

Narratives of being: A longitudinal study of Physiotherapy students

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Abstract

This narrative study sought to explore Physiotherapy students' stories of their undergraduate experiences to gain an insight into the process of becoming and being a student. It presents findings gathered from a three-year longitudinal study in which the central aim was to listen to students' stories told in their own words over a series of narrative interviews throughout their degree programme. As such I have presented some of the personal and social circumstances that can influence students' experiences during the process of becoming and being a Physiotherapy student. The seven students who volunteered to be included in the study were interviewed on at least five occasions and at each interview they were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences as a series of 'episodes' beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate.

Analysis of the stories revealed that whilst each individual's experience of university life was multi-layered, for each student a specific orientation dominated their re-telling of 'being a student' across their interviews. Thus the stories are presented in relation to these orientations: peer support (two students); financial difficulties (two students); learner self-direction (two students); or personal difficulties (one student). In addition, I have considered the narratives in terms of Heidegger's (1926/62) concepts of 'being' and 'time' to inform the analysis and interpretation of the data: to present a more insightful exploration of the students' experiences.

These temporal narratives offer an insight into what university life was like for those undergoing it, providing a greater understanding of what 'being a student' meant for these particular students. The study demonstrates that 'becoming' and 'being' a student are about students developing a sense of themselves and of belonging to an institution. Ultimately a higher education is necessarily a process of becoming and as such can be considered as a transformation of 'being' as students develop over time.

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'Because stories are important'

Pratchett, 1992:8

Chapter one – Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

This study explores Physiotherapy students' stories of their undergraduate experiences, and in particular investigates how these experiences impact upon their 'being a student'. It presents the stories of seven students told in their own words over a series of interviews throughout their degree programme and running in parallel with them is an eighth: my own story as a developing research student.

The study began with an initial interest in Physiotherapy students' learning experiences; I wanted to explore what 'being a student' meant to the students and how this influenced their experiences. An underpinning intention of the study was to use the findings to further develop learning and teaching on the faculty programmes I taught on and add to the knowledge base on students' experiences. At the outset there was a specific focus on the first year of students' experiences with an emphasis on the transition into higher education, academic engagement and factors associated with attrition; and the study was initially designed as a sequential exploratory mixed methods study. However, during the first round of data collection and preliminary reading my understanding of concepts of 'being' matured, as I developed as a researcher. I realised that I was attempting to explore 'being a student' solely from a pedagogical and institutional perspective rather than acknowledging that for the student it is a broad and changing multidimensional concept that varies over time.

I was not alone in this initial focus; as stated by Bryson and Hardy (2012), many staff focus on academic engagement as students who are academically engaged do achieve good outcomes. However, whilst reading my own and others' studies on student experiences, I was struck by the way in which most of these studies fragmented the students' experiences by only looking at a particular snapshot in time of the students' overall experience, and/or targeting a particular aspect of that experience. The majority of the studies I read were limited by short time frames as they followed agendas set by institutions, both providers and purchasers, and whilst they valued the students' voice as much as possible, I felt the journey that students undertook during their undergraduate studies, was essentially underplayed. Within these studies, as described by Solomonides et al. (2012) there were numerous interpretations of student engagement – dichotomous, engagement as a measured quantity, categorical, naive and multidimensional – all on occasions interpreted and applied in a number of different ways. I sensed that in order to gain an insight into 'being a student' I needed to reflect on the different dimensions of student engagement and put them together to form a coherent whole.

Thus as I began to explore the students' stories in this study, I began to question my focus on academic engagement and the short time frame of the original sequential exploratory mixed methods study. I believed that to explore 'being a student' I would have to explore not only academic engagement but also what underpins and influences it; I needed to revisit

the study design and plan a much more in-depth, longitudinal qualitative study. I believed that the proposed study would present what Carter (2004) described as an academic/professional discourse of the students' experiences, with little of the individual emotional journeys of the students themselves. After a period of reflection and literature review, the design of the study was subsequently adapted and it became a three-year longitudinal study utilising narrative interviews. The quantitative survey element of the original study design was replaced with further rounds of narrative interviews. This redesign provided an opportunity for the students to narrate their stories over time, to locate their voices as their experiences developed and allowed me to access experiences because 'stories reveal truths about human experience' (Reissman, 2002:10); to identify what factors influenced student engagement and their learning trajectories during their experiences of 'being a student'. Thus the central goal was to listen to students' stories, told in their own words over a series of interviews throughout their degree programme. The focus was on exploring the students' sense of themselves, the challenges they encountered and their learning, recognising the importance of the students themselves in the context of their experiences and capturing lived experience beyond the academic discourse.

To explain this research journey the introduction and background chapter of the thesis provides readers with an overview of my personal location and an explanation of the personal research narrative that led to me pursuing this research area. In addition it outlines the aims of the study

and contextualises the work by describing the change in the methodology and by reviewing and discussing some of the literature relevant to the study. Thus it aims to provide a back story to my interpretation and analysis of the students' narratives.

Chapter two provides an overview of the chosen methods and methodology that guided the study and an explanation of my philosophical orientation of pragmatism which has influenced the study. Chapter three introduces the findings and presents the seven student narratives under four broad orientations. Chapter four provides an analysis and discussion of the data in relation to relevant literature with specific reference to the philosophy of Heidegger (1926/62). The final chapter concludes the dissertation, summarises the findings and provides final reflections including how the work has influenced my way of working and the potential to transfer the findings to other settings.

Within this introductory chapter I attempt to make apparent my reasons for undertaking the study and how I came to identify the specific aims. The purpose of the study is articulated and I explain how the study is underpinned by my personal concerns about students' learning experiences.

1.2 Back story

Prior to beginning this study I had worked as a practising Physiotherapist for twelve years and as a Physiotherapy lecturer within Manchester

Metropolitan University for seven years. This gave me experience of both supervising students on clinical placement and of designing and leading taught sessions on campus. My aim as both a clinician and lecturer was to enhance student learning; I wanted to gain a greater understanding of students' experiences so that I could create a learning environment that stimulated and inspired learning. Central to my teaching was the goal of engaging and motivating students; I wanted to encourage thinking and make learning exciting. I always put students' perspectives at the centre of my teaching and as my teaching experience broadened, I began to research students' experiences with a focus on exploring academic engagement (including some of the personal and social influences involved in 'being a student'). Most of all I aspired to provide an environment that encouraged students to be academically engaged with their programme and have the very best learning experience. I believed that in order to enhance my teaching and thus the students' learning experiences I needed to gain a greater insight into their on-going, everyday experiences. This insight would subsequently enable me to understand how their learning requirements changed over time, and facilitate being responsive to their needs as social and personal transformation took place during their undergraduate studies.

During my career as a lecturer I have completed several projects researching the experiences of undergraduate healthcare students and my choice of topic was thus significant, on both a personal and professional level. These research projects have focused on exploring

undergraduate healthcare students' experiences and identified how different factors had an impact on their academic engagement and attrition.

My first significant research study was an MSc by research: a mixed methods, sequential exploratory study that explored first year students' perceptions and experiences during their first term at university, with a focus on online learning resources. Data analysis of the student interviews and survey, used within the project, identified that some of the students struggled to engage fully with their studies and that they had difficulties adapting to the requirements of degree-level study (Hamshire et al., 2009). Following this study my second project was another mixed methods study that investigated student transition to higher education and their perceptions of the institutional induction process. This second study identified that some students found the transition to degree-level working problematic as they developed as autonomous learners, and that induction needed to foster both peer and staff relationships (Hamshire and Cullen, 2013).

My third significant study, an NHS-funded project, was also a mixed methods, sequential exploratory study that explored factors that contributed to student attrition at nine universities in the North West of England. This study gathered information from both staff and students and identified that some students struggled with social, academic and personal issues throughout their undergraduate education (Hamshire et

al., 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). This project included students at a variety of different stages within their studies and, along with my on-going practice as a lecturer and research student, gave me greater awareness and understanding of the students' perceptions and experiences of their undergraduate studies.

Although each of these three research projects had answered some of my research questions and helped me develop as both a lecturer and research student, in essence I believed that I was only at the beginning of a journey of understanding. Whilst I do not wish to devalue this research, I was sensitive to the fact that whilst I had gained some insights into student learning, induction and attrition I had only achieved a narrow 'academic' interpretation of undergraduate students' experiences whilst highlighting several further issues and prompting further questions. From my work as a lecturer and this previous research, I was aware that some students struggled during their first year and the initial transition to higher education, and that personal and social concerns impacted upon students' learning experiences (see Yorke, 1999; Tinto, 1999; Hamshire et al., 2013; Bryson and Hardy, 2012). I therefore wanted to further explore students' experiences and the idea for the initial research proposal for this study was developed.

At the same time as I was developing my research proposal, higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) was undergoing unprecedented change (Browne, 2010; Leitch, 2006) and universities were adjusting to

meet the needs of both national and international students, within a competitive market and a new student finance scheme. Higher education was being marketed and repositioned for the learning economy (Barnett, 2007) and the long-term impacts of factors such as tuition fees of up to £9,000 per year; income-contingent student loans and targeted bursaries on recruitment, widening participation and attrition were unknown.

Initial reports indicated that there were significantly fewer people applying to university in the first year following the introduction of higher fees (IPC, 2012); however, it was too early to draw any firm conclusions from this in order to make future plans. Nevertheless it was clear that to be successful during these massive changes (Barnett, 2007) universities had to develop and deliver programmes that met the needs of both national and international students, with a focus on the quality of the student experience and enhancing the educational experience of all (Haigh, 2004). Such developments should then improve student retention and completion, issues that have been highlighted as a key measure of success, and attached to state funding.

Essentially universities were therefore constantly developing in a dynamic way to adapt to this changing environment and, as advocated by Barnett (2011), needed to explore what it was to 'be' a university in a contemporary world whilst considering the type of institution they wanted to 'be', with 'being a university' considered as an on-going process of 'becoming' as universities were constantly developing (Barnett, 2011).

Consequently, 'being' a university is always unfinished business as institutions adapt to changing policy and politics, both local and global (Barnett, 2011). Future possibilities needed to be considered in terms of financial, material, intellectual and ethical circumstances taking into account both pragmatic conditions and imaginative possibilities (Barnett, 2011).

