In terms of the academic community Rose spoke of the teachers and tutorials as a source of support. She made particular reference to a couple of lecturers who she considered as experts in their subjects and in particular, the feedback she got from them. Besides the teacher, the student community was portrayed as equally beneficial. Rose said that talking to other students and sharing knowledge within the classroom was a valuable source of emotional and social support. She said that the role of a particular group (one that comprised of three other mature students and a younger student), was particularly important during the month before the Christmas break when she thought she was going to drop out. She noted that the group helped her to continue with her degree.

When talking about learning at university, her descriptions appeared to focus on a specific notion of her 'work' in terms of what she needed to acquire, to ensure she

understood the subject, be it writing essays or revising for exams. When asked to describe her approach when revising for an exam, she said she would go through all the lecture handouts given by the lecturer throughout the module to ensure she knew what the important points in each topic were. In terms of writing essays, although she acknowledged that challenging herself was important, the time available, the module layout and her interpretation of the learning outcomes were described as guiding her learning. This was demonstrated in the case of her essay in biology, where the choice of the essay rested on a pragmatic decision in terms of her abilities, knowledge and future modules.

Becoming familiar with her module-specific community was described in her accounts with regard to the mode of learning and assessment practices. It emerged that there was a huge variation between disciplines, which Rose felt she had to become accustomed to through talking to the lecturer and participating in the learning tasks. For example, she said that for psychology, unlike law, there were no seminars during the first year. Further, all her exams in psychology were yearly, with frequent lab reports in between, whereas for law they took place at the end of the semester. Working through and managing with the standards and different discipline structures was something that Rose said she found particularly difficult.

Finally when Rose was asked to summarise the value of the first year, she described it as:

Finding what we are all about, what our abilities are, and working on them, working to develop certain areas that we are struggling.

(Interview 1)

Rose described the process of adjusting as a confirmation of being able to bridge the 20 year gap from school education. This gap appeared to play a role in the type of adjustment she referred to, which differed in focus and in emphasis from that of the other students. She noted the differences in the student profile within her modules and around the University, who seemed to be different in terms of age, life experiences and long-term outcomes. This gap also had implications for how Rose perceived herself within the university environment and the struggles she faced when balancing between roles, self-perceptions and the pragmatic requirements of her circumstances against the expectations of her inter-disciplinary subject communities.

In conclusion, it could be argued that Rose's experiences of formal education, the job sector and going to university, challenged her self-perception, her approach to learning and her interaction with the environment. The challenges were at times perceived as being positive and at other times as negative. At the start of her degree, she had some difficulty in understanding the way in which the university was organised as a system. These difficulties seemed to be structural and personal in origin. 'University' meant a change in the pattern of her life, her identity, and a re-acquaintance with education. Additionally, the multiplicity of her roles along with the way she perceived herself and interacted with the different disciplines (psychology and law) seemed to clash with how she perceived the HE institutional

context in terms of the student profile and the emphasis on particular (often cognitive) aspects of learning. It seems that in decoding the practices of the various communities, Rose relied on formal and informal support networks. In that sense, it is possible to argue that moving to a new place or role indicates a feeling of having to 'start again' and in so doing, the transitions can be frightening as they imply a sense of re-identification with the new environment.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

The aim of this section is to critically analyse the case studies using the research questions as a guide. Further themes that are grounded in the data will also show light on the analysis. Discussion will follow the description of themes in each section of this chapter.

4.3.1. Influence of students' backgrounds and experiences to the process of learning

In this section I will explore the extent to which pathways and choices are gendered, raced and classed and their impact on a student's identity. This relates to the 'personal identity context' of my theoretical model, which refers to the way that individuals construct their identity. I have developed three themes. By 'personal orientations' I mean the role of goals that act as a framework that guide their decisions. By 'compulsory education' I mean the type of school the participants went to and the school's ethos. And by 'significant groups' I understand to be family, teachers, and friends that seem to influence the participants' self-conceptions and

interactions with the social world. I argue that the above factors can influence a student's identity and the decision to go to university or not.

4.3.1.1. Personal Orientations

I developed this theme to explore the role and possible influence of students' personal orientations to the construction of their identity. The data reveals how the participants' goals and aspirations created a framework which they could use to make decisions and evaluate the opportunities they were presented with. The value they placed on this framework seems to vary among participants, with some expressing a stronger adherence to it than others. This was especially evident when deciding to go to university or not.

More specifically, Baris's sense of self-regard appears to be influenced by his early determination firstly to go to university and secondly to go to the university in the USA. Such strong determination created the framework within which Baris situated his personal and learning development as evidenced by the choices he made in terms of subjects, approach to learning, and social relationships, throughout his compulsory education. In that respect, it could be argued that Baris's decision to go to university was on par with what was expected of him by his academic and wider socio-cultural communities. Although Baris's determination appears to be tested in his interactions with his communities, which in turn influenced his perceptions of learning, it appears that the formation of a close relationship with his school teacher who he reported to look up to, provided him with the confirmation that he needed towards achieving his goal.

In contrast to Baris's decision to go to university, Rose appeared determined to drop out of school and go to work, as she did not perceive her school to provide her with a viable different perspective. It could be suggested that her father's working class background in conjunction with Rose's conceptions of school, made the option of going to work as a more viable pathway than staying at school. Lucy, like Rose, appears to experience moments of worry and confusion during her secondary school when she reported to dislike the regimented and mechanistic approach to learning. Even though, Lucy, unlike Rose, comes from a middle class background, it could be suggested that her sense of struggle might be a result of the importance she attaches to her personal values and conceptions of learning as empowering which seem to clash with the school's learning ethos.

In this section, I have used data from the case studies to show that the participants' personal aspirations, which ranged from travelling, going to university, to working, appear to guide and scaffold their decisions. In addition, the participants appear to use them, especially in times of confusion or disorientation, like in Lucy's case, to remind them of their core values. This could imply that their personal orientations provided them with a sense of ownership and a reliable context they could rely on during turbulent times. In this respect the participants seem to exercise their agency by actively acting upon what seemed to be important to them even if it meant, like in Rose's case, they went against what was considered as normal.

4.3.1.2. Compulsory Education

I use this theme to explore the role of the sociocultural environment by looking at the possible influence of the school and its impact on the participants' respective development. In other words, I examine the ways in which the school can influence participants' self-perceptions and their subsequent decisions. The majority of the participants, besides Rose and John, perceived their interactions with their respective schools as positively influencing their personal, academic and social development. John described the negative role his disability had in his development and self-perceptions. It can be argued that the lack of acceptance from his peers and learning assistant, as well as the absence of a social support group acted against his inclusion in terms of feeling valued and accepted by his school community. This had an impact on his self-regard and perceptions of learning. It appears that partaking in the way individuals perceive themselves, are their own self-constructions and the manner in which their self-perceptions are interwoven into and influencing their interactions with their academic and social settings.

Linked to the above argument about the role of the school, my participants described the ethos of the school as paramount in terms of the framework within which self-perceptions seem to be situated. The ethos of the school refers to the social arrangements and attitudes towards university that are explicitly or implicitly portrayed by the school as desirable. For John and Lucy this was reflected in the structure of learning, the teaching style, and the curriculum that appeared to place a strong emphasis on going to university. On the contrary, it seems that Rose did not perceive her school as motivating and encouraging her to go to university. Whilst previously she tacitly accepted her student identity, it can be argued that the lack of

support and direction into going to university that she later on identified as important shows a mismatch in the framework between Rose and her school. John presents the role of his specialist school as having had a positive impact on the transition to university. One possible factor for the difference in their accounts could be the type of school they attended. Rose and John went to a comprehensive school, whereas Lucy went to a private school, which she described as having had a particular emphasis on achievement.

The nature and role of the participants' experiences of compulsory education depict a series of complex relations. These relations are described not only in connection with participants' structural characteristics, such as disability or social class, but also in terms of the effect that their interactions with their schools can have in directing, positively and negatively, their self-perceptions and career pathways.

4.3.1.3. Significant Groups

I have previously argued that the role of the participants' personal orientations and experiences of compulsory education contributed to the way they perceived themselves and what they and others perceived as appropriate. I have developed the theme 'significant groups' to look at the role of participants' relationships with others, such as the family or the school community, and how such close relationships can reinforce or hinder their decision-making process by paying attention to particular pathways.

As has emerged from the data, all of the participants sought advice from people in their immediate environment. The role of Rose's father who came from a working class background along with the perception of university education as not being considered as an 'automatic expectation', may be two factors that have perhaps contributed to Rose's own perception of what she accepted as a valid pathway at that time. Equally Baris, John, Michael and Lucy, who are younger than Rose, show some similarities and differences in the ways their relationships with others have influenced their decisions and relations with their communities. Baris said the role of his relationship with his school community and in particular his physics teacher as further legitimising his decisions not only in terms of the feasible learning rewards (by studying abroad in the USA), but also in relation to his personal development. However, when deciding to make the transition from the USA to the UK, he appeared to rely strongly on his own aspirations and abilities, and to ignore the advice of his immediate environment. Michael also described the relationship with his siblings, who being older than him and having gone to university, provided him with a support group that Michael appeared to strongly rely upon. This is also true for Lucy who sought support and motivation from her friends. As all the participants, besides Rose, wanted to go to university, the outcome of their transition appeared to be in accordance with the normative expectations.

However, in exploring further the nature of the social community available to the participants, there seem to be some differences on the way the participants interpret their interactions with their environment. John presented the idea of going to university as part of the next step, which could be a result of his personal aspirations, and the positive confirmation from his school community and family, especially his

grandfather who had been to university. However, his description of the University of Nottingham as 'big' and a place that implied his re-integration into mainstream education can be two possible factors that influenced the way that John appeared to re-position himself in relation to that context. Equally, Michael appeared to be unhappy with his first choice of university in terms of feeling socially uncomfortable, which resulted to him dropping out. Baris would consult his teachers and family when deciding to go to the college in the USA, but he relied on what seemed important to him against the advice of his social community, when he transferred to the university in the UK. On the one hand it could be argued that this social community seems to create a context within which the participants evaluate themselves and their abilities. On the other hand, it might have also acted as a possible barrier in the way it made some choices and decisions appear more appropriate than others. This is so in Rose's case and it could be suggested that her father's lack of university education, the possible emphasis on the value of work and her perception of the school as lacking in guidance, may be factors that made the decision to go to university as not appropriate.

In examining the relation between students' backgrounds in relation to learning and identity, I have problematised the relation between a tacit understanding of one's orientations and their social world in influencing their future decisions, such as going to university. I have suggested that decisions and choices are influenced by an individual's agency, structural factors and social communities. This interplay does not seem to be so only for these individuals who appear to be lacking the material resources or role models such as Rose, but others like Lucy and Michael who appear to have second thoughts about university, despite the availability of resources and a

social network. Evidently, the way these aspects play a role in the participants' self-regard and career pathways seems to vary. The reported variation can be attributed to the degree of disparity between personal aspirations and normative expectations, which in turn can influence the way the participants construct their identity. This construction does not ignore the subtle role structural characteristics and social structures play in making certain choices, like going to university or to work, appear more valid than others. Rather it highlights the way these sit along participants' self-perceptions, personal aspirations, and their life experiences.

4.3.2. The range of the students' transitions

In this section, I will explore the way that the participants talked about the transitions they were going through. To explore the various transitions I have identified three interlinked sub-themes. I use the 'external changes' to look at students' experiences and their reactions as they move between various contexts such as school, countries, and programs. I understand the 'internal changes' to be the changes in knowledge and perceptual frameworks and the way they adjust to these changes in relation to their identity. Further, I use the 'turning points' to look at the critical moments through which individuals reflect on their learning trajectories. And finally, I understand the 'step-changes' to be the positive and negative consequences resulting from participants' self-perceptions and conceptions of learning at university. I argue that the manner the participants reacted to each of these transitions provided them with a context to negotiate, reflect, evaluate, and resolve the changes they were confronted with. As a result, sometimes the transitions can be disruptive, for instance when moving between countries and settings. And at other times they can be slow and insidious, for example when discovering there is no certainty in knowledge.

4.3.2.1. External Changes

Throughout the case studies, the participants found themselves in different countries, institutions, programmes, and communities. In each of these contexts the participants reported the need to gain a sense of familiarity especially when the environment was new which evoked a sense of 'starting again'. For Rose it seemed that moving from work to university was not linear or 'part of the plan' but rather a result of changes in her professional role (from assistant to manager) and her personal role (getting pregnant twice). Even though it could be argued that the changes in her professional role were part of the process, it brought a change in her self-belief and level of confidence. This renewed discovery of herself in terms of her abilities and skills along with the possible changes in her personal circumstances can be seen as a catalyst for adopting a more strategic plan of action. It could be suggested that this plan of action gave her the confidence to move again from work to college and eventually to university.

For the rest of the participants attaining a degree was seen from the start as a positive asset that could help them in gaining employment. Whereas for Baris, John, and to some extent Lucy, this realisation appeared to underpin their learning trajectories, for others like Michael the decision was initially met with some hesitation. The lack of confidence in his abilities that could be seen in Michael's learning trajectories can be partly a result of his earlier cynical approach to the role of education and partly a result of the influence of his interactions with his family and school. Therefore, it could be argued that the importance the participants attached to gaining a university degree was socially constructed and reinforced by parents, teachers, course descriptions or governmental reports that portray the degree as a valuable

commodity. Even though Lucy seemed to be critical of the value of getting a degree, nonetheless, she, like Baris and John, perceived the degree as a means to helping her achieve her personal interests in social care and travelling. It could be suggested that the emphasis they attached on their future acted positively when managing this transition.

In addition, there appeared to be a degree of convergence around the perceived value of university and where this convergence seemed to be justified by the status and reputation of the university among family, friends or fellow students, the degree of adjustment the participants had to make was likely to be more powerful. Through the participants' interviews that seem to support evidence gathered from course documents and institutional policies, it became clear how highly regarded the university was as evidenced in entry requirements, the ranking of the university, and the quality of the support services. Rather than feeling alienated by the reputation of the university it appeared that such awareness was perceived positively in terms of the expressed sense of safety and security that resulted from the kudos surrounding the university and in turn their course. It could be argued that the reputation of the university along with the perception of the physical environment and the social surroundings were used by the participants to justify the rigour and the criteria applied during admissions procedures or the level of independency expected by the participants in their learning.

In this section, I have described the transitions that students went through as dealing with their external changes. Such changes could be described in terms of progressing

between contexts such as from college to university or from school to work. The majority of the participants, besides Michael, seem to use their aspirations about what they would like to do after their degree along with managing to enter such an elite university, despite all the distractions, as tools that allowed them to see this transition in a positive manner.

4.3.2.2. Internal Processes

So far, I argued that external changes involve moving between sectors, programmes, and communities. In the process students are required to familiarise themselves with the skills, competences, and knowledge that form part of the practices of the various communities they engage with. During this process students will have to make connections between their personal and social realities. Dealing with and managing such connections can involve painful decisions and changes at academic, social and personal level. The theme of 'internal processes' aims to further explore the nature of changes in knowledge, roles and practices in the process of becoming a student and how the participants cope with and adjust to these changes.

All the participants described going to university in terms of the cognitive skills and competences they have to develop. This awareness was reinforced within the respective course documents and module handbooks that portrayed being a student as someone, who can demonstrate criticality in their thinking, integrate different perspectives, and argue effectively. However, some students found this aspect of the transition difficult to resolve and come to terms with. For example, Baris seems to experience a sense of a discomfort in his interactions with his academic settings.

This discomfort was evident in various occasions such as the decision to transfer to a British university after his disagreement with the learning ethos of the college in the USA, or the preference of studying by himself rather than attending the lectures. It could be suggested that the way Baris dealt with this aspect of his transitions was by adopting a 'resistant' or 'resilient' standpoint. However, I argue, that far from seeing Baris as resilient, it might be more conducive to see his attempts as a way of exploring, resolving, and tolerating the impact of the transitions on his self-regard and role.

In dealing with the epistemological changes of her degree, Rose seems to focus on the positive outcomes of her degree in terms of getting a better job. Even though she did attempt to prioritise her student identity, she often found coping with the multiplicity of her roles, a struggle. It is possible to argue that Rose's struggles are interwoven in a complex web of multiple directions arising from her life experiences and personal goals along with her maturity and career aspirations. Despite the tensions that Rose's transitions imply in terms of her roles and having to 'start again', Rose's decision to re-enter university after a long time of absence and the financial rewards of the degree, could explain her determination to become part of the academic community. Arguably, for Rose and Lucy, their reported fear could be attributed to a feeling of being the 'other' as caused by moving to an unfamiliar environment. For John, this move which he describes as 'challenging' could be interpreted as a relocation of his identity: from an individualised approach which may explain his emphasis on his social development, to a more collaborative approach.

The experiences of these students raise a couple of issues. Firstly, there is the question of the effect of the disparity between expectations and reality that are implicitly reinforced by the existence of binary positions that appear to be equally valid. Secondly, although learning can be seen as the acquisition of skills, knowledge and competences, there is also an ontological perspective that needs to be respected rather than displaced as irrelevant. For Rose and Lucy, the idea of starting again is described primarily as an independent struggle, whereas John presents it as a social one. It can be argued, therefore, that it is important to situate the internal processes of the transitions within a context that highlight changes at both epistemological and ontological level.