I was also conscious from my previous research projects that Health Profession education programmes were considered to be challenging and time-intensive, and that for some students they could also be both emotionally and academically stressful. Physiotherapy students have to master detailed anatomical and pathological curricula at the same time as completing a minimum number of 1000 placement hours specified by the accrediting professional body (the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy). Factors that students identified in my previous research as impacting on their academic engagement included long placement travelling distances, minimal bursaries, unmet expectations and shorter holiday periods than the majority of the student population (see Hamshire et al. 2011, 2012, 2013.) These demands can lead to some students experiencing stress during their studies (Bowden, 2008; Brown and Edelman, 2000); sometimes they could also ultimately lead to attrition (Hamshire et al., 2011), as some students struggled to balance 'being a student' with their other life roles. I therefore began this research study with the goal of adding to the understanding of students' academic engagement and the development of the Physiotherapy programme at Manchester

Metropolitan University by contributing to the research on students' undergraduate experiences. Thus, whilst it was hoped that the findings would be of relevance and transferable to other higher education settings the focus was strongly on Physiotherapy students.

1.3 The initial study design

This study, as already indicated, began with my concerns about, and interest in, students' undergraduate experiences within my own institution; I wanted to explore what 'being a student' meant to my students, how they constructed their experiences and how everyday occurrences shaped their experiences. Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is a large, campus-based, post-1992 institution which attracts a diverse student population with wide-ranging expectations. Students on the Physiotherapy programme are from a range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds and as such their individual needs are not dissimilar to students across the breadth of the wider sector. The curriculum is broad and varied and excellence in teaching and learning is therefore fundamental to ensure that we provide learning opportunities for all and make learning flexible and accessible.

Thus the initial purpose of the thesis was to explore students' transitions to higher education with an emphasis on academic engagement and factors associated with attrition, using data collection methods that focused on the students' perceptions and experiences. The central aim was to explore students' expectations by exploring their opinions and

beliefs, described in their own words, to identify the factors that influenced learning experiences and ultimately programme attrition. To achieve this, the study had a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data for a comprehensive analysis (Creswell, 2003). This design utilised narrative-type interviews to explore in-depth the perceptions and experiences of a small number of students in the qualitative phase and a survey with a larger sample in the quantitative phase so the results could be generalised to the study population (Creswell, 2003). I initially considered this to be the most appropriate methodology for the study, as I believed that the use of more than one mode of data collection would allow me to develop a more complete picture of the students' experiences, and allow for greater generalisability of the findings. Following ethics approval of this design I began the study with an in-depth exploration of the research literature.

1.3.1 Initial literature review

Student 'engagement' is a widely used term but is interpreted and applied in a number of different ways within the higher education literature (Solomonides et al., 2012). As explored in Newbery (2012) there has recently been an increase in both the diversity and number of those interested in student engagement, driven by the changes impacting on contemporary higher education. Therefore in an attempt to focus my initial review of the research on healthcare student experiences and engagement, I began with a review of the literature on student retention. My rationale was based on a consideration that those students that

completed their programme and achieved academic success would inevitably be academically engaged, and as stated by Foster et al. (2012) retention can be considered to be the baseline from which all other engagement begins. Thus the concept of engagement underpins student learning in terms of both retention and persistence (Nelson et al., 2012) and student success and attrition are perceived as a worldwide concern (see Torenbeek et al., 2010) with an average 10% of students in the UK leaving higher education in their first year (National Audit Office, 2007).

Within this literature the dominant discourse of academic engagement and 'being a student' related to increasing student retention as there is a substantial financial cost associated with attrition from healthcare programmes currently in the form of bursaries and clinical training costs. Recent reports estimated that the costs of attrition in UK nurse education could be as high as £99 million a year (Waters, 2008) and in the present climate of austerity this funding is likely to be an increasingly contentious and potentially political issue as institutions compete for students and resources. In addition, although attrition occurred across the entire higher education sector, there was a particular significance associated with programmes responsible for training the health and social care professionals of the future; in particular there was concern over wasted resources (Prymachuk et al., 2009) and the eventual impact upon health professions' workforce planning and targets (Hamshire et al., 2012).

A recent report on student retention from the National Audit Office (2007) highlighted several key factors that influenced success and attrition including personal reasons, lack of integration, lack of preparedness and financial difficulties. My previous research had also identified that a broad range of factors could impact on students' learning experiences; the most often cited factors across studies that contribute to lack of student success and attrition were personal issues, financial problems and academic difficulties (see Hamshire et al., 2011, 2012, 2013 Glossop, 2001). However, such broad categories made it difficult to ascertain the exact impact of such factors on 'being a student' for individual students and consideration also needed to be given to the impact of early life factors that help to build individual learning trajectories and set expectations and initial education experiences (Gorard et al., 2007). To me, it appeared that the categories identified within the majority of the literature seemed to homogenise individual experiences with little acknowledgement that each student's experience was unique. In addition I believed that there was effectively a fragmentation of the students' experiences and thematic splitting of students' stories.

What became apparent to me as I read the literature was that understanding the factors that impact on an individual student's learning experiences and thus engagement could be challenging, and there were a number of methodological difficulties in recognising how multiple factors compound and influence each other over time to lead to either retention or attrition. For example, categorising factors into groups such as

'academic difficulties' and 'personal factors' can often be vague and misleading, and therefore disguise the underpinning circumstances. A student who gives 'academic difficulties' as a reason for their disengagement or desire to leave may just be focusing on the consequences of on-going personal difficulties, or they may have been experiencing difficulties in their academic work due to paid work commitments. Factors may not always be mutually exclusive and in some cases causal relationships between factors may exist. For example, a student's family difficulties may have been an underlying factor that led to an assessment failure (Glossop, 2001). The individual, everyday reality of 'being a student' was thus overshadowed by broad factors that were being used to describe students 'en masse' (Barnett, 2007).

Whilst not devaluing this research or the researchers, in accord with Carter (2004) I thought that this research was only part of the research that was needed in this area. I believed that it was likely that within these studies some students could have experienced a number of interrelated factors which led them to struggle to manage their learning and academic studies and that it was therefore difficult to capture the complexity of individual stories within research projects that sample students on single points in time. Some of this research was essentially generic and whilst broad factors and circumstances could be consistent, individual experience is not, as students will have different orientations to education and different concepts of 'being a student' (Britton and Baxter, 1999). Reasons for lack of student engagement are likely to be a mix of

personal, institutional, social and financial factors and it is important to consider that students in similar circumstances may come to different decisions and have varying degrees of academic success (Urwin et al., 2010). Current UK research suggests that there are no direct links between a range of factors and a successful transition (Harvey et al., 2006); however, numerous studies have found that students withdraw from the first year if they feel they are not integrated academically and/or socially (Harvey et al., 2006). Essentially 'being a student' can be problematic if it does not fit easily with a student's personal and social circumstances.

What became clear from my reading of, and reflection on, the literature was that student success and on-going engagement were complex phenomena and related to a number of factors such as the education and social development of the student prior to enrolling; the social and academic engagement between the student and the institution; and the commitment of the student to the institution (Urwin et al., 2010). In addition, as explored in Solomonides et al. (2012), engagement was not a static phenomenon but could vary over time relative to both academic and outside influences. Thus although this research on student attrition and retention provided some information on broad factors that could influence students' experiences, I felt that a fuller consideration of what 'being a student' was needed; to begin with an examination of the process of 'becoming a student' and the personal and social determinants that influenced the process was required. Although there was a

considerable body of research on student retention, as stated by Palmer et al. (2009), few have related this to the actual experiences of individual students or, as explored by Christie et al. (2004), given consideration to why similar circumstances can be bearable for one student but not another. As stated by Barnett (2007:8) 'Of the individual student with his or her own challenges and struggles, we gain little sense.'

I began to question my research design and believed that my planned focus on factors associated with student academic engagement and attrition could only partially explain how particular difficulties – personal, social or academic – impacted on experiences of 'being a student' (Christie et al., 2004). A change of study design, with a more specific focus on individual students, and their own 'challenges and struggles' (Barnett, 2007:8) was needed to gain a more sophisticated understanding of students' individual emotional experiences.

I was concerned that if I continued with the planned study, focusing on academic engagement and attrition, I would be artificially fragmenting students' experiences and presenting an academic/professional discourse (Carter, 2004). I needed to explore how individual experiences developed over time and I started to read further literature, beginning with a review of the literature on 'becoming a student' and the initial transition to higher education. I had a growing awareness that reviewing student retention and academic success required consideration of the whole student life cycle from open days right through to graduation and beyond.

I therefore began to reflect on whether or not my research design was appropriate to explore individual experiences and I had a sense of dissatisfaction with the literature I was reading.

1.3.2 Student transitions literature review

According to Palmer et al. (2009) becoming a student is a gradual process that begins during the initial period of induction at the start of the first year (as students become accustomed to the higher education environment), and encompasses many kinds of change. It can be understood as part of the continuous process of identity construction and involves both a personal and social transformation (Britton and Baxter, 1999) as students make meaningful connections (Palmer et al., 2009). This process of becoming and transition into the higher education environment has been repeatedly identified as problematic for some students as there is a loss of continuity (see Palmer et al., 2009; Scanlon et al., 2007; Thomas, 2002; Yorke, 1999), and the literature has identified that a wide variety of personal, social and academic factors can impact on students' learning experiences, probability of academic success and ultimately on attrition at this time (see Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1999; Yorke, 1999). Thus the issue of first year student engagement has always been critically significant and has recently become a focus for international discussion (Nelson et al., 2012).

The learning transition to higher education has both a social and personal dimension and some students can struggle with both social and academic

integration during the transition (Harvey et al., 2006). Healthcare students have the added complexity of making a simultaneous transition to 'become a professional' as they learn the occupational role associated with their chosen profession (Holland, 2001). This dual role as both student and worker can be difficult and their exact status as 'learners' within both university and practice environments needs to be made explicit (Holland, 2001).

Holdsworth and Morgan (2005) state that individual transitions are enormously varied, with learning transitions consistently described as a gradual process of 'becoming' over time as new skills are gained and adapted, and students are integrated into the higher education environment (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Such periods of transition are reasonably common within an average person's life course and can include, amongst others, marriage, divorce, bereavement and unemployment. As such, some authors have suggested that an average life span is ostensibly organised around a series of transitions (for example, Holdsworth and Morgan (2005)) and others that transitions are essential features of social life (Field, 2010). These personal transitions are variously described as a period of change from one way of life to another demarcating a new status and/or new roles (Henderson et al., 2007) or a 'movement' from one social stage or status to another, sometimes with an accompanying physical movement from one place to another (Turner, 1982). Van Gennep (1960) regards transition as a point

of liminality within a period of change for a person, change being split between rites of separation, transition and incorporation.