In this section, I have described the internal processes of the transitions. Such processes can have positive and negative outcomes, for example in Baris's decision to disrupt his learning in the USA or Rose's decision to re-enter university. In other words, they can help us to explore why students might decide to take on or resist certain positions and the challenges such decisions present them with. Even though these processes can be seen as part of learning, it highlights the tacit risks that often underpin these transitions. These are described in terms of understanding, resolving and coping with changes in confidence, approaches and perceptions that seem to be situated in quite different practices. The way that some participants seem to react and deal with the changes, highlights that transitions are not something that happens to individuals but rather something they have to work through and make sense. How successful they are in coping with and resolving the challenges they are presented with, can impact their experiences of becoming a student at university.

4.3.2.3. Turning Points

This theme will explore further the link between the participants' external changes and internal processes of the transitions. Even though it is possible to argue that all the participants talk about their experiences in linear and clear cut terms, it seems that some of them reached various points, which I refer to as 'turning points', which resulted in a break from this straightforward pattern. I believe these points, which are different for each participant, to be crucial for two reasons. Firstly, they reinforce that transitions can imply a straightforward pattern of moving from one context to the next, as well as a break from normative expectations. Secondly, these points further illustrate the dynamic nature of external changes and internal processes. By this, I refer to a gradual awareness of a difference between what is perceived as legitimate by the institutional and social communities and what individuals appear to value.

For Rose her decision to leave school at 16 and go to work, getting pregnant, and deciding to change her status for a part-time student at OU to a full-time student at university, can be seen as turning points. Such points along with possible changes in her self-perception, age, maturity, and long-term outcomes, may have contributed in pulling Rose in different directions. It is possible to argue that these points highlight the non-linear nature of the transitions and her attempt to balance, prioritise, and adapt to the changes that her different roles implied. The changes that Rose described can be seen in John's learning experiences. Even though John is younger than Rose, his disability might be seen as a turning point. This is particularly the case in his decision to transfer to a special school earlier than expected and the decision to defer his second year at university. It seems that both of these decisions emphasise

the disruptive nature of the transitions that resulted to a break from what was considered as adequate by the institutional community but not by the individuals.

Similarly to Rose and John, Baris seems to rely on his personal orientations and approaches to learning when he decided to move to a college in the USA and later on to a university in the UK. Although, Baris initially appeared to enjoy the proximity and close relationships of the college, he cited the heavy workload and the pressured timetable in terms of teaching and learning as having had a negative impact on his experiences. It can be that the disparity between the learning ethos of the college and Baris's emphasis on the integration in the academic and social aspects of learning, acted as turning points. By deciding to transfer to a university in the UK rather than continue with his college education, which seemed to be what the college and his social community expected, Baris appeared to challenge rather than conform to their expectations. In this respect, Baris's experiences seemed like Rose's and John's, since they appeared to react against the expectations of their different environments. Similarly, Lucy decided to take a gap year which can be seen as a turning point in relation to her approach to university. Even though Lucy appeared to want to go to university, during her A-levels she seemed to be having second thoughts. It can be argued that her gap year reinforced her decision to go to university. In this respect, Lucy, like John and Baris, she did not seem to perceive her environment as supporting her aspirations in a manner she regarded as legitimate. Maybe it is the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as well as the degree of change in relation to their personal orientations that can be seen as influencing the pattern of their transitions as reflected in the non-linearity of their decisions.

Although there seem to be variations in what can be seen as turning points for each of the participants, nonetheless, they all came across moments where they felt the need to change their course of direction. This need can be a result of their exposure to 'new' environments, people, ways of thinking and the degree to which these are or are not in agreement with previously accepted frameworks. It seems that such points bring to the fore participants' attempts to make connections between what can or cannot be perceived as legitimate in terms of knowledge, positions, and roles within different contexts. It is possible to argue that even though learning demands a change in perceptions, attitudes and approaches, the degree to which this legitimisation can be accepted and considered as valid might relate to an individual's orientations, conceptions and beliefs. These in turn can influence the positions they do or do not take up.

4.3.2.4. Step-changes

Previously I argued that the transitions the participants had to deal with and manage can be described in relation to external changes (moving between contexts) and internal processes (making connections and resolving changes at personal and academic level). In trying to bring together and negotiate ideas and perceptions about knowledge and the social world, the transitions can often incorporate further challenges. I use the sub-theme of 'step-changes' to highlight the positive and negative outcomes that such a synthesis can imply. I will argue that such synthesis involves adjusting and negotiating standpoints that are often subjected to different interpretations by students and academics.

In all of the participants' learning trajectories it was clear that the way they perceived their role at secondary school and at university was very different. They distinguished between aspects of their role that they were accountable for such as being responsible and organised, and aspects that resulted from their interaction with their communities such as developing particular ways of thinking, speaking, and writing. Although all the participants appeared to find this transition difficult, for some the degree of difficulty extended beyond their control. John's own understanding of and coming to terms with his disability and how others dealt with him, presented him with challenges that had positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, the support services in place, such as the disability officers and the academic support ensured that the format of the resources such as books and other learning materials met his particular needs, allowed him to concentrate on being independent. On the other hand, the degree of his independency appeared to be restricted by the fact that he had to wait for materials to be brailled which in turn had implications on his time management. To ensure that he got the resources on time, John had to develop a partnership between the support services and his course convenors. The success of such partnership was not always positive as highlighted by the amount of the workload and the time limitations that John experienced. It is possible to suggest that this process highlights that resolving the changes that the transition implied can involve a state of dependency and independency at the same time.

Similarly to John, Michael described the transition to the second year at university as changing the way he perceived learning at university. This could be attributed to moving away from existing concepts and frameworks to developing and exploring

more sophisticated concepts and tools. Lucy presented the progression that Michael referred to in a different way. Even though Lucy and Michael read for the same degree, it is possible to suggest that Lucy interpreted this degree of specialisation as being part of her course rather as the means to an end. However, it can be argued that Lucy's focus on 'working as a historian' made the pattern of her transition less disruptive. By seeing herself as a 'historian', it can be argued that this re-negotiation of her identity meant that she changed the way she engaged with the practices of her module-specific community. It is this change in her role, which suggests that Lucy saw the abstraction of her course as a tool to help her engage with her discourse. Michael, on the other hand, appeared to struggle with this engagement which made the pattern of his transitions more disruptive. It could be that the differences in their personal orientations and the way these are translated in the practices of their communities could help us account for these variations.

In this section I have argued that the students' transitions can often involve positive and negative consequences as evidenced in the step-changes that underpin them. While John and Lucy appear to accept the need to work together with their respective communities, Michael seemed to struggle with this transformation. In this respect, it could be argued this transformation affected the pattern of their transitions. For Michael the transition appeared to be more disruptive, whereas for John and Lucy it appeared to be more slow and insidious. These can be a result of the way they perceived their interactions with their communities, the practices they engaged with, and the strategies they employed to cope with the reported changes.

4.3.3. Making sense of the university's practices

In this part of the chapter I will explore the role of specific practices such as modes of learning, learning tasks, and assessment, that can influence students' interactions with their subjects. This idea resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) notions of 'community of practice'. In other words, the process of being a student at university is a result of their participation in their communities where members become accustomed to the practices and roles, explicit and implicit, that such membership implies. However, as revealed by the case studies, there are restrictions to their membership. While on the one hand the practices in place appear to explicitly request the participants to develop their own framework and voice, on the other hand the way this framework is constructed, appears to be subjected to degrees of authority and power.

4.3.3.1. Modes of learning

I understand 'modes of learning' to be lectures and seminars that can be seen as part of gaining familiarity with their discipline and in particular with ways of thinking, behaving, and writing. I use this theme to explore their impact in participants' experiences of learning at university and how the activities in such contexts become accepted as part of the norm and part of the repertoires that students need to become accustomed to while studying at university.

During their first year at university all participants distinguished between the role of lecturers and seminars in terms of their perceived position and the value they attached to each. With regard to their position in lectures and seminars Lucy, Baris

and Michael, described using them as a way of developing an awareness of the particular module in terms of the subject knowledge, the use of language and ways of thinking within that specific subject. However, there are differences amongst the participants in terms of how quickly they engaged with them and the implications this had on their role and self-perceptions. Rose described the process of adjusting as a confirmation of being able to bridge the 20 year gap from education. This gap played a role in the type of adjustment she referred to, which can be different in focus and in emphasis than the rest of the students. While Baris appeared to be selective in his engagement by opting to study on his own, Michael seemed to use the lecture to frame his learning experiences. The level of information, as well as their participation during each lecture or seminar, seemed to depend on the subject and the lecturer. Some lecturers provided more extensive information than others in the form of single sheets, detailed power point presentations, and videos. Despite the reported variations in the lecturer's tools, all the participants seem to use the information presented in lectures and seminars as a way of integrating to the practices of their subject communities. Such an approach resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. As peripheral participants they do the activities through which their knowledge and skills develop and through which they start to build an initial picture of the university culture. In other words, as novice learners they use lecturers and seminars as a form of 'apprenticeship' into the practices of their subject communities.

After their initial apprenticeship into the practices of their subject communities, the expectation is that there will be a change in their roles and positions within lectures and seminars. This move from a student identity or 'novice' to thinking like

historians or 'experts' is also reflected in module handbooks and reinstated during the classroom observations. Such a perception seems to dismiss the time frame and the difficulties it can often present participants with. While Lucy described this progression as part of learning and being a student at university, Michael appeared to struggle with this transition. It is possible to suggest that Lucy interpreted her role as part of a natural transformation in knowledge and in understanding that could be attributed to her personal interests and viewing of learning within a lifelong learning framework. For Michael the transition appears to be more explicit as he finds it difficult to tolerate and balance the familiarity of preferred ways of thinking and the uncertainty embedded in new ways of knowledge.

In this section I pointed to the role and value that students attributed to lectures and seminars. Even though they often perceived the scope of each of them in different ways which in turn influenced their role within them, they seemed to present students with particular ways of thinking. By attending lectures and seminars, the participants were reminded of the need to focus on particular articulations, perceptions, and epistemological models. These in turn imply a tacit change in their identity within a relatively short amount of time. During their first year embedded in both lectures and seminars is the construction of a 'new' role, which can be presented as desirable when participating in their communities as novices. As they become more familiar with the practices of their subject, especially during seminars, the expectation is that they will become 'experts'. However, for some (Lucy), this reconfiguration can be seen as part of the process and might adjust quicker to the changes whereas others (Michael) might need more time to deal and work through the uncertainty in knowledge and their roles.

4.3.3.2. Learning tasks

I understand 'learning tasks' to be essays, presentations, debate forums, and group projects that explore the specific ways of students' inculcation to their communities and the changes that such a process may present. Underpinning the construction of such tasks are various degrees of power and authority, and the influence of multi-disciplinary practices. I argue that understanding the meanings and process of such practices is not a straightforward process. Rather it brings to the fore question relating to the way students' position themselves as evident by the use of language and writing style. The case studies illustrate that learning involves an awareness of various interpretations that can be contested and how these operate and change within different subjects.

The way that Lucy described her approach to essay writing in her first year revealed her emphasis on the academic knowledge found in academic books and lecture notes that she uses to structure her thinking. Other sources that the participants made reference to include handouts, reading lists, lecture notes and module handbooks. For example, during one classroom observation, the students were divided into groups and were required to give group presentations. The structure of their group presentation was decided in advance by the lecturer who gave them a handout exemplifying the aim, scope, and outcomes of the activity (see Appendix VII). Lucy and Mark who took that module, but were part of different groups, pointed out the value of the handout in terms of how they should approach the topic and the materials they could draw from. This suggests that the way learning is constructed appears to be defined more by the use of specific concepts that the participants perceive as being valid by their subject than the student's own interpretation of the

activity. This was further reinforced in essay titles, tutorials and feedback sheets. While this is part of the process of learning, the way that some perceptual frameworks are prioritised and regarded as more valid than others, suggests that learning is legitimised and constructed according to the particular practices of the module and subject.

Further, the degree to which the participants used their personal and professional experiences in terms of previous knowledge and skills to represent their ‘voice’ was something that some of them, like Rose, Baris and John, found difficult to balance. For instance, John commented on his tendency to over-research and the implications this had in terms of the structure of his argument. In one occasion John showed me the feedback he got for one of his essays where he received a low mark because he had relied more on his own opinion and less on the provision of academic references. Similarly, Rose found difficult to move away from using more personalised forms of writing (such as the use of ‘I’) that were seen as acceptable in her professional writing practices, to more abstract and impersonal forms. Both of these examples are seen as individual’s interpretations of how they thought should meet their learning tasks. Such interpretations which seem as a way of familiarising themselves with the practices of their communities, acted as a reminder of the need to displace previous practices. The idea that learning involves becoming integrated into the practices of their communities resonates with Lave & Wenger (1991). It could be argued that in their first year, as apprentices, the students use the “classroom curriculum” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93) to learn about the university culture in terms of people, use of artefacts and resources as well as appropriate ways of thinking and being a student in the context of their communities.

The evidence presented here highlights how students construct their roles in relation to the practices of their specific subjects. As a result, learning is conceptualised, legitimised, and situated within specific practices that may have little relevance for the majority of students in HE. Although both Lucy and Michael described the learning tasks as examples of finding out how the system works and their role within that system, they highlighted the difficulties in integrating individual perceptions and social processes. This could be attributed to a contrast between the way they position themselves in relation to their learning tasks and the way such position was interpreted and evaluated by the practices of their communities. Such interpretation is subjected to individuals, practices, and interests. It could be argued that such tasks illustrate the ways students are socialised into the practices of the communities and the challenges with which it presents students and communities. Even though this transition is not a linear process, it emphasises a process of shifting between particular roles and positions when interacting with their subject communities.

4.3.3.3. Assessment

In the previous section, I have argued that individuals' experiences are not incidental, but can be directed and situated by the practices of their communities. Assessment is another factor that seems to be directing the way that the participants experience learning at university. As I analysed data in the form of module handbooks, handouts, power-point presentations and exam questions, the participants 'get a feel' of what being a student at university entails regarding the learning outcomes they need to meet and the competences they need to develop in the process. Experience from the observation of the element of this study has shown that while students appear to be reminded of the competences they need to develop, what

they mean, what the underpinning expectations are, and how they are used within different communities, appear to be rarely explained. The confusion resulting from such tacit epistemological explanations seems to be reflected in the ways the participants interpreted the practices of assessment.

Reading through the cases, it appears that the participants use assessment to evaluate their understanding and focus on these practices of their communities that are assessed. During their first year, this understanding can be seen as a process of ‘trial-and-error’ as they attempt to familiarise themselves with the standards and formats of assessment such as writing essays or revising for exams. Michael, Lucy and Rose commented on using notes from their lectures and reading for their modules as a starting point to construct their arguments. This suggests that in participating in these activities, the participants were also learning how to construct a new identity. In so doing, they illustrate Wenger’s (1998) emphasis on the social participation of learning through which they were defining themselves in relation to what they were able to do and what seemed to be new and unfamiliar. As a result, the participants appear to use the institutional guidelines as benchmarks within which to situate their learning and identity.

While this proved useful in allowing the participants to gain an initial understanding of the assessment practices, it appeared problematic when applying what was learnt in other disciplines and modules. Rose described how going through the lecture notes and the seminar discussions were guiding her understanding of learning by doing. However, she said she needed to alter and adjust these newly formed practices

in relation to the module-specific communities (psychology and law). It is possible to suggest that learning involves a synthesis of using and practicing different epistemological frameworks within different communities in order to find 'what works'. This means that learning is not only relational, but is subjected to different interpretations by students and academics. This sense of resolving and making sense of different interpretations is reflected in Michael's drawing in which he showed resources such as library books and journals, as more reliable than people's opinions during lectures or seminars.

These findings highlight the heterogeneity between disciplinary practices and the degree of power in the construction, production, and evaluation of knowledge. This is clearly demonstrated by Rose whose interactions with two disciplinary communities (psychology and law) led to the devaluing of her lifelong learning and previous professional experiences in search of developing an identity that was more in tune with the criteria set out by her different subject communities. It is possible to suggest that such a semi-imposed perception of her identity appears to sit against her multiplicity of roles as partner, mother, professional, and a student. As a result, she appeared to struggle with her other identities that seemed to intersect and interrupt her interactions with her learning. John's experiences add to the complexity of the picture. He presented the role of his disability as negatively affecting the process of assessment. However, what makes John's case more different than that of the other students appears to be the degree of reliance on the provision of resources, which are of an appropriate format. Managing time and resources efficiently and in an organised manner, can be argued to be critical for John. As such, the assessment practices, for Rose and John implied a sense of collaboration and communication

between different parties besides the individual, such as family support and academic support, along with a greater attention to time management and organisation.

In this section, I have referred to examples of various assessment practices as a way of inculcating students into the ways of thinking and behaving within their respective communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As the data revealed perception of such practices appear to be interpreted differently by students and academics. There are not only variations between perceptions of what is accepted as appropriate in terms of structure, content, terminology within the same subject, but also across disciplines. Such variations in disciplines and individuals highlight that the process of becoming a student involves working through, and resolving practices that can be contested and conflicting. As a result, students who do not seem to have developed an identity that seems to be part of their repertoire of writing skills and ways of thinking to cope with their multi-disciplinary communities, appear to experience the change in their identity construction as one of ambiguity, loss, and disorientation.

4.3.4. Learning and the role of communities

In the previous section, I have explored the impact of modes of learning, the nature of learning tasks and assessment as practices that can influence students' membership and construction of their roles in relation to their communities. In this section, I will explore further participants' conceptions of learning and the range of communities that students can encounter during their university career. Placing experiences of learning as part of students' interactions with their communities makes it possible to explore the way that knowledge is produced and constructed.

Such knowledge I argue influences the degree of students' membership as in some communities students can stay at the margins while in others they can be more centrally involved.

In exploring the concept of 'learning' I have identified a further sub-theme: 'types of knowledge'. I understand 'types of knowledge' to refer to the way different contexts can reinforce and advocate particular constructions of learning.