Turner (1982) describes this liminal stage as being a place of ambiguity, in which there is 'social limbo' (Turner, 1982:24) and states that it is a 'temporal interface' and 'a particular stage in life that is characterised as betwixt and between' (Turner, 1982:41). Significant life events all include this period of liminality and it can be considered as a 'process of becoming' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). An individual moves forward in their lives from one stage to the next, as a transition is not only a change process but also a transfer to a new identity (Ecclestone et al., 2010).

From my reading of this transitions literature I began to understand that a student's transition into the higher education environment is not simply a linear process and it could instead be considered as a complex, often cyclical, individual process that takes place over time. It could include both social and personal dimensions and is always specific to individual students and their own particular consideration of 'being a student'.

Student success in higher education is described by Nelson et al. (2012) as being determined by first year student experience and the initial transition with multiple factors influencing students' on-going development and transformation during these transitions, with individual experiences varying (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). For some students it could be an

emotional journey, as they manage both academic and social transformation during a time of considerable personal and social adjustment (Case et al., 2010; Yorke et al., 2000), and some could become 'stuck' in the liminal phase of the transition which results in an 'in-between-ness' or betwixt space and lack a sense of belonging to the institution (Palmer et al., 2009).

Thus the first few weeks of term could be a time of both high expectation and anxiety during the process of 'becoming a student' (see also Gutteridge, 2001). In addition, according to Lowe and Cook (2003) a difficult transition during this time with personal or social difficulties could subsequently have a lasting impact leading on occasion to attrition and under-achievement. Part of this transition process essentially involves learning the cultural rules (Holland, 2001) or as described by Thomas (2002) adapting to the 'institutional habitus'. Evidence from UK Nursing students suggested that failure to integrate during the first few weeks of their course is an important factor in discontinuation (Trotter and Cove, 2005), and whether or not initial personal expectations were met or exceeded or disappointed, could have an enormous impact upon future experiences. Palmer et al. (2009) identify a 'turning point' where circumstances can combine to result in students developing a sense of belonging, and Barnett (2007) suggests that the moment a students' 'will to learn' and enjoyment decrease the likelihood of successful completion reduces.

Although learning transitions are on-going throughout students' studies, and difficulties during learning transitions could occur at any time, the literature on student transitions recognised that the first year is critically significant (Scanlon et al., 2007; Yorke, 1999). Hence the process of induction to an institution and gradual building of relationships with both peers and academic staff is important to foster a sense of belonging (Harvey et al., 2006). Programmes that aim to gradually build both academic and social relationships will support students during their time in higher education. By maximising positive experiences and managing student transition sympathetically, institutions could build positive relationships with new students which Yorke and Longden (2008) consider 'bends the odds' towards student success and academic engagement. A programme built around information transfer and not relationship building could confuse and dishearten students and exacerbate their predisposal to withdraw (Edward, 2003). In effect, if an individual student fails to develop a 'sense of belonging' and has a subsequent loss of academic engagement they have a reduced likelihood of successful completion (Barnett, 2007).

The student transitions research literature therefore advocates that institutions encourage a sense of belonging so that students can feel part of the university community and gradually become accustomed to the university culture (Edward, 2003). Students' feelings of 'connectedness' to the university and hence their identity of 'being a student' have a

potential to impact on both their development as learners and ultimately their commitment to studying (Scanlon et al., 2007).

The themes from this literature with a focus on 'being' and 'becoming' a student over time resonated more with my research aims, and I realised that my original research design was incongruent with my research goals. I began to understand that using themes from a single set of narrative interviews as a basis for a survey, and then from the results generalising about individual learning experiences, was not the most appropriate methodology to explore what 'being a student' meant for individual students. I began to appreciate that student engagement could be neither a measured quantity nor a dichotomy but was a multidimensional entity that combined diverse aspects of students' lives (Solomonides et al., 2012). As such, in order to investigate and explore individual student's experiences I realised that I needed to reconsider my methodology and redesign my study so that I could explore the 'wholeness' of students' experiences.

1.3.3 A change of design

At this point in my study I had already completed and transcribed the first narrative interviews that I had undertaken in the first term of the first year with my student sample. These transcripts offered detailed data about the students' perceptions and experiences but as I read the interviews through, I recognised that the topics that the students included in their narratives represented complex issues. I believed that if I attempted to

surmise the students' experiences from these individual interviews it would be similar to reading the first chapter of a book and making assumptions about the ending. I became increasingly aware that the design of the study and my research experiences were influencing the way in which I would be presenting the students' experiences.

I reflected that if I only interviewed the students once there was potential for them and me to focus on 'critical incidents' that had occurred, rather than on on-going experiences, and at another point in time the students' opinions and perceptions may have been different leading to different findings and conclusions. A sense of self is a fluid and changing concept and can encompass confidence, happiness, imagination and self-knowledge (Barnett, 2007). I therefore considered that by using a sequential exploratory study design I was attempting to develop somewhat unsophisticated presentations of students' voices. Whilst valuable insights would be gained, I believed that the study would be limited by the short time frames of the interviews and my presentation of the students' experiences would be disjointed. I deliberated both with colleagues and my supervisors about the influence of my previous research methods on my findings.

Reading my own and others' studies on student experiences, I had a growing awareness that by employing a research methodology that had a single point of contact with students I was overlooking the impact and importance of on-going experiences. Indeed, to focus criticism on my own

previous studies, I had targeted becoming an autonomous learner (Hamshire et al., 2009); student expectations (Hamshire et al., 2013); student attrition (Hamshire et al., 2011); and retention (Hamshire et al., 2012) – with each of these ‘thematically splitting’ the target of interest further. I was therefore motivated to redesign my research as a longitudinal study in order to gain a more comprehensive interpretation of students’ experiences and consider concepts of ‘being’ a student. Consequently I would be able to explore the individual challenges and experiences of ‘being a student’.

My critical reflections at this point were that if I continued with the planned sequential exploratory methodology I would only explore a ‘temporal slice’ of the students’ lives which effectively excluded the influence of their past experiences and the expectations of their future selves. My experiences as a lecturer and personal tutor for undergraduate Physiotherapy students, by contrast, gave me an opportunity to appreciate that students’ development was temporal and that time was effectively central to their experience. In addition my own journey, as a continually developing student researcher, made me acutely aware of the students’ development as learners. I therefore wanted to extend my research and further explore how students’ experiences changed over time, to gain an in-depth insight into their learning and a more comprehensive understanding of their situations over the three-year time frame of their undergraduate studies. I subsequently redesigned the study as a longitudinal narrative inquiry, with the aim of listening to students’ stories told over a series of

interviews to gain a greater understanding of the factors that influenced their experiences and development during their undergraduate studies.

Although I had gained some understanding of the students' experiences from the first narrative interviews, I believed that as the students had only been interviewed at the start of their degree programme I had essentially gained a glimpse of their thoughts and perceptions at a single point in time and was attempting to extrapolate from these. I was concerned that I would be giving a misleading and oversimplified articulation of students' experiences that were in reality far more nuanced and complex when the entirety of their undergraduate experiences was considered. I wanted to go beyond what Carter (2004:213) described as 'attempting to capture a lived experience in terms of tick boxes and answers to structured questions'. Therefore I believed that if I modified the study to become a longitudinal study, I could gain a greater insight into how and when 'life factors' such as personal relationships, social networks and initial education influenced students' engagement and achievement. I wanted to listen to the first-person voices of the students as they described how their experiences affected their learning.

The reason for this redesigned study was to add a contribution to the existing research body on healthcare students' learning experiences. This would be best achieved by listening to and analysing students' narratives, told over the three years of their studies, to consider how individual challenges, successes and experiences impacted on the students over

time. I therefore planned a narrative inquiry that elicited and analysed students' stories told over a series of interviews so I could present their stories as a sequence of episodes that presented on-going concerns and triumphs (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). The purpose was to present students' stories as they varied over time in response to both academic and outside influences to expand the scope and possibly the effectiveness of practice (Carter, 2004) both within my own institution and beyond, offering the 'students' discourse' and focusing on individual experiences.

1.4 The selection of narrative inquiry

I believed that listening to the students describe and construct their experiences would be key to enhance my understanding; therefore, the study was redesigned to provide a space in which students could talk at length over a series of interviews. This would allow them to tell their own stories, in their own words, detailing whatever experiences were important to them as individuals whilst acknowledging that the narratives would be co-constructed with me as interviewer as they took shape during the active narration (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Whilst reflecting and redesigning the study proposal, I read extensively and became more familiar with the use of narratives to give voice to everyday experience. Issues arose such as framing the students' experiences; the location of the students' experiences and who was listening; and I began to realise the importance and cultural significance

of narratives which have been used as a means of communicating experience for centuries (Koch, 1998). As described by Frank (2010:21) 'people have experiences – something happens – and then they tell stories that represent those experiences'. People live stories and through the telling of them make sense of their lives, as narratives are constructed through storytelling (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000), with the narrative constructed for a particular audience (Gergen, 2004). Although I had already completed a single set of narrative interviews with the students I began to appreciate the value of listening to the students' stories unfold and change and elected to conduct a series of interviews which could ultimately portray individual students' development over time.

As I reflected on this, I was drawn to justifications of narrative inquiry such as 'Within the narrative method "the interview or story is taken as a whole".' (Nettleton et al. 2005:206) and 'unlike other qualitative methods the approach [narrative analysis] does not fragment texts into thematic categories for coding purposes. The approach preserves the integrity of the narrative ...' (Edvardsson et al., 2003:379).

In addition it was not unusual in narrative studies for the researcher(s) to return to the participants a number of times to allow the narrative to develop over time (see, for example, Gubrium, 1993; Stamm et al., 2008). I felt that the holistic nature of narrative inquiry would give the students on-going opportunities to focus on key personal events and describe their experiences, rather than following an agenda set by the researcher; and

that this would allow me to investigate students' experiences in all their complexity and richness (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Experience is multidimensional and I believed that students' stories would reflect this and demonstrate how their experiences changed and shaped them (Carter, 2004).