4.3.4.1. Perceptions of Learning

This thesis examines the nature of learning, which I consider to be a social process resulting from the interaction between individuals and their respective communities. The findings suggest that what the participants identified as learning was a synthesis between elements of previously constructed and familiar identities that were a result of their personal goals and college experiences, and adjusting their identities in relation to the practices of their new environment. This resonates with Lave & Wenger, who view learning (and subsequently identity) as participation in a social practice.

Types of knowledge

Looking at all the case studies it seems that the characteristics that the participants attributed to the concept of learning seem to vary. More specifically, Baris, who is a first year student, describes learning in terms of the skills and information he has acquired. Rose, who is a mature student and a mother, focuses on the practical aspects of learning. For example, learning how to read or how to apply the

knowledge she gained in her lectures, to structure her essay and meet her learning tasks, appear to be characteristics of her perception of learning. It is possible to suggest, that such characteristics that Baris and Rose pay attention to are a result of their previous experiences of learning at college (Baris) and the workplace (Rose). These can be seen as providing them with a sense of security and control in the light of their new environment. This suggests that when faced with the reality of being at university as newcomers, the participants use their previous experiences while at university as the main point of reference.

Michael, who is a second year student, seems to distinguish between instrumental and personal learning. By instrumental learning he seems to pay attention to learning that is based on learning outcomes and learning tasks. While personal learning seems to suggest an emphasis on learning that is of interest to Michael himself. Throughout his second year Michael seems to struggle to work through and balance these two types of knowledge. The degree of uncertainty and risk that underpins the personal aspect of learning implies that Michael chooses to place more emphasis on the instrumental aspect of his learning as evidenced by his reluctance to move to more independent ways of thinking. This sense of struggle is evidenced in Michael's image in the magnetic board. It is possible to suggest that the specialisation of the second year modules along with the introduction of more advanced concepts plays a role in Michael's perception of learning.

On the contrary, Lucy, who is also a second year student, appears to be more confident with the way she perceives learning at university. Although like Michael

she pays attention to the degree of familiarity with her subject knowledge and the practices of her module-specific community, it could be suggested that she does not frame her perceptual framework on the instrumental aspect of learning. Rather it acts as a means to foster the connection between previous ways of thinking and goals to developing her confidence and become an active member of her subject. It could be suggested that Lucy's approach stems from her description of learning within a lifelong framework. In this respect, learning for Lucy seems to encompass not only the opportunities to develop academically, but also socially. Therefore, it would seem that interacting with her fellow students and developing an all-round approach to learning, are characteristics that feature in Lucy's view of learning.

The experiences of these students seem to raise a couple of issues. Firstly, the characteristics that the students seem to emphasise in their conceptions of learning highlight the role of their personal aspirations and previous experiences in terms of creating a context and an identity that the participants felt in control. As they engage with the practices of their new environment, they seem to experience changes that result from their social participation. These changes, which are expressed in their writing, thinking and speaking, form part of their conceptions and beliefs about learning and the way they position themselves in their new communities. It is possible to argue that such constructions are not shared or fully understood, but rather they can be developed through engaging with the process of learning. However, it could be that for some students, like Michael, the process of decoding learning criteria and practices might be more cumbersome. Secondly, and linked to the previous point, it appears that there is more emphasis paid on the outcome in

terms of producing an essay or completing a task than on questioning what the community might have taken for granted.

4.3.4.2. Communities

As I stated earlier, one of the main aims of the study is to explore the various communities that students can encounter during their university career, their role and influence on their development and engagement with learning. In other words, this theme will involve an exploration of the notion of communities, as shown in the participants' interactions between the university (academic communities), students and lecturers (module-specific communities), and between students (student communities).

4.3.4.2a Academic Communities

I have used this sub-theme to explore further the relationship between participants and their respective academic communities in terms of support networks. I understand support networks to be the resources that students use to scaffold their learning. These can be 'formal support networks' (explicitly provided by the university) and 'informal support networks' (resources that students seek outside the university).

Formal Support networks

When talking about the kind of support that appeared to be important to the participants, they included the support offered by the university's support services,

tutorials and feedback sheets. Embedded in all of them was an emphasis on developing new ways of learning and feeling competent to meet the requirements of their student identity. Although both Michael and John admitted they were not happy with their writing style and were thinking of seeking advice, they appeared reluctant to attend sessions offered by the academic support units. It is possible to suggest that their reluctance could stem from their perception of the generic nature of such units. Such an approach implies that the development of these skills involve a simple acquisition of skills that can be taught during sessions run by the academic support units. The link between generic and specific practices is illustrated by Wenger (1998) who views learning as being the product of activities and tasks that result from participation in the specific practices of their communities.

All the participants were aware that while at college they experienced close relationships with their tutors at university they perceived they had to be more independent and autonomous. When Rose is talking about tutor support she seems to conceptualise it within the remits of achieving a sense of familiarity with the environment in relation to knowledge about the physical environment, the staff and what is expected of her. It would be possible to perceive this as normal for Rose whose multiplicity of roles – a mother and a mature student – along with her experiences and knowledge in previous contexts, have not only influenced her decision to come to university as a mature student, but also her choice to consciously change her career path. In this sense, she is distinguishably different from the usual 18 year-olds who attend university. Michael and Lucy, who in contrast to Rose are younger, appear to be defining tutor support by paying attention to the type of feedback they received. They appear to use it as a benchmark upon which they seem

to evaluate their performances. Even though such support provided them with a starting point, it appears to frame their development as independent writers and learners. This implies that for some students learning how to engage and interact with their communities by developing their own voice might be more uncertain and risky.

A factor involved in students' engagement with learning and the practices of their communities is by looking for and accessing different types of formal support such as attending academic support units and using feedback. Although the evidence highlights the social nature of learning, they also point that integrating into their new communities involves more than a simple transferability of skills and competences between contexts or from the first to the second year. Rather moving to a different learning environment brings new set of uncertainties and disorientations because the students must make sense of them in the light of their new environment. Such a transition involves negotiating and tolerating roles and practices that are subject to interpretations. Some interpretations, such as those that result from tutorials, might carry higher degrees of authority than others and therefore may be perceived as more appropriate towards developing ways of learning and thinking.

Informal Support networks

It was clear that the students had limited understanding of the standards expected of them and the degree of their epistemological and ontological shifts, and this seemed to prove difficult to work through at times. Further, the loss of a comprehensive sense of what it means to be a student along with the loss of the student-teacher

relationship could be seen as factors that enabled the creation of other informal support networks that the students sought advice from. Such networks include the role of family, and friends, within and outside the university, that appear to provide the participants with the required emotional support that would allow them to cope with the changes of being a student. This is especially, in Rose's and John's cases.

Rose, besides being a student, is also a mother with two young children. The multiplicity of her role seems to influence the way she perceives herself and is perceived by others within and outside university. Such multiplicity and the emotional impact that can emerge from trying to balance two different roles appear to run through her learning trajectory. This seems to be so in relation to the changes in her status (from working full-time and studying part-time to becoming a full-time student) before embarking on her course. Such change seemed to highlight the financial and cultural pressure that the new identity implied. Getting her partner's approval and continuous support seemed to be essential from the outset. It is possible to suggest that for Rose the availability and confirmation of this support network from a range of family members proved critical in her decision to commit to the course and also during her course when she had to choose between meeting her essay deadline and being a mother. Such dilemmas and the pressure from working through them and finding a balance between being a good mother and being a student appear to be part of Rose's identity.

Even though for all the participants support either from the wider socio-cultural context was paramount, for students with disabilities, like John, and mature students,

like Rose, the nature of support took a different meaning. For them learning involved more than the development of the cognitive aspects. It involved a conscious effort to balance the multiplicity of their identities by trying to resolve conflicts that can emerge from such roles. In so doing, they appear to rely more on informal social networks that can provide them with the opportunity for discussions, a sense of motivation and confirmation that can allow them to remain focus and engage with the practices of their communities.

4.3.4.2b. Module-specific Communities

This theme will involve an exploration of the nature of the relationships between the interviewees and their respective lecturers and the ways these appear to have an influence on the way learning is constructed within these communities. In exploring the interaction between students and their lecturers I look at the indirect factors of the lecturers' role such as the context of the degree and the teaching environment in influencing students' roles and degree of membership in these communities.

Role of Lecturers in the Construction of Learning

All the participants maintained that the nature of the interaction between students and lecturers varies. Factors such as the perception of the teacher's knowledge and role as an expert and the implicit power dimensions that seem to underpin the nature of their relationship are described as playing a role in the way students construct their roles as students. Evident in their comments seems to be the role of the lecturer as the knowledgeable other which in turn seems to imply a particular approach to learning.

In describing the role of lecturers in influencing participants' constructions and perceptual frameworks, the participants distinguish between good and bad lecturers. Criteria such as pace, order, coherence and cross referencing seem to be used by them in evaluating their lecturers with some lecturers appearing to demonstrate a good awareness of students' needs at university. Rose describes the role of her lecturer as affecting her engagement with the learning process in a positive way. This could be interpreted as her personal interest in the topic along with discussion with her lecturer that provides her with a conceptual framework for establishing her role. Even though Rose begins to take a more active role, still the lecturer appears to be seen as the expert. Although this could be seen as part of her peripheral participation that is justified by her unfamiliarity with the practices of her subject and the university, it seems to suggest the degree to which there are opportunities for dialectic interaction between the experts (such as the lecturer) and the novices (such as the students).

The nature and extent of the opportunities for a dialectic relationship appear to be questioned by Michael. He seems to be struggling to find the balance between an instrumental approach and a personal approach to learning. His choice of an instrumental approach to learning, which is expressed in the perception of himself as an 'apprentice', seems to be reinforced by the practices of his community. In a number of occasions, during my classroom observations, the lecturer would rephrase what the students had said when discussing the significance of a particular school of thought. It is possible to suggest that the choice of language and phrases the lecturer used, which was immediately copied by the students, would in turn place Michael in the periphery of his community. It is possible that the lack of previous knowledge

along with the introduction of more advanced concepts played a role in Michael's perception of learning. Even though Michael felt he was part of his module-specific community, (evident in the completion of the learning tasks), he seemed to struggle with the internalisation of the ideas presented to him. These ideas were seen as a means to learning, rather than fostering the connection between previous dispositions and goals.

It could be argued that the ability to make these connections were presented as an essential part of his self-perception as a practicing historian. In addition, such an approach might act as a reminder to Michael of the difference in status between his role and the role of the lecturer. This in turn can impact Michael's engagement with his subject evidenced in his expressed difficulties with making the transition to developing his own voice and writing identity. This could be due to the emphasis he placed on meeting the task in terms of producing an essay or completing the activity, rather than on questioning taken-for-granted ideas and approaches in the way he presented or talked about the issues at hand. It is at this point in Michael's narrative where his decision to conform to rather than question what his teacher or the university might have taken for granted, had an influence on his position in his module-specific community.

It is possible to suggest that being familiar with particular terminology or a conceptual framework, as illustrated in the stories of Rose and Michael, are elements that can help students to engage with their module-specific communities. When interacting with these communities, the nature of the topic, the level of knowledge,

and interest in the subject were identified by all the participants as influencing their interactions, and in distinguishing between the different perceptions of students and teachers. It is possible to suggest that their primary interest in the topic might have played a part not only in the way they engaged with the lecturer, but also in maintaining this dialogue and questioning taken-for-granted constructions to learning. The lecturer seems to be seen as the 'gatekeeper' in terms of granting approval to the way knowledge and learning is phrased, constructed and produced.

4.3.4.2c. Student communities

Besides the role of support networks and lecturers that the participants seem to perceive as influencing their membership and interactions, the role of other students, either classmates or friends in the halls or outside the university, can play a part in the participants' educational and personal development, and ultimately their learning. The degree to which the participants found these relationships helpful seems to depend on the context and the learning task and the nature of the support they received from such communities. I have developed two sub-themes to explore the ways in which peer interactions can enable the process of learning. I understand the 'Inside the Classroom' to be the way students attempt to make sense of the learning activities within the classroom and the implications this can have on how they perceive themselves. I understand the 'Outside the Classroom' to be the tools and resources that individuals use to make connections between their own perceptions about their role and learning using the learning tasks as starting points.

Inside the classroom

During my classroom observations the tools that the participants used inside the classroom – such as group and individual presentations, debates and forums, can be seen as reinforcing the social nature of learning. The students used these activities to develop and maintain the peer interactions within the classroom. Experience from the observation element of the teaching and learning episodes, it appears that during their peer interactions, there is a shift in the way gaining knowledge and understanding of the topic was described.

During the two group projects that Baris participated, there were differences not only in the nature of the group composition but also on the discussion process. In the first group the unfamiliarity with the members of the group and the groups' preference to work on their own for the most part of the project, could be seen as factors that contributed to perceiving this group as unsupportive. When these factors were reduced, as provided in the example of the second group, there seemed to be a greater opportunity for a dialogue between the members. Lucy described positively her interactions with her fellow students as playing a part in scaffolding and directing her learning. This could be interpreted as the moving away from the periphery as in listening to others, towards developing her understanding.

In observing class-group interactions, the students would appear to adopt the lecturer's approach not only in terms of dividing responsibilities, but also in the way the task is presented later on. This process can be seen in the way participants describe the construction and sharing of responsibilities before and after class.

During the shadowing of one of the modules, Michael's group would have a short meeting before the beginning of the class where each member would outline the progress they have made in relation to the use of materials or the writing of their section. When Michael's group went into the classroom, there appeared to be a difference between the nature of their interactions in terms of language they used or the positions they took. It is possible to suggest that presence of the lecturer as the 'expert' could have account for this change.

Outside the classroom

Besides the group interactions within the classroom that the participants described as valuable, some of them described a well-developed system of peer group outside the classroom. Some of the participants described the social nature of learning within a group as appearing to be more conducive to their learning than individual presentations due to the negotiation and discussion of ideas.

Finding common links and time were important aspects of the sustainability of these peer-groups. The majority of the students in Rose's class were younger than her, which further highlighted the differences in age, experiences, and life skills between Rose and her fellow students. Where academic and personal links were made with the three other mature students, these seemed to be on the sharing of knowledge and experiences. For other students, like Lucy, time did not seem to be a barrier as they had organised their meetings to take place during breaks between classes in the campus library. The content of these meetings would vary from discussing, exchanging, and sharing information about topics that were discussed during class as

well as contrasting between approaches to essay writing between different lecturers. In occasions where academic problems arose, the group would provide emotional support and offer possible solutions.

In this section I have argued the importance of student communities in terms of the kind of support and opportunities for sharing, discussing, and exchanging ideas that seem to be important for the students. The data also suggests the potential difficulties between groups that were artificially put together (within-class) and groups that were established and created by the students (outside-class). Establishing a social network which can be used to motivate, discuss or clarify ideas can play a part in the participants' process of becoming part of their communities. It also resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) view of learning as participation in their communities of practice.

4.4. Summary

In the previous sections, I have analysed participants' accounts of their learning experiences at university as transitions between different contexts such as compulsory education, the HE institutional context, and their social settings. I have looked at the way they tried to make sense and negotiate between their own perceptions and academic perceptions of their roles and construction of knowledge. This is important because it allows me to explore the relational, multi-directional and situational nature of learning and its impact on students' experiences. In other words, I am focusing on the nature of learning in terms of what is individually and socially legitimised and how it develops and evolves in practice. In this section, I will

provide a summary of the key findings and will highlight the similarities and differences between participants' experiences.

The accounts of the majority of the participants illustrate elements of how factors such as personal aspirations, compulsory education and significant groups provide the participants with frameworks that influence their self-regard and individual conceptions. Structural factors such as disability, ethnicity and class played a role in the way participants viewed themselves and in their interactions with their social settings. For John it was not only his goals that directed his learning, but rather the institutional approach to his disability that acted as a factor which caused him to initially experience his transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education as alienating (Reay, 2002). Lack of awareness in terms of support, training, and staff knowledge at his primary school appear to contribute to his personal and social exclusion. This in turn made him question his self-perception and role. Similarly, Rose's and Baris's decision whether to go to university or not, seem to be influenced by their social environment. Throughout the participants' experiences of compulsory education, it can be seen that they describe their respective schools in relation to what is presented as desirable and accepted. Having a group of people such as teachers, family, and friends, who they could turn to in moments of worry, confusion, or when seeking confirmation, proved to be significant. The existence of a social environment could be interpreted as providing the participants with the means and knowledge to deal with their future transitions.

In relation to the range of the transitions that the students had to work through, I have identified three sub-categories: external changes, internal processes and step-changes. Rose and Baris seem to hold onto their own perceptions of learning when straying from normative expectations. Rose decided to leave school at 16 and go to work, and equally Baris chooses to discontinue his college education in the USA and transfer to a university in the UK. Even though these seem to result from Rose's and Baris's learning trajectories and personal aspirations, these changes, highlight the non-linear pattern in their transitions. At first glance, these seem to suggest that breaking away from normative expectations can be perceived as having a negative impact on students' self-perceptions, confidence and learning in relation to their new communities. However, I argue that this non-linearity in the transitions was positively regarded by the participants as it reinforced that making sense and dealing with changes can often incorporate a synthesis of individual and external factors.

This synthesis can be seen in the impact of turning points. Even though participants have experienced various external changes such as a gap year, going to work or changing schools, it is the extent to which these critical moments influence their experiences and career paths that is of particular importance. For example, John and Lucy took gap years which appear to play a part in their accounts of their development. Both reported the need of a break from compulsory education. This is especially significant for Lucy in terms of balancing the freedom that is provided by her aspirations within a context that demands a degree of control as portrayed by the prescribed discourses and practices at her college.