Thus I believed that by using a series of narrative interviews I would enable the students to focus on what they perceived as the significant aspects of their stories of 'being a student' told over time as they developed, rather than directing the students to focus on current issues. The students would be able to incorporate whatever events they believed were important into a coherent account that they organised themselves, as they described some of the social and personal developments and challenges that had occurred during their studies (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). I wanted as much as possible to avoid transforming the students' stories into something that was wholly shaped by my own questioning and expectations, and merely presented the concerns that they had in the first term of their first year by inviting the students to tell their narratives over time and providing a 'space' over a series of interviews where I listened unquestioningly to their narratives. I anticipated I would gain a more authentic representation of Physiotherapy students' undergraduate experiences and thus gain an insight into how the individual students gave coherence to their lives in the context of their everyday concerns and circumstances (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). The 'self' as described on one occasion may have multiple occurrences,

linked to the circumstances of the narration, so by undertaking a series of narrative interviews I would achieve some understanding of how on-going concerns shaped the students' learning experiences over time (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Thus, I wanted to explore further how 'temporality' effected students' perceptions and engagement with their studies and investigate how students' perceptions changed over the course of their three-year undergraduate studies. I wanted to extend my understanding of how their situations and experiences were influenced by their past experiences and how the 'present moment' influenced their futures. As I searched the literature I located a prolific body of work around students' learning experiences, from a range of different perspectives (for example Andrew et al., 2008; Fergy et al., 2008; Yorke, 1999; Tinto, 1999). However, there was little published research that explored healthcare students' narratives of their learning experiences told over the three years of their undergraduate studies. One important aspect of this study was therefore to listen to students at regular intervals across the three years of their studies and to locate their voices as their experiences developed. Also to identify what factors influenced individual students' engagement and their learning trajectories, to explore how Physiotherapy students constructed and narrated their experiences of 'being a student', with an 'interpretation' of time as the possible horizon for understanding.

1.4.1 Analysis and structure of the narratives

As I continued with the subsequent student interviews I read extensively and reflected on the most appropriate methodology of presenting the students' narratives. The work of both Gubrium (1993) and Lieblich (1993), the first a book and the second a book chapter presenting narratives, had particular resonance with me and subsequently, considerable influence on the final presentation of the students' narratives. My reading of and reflection on these texts prompted me to develop my research ideas and I read further research papers that explored the use of narratives and presented narrative research (for example, Britton and Baxter, 1999; Beech, 2000; Carter, 2004, 2007; Koch, 1998).

From this reading I believed that narratives or stories are told from a particular point of view, linked to the circumstances of the telling and this gives each story a unique and personal perspective that can provide insights into how individual experiences are shaped over time. Personal perspectives were exactly what I wanted my study to explore and I therefore began this study in 2009 motivated by a desire to gather authentic information about students' multidimensional situations and how these changed and developed over time. I believed that listening to students tell their stories from their own perspective, and the analysis of these stories could help me gain an insight into their experiences and thus improve provision for future students. I had a deep desire to present critical work that effectively communicated the individual 'journeys' of the

students through their three years of undergraduate study to give them meaning as their stories unfolded and changed. Hence I wanted to present 'good' stories that displayed the sequentiality of the students' experiences (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000) without adopting a 'shock and awe' approach, see below, as described in Carter (2008).

At times during the data analysis of the narratives I struggled with what Koch (1998:1183) described as 'creating an acceptable and accessible research product' that maintained the nuanced and complex stories of the storytellers (Carter, 2008). I wondered how I could ensure that I maintained the integrity of the students' stories, sufficiently engage readers and highlight important issues without focusing on exceptional/horror stories and skewing the stories towards the exceptional as described in Carter (2008). I found the stories to be at times highly personal, emotive and compelling and I felt privileged that the students were prepared to share their stories with me. In essence I almost felt that after the students had so generously given their time to meet with me and tell their stories, I almost owed them a debt to ensure that I presented a research product that added to the critical understanding of the wholeness of healthcare students' undergraduate experiences. In addition I wanted as much as possible to include all the important elements of each story and not leave anything out or overtly focus on the exceptional (Carter, 2008).

Thus the analysis of the narratives has been a personal research journey, as starting originally from a science-based first degree I have at times had to strive to develop the skills of a qualitative researcher and develop my understanding of concepts of being. At the beginning of the study I initially sought to ensure that I would be unseen in the students' stories as I felt very strongly that these stories were theirs not mine. But as I now acknowledge and attempt to convey transparently, my personal background and experiences have significantly influenced my understanding of the students' stories and inevitably shaped the circumstances in which the stories were told and analysed (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Structuring the narrative texts was also in itself a voyage of discovery and my understanding of the students' narratives is informed by both my roles as lecturer and researcher and my desire to ensure that the students' unique and complex narratives were maintained. In addition I wanted to make a contribution to the critical dialogue on healthcare students' experiences. Therefore whilst acknowledging that each narrative is unique; there were commonalities that emerged from them and I have endeavoured to present these narrative focuses on the students' experiences as four specific orientations. These four orientations were common across the student narratives, and over time as I reflected on my analysis I began to view the students' stories as almost akin to different symphonies. Although the same influences were always involved, the 'pace, volume and intensity' of each influence varied with each individual

student's story. I have thus chosen to present each narrative with the specific narrative focus that was the strongest and most influential within the individual story.

1.5 The incorporation of Heideggerian concepts of being

During my analysis of the students' narratives I began to gain a greater understanding of how temporality influenced the students' experiences and their perceptions. What was central to each student's narrative was the way in which they were 'being a student' and how this ebbed and flowed across the three years of their studies. Time appeared to be a crucial influence upon the students' perceptions, and therefore to add to my understanding of their experiences I began to read the philosophy of Heidegger (1926/62) and gain an understanding of his concept of 'being' and time.

I was initially introduced to the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger by my supervisors and by my reading of the work of Newbery (2012) who explored the psychology of being engaged and its implications for promoting engagement, and of the work of Barnett (2007) who explored students' 'will to learn'. I began by reading a 1962 English translation of the original version of 'Being and Time' (Heidegger 1926/62). I also read Barnett's exploration of 'A Will to Learn' (Barnett, 2007) which describes a philosophical perspective of student engagement, students' sense of self and ultimately what it is to be a student.

The philosophy of Heidegger (1926/62) explores concepts of both 'being' and 'time' in an effort to understand what it is to be in the world, with an investigation of 'being as it is encountered and made meaningful in practical everyday life' (Collins and Selina, 1998:45); a discussion of the temporality of the human being (Dreyfus, 1994); and of understanding experience within the context of everyday lives (Draucker, 1999). This was fundamentally what I believed I was exploring within the students' narratives of their 'everyday' undergraduate learning experiences and what Barnett (2007) described as crucial for understanding what it is to be a student in a contemporary world.

Originally written in German, Heidegger's work is difficult to read, due in part to both its structure and the language in which it is written (Inwood, 1997). Indeed Heidegger used a peculiar language which puts off most first-time readers especially non-German readers (Dreyfus, 1994) and it has been described as strange and impenetrable (Steiner, 1989).

However, it is also celebrated as a great philosophical work and has been compared to the work of Hegel, Kant and Plato (Inwood, 1997), with Heidegger described as a contributor to modern hermeneutics. Indeed as stated by Dreyfus (1994), most readers come to see Heidegger's vocabulary as 'rigorous, illuminating and even indispensable' (Dreyfus, 1994:xiii).

Heidegger's body of work included several publications and lectures but the central work 'Being and Time' (Heidegger, 1926/62) has been named

as his major work (Collins and Selina, 1998), and described by Barnett (2007:9) as a monumental opus. Within this text Heidegger outlined his philosophy: essentially a consideration of the meaning of being – ‘what is being?’ (Inwood, 1997:9), with a central preoccupation in the text of how we can understand ‘being’ and as such the meaning of being (Collins and Selina, 1998).

Within the text Heidegger explained why it is important to ask this question and notions of ‘being’ are examined at length throughout the text with an “‘interpretation” of time as the possible horizon for understanding’ (Heidegger, 1926/62:1). My interest in the philosophy of Heidegger developed, and as I reviewed the students’ narratives during the analysis phase of the study I began to become interested in an interpretive approach that would take into account the meaning of being. I was clear that I was not looking for a new research method. I believed that narrative inquiry had been the most appropriate methodology for my study; rather, I was looking for a way of interpreting the students’ narratives and deepening my understanding. The work of Heidegger offered a different perspective, that considered the way the student is in the world and their sense of self with an exploration of what is the nature of being (Barnett, 2007).

Using Heidegger offered a different way of thinking about the world and the concept of ‘being’ (Heidegger, 1926/62) and I therefore considered that the philosophy of Heidegger could be used to develop the discussion

of the students' narratives and guide my interpretation. Heidegger's work is considered to deepen our understanding of what it is to be and to show how this is ultimately related to temporality (Dreyfus, 1994), with 'being' described as both in time and anticipating the future (Barnett, 2007). I therefore began to extend my reading to explore the philosophy of Heidegger to gain an understanding of his concept of being-in-the-world (Inwood, 1997:11) and build a more sensitive approach to my research.

Using the concept of 'Dasein' (Heidegger, 1926/62:20) to represent human 'being' – or as described by Barnett (2007:28) as 'being-there' to represent our 'placedness' of being – Heidegger described us as being 'in the world' (Inwood, 1997:11) and our 'being' as essentially temporal. He depicted 'Dasein' as always understanding 'itself in terms of its existence' (Heidegger, 1926/62:33) and suggested that an analysis of 'Dasein' needs to focus on the basic state of 'average everydayness' (Heidegger, 1926/62:38) to 'bring out the being of this entity' (Heidegger, 1926/62:38). Thus 'Dasein' denotes the human entity in all its ways of being (Collins and Selina, 1998).

The word 'Dasein' originates from the verb 'dasein' and means 'to exist' or 'to be there, to be here' (Inwood, 1997:22). Heidegger used the term to refer both to human beings and the being that humans are: 'The entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being' (Heidegger, 1926/62:27).

Heidegger used the concept of Dasein throughout his work to represent a 'possibility of many ways of being' (Heidegger, 1926/1962:68) as 'in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it' (Heidegger, 1926/62:32 – emphasis in the original text). Thus in order to explore 'being' we must begin with an initial concept of what 'being' is otherwise we would not be able to question 'what is being?' nor begin to start contemplating and answering the question (Inwood, 1997).