Another key finding concentrates on the differences between what participants expected university to be like and how these expectations turned out in practice, emphasising the role played by their respective communities. In instances where the participants' experiences of what they perceived of their environment or of their role diverged from their own aspirations and orientations, they expressed a sense of dissonance. This was especially so for Rose, who described the multiplicity of her roles as mother, student and wife as interfering with her participation in the academic environment. As a result, participation in the classroom for Rose was not just a smooth and simple transition from the periphery to the centre, but rather a conscious effort to balance time, workload, responsibilities and different roles as a student and as a mother.

It is possible to argue that each of the participants' aspirations have affected their interactions with their communities in the light of their membership. In the participants' accounts the interaction between 'theory' and 'practice', seems to be influenced by good relations between students and the university, lecturers and students and between students. The way in which each interaction was valued depended on the time they spent on activities such as negotiating the procedures for group project (as illustrated in the stories of Baris and Michael) or the format of resources (as illustrated in John's story) (see section 4.3.3.2). All of these seem to frame learning within a particular approach that uses particular terminology and language. This approach may be familiar to the academic community, but individuals might have difficulties in decoding and understanding. It is also clear that each interaction is complex since it highlights the development, application and understanding of 'threshold concepts' and ideas that are relevant to the particular

discipline (Meyer & Land, 2003a). All the participants described the lecturer as providing them with the overall picture of either the subject discourse or the particular module they were reading for. This was particularly in the first year where the lecturer was perceived as the tool to scaffold and ease the student's understanding of such concepts. Some of the participants relied on the lecturer as the 'expert' to gain access to the teaching and learning procedures (as evidenced in the course and module handbooks) and the practices of assessment and learning tasks.

All the participants found moving to the second year challenging due to the greater emphasis on specialisation and the independent nature of learning. This proved more challenging and problematic for Michael than for Lucy. Michael appears to find the development and implementation of more sophisticated concepts and ways of thinking as disruptive. This seems to have had an impact on his perceptions of learning and self awareness. It could be that his lack of interest and motivation as expressed in the choice of the modules for the second year can be seen as factors that led to the adoption of an instrumental approach to learning. His approach of mimicking the lecturer's style seems to dominate his interactions with his module-specific community. This is in contrast to Lucy, who seems to consider the specialisation and choice of modules as part of the process of moving to the second year. As a result she appears more confident to develop her own voice, even though she appears to seek confirmation from the lecturer during tutorials and discussions about feedback.

In terms of the level of participation within the different communities, Lave & Wenger (1991) use the concepts of 'novice' and 'expert' to indicate the different levels of memberships. Applied to my research, all of the participants are legitimate members. However, the ways in which their membership is expressed implies the transition towards new ways of becoming through adjusting to the epistemological and ontological changes that their engagement with the practices of their communities seems to highlight. Lucy uses her past experiences and knowledge in conjunction with information from discussions with her tutors or friends to consciously "deconstruct existing concepts and rebuild more sophisticated ones" (Brown, 2004, p. 35). In terms of developing their independence, even though John, like Michael, present working with others in joint projects or presentations as positive influences on their experiences, he emphasises having the time to reflect on what he has learnt on his own. In contrast, Baris shows a self-directed approach to learning as expressed in his search for individuality by carefully monitoring his role when working with others.

It is possible to suggest that engagement in these activities might mean that the transition from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' of their communities is not a simple one. Deciding to remain at the periphery can involve painful decisions and changes at personal and professional level. It can also be seen as a way of exercising their agency and taking control of the learning process in a manner that appears to be relevant to them. As a result, the way they approach and use their membership in their respective communities will be distinguishably different for some than others. Whilst Lucy and Baris feel confident in maintaining their independence in their discussions within the classroom, Michael and John appear to be more reluctant to

adopt such a standpoint. By relying heavily on their own abilities and skills (Baris) or the support services (John) they appear to situate themselves and engage with communities of practice than maybe different to the ones that Lave & Wenger (1991) refer to.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed the experiences of all the participants. At a personal level, each student makes the transition to university with their own expectations, tools and goals. These form part of a student's construction of learning, which will develop and reconfigured as they interact with the HE institutional context. Becoming a student at university also implies becoming a member of the various communities that students encounter during the course of their degree. Such a process can illustrate the need to balance, become familiar with, negotiate and work through a range of external changes (moving between events and countries, for example) and internal process (tolerating changes in confidence) that form part of the students' transitions. The data reveals that the impact of these transitions varies as not all students experienced them as such. For example, although participants dealt with the external changes successfully in the end, they experienced difficulties in coming to terms and working through the internal processes that are part of the transitions.

Although all of the participants anticipated the individual responsibility in handling coursework, managing time and attending lectures, they re were variations amongst them. The differences are strongly linked to their personal aspirations and goals in

terms of going to university. Participants who appear to be goal oriented like Baris and Lucy seemed to cope with the transition by adopting an individual approach which was reinforced as they grew more familiar with their new environment. For others like Michael who perceived the specialisation of the second year as demanding in relation to their prior expectations and experiences, coping with the academic demands resulted in over-reliance on the availability and approachability of the staff.

The students' aspirations, conceptions, and beliefs about learning and the ways in which these direct their interactions within their respective communities are characteristics of the step-changes in their transitions. The ways these aspects are enacted through their interactions are situated within an environment that is described as supportive and challenging at the same time. The relationship between the two highlights the difference between what is conceptualised in theory whilst drawing on past or 'old' knowledge and that which is regarded as 'new' knowledge.

In the next chapter, I will re-examine the arguments made in this chapter with reference to the literature and the framework for understanding students' transitions with the research questions providing a structure for the chapter. In addition, I will discuss the implications of my research for practices in HE.

5. THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I firstly presented the learning trajectories of five of the students that participated in my research. I then analysed the data by concentrating on a range of themes and sub-themes that depict similarities and differences between and across the case studies. In this chapter I will present the findings of the thesis by firstly drawing on the evidence that emerged from the empirical part of the study as discussed in chapter 4, before discussing them in relation to the literature in the area.

Further I will use the evidence from the data to develop further the conceptual model I have initially outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.3) in order to bring together the different elements that can influence the way my participants experience learning at university. My aim is to present in practice what a student's experience of learning at university might look like. I will argue that moving to and engaging with the practices of a new environment can act as a turning point, as a point of reflection, of reorientation, and of connections. The way individuals will react to this environment and learn to adjust to and tolerate the underpinned changes in their self-perceptions and interactions with their social world, are part of transitions. However, the way that meanings and identities are constructed and how they are enacted in practice at different times and at different stages can reveal their contested and conflicting nature. In this respect, the conceptual model makes it possible to problematise the range of transitions that students go through and to analyse how these transitions are

part of the interactions between individual and communities. In other words, I will maintain that there is a need for a shift from the current emphasis on cognitive development towards exploring how students become part of their communities.

5.2. The findings of the thesis

In my thesis I look at the process of becoming a student at university and the changes that this can imply at personal and professional level. Essential to this argument is the idea that coping with such changes means that an individual has to reconfigure pre-existing perceptions about knowledge in the light of the new environment. For some students this might mean that they have to find alternative ways of positioning themselves. Part of their positioning is shaped by their personal identity context as well as their institutional and wider socio-cultural contexts. I would therefore suggest that viewing students' experiences in relation to transitions addresses the gaps about the way learning is practised at university. Such gaps refer to the construction of individual's identities as they interact with widely different contexts. Such interactions can frame their conceptions and beliefs about themselves and the process of learning.

5.2.1 The construction of identities

One of the aims of my thesis is to explore and understand the way that students perceive themselves. This refers to the 'personal identity context' of the conceptual model that focuses on the individual in relation to the wider socio-cultural context that affects an individual's self-image. Much of the data here are concerned with

personal descriptions of their identity in relation to their personal aspirations, compulsory education, and influences from groups that they perceived as having an impact on their learning careers.

More specifically, data suggests that not only do the participants' draw on a variety of resources that affect the choices they make, but in some cases their decisions stray away from what is expected in terms of normative pathways and accepted patterns of behaviour. This is illustrated by Rose who seems to appear confident of her decision to go to work instead of university while she was at school. However, as her personal circumstances changed (becoming a mother) she appears to reflect on her work experiences and starts to view education differently. Indeed, Sayer (2005) argues for a relationship that is dependent upon evaluative rather than classificatory and instrumental mechanisms, for example when describing differences in terms of abilities and perceptions.

In terms of the relation between identity and decision-making processes and the tensions it presents the non-traditional student, various authors (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, Reay, 2002, Ball *at al.* 2002, Shiner & Modood, 2002, Bowl, 2001, Holloway, 2001) seem to identify structural factors such as social class, nationality, age, and ethnicity as influencing what individuals perceive as appropriate or not. For example, in the studies of Reay (2002) and Archer & Hutchings (2000), the authors use social class and ethnicity as factors that can influence the way students develop and relate to the world. Such factors are evident in my research, especially for Rose whose decisions appear to be influenced by her father's working class background

while Lucy's and Baris's middle-class backgrounds seem to direct their expectations and self-perceptions. Interestingly, Michael appears to struggle and feel like "a fish out of water" (Thomas, 2002, p. 431) despite the availability of material and cultural resources. These examples indicate that inherent in students' constructions of their identity are personal meanings and aspirations.

Additionally, the data shows the influence of family and experiences at school and how these play a role in how decisions are formed. This is illustrated in the participants' decisions to go to university, especially so when going to university is not considered to be the norm by their immediate and school environment. For example, Rose commented upon the effect of her parents' separation on her learning path. She described the absence of a mother figure in influencing her decision to go to work instead of university. It is possible to suggest that the lack of academic role models, since neither of her parents had been to university, along with her father's emphasis on going to work, provided Rose with a context to justify her decision to go to work. In contrast to Rose, Michael and Lucy presented the role of their family as affecting their learning careers. Michael, for example, appeared to draw on his family's knowledge, when he found himself struggling with the learning tasks or the decision to go to university, which in turn had an influence on his self-perception. It is possible to suggest that Rose, Lucy, and Michael, like the other participants, sought confirmation of their decisions from their immediate environment. Past research (Hodkinson & James, 2003, Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000, Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999) highlights the role of compulsory education, in directing students' choices and perceptions.

Further, my research stresses the important role played by family and other communities in shaping self-images and decision making processes. The way that these factors are connected reveals the various degrees of control that the participants seem to exercise in response to the uncertainty of their decisions. For example, in terms of how this impacts their self-perceptions and learning careers, Rose, Michael and John had different experiences. Whilst Rose appears to consciously reject going to university, Michael appears to feel uncertain about his academic identity as evidenced by his feelings of inadequacy at various points of his learning career. For John his disability (he is visually impaired) appears to act as the source of his self-doubt especially during university. His disability seems to be a key factor that influenced his feelings of his academic abilities. As Barnett (2007) suggests, this variation can be attributed to the relationship between personal and pedagogical identities. It is possible to suggest that such feelings can be influenced by their perceptions of attending an elite university.

To sum up, my research indicates that students' backgrounds and individual experiences influence their self-images and their decisions about going to university. Even though students' decisions may be conditioned by their social class, ethnicity, and gender, it is through their interactions within different contexts that individuals make connections between what they are interested in relation to what is considered as a normative pathway. The outcome of this integration seems to depend on a synthesis between agency, social structures and personal goals, which can in turn influence their roles.

5.2.2 The range of the students' transitions

In exploring the nature and range of student transitions and the degrees of success, the research findings suggest that the participants' personal orientations, social interactions, and life experiences provided them with a framework to construct their identities and abilities. This section discusses how the case study students reacted to and experienced their transitions when they first moved to the university (external changes), the changes their enculturation to their new environment implied especially when trying to make sense and resolve mismatches between expectations and reality (internal processes) and the realisation that the process of being a student involves balancing and tolerating between knowledge, roles and practices that can be conflicting and subjected to interpretations (step-changes). In this respect, the pattern for these transitions can imply an aspect of straightforward reaction to contexts and events as well as a break from normative expectations. This view is echoed by Fuller (2007) who argues: "Focusing on an educational transition, which has been unconventional in terms of age-related expectations, helps to illuminate the (increasingly) reflexive relationship between institutionally mapped pathways, individual lifecourse trajectories and broader social change" (p. 219).

5.2.2a External changes

External changes are linked to changes from moving between contexts, countries, and programmes. The way that the participants reacted to these changes seem to imply that for some the process was more gradual than for others. This is illustrated by Rose whose learning trajectory emphasise the non-linear and disruptive nature of her transitions that result from her making sense of her role in different environments

(the school, the workplace, and the home). However, the choice to re-enter an environment (the university) that she has little familiarity with, despite the lack of previous qualifications, suggests high levels of motivation that is bound with life events, the satisfaction of personal goals, and her personal circumstances. Accounts like these show the influence of the 'personal identity context that emphasises the importance of personal qualities and the desire to change their social circumstances, in spite of distractions and barriers.

However, the degree of connections between contexts can make progression to some contexts more appealing than others. Indeed, studies by Macaro & Wingate (2004), Lowe & Cook, (2003), Booth (1997), Watt & Patterson (1997), Bloomer & Hodgkinson (2000) and James & Bloomer (2001) stress the level of preparation needed in bridging the gap between various educational establishments and highlight the difficulties that occur. The above studies show that the difficulties experienced could be attributed to the way students' expectations are contextualised and influenced by their social environments. Even though the empirical findings in my study resonate with this argument, there are some subtle differences relating to how the participants experienced the move between different contexts. More specifically, Michael and Lucy comment on the meaning they attach to going to university ranging from an instrumental to a personal interest for the subject. Within various governmental reports (Dearing Report, 1997, DfES, 2003, 2006, Leitch, 2006) the value of attaining a university degree is presented in relation to economic factors or cognitive development. Although such reports provide useful insights which help to explain the increased participation in HE, they underplay ideas about 'self-growth',

‘bettering’ and ‘having a personal interest’ that were identified as important by all the participants.

5.2.2b Internal processes

In considering the experiences of non-traditional students literature has suggested that we need to move from simplistic notions of participation towards models that emphasise the complex and dynamic nature of the interplay between students and the institution (Laing & Robinson, 2003, Lowe & Cook, 2003, Edwards, 2006). Evidence from the data shows that all students were motivated to go to university and saw their university degree as a means to further their personal, social and academic development. The participants seem to also recognise the academic and personal challenges that faced them when interpreting unfamiliar environments and practices. In relation to such challenges, the research data indicates that there is a degree of dissonance amongst some of the participants in relation to how previous practices that were considered as part of the norm were being questioned.

For example, Baris during his interactions with his communities in the USA and in the UK appears to question the institution’s ethos and focus on what he perceives as a rigid and inflexible view of learning. Instead of conforming to this view, he seems to deal with these practices by adopting a more independent approach as evidenced by his reliance on learning through the internet. Similarly Rose, who is a mature student, brings with her a wealth of knowledge gained from her experiences in the professional sector. However, at university she appears to be surprised, in more than

one occasions of being unable to use such experiences and start afresh. Indeed past research (Lowe & Cook, 2003, Thomas, 2002) has highlighted the emotional element of the process as individuals search for a new identity in the light of their new environment. For instance, Lowe & Cook (2003) emphasise that successful adjustment to new environments relies heavily on realistic expectations on the part of the students.

The findings of my research concur with such arguments that are crucial for understanding why some students may perceive their transitions as an opportunity for further development, while others might see them in a negative and disruptive manner. This process is not straightforward, but a process of transformation between what individuals have previously felt comfortable with in terms of their perceptual frameworks and understandings, and a process of re-examining them in the light of their new communities. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that in analysing student transitions, the ways that personal values and qualities, understanding of claims and knowledge are facilitated and fostered by the learning environment, are of primary importance to the participants.

5.2.2c Step-changes

Moving to a different context evokes different attitudes from individuals. Indeed, some authors (Furlong *et al.* 2006, Lowe & Cook, 2003, Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999, 2000) have described such moves as being fluid, non-linear and complex, since they encompass perceptions and interactions that are formed at different points

and serve different purposes. My research concurs with this argument insofar as in their participation within their communities individuals are likely to adopt different stances and standpoints in response to the practices of their communities, which might also imply a change of identity. This suggests the fluidity of identities and transitions through a process which “consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). Furthermore I would argue that students’ transitions often imply a perceived feeling of loss of power and control when searching for alternative ways to relate to the practices of their communities and gain membership. The effect that such transitions can have on students’ emotional development and ultimately their experiences of learning is recognised in the literature (Colley, 2006, Cook & Leckey, 1999, Rickinson, 1998). As academic and social contexts evolve and meanings are subjected to interpretations by students and academics, so do constructions of identities.

For example, even though Rose describe her adaptation to the new environment as discomfoting that is created by the tension of balancing between her personal roles (as a mother and a wife) and her student role. For John going to university highlighted the need to balance a state of independency (as portrayed in university prospectus and module course books) and dependency on the university’s services. Whilst in the past, Rose and John had managed to monitor the demands of their roles effectively I would argue that entering a new environment can challenge this balance between different and often conflicting roles. Michael, like John, seems to position himself within a binary context where there are references to ‘good/bad’ people,

behaviours, and approaches. Such an approach appears to provide him with a framework to evaluate different degrees of authority found in lecturers and in fellow students that seems to guide his learning experiences. For example, he seems to be aware that by reproducing the lecturer's framework in his essay, he will get good marks. Equally, he does not appear to value in the same way his participation in social communities such as with fellow students. It is possible to suggest that Michael seems to be in turmoil by trying to mask his internal confusion through finding an arrangement that would resolve the dilemma of the binary positions. This turmoil appears to reach its peak during his second year where engagement with her subject is presented as taking an explicit epistemological stance, one that Michael seems to be reluctant to challenge. Instead of attributing this solely to a lack of skills or knowledge, as Michael's narrative appears to allude to, it might be premised on lesser or greater attempts to reproduce the type of knowledge that he feels is valued by his respective module-specific community and individual lecturers. Such an approach can be quite risky, emotionally and academically, because of the heterogeneity in discourses, practices and individuals.

Even though all of the participants appear to be well motivated and eager to succeed, despite the barriers they face, the changes inherent in learning at a higher level imply the possibility for engaging with learning in a different manner and this influences their self-perceptions and abilities. Indeed, I would suggest that embracing such possibilities, which can be contradictory in nature, highlights the problematic nature of this aspect of the transitions. In this respect I would argue that besides seeing

transitions as a progression to a goal, they are also seen as a point for reflection and reorientation.

In summary, I argue that the nature of students' transitions seems to vary in the way that they involve changes in perceptions, positions and attitudes that are experienced within different contexts and at different times. Through using the model I have shown that these changes are subtle expressions of the way students become aware of what they have previously taken-for-granted and the implications of this realisation as reflected in the way individuals work through, challenge, and resolve. An important aspect on how they react and experience them is the meaning students attach to their role at university which varies from being instrumental to having more of a personal significance which reveals the importance of an "ethical dimension" (Sayer, 2005, p. 16) embedded in their transitions. This dimension pays attention to the evaluative rather than the instrumental character of the participants' decisions and choices.

5.2.3 Making sense of the practices of the academy

Previous research (Gow & Kember, 1990, Brownlee *et al.* 2003, Kember, 2004, Todd *et al.* 2004, Ramsden, 1992) has indicated that factors such as workload, assessment and motivation have an impact on students' perceptions of their roles. This is also supported in my research whereby participants' engagement with the practices of their communities is influenced by the way they define their individual participation. Their definitions seem to be initiated or framed by modes of learning,

learning tasks, and assessment practices. I see the above factors as part of students' enculturation into the practices of their communities whereby students learn what is expected of them through participating and engaging with their communities.

A question which arises from the analysis concerns the way learning is situated and framed and the way it influences participation as expressed in the modes of learning. All the participants expected lectures and seminars to scaffold and guide their learning in relation to the practices of their communities. Lave & Wenger (1991) describe participation in terms of progression from the periphery as novices to the centre as experts. For the authors an expert is someone who participates fully in the social practices and activities of their communities.

The notion of becoming an 'expert' is understood differently by the participants. For Rose and Michael this becoming involves a contradiction. On the one hand, they see lectures and seminars as a benchmark against which they can situate their understanding. On the other hand, they recognise the provision of clear boundaries is more blurred. In analysing the difficulty of applying the knowledge in practice McLean & Barker (2004) argue for the existence of two different models with different implications for learning: the first pays attention to the acquisition of transferable skills, whilst the other concentrates on the process of 'becoming' that is situated within the practices of the specific discipline. This resonates with the 'HE institutional context' of the model, which makes it possible to identify students' experiences and identity construction in a process of flux. As Simons (1999) argues, locating learning within the specific context in which it is taking place illustrates the

difficulties involved in the transformation of knowledge. These difficulties relate to a realisation of the interpretation of the learning at different stages. Conceptualising participation not only in terms of progression, but more importantly, in terms of reflection and reorientation, allows us to locate change not only in relation to the generic skills that students can develop through participation at university, but more importantly as an ongoing process that identifies the particular difficulties in establishing engagement with the practices of their subject.

Exploring the way the participants interpreted the learning tasks is strongly associated with the way that they perceive their roles within their communities. Drawing on the theories of Lave & Wenger (1991) I have maintained that through group discussions, essays, and exams individuals gain knowledge about the writing forms and standards at the university. The data suggests that these tasks also define how they perceive themselves and their roles. The students had to cope with the unfamiliarity of various academic literacies (Lea, 1995, Lea & Street, 1988, 2000, Baynham, 2000) and learning how to write, argue, and talk during debates, group presentations or essays became a focal point of their construction of their student identity. For example, John, Michael and Rose appear to struggle with coming to terms with what is considered as appropriate including writing skills, use of language, and provision of referred sources. Resources such as establishing a dialogue with the teacher, reviewing past exam papers, or 'learning by doing' seem to act as ways to familiarise themselves with such writing practices. Others, like Baris and Lucy, seem to use the internet or feedback gained from the teacher as a means to gain access the academy. What appears to emerge here is that the process

of being a student at university is learned and constructed within a community through the completion of various learning tasks (Douglas, 2000, Alfred, 2003, Bowl, 2001). In so doing, the notion of practice as being shared, joint, and leading to a mutual understanding (Lave & Wenger, 1991) does not seem to be equally shared by all.

Their experiences reflect the 'HE institutional context' of the tripartite model that makes it possible to question the difference between communities in relation to who has got access and what kind of a process it entails. Indeed, Parker (2002) brings to the fore the distinctive nature of a discipline: "A discipline is a more complex structure: to be engaged in a discipline is to shape and be shaped by the subject, to be part of a scholarly community, to engage with fellow students – to become disciplined" (p. 374). By focusing on the acquisition of skills and knowledge, there is the danger of missing what is specific and unique to that discipline in terms of becoming engaged with the practices of their communities. These descriptions point to variations in attitudes, personal interests or reasons for studying at university that question the nature of 'communities' and of 'practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In relation to the nature of communities, I would argue that the power dimensions in reinforcing specific ways of 'becoming' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is expressed in participants' interpretation of the assessment practices which contribute to their enculturation and development of 'a sense of belonging' (Darlaston-Jones *et al.* 2001). For example, whilst Rose has previously appeared to question the lack of information available to prepare her for writing essays, she seems to have accepted

her questioning as part of her socialisation into the practices of her community. Indeed, Haggis (2004) invites us to question the instrumental view of learning and its effect on the way individuals conceptualise learning. An absence of this individuality was expressed by the participants when distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' students. It could be argued that their perceptions are a result of their membership or what Lave & Wenger (1991) refer to as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. According to them it "refers both to the development of knowledgeably skilled identities in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice" (p. 55). This 'becoming' endorses a certain way of behaviour which derives from knowledge about the field. However, analysis through the 'HE institutional context' of the model, the data and literature on the learning careers of young people (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000), it is shown that becoming an active member of their academic communities is not straightforward, but rather problematic.

In understanding how access to their communities is perceived by the participants, the evidence suggests the importance of factors such the role of modes of learning, the nature of the learning tasks, and the assessment practices. On the one hand, students are aware of the greater individuality characterising their learning, which they accept as part of their role. On the other hand, the changing nature of the relationship with others, contributes to the paradoxes in engaging for learning for its own sake and seeing it as a means to an end. These paradoxes refer to the ways that learning is theorised and practised and as such highlight the importance of evaluating what appears to be of primary importance for individuals.

5.2.4 Academic and Social Membership

So far, I have used the ‘personal identity context’ and the ‘HE institutional context’ that form part of the conceptual model to explore the way students cope with changes at different stages. I have shown that such a process is far from straightforward and constitutes a number of shifts in the process of being a student at university. In this respect, I argue that interactions that explore the way that practice appears to challenge existing perceptions and ideas are important in understanding students’ shifts. In other words, I pay attention to the role of tools and resources offered by communities, and how these are used by students in their engagement (and disengagement) with the learning process.

In relation to the process of learning and the characteristics that the participants identified as important, my research shows that their perceptions of the process are mediated by the individual’s pre-existing knowledge and the way it is being transformed by engagement with the learning activities in their communities. For example Baris and Rose who are in their first year pay attention to the practical aspect of learning that seem to direct their interactions with their communities. While these characteristics can be seen as part of the ‘surface approach to learning’ (Marton & Saljo, 1976) a further analysis of their accounts point to the role of personal goals, possible career development and past experiences. Michael and Lucy, who as second years they can be described as ‘oldtimers’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) they distinguish between an ‘instrumental approach to learning’ and a ‘personal approach to learning’. Evidently, this shift can be seen as part of the process of studying at university. When students become more familiar with their

community in terms of the content and the context, there is a change in focus from learning about the environment to learning in terms of participating in tasks and activities that define the practices and roles of its members and the communities. This change implies moving towards a different epistemological and ontological membership in the process of becoming a different person (Lave & Wenger, 1991). What kind of person one can become it is part of the relationship between individuals and communities. The nature of the relationship and how it is perceived will have an impact on students' personal and social attainment, and consequently on their interactions with their respective communities.

5.2.4a Academic Communities

When entering HE students will be expected to familiarise themselves with their new environment. For some students this environment might seem 'alien' and intimidating. In Chapter 1 (see section 1.3), I have discussed the way that external changes in the structure of the university are likely to influence the way that learning and teaching is defined in terms of the emphasis on research and the loss of the student-teacher relationship. This was also recognised by the participants in the process of accessing their academic communities. Analysing the existence of support networks (formal and informal) and the ways these are being used by students in their participation with the practices of their academic communities, provides us with a starting point for establishing the manner through which such communities may tacitly reinforce practices that inhibit the fostering of reflective and critical learning. For example, the depiction of learning as the transference of skills along with an emphasis on assessment over gaining knowledge and understanding may colour

students' expectations of their engagement with the learning process. Such expectations direct us to exploring the different conceptual models used by students as part of studying at university and the subsequent implications for their identity. These models can be placed within a continuum, which deploys a technical view with an emphasis on the acquisition of skills towards a conscious effort for situating understanding within the practices of their disciplines (Parker, 2002, McLean & Barker, 2004).

Within this environment, there is a shift amongst some of the participants relating to the meaning they appear to attach to studying at university. Such meaning can present students with particular ways of thinking or with "threshold concepts" (Meyer & Land, 2003b). The way these concepts are understood by students relates to the degree of their immersion to the practices of their communities as well as to personal interest. For example, Michael found the abstraction of some of his modules difficult to understand while Lucy appears to perceive these abstractions as the beginning rather than the end of her exploration with the process of learning. Even though some like Lucy seem to link progression with development in terms of skills and workload, for Michael there is a reaction against the technical orientation to learning. This shift from the 'old' self to the 'new' is part of students' search for 'belonging' (Darlaston-Jones *et al.* 2001). "In describing ... they are building a world, they are constituting their social reality, manufacturing and constructing their lives" (Wetherell & Maybin, 1997, p. 245). As has emerged from the data analysis, a question has arisen concerning the conceptual barriers in students' interactions with their communities which relates to the degree of engagement with the process.

5.2.4b Module-specific Communities

Lowe & Cook (2003) and McInnis & James (1995) argue that students must come to terms with different teaching styles. In familiarising themselves with these aspects of learning at university, the participants described their relationships with others such as teachers as influencing their role at university in terms of becoming more independent, developing particular frameworks and ways of thinking. However, the power dimension that seems to characterise the relationship between staff and students as described by Michael seems to illustrate the tension between constructing independent identities and the anxiety provoked by 'getting it right'. Whilst students previously may have taken the lecturer or teacher as the first point of call, at university there is a shift. This shift is reflected in the evaluation of expertise which illustrate Lave & Wenger's (1991) concept of 'expert-novice'. Inherent in this participation are constructions of positions and accounts that are subjected to interpretations by students and lecturers. As a result at times participation can be more central whilst at others students may be positioned in the periphery due to the imposed restrictions and limited opportunities. This finding is in agreement with previous research (Merrill, 2001, Thomas, 2002, Antikainen *et al.* 1996), which views support from more experienced others as an ongoing process of clarification and adjustment in relation to perceptions and practices.

The way that communities have been looked at in past research varies. More specifically, some authors (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006, who explored the Oxford tutorial) have provided strong links between conceptions of learning and the role of contextual factors. Other others have looked at particular disciplines, for example,

Hazel *et al.* (2000) in biology, Prosser *et al.* (2000) in physics, Case & Gunstone, (2003), and Case & Marshall, (2004) in engineering. These studies have looked at ways to support students through modifications to the curriculum or courses. In exploring the nature of the module-specific communities all the participants regarded the lecturer as the expert. This perception raises questions relating to the implications it has for students' participation and degree of membership within this community. Evidence from the data analysis shows that the lecturer's approach and familiarity with the specific terminology can influence the manner through which, students develop their individuality. Although the participants describe the role of the lecturer as supporting and guiding their development, nonetheless, having the confidence to move outside what is described as a 'correct' way of approaching learning by using their own initiative can be challenging as the accounts of Rose and Michael suggest. Rose as a first year student and having re-entered university after a 20 year gap, she uses the lecturer's feedback, knowledge, and expertise as a benchmark against which she evaluates her skills and abilities. This is depicted by the 'HE institutional context' of the model that makes it possible to locate development and participation within the confines of pedagogical practices. In so doing, learning is a process situated in social relations and interactions.

5.2.4c Student Communities

Students' interactions with the university depict the importance of social networks and relations (Thomas, 2002). In such communities the roles and relations are reported to be different in the sense that the perception of each other in terms of power and status is perceived to be less threatening. The co-construction of

knowledge requires support from others that can support and guide this interaction. The experiences of Baris, Michael, and Lisa suggests the integration of a range of diverse classroom resources such as handouts, lecturer's style, group discussions and presentations as well as 'outside the classroom' resources, which are used as tools to structure their learning.

My research findings support the argument that peer-interactions in terms of support, knowledge, and discussion of the academic content are important for their development. For example, within the history course, participation in such communities were artificially created by engagement in activities such as group presentations, classroom discussions, and debate forums that allowed students to share, discuss any academic issues that resulted from their class participation. Clearly, for some, like Rose and Lucy, the existence of such groups continued outside the classroom environment where they had the opportunity to discuss and exchange information that related to particular learning incidents such as the use of particular terminology and frameworks for structuring essays or longer projects. This seems to indicate that even though students may have acquired the subject knowledge or the skills, engaging with the practices of their communities is a process that demands a certain degree of transformation from within. This means developing their own initiatives and claims to knowledge, integrating theory and practice *in situ*. Such a process is not seamless, but rather challenging and has implications not only for the way students interact with others, but also for the ways that students view themselves.

Rogoff (1990) argues that: "Cognitive development consists of coming to find, understand and handle particular problems building on the intellectual tools inherited from previous generations and the social resources provided by other people" (p. 190). Rogoff not only points to the particularity of the developmental process, but she also highlights the tools provided by the socio-cultural context. This particularity is seen in my research although there is a variation in the way tools appear to be perceived by the participants. For some, such tools refer to their personal interest for the particular module, and learning tasks, reference to previously practised skills and strategies, or to those resulting from the social interaction with their subject communities. Sociocultural theories (Rogoff, 1990, Resnick, 1991) and Wenger (1998) pay attention to the role of social interactions. My research resonates with these authors in terms of the influence of social interaction on students' development and engagement with learning at university. The experienced variations suggest the different emphases that students place on engagement. For example, some of the participants had difficulties in balancing their own expectations with that of the community and in doing so they found the process challenging even if at the end the outcome appeared satisfactory in terms of grades.

I would argue that the tripartite model makes it possible to explore the way students deal with the difficulties in understanding the process with which they have to engage. It suggests that embedded in the process are a range of shifts that influence the way they relate to their communities and the positions they occupy. For example, during presentation activities, as revealed during observations and interviews, Michael and Lucy took active roles not only in terms of how they expressed

themselves, but also in the degree of involvement and control during the formation of knowledge. In so doing, the idea of conceptualising students' experiences at university calls for a twofold aim. On the one hand, students are required to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts and practices modelled throughout their courses, whilst on the other to embrace the epistemological and ontological challenges they are confronted with. It is through these challenges that the multi-directional nature of the transitions surface.

To sum up, I have used the theoretical model to explore the mechanisms according to which students engage or disengage with the practices of their communities. I have argued that interactions at any stage of a students' course of study at university emphasise a process of adding to pre-existing knowledge as well as developing new knowledge. As evidenced in my research the research participants approached this development by working together or modelling the lecturer's activities. Further, I have shown the difficulties that this dialectic process can present to students as it takes different meanings at different times indicating a process of non-linear and multi-directional transitions.

5.3 Further development of the conceptual model for understanding student transitions in HE

In order to analyse the nature of students' transitions and their influence on the ways students experience learning at university, I have further developed the model I outlined in chapter 2 (section 2.3) (see Figure 5.1 below).