Barnett (2007) explored this Heideggerian concept of Dasein in terms of student learning and pedagogical being and concluded that each student has 'being' as a student as well as a person more broadly. These are not, however, separate entities as each permeates the other and there is interplay between the two, and as such each student has both a generality and particularity of 'being' (Barnett, 2007); in essence the being of each student is the way the student is in the world (Barnett, 2007). However, the curriculum, academic relationships and social codes within an institution will all influence the students' pedagogical being and ultimately encourage certain modes of 'being a student' (Barnett, 2007).

Within 'Being and Time', Heidegger also asserted that there is a basic state of Dasein which he described as 'average everydayness' (Heidegger, 1926/62:38), when there is no in-depth contemplation of philosophical concepts or any exertion of all of its capacities (Inwood, 1997). This state of 'average everydayness' is described as a basic state but shares many characteristics with more elevated states when Dasein

incorporates a conceptual reflection (Inwood, 1997). Fundamentally 'average everydayness' is the state in which most of us live the majority of our lives and I have taken it as the state in which the students were as they related their narratives to me during the interviews. Although Heidegger (1926/62) also noted, whether in a state of 'average everydayness' or not, Dasein is 'in the world' (Heidegger, 1926/62) and the world and Dasein are complementary entities (Inwood, 1997).

Thus Heidegger asserted that 'Being-in-the-world' is influenced by the 'fundamental *existentiala* of states-of-mind and understanding' (1926/62:203 – emphasis in the original text). Heidegger then further explained that "state-of-mind" is equiprimordial with an act of understanding' (1926/62:203), where the term equiprimordial is interpreted as meaning that the two elements exist together and are equally fundamental to the state of 'being'. States-of-mind affect both emotions and moods and Heidegger also contested that in order to understand concepts of 'being' we must also consider time, which he believed was 'the horizon for all understanding of Being' (Heidegger, 1926/62:39), and thus that 'the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time, if rightly seen and rightly explained' (Heidegger, 1926/62:40).

Heidegger stated that Dasein is 'essentially temporal' and therefore historical; its being is 'bound up with temporality' (Inwood, 1997:11) and concepts of 'being' cannot be considered separately to time. To express

how Dasein is related to time, Heidegger used the word 'historicality' (1926/62:41) and explored this concept in detail: 'Dasein 'is' its past in the way of its own Being, which, to put it roughly "*historizes*" out of its future' (Heidegger, 1926/62:41 – emphasis in the original text).

In summary Dasein is in the world, already dealing with what was in the past, whilst projecting into the future and at the same time pre-occupied with the world in the present (Collins and Selina, 1998). Thus Dasein 'has it's being in all three temporalities: its past, its possible futures and its present' (Collins and Selina, 1998:79).

Throughout the text of 'Being and Time' Heidegger (1926/62) explored how Dasein is linked with temporal presence and how Dasein is in time, understanding both the present and the future with regard to the past. Thus he deduced that the importance of our historicality cannot be underestimated, as it has an effect on both our present and all of our future understanding (Heidegger, 1926/1962). Dasein is not confined to its awareness of the present moment but looks both forward into the future and back into the past.

Applying these Heideggerian concepts to students' sense of being, Barnett (2007) asserted that individual students' being is both fragile and enduring at the same time and we need to understand the student as being '*in* their educational setting' (Barnett, 2007:28 – emphasis in the original text). This 'being' is a dynamic, unique, sense of self and is

influenced by both past educational experiences and the anticipation of future educational experiences and achievements. As such, an individual student's 'being' is complex, both general and specific and fully conscious whilst barely there at the same time, and is infused with other life roles and 'being' a human being (Barnett, 2007). This concept aligned with and enhanced my understanding of the students' narratives and I believed that an analysis of their stories could be enriched through the consideration of Heideggerian thinking and by my reading of Barnett (2007).

As a pragmatist I was guided by the purpose of the study throughout, and as this purpose was to explore Physiotherapist students' stories to gain an insight into what 'being a student' meant to them, I subsequently explored health-professional research that had utilised narratives and used a Heideggerian interpretation to contextualise my study. I discovered a substantial body of work within Nursing research that explores both Phenomenology and the major strands of philosophy but there was only a limited research base within the field of Physiotherapy despite its use being discussed in the early work of Shepard et al. in 1993 (Shaw and Connelly, 2012).

Prior to reading the work of Heidegger (1926/67) I had not previously considered how I could incorporate a philosophical perspective into my thesis. As described earlier my previous research projects had been from a positivist background and a consideration of an underpinning

philosophical perspective or framework had never been considered. However, as I began to gain an understanding of the work of Heidegger I believed that interpreting the students' stories through the lens of Heidegger would add layers of understanding and enhance my reading and discussion of the narratives. Thus I could present a richer picture of the students' experiences and gain a fuller understanding of their experiences of 'being a student'.

Whilst exploring the philosophy of Heidegger I also read the works of other philosophers that have been applied to healthcare research, including the work of both Husserl and Gadamer. As I gained an introductory orientation to the work of these philosophers, the philosophy of Heidegger (1926/67) seemed most relevant for this study of student narratives because he interpreted 'what is being?' through the horizon of time, describing 'being' as essentially concerned with time, suggesting ultimately that experience can only be understood in relation to the past – historicity – and the social context of the experience (Draucker, 1999). I was particularly interested in how the students' concepts of 'being' changed over the three years of their narratives, essentially the temporality and historicity of their narratives and therefore the work of Heidegger chimed with my research.

My reading of the work of Husserl and Gadamer was less encouraging and after a period of reflection and discussion with my supervisory team, I decided that these philosophies were less appropriate for interpreting the

students' narratives. I believed that the philosophy of Husserl (1913/70) which advocates 'bracketing' and is concerned with the reality of things and concrete phenomenon was less applicable as it does not focus on time as a horizon (Shaw and Connelly, 2012). I also discounted the philosophical hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle of Gadamer (1960/89 1976) who was a student of Heidegger and who focused more upon truth and method and fusion of horizons. I wanted to explore 'being' a student within temporal narratives and only Heidegger (1926/67) focused on 'being' in relation to time.

As I read further on philosophical interpretive approaches to research I also discovered a note of caution. When I searched the health-professions literature on Heidegger I came across a body of work within the Nursing research that critiqued the way health professionals had used philosophical texts to interpret their work: Draucker (1999), Paley (1997, 1998, 2005) and Crotty (1996). There was an intense debate around the integrity of the studies (Shaw and Connelly, 2012), and within Paley (2005) – 'Phenomenology as rhetoric' – there is a critique of how Nursing researchers have used philosophical texts and a number of discrepancies between phenomenological rhetoric and phenomenological practice were identified.

This is described as a misinterpretive phenomenology of Heidegger and is explored in depth by Paley (1998). In this paper Paley examined how Heidegger's work had been used within Nursing Phenomenology and

suggested that hermeneutic studies of lived experiences are not compatible with Heidegger's ontology (Paley, 1998). Indeed he goes on to suggest that lived experience research in Nursing is based upon a misreading of the work of Heidegger (Paley, 1998).

Draucker (1999) provided a critique of Heideggerian hermeneutical Nursing research that covered ten years and 25 research reports which reveals variations in the way in which 'Heideggerian research' had been presented. Some of this research was been critiqued for the absence of specific Heideggerian ideas and for not specifying how Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology informed data analysis (Draucker, 1999). However, several authors (for example, Kondora, 1994) argued that Heidegger's basic philosophy can be seen as underpinning the analysis of the data and specific reference to the tenets of Heidegger may not be required for researchers to remain true to a Heideggerian philosophical interpretation of their research (Draucker, 1999).

On reflecting upon this discussion and critique within Nursing research I became clear that Heidegger's philosophy could underpin my analysis and interpretation of the students' narratives. I was considering how students spoke about their experiences of 'being a student' during their everyday lives and Heidegger offered a different way of thinking about these experiences and thus could deepen my understanding and reveal new insights. Specific Heideggerian concepts would be used within the discussion and I would not claim any of the methodological implications

that Paley (1999) had critiqued, but my work would become 'part of the continuing conversation' of Heidegger's philosophy (Paley, 1999:823).

As I explored the philosophy of Heidegger and the temporality of 'being', I was again prompted to return to literature on students' experiences.

Before moving on to what I considered to be the meanings of the narratives I wanted to investigate further how students' concepts of 'being' and expectations could influence their learning experiences and how these could be integrated with Heidegger's concepts of being and time (Heidegger, 1926/62).

1.5.1 The impact of expectations and concepts of being

Whilst studying in higher education, students undergo a continuous process of becoming (Barnett, 2007). During this process of 'becoming a student', individual students' expectations will have an impact upon their perceptions of the higher education experiences (Christie et al., 2004) and recent research has identified growing expectations amongst students (Palmer et al. 2009). Past experiences guide our thinking and inform the expectations that we might have for ourselves (Miller et al., 2005); we also have expectations of the behaviour of others and of the environments in which we live and work (Miller, et al., 2005). Students have expectations of their learning experiences and these are based on their previous educational experiences and the information they have acquired about their programme and chosen profession. They are also further influenced by the expectations and perceptions of family and

friends who play a role and give a particular context to individual learning trajectories (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Gorard et al., 2007).

Individual expectations can therefore have a profound impact upon students' perceptions of these learning experiences (Ecclestone et al., 2010). There is also a significant emotional dimension to learning that influences students' perceptions (see Case et al., 2010) and it is noted by Foster et al. (2012) that in students that withdraw, experience rated lower than expectation in all areas.

For some, studying on a healthcare programme is a time of optimism and positive change as expectations are realised or exceeded, but for others it is difficult and dispiriting as expectations remain unmet (see Field, 2010). There is also the added transition of 'becoming a professional practitioner' throughout their studies, and there can be confusion for students as there is the 'possibility of many ways of being' (Heidegger, 1926/1962:68) and also a potential loss of 'authenticity' (Heidegger, 1926/1962). Hence becoming a student can be considered as part of the continuous, gradual process of identity construction (Britton and Baxter, 1999), essentially a process of on-going personal development with 'being' moving through time (Barnett, 2007). As noted by Barnett (2007) this 'being' is a process and is both fragile and complex with students in a state of anxiety and uncertainty as they develop.