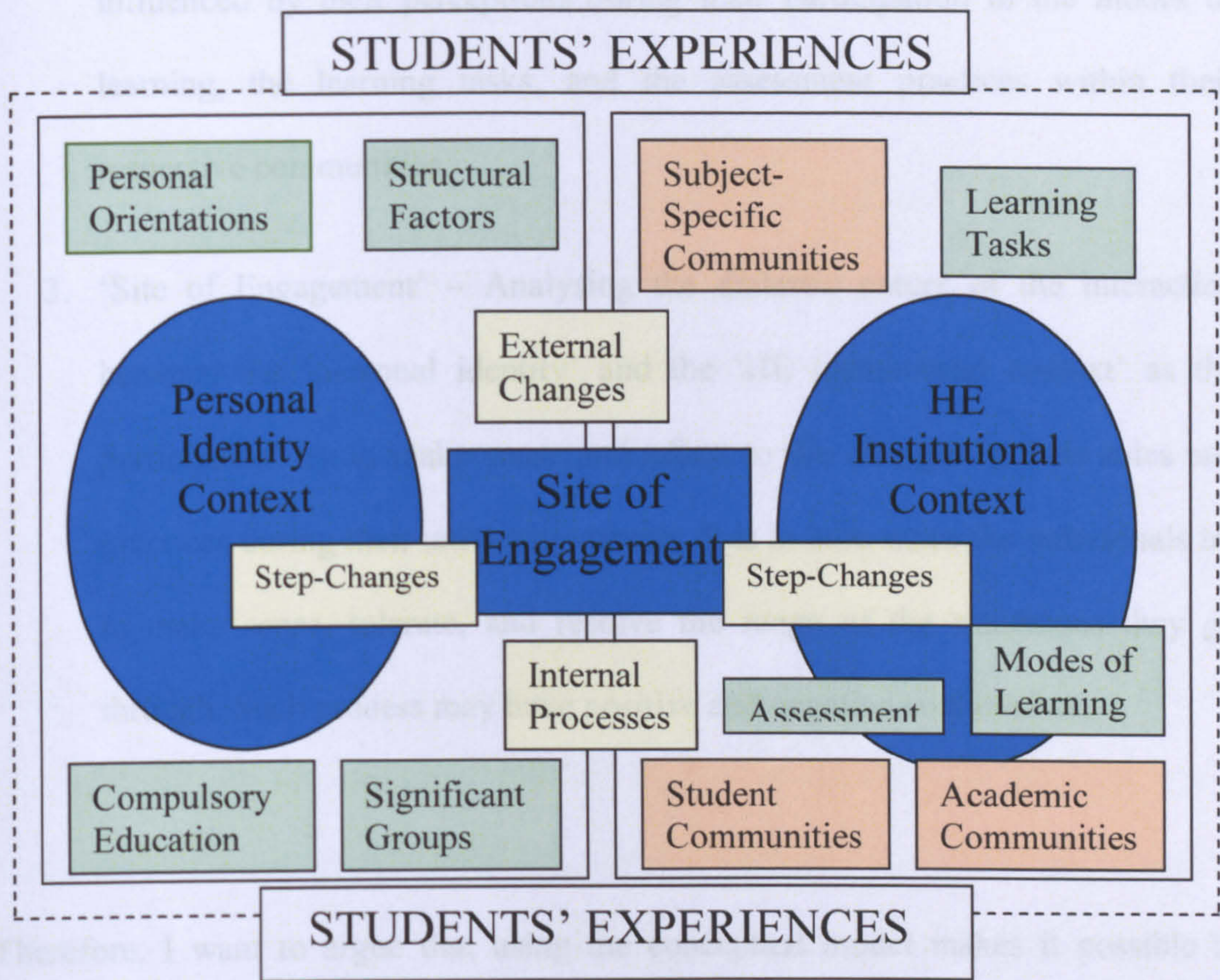


Figure 5.1 Developing further the model for understanding students’ transitions in HE

The focus of this model is on the interaction between three inter-related contexts:

1. ‘Personal Identity Context’ – The participants’ constructions of their identity and the development of perceptual frameworks and conceptions about the process of learning, the evaluation of decisions such as to go or not to go to university depended to some extent on their personal goals, structural factors, experiences of compulsory education, and the influence of significant groups.
2. ‘HE Institutional Context’ – When entering university, the way that the participants perceived their role within their new environment seems to be

influenced by their perceptions during their participation in the modes of learning, the learning tasks, and the assessment practices within their respective communities.

3. 'Site of Engagement' – Analysing the dialectic nature of the interaction between the 'personal identity' and the 'HE institutional context' as the participants' try to make sense and adjust to the changes in their roles and practices during their university careers. It is in here when the individuals try to make sense, tolerate, and resolve the range of the transitions they go through. Such process may have positive and negative connotations.

Therefore, I want to argue that using the conceptual model makes it possible to explore the nature of students' shifts and the factors that contribute to the way students search for and negotiate meanings. In essence, the conceptual model highlights the different elements of studying at university and the epistemological and ontological changes it can imply for students. At the heart of my model are shifts that vary in nature to include changes in perceptions, positions and attitudes and in scope as they are linked to students' personal orientations and influences from their sociocultural environment. The model also depicts the range of transitions that the students can go through which refer to:

1. External changes – These transitions involve moving between contexts such as school and work.
2. Internal processes – These transitions involve shifts, for example in confidence or in perceptual frameworks, that occur within the individual as

they try to make sense or make connections between the different parts of their learning journey, and adjust to the changes.

3. Step-changes – These transitions involve moving your standpoint within particular roles and practices. This is an attempt to bring together and make sense of practices and ideas that are often subjected to different interpretations by students and by academics.

These transitions are important, because they emphasise how individuals cope with the perceived and prescribed expectations of their environment. In addition, I have used the model for understanding students' transitions to explore the taken-for-granted assumptions that have become part of students' socialisation into the practices of their communities. The participants' accounts revealed the existence of three types of communities that they regarded as influential:

1. Academic Communities – the participants' descriptions of these communities focused on the role of formal support networks (those that exist within the university such as support services) and informal support networks (those that exist outside the university such as family). Such networks highlight that participation in university might entail engagement in different communities of practice that those envisaged by Lave & Wenger (1991).
2. Module-specific Communities – even though the participants start to develop an understanding of the practices of the academy by their membership in their academic communities, it was through participation in the activities and practices in their module-specific activities that provided them with a more

tangible context of learning. Within these communities they can contextualise the explicit aspects of their learning including assessment, language, and other 'academic' issues as well as tacit aspects relating to the way learning is legitimised, constructed and validated within and between modules.

3. Student Communities – membership in these communities reinforce the role of social relationship evidenced in the peer-interactions formed within and outside the classroom. The participants used these groups as a source of emotional and academic support.

In this chapter, I have used the model for understanding students' experiences at university as a tool for exploring the range of transitions that students go through and the way they adjust to the changes at personal and professional level. I refer to the model to view the process of learning as a result of students' interactions and participation within different contexts such as the personal, the HE institutional, and the wider socio-cultural context. On the whole, these elements concentrate on the way the participants' describe their perceptions in the light of their personal orientations that are operationalised within the communities that form part of their experiences. In this respect, transitions can be potentially problematic as evidenced in the number of challenges embedded in the relation between students and communities. The characteristics of these challenges, which emerge from the conceptual model and data analysis, are:

The process of transitions brings to the surface the multiplicity of roles and relationships that influence participation.

By using the 'personal identity context' of the conceptual model I explore the relation between individual perceptions and participation in various communities and the changes it underpins. Students as individuals enter different communities and interpret the practices in these communities using their own perceptions, conceptions, and beliefs about knowledge and their roles as defined in different contexts. For example, Rose's identity constitutes a multiplicity of roles (such as student, professional, mother). The difference between these roles lies in the way she relates to her community and the implications this has for the way she participates and interprets the practices of her communities. Even though Rose seems to be appreciative of the lifelong skills gained by working in the professional sector, she also comments on the difficulties in making sense of the practices of her new environment in terms of the knowledge she is expected to have such as knowing how to write an essay. It follows that students' construction of their identity and roles are interlinked with, and are part of the social reality that is constructed through their assigned membership and interactions with their communities.

Participation within various communities creates challenges, as there are differences between individuals' perceptions of themselves and their roles and those of others, as exemplified by the example of Rose. This is an important aspect of the model as it illustrates the taken-for-granted assumptions made by individuals and communities that contribute to the reproduction of particular activities and practices during their university career. These practices may have little relevance to the majority of

students within a mass HE context. Students, who come from non-traditional backgrounds or who are first generation students, may experience difficulties when trying to link frameworks and discourses used in their personal communities and those used in their social communities. This can be a result of a perception of their role that is different to the way learning is conceptualised and practiced within their new environment, especially so when they are exposed to a particular way of thinking and terminology. In this respect, the ‘personal identity context’ of the model can allow us to identify the resources and frameworks that students have used to construct their identities and conceptions of learning in their previous interactions and the changes they are required to make during their interactions with their new environment.

Transitions are described in terms of external changes, internal processes and step-changes.

Previous research (Furlong *et al.* 2006, Macaro & Wingate, 2004, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000) maintains that transitions are complex, non-linear and contribute actively to the way students engage with their environment. Understanding the nature of engagement that these transitions evoke entails a complex process of becoming or “a discovery for herself, but in so doing, discovers herself” (Barnett, 2007, pp. 54-55). In this sense becoming is twofold: by engaging with learning, individuals are required to search for meaning themselves. In so doing, they are also involved in a process of developing their own position in relation to learning.

The numbers in Higher Education have expanded substantially in recent years because of economy-led educational policy in which the government has introduced perceptions of high financial incentives regarding students going to university. Such perceptions that seem to be reinforced with the introduction of more vocational degrees such as Foundation Degrees, suggest a shift in the nature of education with an emphasis on 'employer engagement' and 'work based learning' (Leitch, 2005). This must have an effect on transitions because there will undoubtedly be more people at university who are there by default (drifted into it as that was what parents and schools suggested) or because of pressure from peers, parents, or schools.

Despite the potential financial rewards from getting an academic qualification in terms of employment, it can be argued that not all students will be able to cope with the learning process in the same way. Factors such as the nature of their membership or the way they relate with others are described as means through which they evaluate the different positions they occupy within their communities. The importance of preparation and the bridging of sectors are identified by some authors (Macaro & Wingate, 2004, Lowe & Cook, 2003, Booth, 1997, Watt & Patterson, 1997, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000). My research reveals the additional importance of longer induction periods at the beginning of every year at university whereby students would have the opportunity to talk with other more experienced students who can provide them with a student's standpoint. Such provision can be seen as a starting point for enabling the negotiation of positions and gaining an initial familiarity within different fields. Therefore, the transitions model builds on the concept of the 'expert-novice' relationship put forward by Lave & Wenger (1991),

but also expands it by referring to the important role played by peers and the differences in attitudes expressed in students' reasoning for studying in university.

Transitions are understood as processes of interactions between students and their communities

Within this thesis, transitions are viewed as emerging from the interactions between students and communities that form part of the 'site of engagement' part of the model. This part explores the way shifts are experienced in relation to individual's conceptions and identity, and participation in the process of learning. In order to understand the way students' identities at university are 'discovered' I have used Lave & Wenger's (1991, see also Wenger, 1998, 2006) concept of 'communities of practice'. Lave & Wenger's theories are useful in mapping out the changes in practices and roles that individuals experience as they strive to become part of their communities. However, my research highlights that the transitions from the periphery to the centre of their communities is not simple but problematic. These difficulties regarding participation arise from differences in perceptions, positions and attitudes between individual and communities. Accepting these difficulties as simple enforcements or part of the norm can mask the inter-relation between attitudes, perceptions and positions.

Based on my research data, I have illustrated that the participants are involved in various shifts whilst in the company of others. This ongoing involvement draws upon the dialectic between individual and social practices since it is through their

interaction that opportunities for student development are realised. This dialectic is enforced and reinforced through participation in different social interactions that influence the way 'university' appears to be perceived by students. Such perceptions are not straightforward, but reflect different emphases put on personal interest on the subject, the acquisition of higher order skills, the importance of social networks and an ongoing effort into engaging with the practices of the community. This understanding is not a means to an end, but rather depends on each student's interests and interactions with their communities. By presenting students' transitions in relation to interactions, the role of the environment and the nature of the activities modelled are important.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the transitions that a student can go through vary in nature, are non-linear, and are likely to evoke challenges and uncertainties. In order to understand and examine the range of the transitions critically I have situated them within interactions between individuals and their social world. In order to understand students' experiences as transitions I constructed a model that brings all the different elements together. These elements refer to the way that the 'personal identity context', the 'HE institutional context', and the 'site of engagement' context contribute to students' experiences at university. In constructing my model I have used the theories of Lave & Wenger (1991).

In exploring the ways that students develop and the factors that affect their development, I have argued that besides factors such as social class, ethnicity and nationality, there are other more subtle differences that relate to family and educational backgrounds, personal orientations and expectations. I have also identified students' experiences as a series of shifts that emphasise the way students cope with changes. I have argued that central to understanding students' personal development and their engagement with the learning process are interactions.

In the light of the above arguments provided in this chapter, the next chapter will conclude the thesis by pulling together its key arguments. This argument constitutes a conceptual model that focuses on identifying and analysing inter-connections between individuals and communities. In addition, I will consider the implications of this study for HE practice.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Introduction

In this thesis, I have conceptualised students' experiences in terms of a series of transitions. These transitions are located within a conceptual model that makes it possible to critically examine the nature and range of transitions and the impact they have on students' experiences to and in university. In Chapter 5, I have suggested that there were variations in the nature, pattern and role of the transitions that the students went through. Participants in this small-scale qualitative study interpreted their transitions as not something that happens to them, but rather as something that they have to work through, become familiar with, question and come to terms with. For some students this process might be more personally, academically, socially and emotionally challenging and disruptive than for others. In this regard, the pattern of the students' transitions may be not as linear or straightforward as it has been presented in terms of institutionally sequenced pathways or normative trajectories. I therefore argue that during their university careers students might find themselves occupying different positions and engage with different practices that emphasise the forming of identity through participation in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and that these can influence students' academic and personal development.

By examining in my research the nature of the relationship between individuals and communities, I suggest in Section 6.2 that engaging with learning at university consists of a series of transitions that indicate the interplay between a wide range of factors such as personal orientations, the values and perceptions of knowledgeable

groups such as lecturers, and their social interactions. These transitions are not seamless, but problematic as they can influence the way individuals perceive their role and position within their communities.

In section 6.3, I will critically re-examine the usefulness of the framework I have developed in the light of past research in the area of learning and teaching in HE. In section 6.3.2, I will outline the limitations of the thesis and suggest how these could be addressed in future research. I will discuss the implications of my research for HE practice and the significance of my findings in section 6.4. I will then address the contribution that the research makes and suggest further developments that can enhance practitioners', researchers' and students' negotiation of transitions and their implications for what it means to be a student at university.

Finally, in section 6.5, I conclude the thesis by providing some reflections on the study and some concluding remarks.

6.2. Understanding students' experiences as transitions

Throughout my research I have developed a conceptual model that allows an understanding of the way that students cope with changes at personal and professional level as highlighted by their accounts of learning when studying at university. It can be argued that to some extent the changes underpinned by transitions are not surprising. Indeed, literature on transitions (Furlong *et al.* 2006, Macaro & Wingate, 2004, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, 2000) rejects the notion that transitions are seamless and argues about the multi-directionality and non-linear

nature of transitions, which is a position that my research findings confirms. The case study accounts showed that the process of being a student at university can often involve becoming aware of, negotiating, engaging, and tolerating contested discourses and practices. Overall, my conceptual model points to the complex changes in perceptions and attitudes regarding students' roles and identity. I argue that the model offers an evaluative tool for understanding how roles, perceptions and attitudes evolve through participation in their communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

6.2.1. Summary of the key findings

Literature on the role of students' backgrounds on their identity construction has shown the importance of factors such as ethnicity, disability, age and nationality (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, Reay, 2002, Ball *et al.* 2002, Shiner & Modood, 2002, Bowl, 2001, Holloway, 2001, Tinklin & Hall, 1999); compulsory education (Haggis & Pouget, 2002, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, 2000); and the role of family (Brooks, 2003). While my research has confirmed that students' decisions and choices are likely to be influenced by gender, class and ethnic background, it has also highlighted differences between how students perceived themselves and the degree of agency they exercised. These differences relate to the ways in which students' past experiences, personal orientations, and affiliation to significant groups conditioned how they saw themselves. For example, the role of significant groups such as family, social networks or teachers provided an important context for students to evaluate the decisions they made, even though in some cases (as in the accounts of Baris and Rose) it went against normative expectations such as dropping

out of college in the USA and transferring to the UK (Baris) or dropping out of school and going to work instead of university (Rose).

Another major research finding concerns the nature of students' transitions, which I have argued are linked to students' identity and choices. My research findings suggest three types of transitions: *external changes*, which look at the relation between various contexts and events, *internal processes*, which explore changes in perceptions or attitudes, and finally, *step-changes* that refer to the amalgamation of epistemological and ontological changes. During each of these transitions students try to find ways to negotiate, navigate through, and balance perceptions and practices. This is especially the case when moving to a new environment such as the university. Some of the students (Lucy, Michael, and John) appear to be familiar and knowledgeable of university while for other students (Baris and Rose) going to university was a new experience. Despite the degree of familiarity with their new environment, this type of transition was met with uncertainty, disorientation, and displacement of their roles and positions (Taylor, 1987, cited in Haggis, 2001).

In this respect, my research findings that depict the unsettling nature of the process, concurs with past research which has described the transition from tertiary education to university as unsettling, daunting, and risky (Furlong *et al.* 2006, Lowe & Cook, 2003, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, 2000). While it is important to point out the emotional characteristics of such transitions, however, it is important to also note that all the participants were highly motivated and determined to further their personal and academic development, despite instances of alienation and frustration.

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This finding is situated against normative expectations and portrayals of individuals as in need of support and unable to deal with the difficulties they are presented with. These shifts can contribute to how students view themselves in different contexts with important changes to how they relate to and value the process of learning.

An additional and related finding concerns the subsequent implications that the different types of transitions have for students' engagement with (and disengagement from) their communities. In order to explore the role of the various communities that students encounter, I have distinguished between three types of communities: *academic communities*, that emphasise the role of formal and informal support systems, *module-specific communities*, where the interaction between students and experts such as lecturers become of primary importance, and finally *student communities*, which pay attention to the nature of support and opportunities for sharing and reflection through peer-interactions. Such a definition pays attention to a wide range of factors such as relationships with others, the role of assessment and perception of membership. As has emerged from the data, the participants expected their courses to contribute to their personal and academic development.