Heidegger (1926/62) argued that Dasein can be either authentic or inauthentic (Collins and Selina, 1998). To be authentic is essentially to be

one's own person and to be true to one's self (Inwood, 1997). Therefore Dasein can be an authentic life in consciousness and be true – to do one's own thing – or conversely conform to what others, the 'they', do and say (Heidegger, 1926/62; Inwood, 1997), with the 'they-self' given up to the everyday world the student lives in (Barnett, 2007). Thus Heidegger effectively considers that the question is not 'to be or not to be?' rather it is an on-going consideration by Dasein of 'how to be?' (Inwood, 1997). Dasein can either choose to be its own authentic self or choose not to be itself when 'fearing about Others' – the 'they' (Heidegger, 1926/62: 181). With this concept of authenticity described as central to 'being' if we are to not conform and thus lead essentially inauthentic lives as consciousness is lost to others – doing what others do to fit in and conform. Barnett (2007) therefore described the authentic student as taking hold of their own educational experiences and on their own account making something of them – in essence the authentic student is committed and believes in themselves and is prepared for 'being oneself' (Barnett, 2007:43).

Inauthenticity – the leading of an inauthentic life – however is not an 'unqualified blemish' (Inwood, 1997:27). We are all 'inauthentic' at times in order to function as part of society and it is the 'normal condition' for us generally (Inwood, 1997:27); as described by Barnett (2007), authenticity is not easily achieved and is a challenging state of being. In addition if consciousness is lost to other people then Dasein can return to authentic living via a 'call to conscience' within itself, essentially becoming

responsible for its own actions and choosing its own life (Inwood, 1997). Heidegger (1926/62) described this state of authenticity as Dasein responding to the 'call to conscience' as 'resoluteness', but acknowledged that it can be difficult to stay within this state and that it might cause stress and anxiety at times (Inwood, 1997).

During their higher education studies and on-going learning transitions students can struggle with concepts of being and personal identity and 'authentic selves'. Essentially healthcare students' learning journeys are organised around a series of transitions (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005) as they progress between academic years and transfer onto placement study modules. These personal transitions are variously described as a period of change from one way of life to another, demarcating a new status and/or new roles (Henderson et al., 2007) and the impact of historicity cannot be underestimated (Heidegger, 1926/62). A life transition is a time of change encompassing an ending, a neutral zone and a new beginning (Bridges, 2004). In my previous research I identified that a number of the students on the Physiotherapy programme struggled with these transitions (Hamshire and Cullen, 2009) and on reflection, as described by Heidegger (1926/62), with the leading of 'authentic lives'. If there was a discrepancy between individual student's expectations of the university and the institutional definition of the role of the student there can be increased complexity to individual transitions (Palmer et al., 2009) and students who feel they do not fit in have difficulty settling at university (Christie et al., 2004).

Place, peers and institutional ethos all have a role within the continuing process of 'becoming a student' (Christie et al., 2004) and it is undoubtedly impossible for students to completely separate their individual learning experiences from the on-going daily circumstances of their family and friends. Although it is noted that personal and social circumstances can support students' higher education experiences, numerous authors have identified the impact of social, personal and academic influences that can 'distract' students (Barnett, 2007) and I went on to explore these factors in greater depth within the literature.

1.5.2 Social and personal dimensions

Average everydayness (Heidegger, 1926/62) is undeniably influenced by both personal and social circumstances and personal issues have been repeatedly cited as impacting on students' learning and engagement (Bryson and Hardy, 2012) and their commitment to their studies (Barnett, 2007). Steele et al. (2005) highlighted difficulties of work-study-life balance as being a particular issue among mature Nursing students as they found balancing academic life with family commitments was problematic, with the cumulative and additive nature of such problems compounding the difficulties that the students experienced. In addition White et al. (1999) found that personal issues were the main reasons for student attrition on a common foundation Nursing programme in the UK, and Foster et al. (2012) that emotional engagement and a sense of belonging were particularly important for student continuation.

Vincent Tinto's seminal work on student integration has become a widely accepted work on retention and student success (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Tinto (1975) argued that students' persistence and achievement is largely determined by their integration into the social and academic aspects of the institution. The positive or negative experience of the student, and therefore the likelihood that they will stay or discontinue, is a result of a positive or negative integration during learning transitions (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Only those students who feel socially and academically connected to the university will persist in their studies (Scanlon et al., 2007).

In general the literature suggests that there is no clear cause and effect between personal circumstances and learning experience, as personal factors both impact upon the students' studies and are compromised by them (Bryson and Hardy, 2012). Studying at higher education level involves a necessary adjustment in lifestyle for all students and it is noted that this can have a greater impact for those with long-term relationships or dependents (Gorard et al., 2007). Stabilisation in individual and family circumstances are necessary to ease the process of becoming a student (Palmer et al., 2009) and when changes occur students can suddenly reach a tipping point where the effect on personal aspects on continuing to study can seem to be out of proportion to the benefits (Hamshire et al., 2013). In addition a number of studies have reported that healthcare students frequently report high levels of stress as a result of both their academic and clinical training, and external factors such as personal

problems and financial difficulties (Steele et al 2005; Trotter and Cove 2005; Watson, 2005).

As students transfer to their new identity during the 'process of becoming' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005) there is therefore a social dimension to their experiences and the process of becoming a student is a social one (White et al., 1999). As described by Barnett (2007), others are essential to assist the student's development and becoming, thus students who struggle to develop appropriate support networks with their peers and academic staff are more at risk of lower achievement and discontinuation (Tinto, 1975, 1993). In addition students' perceptions of how welcoming an institution is can have a significant impact on their perceptions of their learning experiences (Hamshire et al., 2013) and what Barnett (2007) described as the student's 'will to learn'.

Research has suggested that central to a successful transition is how students build new friendships (Palmer et al., 2009) and students who fail to develop social networks and do not fit in are more likely to withdraw early (Thomas, 2002) as research demonstrates that friendship, or more importantly lack of it, is one of the key factors that influence students' decisions to leave. It is also noted that non-traditional students who are unfamiliar with the English educational system and out of step with the majority can find it difficult to develop a social support network when they first start higher education (Yorke, 1999). In addition, the importance of developing social ties through living with compatible friends is highlighted

as central in Palmer et al. (2009). Social integration can therefore be considered a key aspect of a successful transition to university and 'being a student'; and occurs when students have developed good relationships and networks with their peers (Tinto, 1975). Creating connections both student-student and staff-student is therefore an important early goal (Anderson et al., 2011); as described by Nelson et al. (2012), student engagement in the first year is vital for a successful transition and quality learning outcomes.

1.5.3 Financial and academic dimensions

In addition to personal and social influences, financial difficulties have been repeatedly cited as a concern of 'being a student' by healthcare students (Steele et al., 2005; Brown and Edelmann, 2000), with financial concerns primarily reported as being due to the difficulties of managing on a small bursary when long placement hours and an extensive academic workload made it problematic for the students to find time for regular part-time work. Students give many examples of how childcare costs, expensive placement travel and on-going financial commitments such as mortgages made them concerned about whether ever increasing debt was worth the final qualification (Hamshire et al., 2012). Financial circumstances also play a pivotal role in students' learning experiences (Brown and Edelmann, 2000; Glossop, 2001), and Brown and Edelmann (2000) identified that some students found it difficult to manage the financial burden of placement travel.

Paid employment can impact upon students' available time to engage with their studies (Bamber and Tett, 2000); lack of available funds can affect the purchase of study materials; and fear of spiralling debt can lead to attrition (Brown and Edelman, 2000). Financial hardship has been cited as a cause of attrition amongst health professions students (Vere-Jones, 2008) and financial problems have been identified as a common reason for leaving in another study, which utilised an exit questionnaire on discontinued students (White et al., 1999); the situation can often be worse for mature students (Gorard et al., 2007).

The literature also provides some evidence that the academic challenges of a healthcare course can be unexpected and demanding (see Brodie et al., 2004) and students who have had a previous educational experience that was teacher-led and didactic can be unfamiliar with the institutional habitus of independent learning and therefore have some difficulty in adapting to degree-level study (Thomas, 2002). Previous research has described that in order for students to be successful they need to undergo academic integration into an institution (see Tinto, 1975, 1993) – a broad term that includes students' engagement with academic staff, their peers and resources, and their attendance at timetabled sessions (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Two important factors combine to influence students' academic integration into a degree-level programme: their individual level of academic preparedness and their experience of the academic

programme that they are studying (Thomas, 2002). If there is a 'match' between the academic preparedness of an individual and the academic experience, the student is more likely to engage with the programme (Thomas, 2002), and the more a student is actively engaged the more likely they are to continue (Crosling et al., 2008).

If there is a mismatch between students' expectations and the academic demands of a programme then students are more likely to struggle to achieve the required academic level (see Andrew et al., 2008; White et al., 1999). A mismatch occurs when students rely on their past educational experiences as a basis for their understanding of the university context rather than recognising that the context of university will be different from school/college/previous institution (Scanlon et al., 2007). Consequently their academic expectations are unmet and there is a sense of disconnect from the academic process (Scanlon et al., 2007) and 'commitment to 'being a student''.

1.6 Personal location

Inevitably I have brought a number of assumptions with me to this study that have influenced my theoretical perspective and thus every phase of the study. In order to locate myself I have therefore attempted to make clear my reasons for undertaking it and how my perspective has impacted upon the study aims and guided the study. I was aware that qualitative interviews presented as stories can be criticised for bias and lack of rigor on occasions (Koch, 1998) and as 'horror narratives' (Carter, 2008); I

therefore believe that to ensure transparency and credibility it is important to state my personal location within the study (Koch, 1998). I will articulate in detail my decision trail during the data analysis in the methods and methodology chapter; here I will describe my personal position.

My theoretical and interpretive position in this study was informed by both my past as a healthcare practitioner, my underpinning philosophy of pragmatism and my desire to give the students a voice; to allow them to talk about their experiences as they developed over time in their own words. This has influenced the stories presented within this thesis as I believe that research is shaped by the personal history and perspective of those undertaking a research project as well as by those who choose to be involved. Personal narratives told within the context of a research interview reflect the circumstances of the occasion and are also shaped through their active narration (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Critical reflections throughout the study have also led me to believe that presenting experience expressed as personal narratives and drawing assumptions from it can be problematic. These reflections permeate this thesis and are explored throughout.

Within this study, I wanted to explore what 'being a student' meant and how 'temporality' effected students' perceptions and engagement with their studies. I wanted to investigate how individual students' perceptions changed over the course of their three-year undergraduate studies during

their on-going process of 'becoming', with the aim of extending my understanding of how individual students' situations and experiences were influenced by their past experiences and how the 'present moment' influenced their futures. I was concerned with exploring how the students experienced higher education and how they described their feelings and responses to particular events. As stated by Heidegger (1926/62), Dasein is not just confined to an awareness of the present moment but is temporal, both looking ahead to the future and reaching back into the past; and that in order to understand concepts of 'being' then we must also consider time, which he believed was 'the horizon for all understanding of Being' (Heidegger, 1926/62:39).