While this is not surprising, there are variations amongst the participants in terms of the way their development is operationalised in terms of the type of community they see as important and the role they occupy within that community. Placing oneself at the periphery or the centre of their community can influence the way they interact with this particular community and other communities. Further, the position that

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students will occupy during the course of their study could be a result of a strategic and instrumental plan of action by students.

The degree of interconnection relates to the final finding of my research that explores the nature of learning in relation to the range of communities that the students encountered during their university career.

Past research has looked at approaches to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976, 1997, Marton, 1986, Ramsden, 1984, Bowden & Marton, 2004) and emphasised the link between learning and contextual factors (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999, Trigwell & Ashwin, 2004, 2006,; Case & Marshall, 2004, Case & Gunstone, 2003, Hazel *et al.* 2002). In line with such studies, the participants viewed learning in terms of interest, understanding, amount of knowledge and roles. These perceptions reflect participants' aspirations towards studying at university as well as the influence social structures have on how perceptions of learning at university are constructed. However, what is notable is that in their various interactions, such as with their departments, lecturers or other students, the process of learning indicates the amalgamation of a series of different and sometimes conflicting perceptions and ideas.

On the one hand, learning is influenced by individuals' personal orientations and previous experiences of learning that relate to the way they make sense of themselves and of their environment. On the other hand, learning at university implies the exposure to a variety of people, ideas or practices that stresses and

identifies the interplay between individuals and communities. This process highlights the importance of providing further opportunities within and outside the classroom for students to share, discuss, and practice skills, knowledge and understandings. The provision of such opportunities can also act as a source of emotional and personal support.

6.3. Developing further the model for understanding students' transitions

In this thesis, I examined student transitions into and in HE through developing a conceptual framework that allows the identification of students' various changes as they are trying to make sense of various meanings and perceptions relating to their own role. I have drawn on the theories of Lave & Wenger (1991, see also Wenger, 1998, 2006) to explore the potentially problematic role that the various communities in HE have in presenting and promoting the values of the academic which might have little relevance to the majority of the students in a mass HE context. As it has emerged from the data analysis, the importance of the model relates to epistemological as well as methodological contributions to the research area.

6.3.1. Understanding the role of transitions on students' university experience – a step further

The model draws from the work of Lave & Wenger in order to analyse the nature of interactions between individuals and communities. These factors illustrate that transitions are not seamless, but rather multidirectional and interconnected with the pedagogy of the discipline and the social interactions of students and communities.

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Whilst the model draws from Lave & Wenger's theories, it also goes beyond them in questioning the emphasis they attribute on the role of the community. More specifically, looking at students' experiences of transitions to and within Higher Education (HE) in England, the participants' accounts raise questions about the degree of their membership. Some of the students strived to become full members of their academic and module-specific communities, other students found themselves at the periphery. I would argue that this is not uncommon, as moving to a different context involves a degree of adjustment. However, what is interesting is the dynamic and relational nature of this transformation in the way that it influences students' decisions at different stages of their educational careers. Whilst accepting the role of the social and cultural aspects in fostering a particular view of knowledge, my research also draws attention to important differences in students' ways of prioritising between communities and the role they take within these communities. Students who shared similar experiences in relation to perceptions found it easier to engage in the process of sharing knowledge and in that sense support each other, whilst others struggled to do so. In so doing, the conceptual model helps us to redefine students' constructions of their role within their communities based on varying degrees of self perceptions, perceived levels of expertise and awareness of the process of learning at university.

The nature of interactions between students and knowledgeable others such as lecturers is of particular interest in my research as a tool for understanding how learning and particular ways of thinking can be legitimised, normalised, and taken-for-granted. This is an important element of the internal processes of the transitions that students can experience at personal and professional level. Although this could

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be seen as part of the familiarisation to their new environment for the first year students (Rose, John and Baris), it seemed to be an issue for those in their second year. For example, Michael found the move away from what he was comfortable with in terms of writing practices and perceptions of his role towards finding alternative ways of thinking and making connections, particularly difficult. This has implications for learning and the meaning that studying at university has for them. I would argue that essential in bridging these transitions are epistemological and ontological interactions that provide the supporting structures for making the transitions. However, as outlined in previous research (Furlong *et al.* 2006, Macaro & Wingate, 2004, Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, 2000, Hodgkinson & Bloomer, 2000) social relations can affect the nature and direction of knowledge.

The ways in which these are formed in practice, as argued by Lave & Wenger (1991), emphasise issues of power, status and hierarchy. In this respect, the process of learning is not simply viewed as a smooth engagement with the practices of the academy where students can gradually achieve full membership. For some students this process of learning might reinforce their peripheral participation within their module-specific communities. In my view exploring learning through looking at the range of communities the students can encounter and the degree of membership they employ within them, allows me to suggest that for some students (such as John and Rose) participation in the student communities might provide them with the tools (sharing information, emotional support) and the confirmation to deal with and adjust to the process of learning at university.

I use the conceptual model I developed to identify more clearly three key interconnected characteristics that permeate students' learning trajectories (see Chapter 5, section 5.3):

1. I use the element of 'personal identity context' to focus on the individual student in terms of the factors that are present in the formation of identity and the ways in which these can influence their subsequent experiences at university. In other words, this element provides the initial context within which an individual student makes sense of their conceptions and beliefs about learning in relation to their self-perceptions and abilities. However, this is not a straightforward process. Factors such as turning points, whereby individuals break away from the normal pathway by taking a gap year or working; influence from significant groups such as school or family; or life experiences, indicate their impact on the construction of their identities and experiences before entering university.
2. I use the element of 'HE institutional context' to explore aspects such as ways of behaviour or social arrangements that students in their first year use to make sense of the practices of their new environment and their role within it. The way individuals talk about and interpret such practices illustrates the difficulties they experience in making sense of the explicit and implicit formats in thinking, assessment, or perceptions that play a role in their integration into their communities. This element acknowledges the existence and diversity of various and diverse communities within one institution.

3. The element of 'site of engagement' is central in the model as it emphasises the interactions between individuals and communities as those are enacted in practice. I consider in particular, the prolonged engagement in students' communities as reflected in their interactions with their disciplines, lecturers and other students. It highlights the different roles students adopt when they interact with others and the positive and negative implications these have for their self-regard, confidence and cognitive abilities. These implications also illustrate the tensions resulting from balancing different, often normative, views which are inherent in the engagement with learning.

The framework illustrates that understanding students' transitions involves three inter-related factors: the personal identity, the HE institutional context and site for engagement that form part of students' experiences of learning.

6.3.2. Limitations of the model and suggestions for further research

This research explores the experiences, perceptions and understandings of students in relation to their transitions and the resulting implications for the process of learning within one traditional university. Generally speaking, students' experiences of learning at university highlight the ways through which the culture of "pedagogy in operation" (James, 1998, p. 115) is embedded. Failing to do so can have implications for the process of learning especially when students are moving away from previously acquired habits and practices towards the development of more advanced skills. The University of Nottingham where I carried out the research needs to be considered carefully as it plays a role in the way that learning is

perceived, because the university is a “research led university” (Hannan & Silver, 2000, p. 45). The University engages in a number of projects that aim to enhance teaching and learning and the student experience (for example the Key Skills project) and claims to apply equal attention to research and teaching and to attract students from a wide range of backgrounds (Hannan & Silver, 2000). The inclusion of two additional campuses in China and Malaysia can be seen as evidence to support the University’s claim of addressing the diversity in the student profile. In addition, the university is a Russell group university, part of Universitas 21 and has four Centres for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CETL). Studying at a university where there is a great emphasis on research is likely to influence the way students perceive the university, their decision to study at Nottingham, the nature of the student body, the entry requirements and what it means to be a student at Nottingham.

In addition, in this study, the views of the lecturers are not investigated and emphasis is placed on exploring students’ experiences. Since the thesis emphasises the inter-relatedness of the personal identity, the HE institutional context and the site of engagement, the views and perceptions of other groups, such as lecturers, convenors, support services or induction groups are also important. Hence, further research in addressing the influence and role of these groups, would be beneficial for developing a deeper understanding of student transition in HE.

Some of the previous research in looking at student experience (Marton & Säljö, 1976, 1997, Ramsden, 1984, Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983, Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) has done so through the use of instruments based on questionnaires or a

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phenomenographic approaches that tend to describe specific tasks and approaches by particular students. Even though the importance of students' characteristics, school, prior experiences, perceptions and a range of contextual aspects have been examined, attention is solely paid to cognitive factors. While I recognise that cognitive factors are important, they provide only part of the picture. Therefore I suggest the inclusion of aspects such as personal and sociocultural factors, which can offer alternative ways of looking at student experience. In my research I have shown that these alternative ways include situating learning within a context that helps us to bring to the fore the range of transitions (external changes, internal processes, and step-changes) that students go through. Each of these transitions are not separate from each other, but are interconnected and illustrate the complex, dynamic and non-linear nature of students' learning trajectories. Evidence from my research data suggests that learning is closely linked to how learning identities evolve within the different communities that students become part of when studying at university. For example, my research findings indicate that during their first year students learn how to become students at university by distinguishing between practices and types of knowledge in previous educational establishments. As they move to the second year students need to re-familiarise themselves with what their role means in terms of the changes in perceptions, positions and attitudes by participating in the learning tasks of their communities of practice.

In summary, I argue that presenting students' experiences as a series of transitions that vary in nature and in meanings, adds to the existing literature by enabling us to look at the influence these transitions have on students' engagement with learning at

university. Research into student transitions in HE allows us to develop a clearer understanding of student engagement with their communities of practice.

In collecting the data, I relied on a combination of research methods that include individual semi-structured interviews along with non-participant observation and document analysis (see chapter 3, section 3.6.). More specifically, the participants provided individual accounts of their experiences. These accounts are based on their narrative reflections of their personal biographies as well as accounts of their perceptions of what was going on in the classroom. The interview data was reinforced by data from field notes and artifacts during the non-participant observations along with the collection of formal documents.

Another methodological issue concerns the process whereby I collected the data. I undertook the main data collection within one academic year to include observations, interviews and collection of various documents. As described in chapter 3, the participants were recruited at different times and were studying different modules. Because of the variations in the recruitment, modules and year of study, there were difficulties encountered in terms of consistency in the data collection. This is reflected in the interview process. The intention was that participants would where possible, be interviewed at least twice; once when they were recruited and again in their subsequent semester. However, this was not always the case because of factors such as students' workload or degree referrals. As a result, two of the participants were interviewed only once, one was interviewed twice in their first year, whilst one participant was interviewed more than twice.

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In turn because of the limitations in the interviews of some of the participants, sketching an overall picture of their profile through the collection of informal document data was not possible. Overall, these limitations point to the 'messiness' of carrying out 'real world research' (Robson, 1993, 2002) especially so within a qualitative research method where the selection of what information could and could not be included in the analysis cannot be planned entirely in advance. In fact, the degree of tensions, unpredictability, contradictions and diversity that I have experienced carrying out my research seems to me to be at the heart of qualitative research. More specifically, it made the examination of inter-relationships more difficult especially across and between cases. It would be useful for further research to consider time allocation for recruitment and data collection beforehand in more detail and to monitor this carefully throughout the data collection process.

While I am aware that the limitations outlined in this section need to be considered, it is also crucial to stress that my research allowed me to investigate in some detail how students defined and perceived their transitions to and within their university careers (external changes), the impact on their identity construction (internal processes), and the epistemological and ontological changes (step-changes). Equally, in my research I positioned these transitions within students' interactions with their communities of practice.

6.4. Implications for HE practice**6.4.1. Significance of the findings for HE practice**

This thesis focuses on students' accounts of their experiences in relation to how they cope with changes as a result of their interactions with their communities. As developed throughout the thesis, coping with change at different stages is at the heart of understanding the ways that students experience transitions to and in university. Change comes from interactions with various communities with different practices, expectations and pedagogies that students may have previously experienced. In this sense, change also draws from the disparity between expectations and reality (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

I would also argue that the different transitions that students can experience at university highlight the relation between two interlinked and possibly conflicting aspects, namely, the development of skills and the notion of support. Firstly, students at university are required to demonstrate criticality, time management and take responsibility for their learning. This highlights the notion of change in terms of who has to change, suggesting that the process is usually one-sided to imply student change rather than more structural changes in the pedagogy of learning and teaching. "Traditional modes of teaching such as lectures and question and answer seminars remain, but this is not as significant as the fact that the process of learning in the classroom shows some inflexibility" (Montgomery & McDowell. 2004, p. 76).

Within such a context students are encouraged to learn to imitate processes and activities modelled by the lecturer, which can be carried out outside the learning

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environment, for example in group meetings. The structured nature of learning coupled with the density and pressure of assessment can limit the degree of flexibility and creativity in the learning process. Students who appear in the end to complete the learning task demonstrate a sense of confusion towards the purpose of learning and at times appear to struggle to adjust to the operationalisation of more sophisticated concepts. Secondly, and related to the previous point, my research reveals that in trying to develop their skills further and engage with the learning process, the nature and level of support students need varies. For example, gaining familiarity with the practices of their subject involves engaging with their community in relation to understanding the terminology used or getting access to the resources referred to in the classroom.

This support, as my research findings have revealed, can be related to the difficulties that students have in bridging the gap between different educational establishments in their transition to and within university, in balancing different roles whilst making their transition from the first to the second year and in understanding the nature of their learning communities. Regarding the preparation for university, previous research (Haggis & Pouget, 2002, Booth, 1997, Watt & Patterson, 1997) has acknowledged the need for the provision of stronger bridges between secondary and tertiary sectors and seems to concentrate on students' initial transition to university. Whilst I agree with these recommendations, I would also suggest that my research findings complement previous research and indicate that equal attention should be paid to students' transitions from their first to second year. More specifically, my findings suggest that especially in the second year of study, students might struggle to establish a link between their personal (academic) interest and engagement with

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learning in their chosen subject. I would argue that this finding, whilst not surprising, supports the need to provide an environment which is challenging, in terms of the tasks with which it presents the students and yet makes explicit the practices and standards the students need to make sense of in relation to the content of their module.

Additionally, it is possible to develop my tripartite model into a tool which university teachers can use for identifying the importance that students' multiplicity of roles, the risks and uncertainty involved in transferring from one year to the next, or from one semester to the next, and the social and emotional components of learning, can have on how students engage with the process of learning. This model might be useful for HE institutions in ensuring that such information is available at both macro- and micro-levels so that students can be supported, not just academically, but in terms of a more holistic approach.

Coping with changes in this respect relates to the notion of learning itself. Simons (1999) identifies three stages of moving in learning – new learning, later learning and practical learning – and recognises the difficulties in progressing to each stage. Lave & Wenger (1991) argue for support through participation in communities of practice to enable the learner to move from the periphery to the centre while being supported and challenged. Defining, however, what can be a conducive environment to learning is not an easy task. With regard to my findings, the lecturer was described as affecting the way the participants made connections with their environment, even though there were variations in their descriptions relating to pace, the provision of

sufficient information, understanding of students' needs and enthusiasm. At an individual level, the use of student mentors who students can ask for advice and support can also contribute to the creation of an environment that encourages students to make connections and cope with the changes they are confronted with as they negotiate between different ideas and practices.

Linked to the above point is the importance of social interactions. Past research on the area of social interactions (Salomon & Perkins, 1998) as well as collaborative learning, especially in the area of e-learning (Laurillard, 2006, McConnell, 2006) emphasise the importance of collaboration as a pedagogical tool that has to be promoted rather than expected to happen. Rogoff (1990) stresses that social collaboration as evidenced in the creation of 'student communities' allows for the exploration of knowledge and practices. My findings resonate with this argument as students described collaborative learning experiences as beneficial especially when engaged in dialogue and in the exchange of ideas, since they had to persuade and convince others of the validity of their arguments.

Even though the participants agreed that social networking is not part of their degrees they emphasised its importance in helping them to cope with the changes they experience in their transitions. This raises questions about the nature of the learning environment. "The first pit-fall is the tendency to assume that social interaction will occur just because the environment makes it possible" (Kreijns *et al.* 2002, p. 9, cited in McConnell, 2006, p. 92). I would suggest that this is true for social interactions across different modules and disciplines. In order for students to

benefit from the development of social relations, this needs to be reflected in the pedagogical approaches and strategies adopted by the institution and individual teachers. Such activities could be further reinforced throughout courses at university rather than being sporadically located among specific modules. Developing further teaching methods and pedagogies that reinforce and support the integration of social collaboration through reflective learning, group work or peer and self-assessment can be seen as a way forward.

6.5. Final Reflections

The central aim of this thesis has been to understand the ways in which students describe how they cope with change. In essence I have been looking at students' transitions and how these influence students' interactions with their communities of practice. In exploring and analysing students' perceptions of these changes I have come to view them as resulting from the interactions between personal identity, HE institutional context and site of engagement that influence student identity formation. This has in turn led me to the development of the tripartite model. The findings of my research are based on the perceptions of ten diverse undergraduate students within one traditional HE institution.

The picture is a complex one that cannot be reduced to the contribution of a single factor such as deciding to go to university, but rather it is important to stress the ways in which learning involves participation in the practices of a range of communities that can pull students in different directions. The accounts of my participants illustrate how the process of being a student at university and reconciling

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conflicting discourses can involve painful decisions and epistemological and ontological changes which mean that transitions often incorporate affective memories with positive and negative connotations.