In summary, Heidegger described Dasein as 'in the world', already dealing with what was in the past, whilst projecting into the future and at the same time pre-occupied with the world in the present (Collins and Selina, 1998). Thus Dasein 'has its being in all three temporalities: its past, its possible futures and its present' (Collins and Selina, 1998:79). His philosophy explored the temporality of 'being' and this is how I wanted to explore what 'being a student' meant to the Physiotherapy students. I was interested in individual student's experiences and their own personal challenges, and how these influenced their sense of themselves and their learning.

1.7 Summary

Whilst evaluating the research evidence during what was effectively my own personal journey of 'becoming a research student' it was clear to me that individual student's experiences of 'being a student' were inherently linked to a wide range of variables and personal emotional responses.

The research literature suggested that students could have unsatisfactory learning experiences and difficulties in 'being a student', for a diverse range of reasons. The pervading themes include adapting to the higher education environment, personal issues, financial problems and academic difficulties (Glossop, 2001; Tinto, 1993). It was also acknowledged that it was difficult to identify and explain the complex interactions that take place in individual cases (see Glossop, 2001).

'Being a student' was inherently the way a student was 'in the world' and 'being' was a key concept when considering students' experiences of higher education (Barnett, 2007).

Understanding students' experiences within the context of their everyday lives – 'average everydayness' – as social and personal transformation takes place over time in the process of becoming a student, was therefore vital to gain insights into the meaning and significance of higher education for individual students (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Draucker, 1999). I believed that examining students' experiences would be key in assessing the quality of higher education provision in terms of those whose lives are affected by it (see Gubrium, 1993).

The purpose of this study was therefore to listen to students' experiences and to add to the literature on Physiotherapy students' experiences and engagement through an exploration of student narratives told over their three years of undergraduate studies. There is a significant body of research on Nursing students' experiences but limited research on Physiotherapy students and I hoped to offer some new insights into the process of becoming a student, with a critical view of some of the factors that can influence these students' learning experiences and 'being a student'. The study aims were:

- To listen to the students' stories and subsequently investigate the students' perceptions and beliefs relating to their learning experiences.
- To determine what university life meant to the students through their narrations of 'being a student'.
- To investigate how this meaning came across in their 'own' stories of their experiences.
- To explore how that meaning changed, if at all, over their three years of study, with an 'interpretation' of time as the possible horizon for understanding.
- To consider the transferability of the findings to other comparable settings.

Chapter two – Methodology and methods

2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the purpose of the study and the methodological theory that was used within it – the underpinning philosophy of the research and my position within the study are discussed and the research design and data collection strategies are detailed and explained. Data analysis procedures are described and summarised and the ethical concerns associated with the study outlined at the end of the chapter.

2.2 Purpose of the study

As stated in the introductory chapter, the purpose of this study was to listen to students' narratives of their higher education experiences to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influenced their multi-layered social, academic and personal development. I was particularly interested in exploring what 'being a student' meant for the students and how temporality influenced their learning experiences. Thus, the main aims were to listen to the student stories and subsequently investigate the students' perceptions and beliefs; to determine what university life meant to the students; to investigate how this meaning came across in their 'own' stories of their experiences; to explore how that meaning changed, if at all, over their three years of study and to consider the transferability of the findings to comparable settings.

Throughout the study I considered the students' individual perspectives to be paramount to identify how personal factors and experiences combined to lead to either a positive or negative encounter. The emphasis on the

students' 'own' stories was paramount; in accord with Gubrium and Holstein (2009), I believed that the stories conveyed by those whose experiences were being researched were more accurate and useful than stories from other sources such as staff. Furthermore, I wanted to present a study focused on the perspectives of individual students rather than that of policy, pedagogy and procedure.

Previous research has suggested that individual transitions are enormously varied (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005) and my experience of working with a diverse student population in a Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care confirmed that students' transitions and educational experiences were wide-ranging (Hamshire and Cullen, 2009 Hamshire et al., 2012). As a lecturer working with Physiotherapy students and a researcher of healthcare education I had already noticed that a number of the students struggled to balance their academic studies with their personal and social lives during their time studying in higher education. These difficulties were particularly evident during the initial transition to higher education (Hamshire et al., 2009; Hamshire and Cullen, 2013) and occasionally ultimately led to attrition (Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013).

Underlying the purpose of the study was a desire to develop provision for future students. Although I am a post-graduate student and lecturer and thus have some insights into students' learning experiences, I do not have direct access to an undergraduate students' experience. Therefore I

considered that listening to the students tell their stories on their own terms, over time, would help me evaluate both the barriers and facilitators to their educational experiences. Narrative interviews that would provide the students with an opportunity to speak about their own lives in relation to their on-going learning experiences were therefore considered to be the most appropriate approach. I believed that examining the students' perceptions of their day-to-day lives, their 'lived experience', was key to understanding their transitions and learning experiences (Dewey, 1963), thus reviewing the quality of provision in terms of those whose lived experiences were affected by it (see also Gubrium, 1993).

2.3 Narrative inquiry

Narrative research has an increasingly high profile in social research (Andrew et al., 2009) and has 'come into its own in qualitative research' (Reissman, 2008: vii), changes which have gained momentum over the last two decades (Webster and Mertova, 2007). It is concerned with the construction, interpretation and the depiction of storied accounts of lived experiences (Shacklock and Thorp, 2006) and aims to organise a sequence of lived events into a whole (Elliott, 2007). The term 'narrative' has many meanings and has been used in a variety of ways as narrative scholars are a diverse group, drawing insights from numerous traditions (Reissman, 2008). Currently a number of narrative inquiry approaches have been developed and there is no single method of narrative research (Webster and Mertova, 2007).

Lieblich et al. (1998:2) defined narrative research as 'a study that uses or analyses narrative materials' and Clandinin and Connelly (2000:20) as 'stories lived and told'. Elliott (2007:3) expanded on these definitions and states that a narrative arranges:

... a series of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. In this way a narrative conveys the meaning of events.

Narrative inquiry is therefore a methodology that is set in stories of individual experiences, with these stories providing researchers with a form with which they can investigate how people experience the world (Webster and Mertova, 2007). It is not an objective reconstruction of a person's life, but a rendition of how life is perceived and retold detailing the chosen aspects of the storyteller's life (Webster and Mertova, 2007).

Narrative methods are typically used in research to address 'real-life' issues as they always reflect an individual's perspective (Carter, 2008) and they result in 'unique and rich' data (Lieblich et al., 1998). Elliott (2007) defined three key features of narratives:

- they are chronological, representing a sequence;
- they are meaningful to the teller;
- they are social, in that they are told to an audience.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) added to these three features, stating that a key aspect of narrative inquiry is temporality, as narratives are concerned with life experienced on a continuum and all experience is temporal. Squire (2009) concurred and added that narratives are the means of human sense making as they provide an opportunity to view and discuss experiences as sequential and meaningful, displaying transformation or change (Squire 2009). Narrative inquiry can therefore be considered a methodology ideally suited to a longitudinal study such as this, in which participants were interviewed over a three-year period.

Josselson and Lieblich (1993) also noted that narratives are a process in which people make meaning of their lives; storytelling is a tradition within many cultures and life informs and is formed by stories. People therefore live stories and when retelling their stories detail how their experiences happen narratively, providing listeners with an insight into their lives and experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Life and story are not separate phenomena as life informs and is informed by stories (Josselson and Lieblich, 1993) and thus can provide researchers with rich data.

Narrative inquiry will therefore always be a complex and multi-layered process (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and researchers that use narratives do so to see different layers of meaning and understand more about social and individual change over time (Andrew et al., 2009). Hence narrative inquiry is well suited to help researchers address the complexities of teaching and learning and investigate the ways in which

students experience education (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Life is education (Dewey, 1963) and educators are interested in individual lived experience as it impacts and influences education. Education and life are thus indivisible and therefore examining students' stories of their experiences is key to understanding their learning experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

There are several approaches to narrative inquiry and they can be combined and adapted (Reissman, 2008); however, underpinning all approaches to narrative inquiry are four common premises:

- an interest in lived experience;
- a desire to empower research participants;
- an interest in process and change over time;
- an awareness that the researcher is also a narrator.

I chose to use narrative inquiry within this study as I was interested in researching students' stories of their experiences over time and using narrative interviewing to allow the participants to express their stories on their own terms. I wanted to provide an interview 'space' in which the students could talk about events that both reflected and respected their own way of organising meaning in their lives (DeVault, 1999). The aim was to listen to the stories and subsequently present participants' experiences holistically as stories of experiences that were not curtailed or halted by an interview schedule or influenced by *a priori* themes (Webster and Mertova, 2007). I believed that examining the students'

stories would be key to understanding their educational experiences over time (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I wanted to know how the students learn whilst studying and how their educational experiences entwined with their lives, to gain an insight into the wholeness and continuity of their experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

As I developed as a researcher throughout the study I also became conscious that the narratives would become collaborations between participants and me as researcher, as storytelling is a social interaction (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I believe that I acted as both an audience and to some degree as a regulator of the stories, as the storytellers shaped their stories according to their perceptions of, and relationship with, me as listener. I was aware that my status as researcher and lecturer would affect and frame the storytelling and all of the students included in this study knew that I was a member of staff working within the faculty building. Once ethics permission was granted and the study began I was able to negotiate my workload so that I did not have any formal teaching or assessment contact with these students throughout the three years of their degree programme. I made this decision for several reasons. Most importantly I hoped to minimise the students' perception of a lecturer-student relationship between us, and the only occasions that I met any of the students on campus, apart from for their interviews, was through brief encounters as we passed each other in the corridors.

I was aware that the students' stories would change depending on who they considered their audience to be and I wanted to remain as neutral as possible. I believed that if I had been closely involved in teaching and assessment with the cohort, the students would have been more wary about sharing their stories especially if they were critical of the teaching team or university systems; whereas, if they considered me to be independent from the teaching team I would gain a greater insight into their learning experiences. I also wanted to frame my perspective of the students' stories by the content of the interviews alone without being distracted by their behaviour in taught sessions, my perceptions of their attendance patterns or comments from other members of staff on the teaching team.