My research findings reveal that the interests, perceptions and skills of students and how they interact with those of the lecturers or their various communities are emphasised in the process of transitions. From my research, it has become clear that acknowledging and respecting that the transitions into and within HE can at times be disruptive and other times be slow, can highlight why some are viewed more positively than others. In this sense, I would argue that the development of a model for examining and analysing the impact of a range of transitions, as I have illustrated throughout this thesis, is crucial, as it potentially allows us to address supporting transitions in a more systematic way. In addition, I would suggest that such an approach takes into account that students' experiences at university can incorporate points of tension and confusion, points for reflection, and points that maybe disjointed. In so doing, it rejects notions of learning and transitions as linear processes, and emphasises the dynamic and relational role of learning in relation to individuals and contexts.

The social situatedness of learning allows the portrayal of the interconnections of personal and social identities and the processes that influence the development and formation of these identities. I have used the model for understanding students' experiences of transitions in HE to explore the way that students develop and the difficulties they encounter when they move to university. The model also emphasises

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that perceptions and positions are understood in relation to the social interactions that structure the nature of learning within which experiences of transitions are located.

Finally, I would like to suggest that understanding the ways that students cope with changes and the implications such changes have for their transitions is crucial, as it relates to the variety of ways they engage with learning. Their engagement is linked to the interactions between individuals and learning communities. During these interactions students are exposed to different ideas and practices. These interactions in turn can affect learning in terms of the perceptions (ideas, thoughts, and beliefs) and applications (use of tools, strategies, and skills) that are practised and valued. In this regard, I would argue that my research brings to the fore the important role of a range of learning communities when students cope with changes whilst trying to engage with the learning process. Overall, my conceptual model stresses the need for developing a range of dialogic processes between individual students and the communities they form part of as a means to support student learning and related transitions.

This thesis contributes to understanding the complex nature of students' transitions and the implications for the process of learning. While taking into account previous research, I would argue that my research aims to illuminate ways to portray the multifaceted and non-linear aspects of the transitions that students can go through. My thesis raises additional questions regarding the nature of these transitions in relation to the role of others such as lecturers, support services, or module-specific communities in supporting students in their transitions. However it also provides a

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model, which emphasizes the dynamic and interlinked nature of the 'personal identity context', the 'HE institutional context', and the 'site of engagement' context that allow us to understand the way students make sense, adjust to, and resolve the changes that the transition to a new environment can imply.

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Appendix I

University of Nottingham - Statement of Research Ethics

Information about completing the form

From September 2004, all research students who have not yet begun their fieldwork/data collection and who will not be beginning their fieldwork before November 2004 will be required to have their plans for data collection approved by the Research Ethics Coordinator, on behalf of the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

In order to gain approval, you will be required to complete a 'Statement of Research Ethics' form, which must be signed by yourself and your supervisor/lead supervisor, and submitted to the Postgraduate Research Student Office, together with:

- (1) a brief statement of your research aims or questions and proposed methods of data generation;
- (2) written materials (e.g. letters) that you are planning to use to gain access to prospective research participants; and
- (3) a draft consent form to be used with prospective participants.

Please note that not all students will be able to tick every box on the Statement of Research Ethics form. However, where you are not able to tick any of the boxes, you will need to provide a convincing explanation in order to have your research plans approved. Most statements relate to the British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational research (2004), which have been adopted by the School of Education.

You should submit your 'Statement of Research Ethics' form at least two full months prior to the planned commencement of any fieldwork, in order to allow sufficient time to have these approved (in some cases resubmission may be necessary). Forms may be submitted by the last day of each month. They should be returned to you by the end of the second full week of the following month.

You must not undertake any data collection until your 'Statement of Research Ethics' has been approved.

This does not apply to those students who have already begun data collection or for whom plans are already in place to begin fieldwork before November 2004.

LEARNING WITHIN ONE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What is the study about?

This study is part of a doctorate study which is concerned with understanding the learning experiences of undergraduate students, as experienced, perceived and understood by them, during their years of study within one institution of HE. It is hoped that the study will inform future developments in teaching and learning activities for both students and staff.

What would it involve if I volunteer?

Each of the students who will express an interest in participating in the study will be interviewed at least once during the current term (follow up interviews will be negotiated between the participants and the researcher). Interviews where possible will take place within a location of student's choice and will be scheduled at the mutual convenience of the student and the researcher. With the permission of the student the interview sessions will be audio-recorded. Upon request, participants will have access to their interview transcripts.

The interview will invite students to reflect on prior experiences of learning along with any influential factors and/or individuals impacting on this. Expectations, assumptions, and conceptions of the learning process will also be explored. In addition, students will be asked to comment upon their learning strategies, skills and interaction with others within the learning setting.

What's in it for me?

Many students find the opportunity to reflect on their experiences within a completely confidential and non-judgmental environment very useful. Involvement with the study also provides an insight into the 'real' research world.

Interested?

If you would like to participate then please email me at: texrk2@nottingham.ac.uk or you can see me at the end of your class.

Please feel free to speak to me about any questions you may have either through email or face-to-face.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Regina

PhD student in Education

CONSENT LETTER

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study of undergraduate students' learning experiences at the University of Nottingham. Interviews should take about an hour and will be recorded with your permission.

This letter assures you of complete confidentiality and anonymity meaning nothing said by you in this research will be repeated to other individual(s).

In addition, I will adopt a completely non-judgemental and non-evaluative approach.

Finally as your participation is voluntary you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give an explanation.

Please sign below if you are happy with the way the research has been explained to you and if you still wish to take part.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

Signed:

Date:

Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Research

- **Myself**
- **Ethics/Confidentiality**
- **Tape recorder**

Demographic

- **Age – Nationality**
- **Course – Year of study**
- **Family background**

University Experiences

- **Prior experiences – when and where**
- **Pressures/Influences – Internal/External**
- **Criteria for Nottingham – why, choice of universities**
- **Transition from school to university**
- **Expectations v Reality – course (typical day), learning atmosphere**

Learning

- **Understanding/conception of learning in HE?**
- **Do you prefer lectures, seminars or individual tutorials? Why?**
- **In which of the above do you learn the best? Why?**
- **Favourite lecturer – Why (examples of teaching styles and methods)?**
- **How do you go about different learning occasions (e.g. revising/studying)?**
- **Interactions/Relations with others (e.g. friends, teachers, outsiders)? Social learning – context?**
- **Obstacles – What? Why? How tackled?**
- **Role in learning process – student/lecturer/others?**

Reflection

- **How has your learning experience been so far? Feelings**
- **Has University helped your learning? In what way(s)?**
- **Differences in person and way you learn? Alterations or changes, noticeable or otherwise (examples)?**
- **Reflection on learning styles/methods: which were best, for which occasions and why (interviewee to give examples)?**
- **Perception of self/learner – (Identity)?**

Conclusion

- **Thank you**
- **Reiterate confidentiality**

Follow-up Interview Schedule

Choice of module

- Criteria for choosing your modules and especially the current ones?
- Contrast between current, past modules, and one observing?
- Are you happy with your choice?
- What do you think makes a good module?

Lecture

- What do you think of the format, organisation and presentation of the lecture?
- What are your expectations of the lecture? Are they different now? Why?
- Does the lecturer and teaching pace impact your learning? In what ways?
- Do you do any reading before or after the lecture (what, aim)?
- Do you find PPP, handouts useful and effective? In what ways?
- Does lecturer clarify/talk about concepts that you don't know efficiently?

Seminar

- What do you think of the seminar (pace, aim, knowledge)?
- Do you feel you need to have some background knowledge on the topic?
- Reading list – too many books or few key texts?
- Did you find the activities (presentations, debates) effective? In what ways? How do you go about them?
- Participation and level of engagement in current module?

Note taking

- In what format do you take notes (text, table)?
- How/when do you use them?

Essay writing

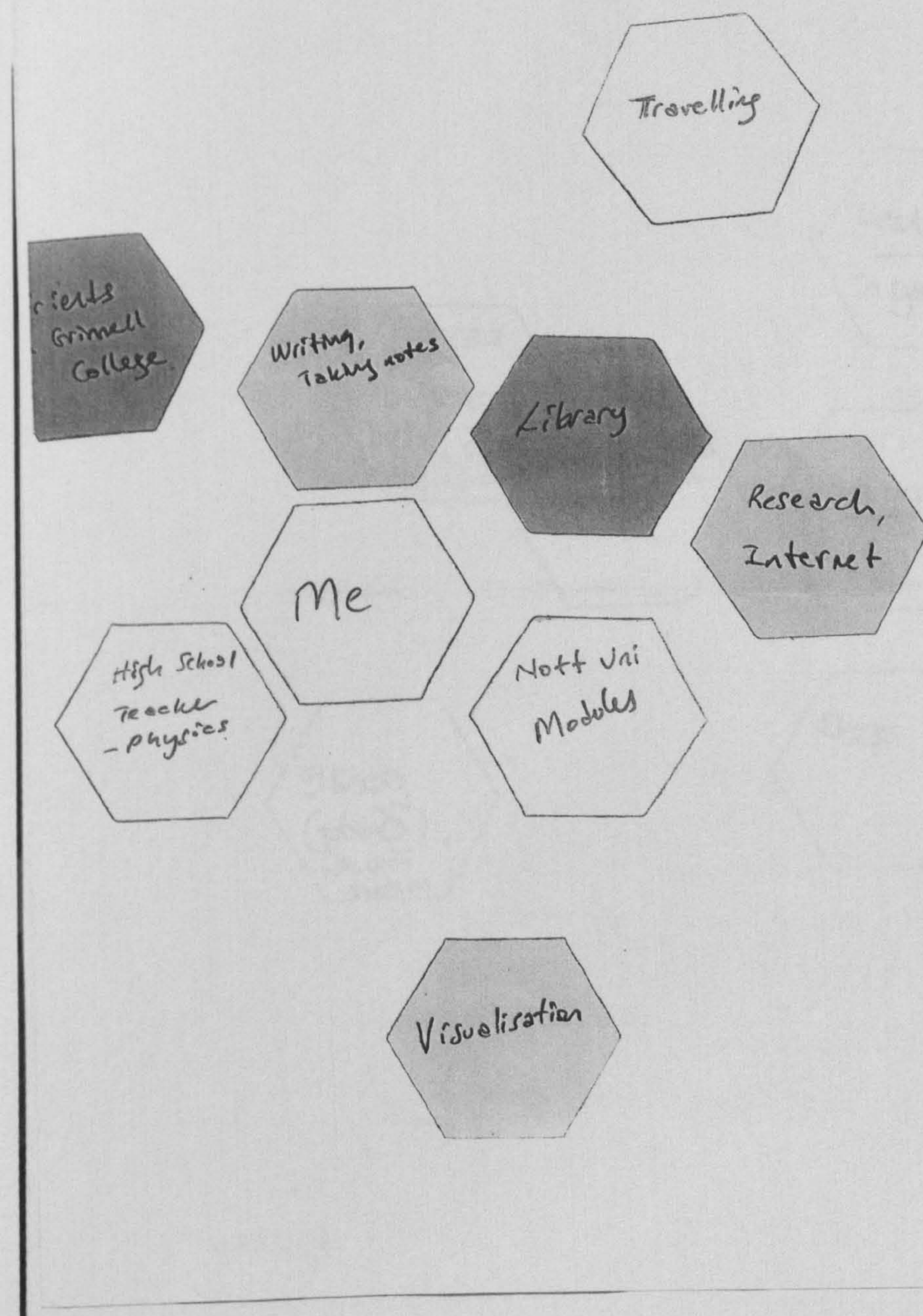
- When do you choose your topic – selection criteria?
- How do you go about reading for it – what do you look for?
- Typical day of essay writing routine (where, how long, process)?
- Feedback – what form and how do you use it?
- Helpful for future essays – in what ways?

Learning

- Do you discuss with others about the lecture? If so when?
- How productive do you find being in the lecture or seminar?
- Impact of size and familiarity of class on learning?
- Do you think having done the compulsory modules grounded your understanding?
- What makes a good/bad student?
- If I was to start the course what would you advise me?
- Skills – Knowledge and time management?

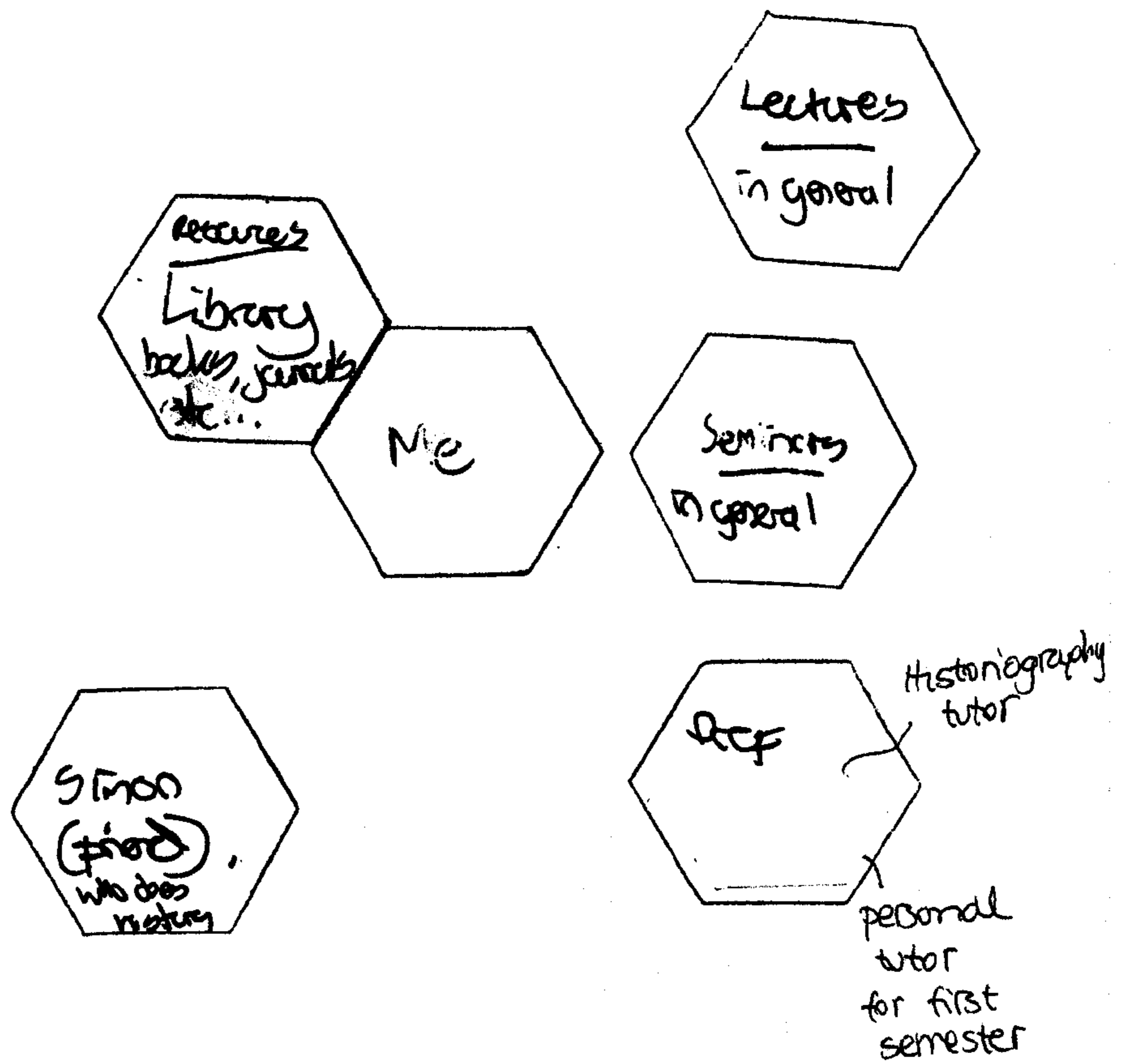
Appendix VI

Baris's magnetic board



Appendix VII

Michael's magnetic board



Handout given by one group's classroom presentation

To what extent did Iraqi independence remain circumscribed by British influence after 1932?

- 1930 Treaty of Alliance was to shape Anglo-Iraqi relations until Hashemite monarchy overthrown in 1958.
- Treaty paved the way for the admission of Iraq to League of Nations in 1932.
- Next generation of Iraqi people saw continued existence of the treaty as great a servitude as mandate had been.
- Resentment acts a catalyst for anti-British and nationalist unrest which reached its peak in 1941 with the rise of Rashid 'Ali al-Kailani.
- Iraq's existence as an independent state begins in an ambiguous way as British presence still as visible as before with most British officials and advisers retaining their posts. RAF still had control of air bases at Hibbaniyya and Shu'aiba.
- King Faisal dies in 1933, replaced by Ghazi who dies in 1939 when Abd al-Ilah is appointed.
- Relations between Britain and Iraq further complicated with outbreak of World War Two in 1939, with the growing number of British demands reminding those in government of more controversial aspects of the 1930 Treaty.
- Nuri al-sa'id the Iraqi prime minister was quick to comply with Britain's demands and assured Britain of Iraq's full support.
- Golden Square (effective arbiter of power in Iraq) believes that Axis powers were more likely to be victorious and so should therefore do nothing to provoke them by aiding the British.
- 1940 dispute arises concerning British requests to transfer troops through Iraq.
- Following dismissal of Rashid 'Ali, the Regent asked Taha al-Hashimi to form a government and although initially enjoyed support of the Golden Square, when he threatened their power, they decide to move against Regent and al-Hashimi.
- Rashid 'Ali put a motion before parliament deposing the Regent and replacing him with Sharif Sharaf as aware of need to authorize actions of the armed forces and of need to persuade Britain that no fundamental change had occurred.
- After Iraqi army refuses to move troops overlooking the British air base at Hibbaniyya, British forces attack on May 2nd 1941 and end immediate crisis.
- Abd al-Ilah restored as monarch and Nuri al-Sa'id and his allies return to Baghdad to reassert control.