2.4 Philosophical approach

All approaches to research embody a conceptual framework or philosophical perspective (Sim and Wright, 2000) with the methods framed by the philosophical world-view of the researcher (Heywood and Stronach, 2005). This philosophical perspective both informs and influences the research study throughout, from the initial research questions through to the design of the methods of data collection and the analysis used to investigate them (Morgan, 2007), thus providing a framework for design. Using such a framework allows researchers to ground their studies in methodological literature that is read and recognised by others (Creswell, 2003). Although philosophical ideas can remain to some extent 'hidden' (Slife and Williams, 1995), they will

influence the research and therefore should be identified (Creswell, 2003).

I will say a little more about myself here because my previous research experiences have been critical in informing the design of this study. I am by nature a pragmatist and, as with some of my previous research, this study was a practitioner research project. I was a university lecturer investigating the learning experiences of students studying at my institution; therefore, the philosophy of pragmatism which values practice-based research resonated strongly with me. Within pragmatism there is a concern with 'what works' (Patton, 1988) and this position is described by Patton (1988) as being one that implicitly chooses a paradigm and method by what will work best to meet the practical demands of a particular study and situation, and bring about positive consequences within the researcher's value system (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). I had previously conducted several mixed methods studies with similar groups of health professions students and each of these had gained valuable insights into the students' experiences and had been guided by my pragmatic philosophy.

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement or anti-philosophy (Rorty, 1982) that began during the latter decades of the 19th century and is derived from the work of Pierce, James, Mead, Dewey and Rorty (Cherryholmes, 1992). Recent writers include Patton (1988), Rorty (1982), Murphy and Rorty (1990) and Cherryholmes (1992). There are several forms of

pragmatism (Creswell, 2003) and my understanding of pragmatism was informed by my reading of mixed methods researchers such as Creswell (2003) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, 1998). Within mixed methods research, instead of a focus on methods the research problem and purpose guide a study; therefore, the research approach is not committed to one system or reality (Creswell, 2003).

Pragmatist researchers look at the 'what' and 'how' of research (Creswell, 2003); the research question is therefore considered to be key to the study and an understanding of this question and the purposes of the study should guide the researcher in all other decisions about the research study (Newman et al., 2003). Pragmatism therefore values personal ideas about research and its practice, and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) suggested that the philosophy of pragmatism gives researchers 'permission' to use the most appropriate methods and study areas of interest, using the findings to bring about positive consequences within the researcher's value system. I view my progression to using narrative inquiry to gain greater depth of understanding of students' learning experiences, after previously using an exploratory mixed methods approach, as a key phase of my development as a pragmatic researcher. As Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) stated, researchers who have a pragmatic philosophy, study topics that they believe are important to study, in a way that is congruent with their own value system.

Philosophical ideas need to be combined with research strategies and methods (Creswell, 2003). Thus I have combined my philosophy of pragmatism with a research strategy of narrative inquiry, using narrative interviews to explore students' experiences. Research methods should always be selected to best-fit research questions (Lieblich et al., 1998) and as the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influenced students' social, academic and personal development over time, asking them to tell their stories of their experiences was most appropriate: listening to students' talk about what was significant in their lives, in their own terms, aligned with the purpose of the study and a pragmatic philosophy.

2.5 Study design

The design of this study was influenced by my pragmatic philosophical orientation and is based on my assumption that a narrative style of inquiry would be the most appropriate to meet the aims of the study. The particular focus was on the students' first year experiences and how these impacted upon the students' on-going learning experiences. I therefore interviewed the students who participated in the study every term of their first year (three times) to explore their initial transitions and experiences and then subsequently at the start of their second and third years to explore their learning transitions and experiences as they progressed through the programme. When individual students were available on campus, further interviews were offered in addition to this

minimum of five interviews during their second and third years. This study design was based on the belief that:

- Interviewing the students every term in their first year would allow them to detail their on-going transition to degree-level study and subsequent progression through the second and third years.
- I would gain extended accounts of lives that developed over a series of interviews allowing insights into the wholeness of students' experiences.
- I would gain an insight into how their learning experiences were influenced by their lives outside of the institution.

2.6 The interviews

There are a number of different ways in which research interviews may be conducted, ranging from the structured question and response interview that proceeds along a fixed schedule from one end of the spectrum, through semi-structured interviews that cover set themes, to the more open narrative interview which may commence with just a single question. In this study a narrative approach was used to allow an experiential interview, but with an element of structure (Flick, 2009) with a holistic approach that enabled the inclusion of all aspects of the students' lives that influenced their transition to higher education. The purpose was to gain an insight into their unique lives and the context within which they lived it (Henderson et al., 2007).

As mentioned above 'narrative' is used widely and in research terms has a number of different meanings. In this study 'narrative' is used to represent the 'stories' produced during the interviews that had a sequenced storyline and particular characters and settings (Riessman, 2008). This method of interviewing allowed the students to tell their own stories in their own words without the interruption of questions that could have curtailed their accounts or led them to focus on specific topic areas that were not important to them during their transition (Flick, 2009). The narrative approach also enabled the interviewees to reveal their transition and learning experiences, as they remembered and reassessed them, during the telling of detailed accounts (Riessman, 2008). Thus I believe I was able to gain a 'window' on the students themselves (Stephenson and Papadopoulos, 2006) by focusing on the 'everyday' happenings during their time studying in higher education.

The purpose of the interviews was:

- To explore the students' experiences.
- To provide a 'space' for the students to remember and reflect on their transition experiences.
- To gain a detailed account of individual students' learning transitions and experiences.

A generative narrative prompt question was used at the start of each interview to encourage the students to tell their stories, with a request for the story to be in chapters or episodes and to begin wherever and

however they felt was most appropriate (see also Gubrium, 1993). Thus through the interviews I was able to elicit a detailed course of events and allow the interviewees to tell their story (Flick, 2009). I was aware that the narratives would not begin without an explicit request to the students to tell their stories and whatever I said would have implications for what stories developed. Therefore the narrative prompt was carefully developed to encourage the students to tell their stories as a series of episodes as much as possible without pre-set 'borders', and although there were individual variations in the words chosen the narrative prompt is broadly captured below:

I would like you to tell me the story of your learning experiences, beginning wherever and however you want and including whatever is important to you. If it helps you to get started, then consider the story as a series of chapters or episodes and include whatever you think has been important to you.

I was also aware that stories do not always start at the point of the telling of the story so a chronological account was deliberately not requested as I wanted the students to develop their own time frame (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005) and to focus on the issues that were important to them as individuals. This interview process was thus designed to let the stories the interviewees told develop into extended accounts (Riessman, 2008) that focused on what the students themselves considered to be the important aspects of their experiences, rather than being driven by an interview schedule that would have focused the stories on aspects of their experiences that I considered to be important. This allowed each student to frame and situate their experiences in different ways according to the

context of their own lives and experiences. As described by Frank (2010:48)

The primary work of stories is making the “blooming, buzzing confusion” habitable by ordering it into foregrounds and backgrounds of attention and value.

After the narrative prompt at the start of the interview the interviewees were allowed to continue their narratives uninterrupted except for active listening signals from the researcher (Flick, 2009). If the interviewees stopped after the retelling of a particular event they were prompted to move on to the next ‘episode’; no further questions were asked but the narrative prompt was again outlined if necessary. This process allowed, as far as possible the interviewees to tell their stories, without being interrupted by me as researcher, asking further questions (Flick, 2009). When the narrative end was signalled by the interviewees with words such as ‘Well that’s it’ or ‘That’s my story’ I began a final questioning phase of the interview where clarification was sought of elements that were unclear or particular points of interest that the students raised during the course of their narrative (Flick, 2009). This interview process is represented diagrammatically below:

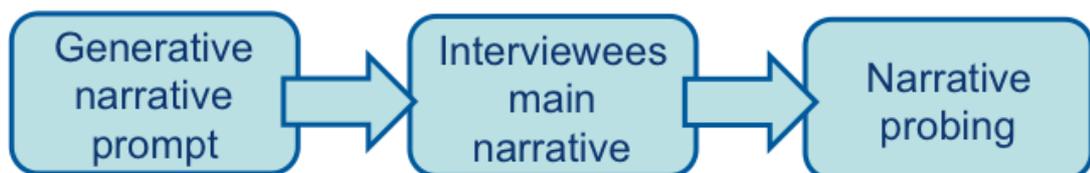


Figure 1 The narrative interview process

At the end of each interview I also asked one additional question.

I would like you to imagine a possible future self at the end of the academic year and consider what that future self will have achieved. If it helps you to get started, then consider what future goals that self will have achieved during the year.

The purpose of this question was to prompt the students to consider the future-oriented components of their self-concept; an imagined future self (see Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006; Miller and Brickman 2004). Heidegger (1926/67) described 'being' as both in time and anticipating the future. I believed that although I was encouraging the students to reflect on their past and present experiences by using a narrative prompt at the start of each interview, I also needed to assist them to consider the temporality of 'being a student' in terms of the future. Possible selves are representations of the self in the future (Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006) and I therefore concluded that by encouraging the students to focus on a possible self at each interview with this question I would gain an insight into their future self.

Prior to the first round of interviews a pilot interview was undertaken with a student who fell outside the sampling frame. The purpose of this pilot interview was to test whether the narrative prompt acted as an appropriate stimulus for storytelling, to test the recording equipment and to conduct a preliminary analysis of the transcript to ensure that the data generated was aligned with the aims of the study. This interview was an invaluable experience as it gave me an opportunity to reflect on the methods and identify areas for improvement. I am naturally talkative and

usually like to fill silent spaces, so after the student had finished their initial narrative and there was a silence I stepped in with a prompt. On reviewing the tape and transcription I realised that if I had waited and given positive non-verbal encouragement then the student would probably have restarted the story. Following this interview and period of reflection I was able to practise and develop my non-verbal, active listening skills with colleagues.

During the first round of interviews in October 2009 there was some variation in the lengths of the initial narrative accounts. Typically the mature students were more comfortable talking about their experiences whilst some of the other younger students moved onto the narrative probing phase of the interviews earlier. Some students also began by stating that they did not have much of interest to say, but I always reassured them of my interest and that I would listen to their stories nonetheless, whatever they included.

In subsequent interviews over the three years of the study I encouraged each student to consider that they were telling the 'next episodes' in their stories and again although there was variation in the exact words used the narrative prompt was:

Many thanks for returning for another interview, as before I would like you to tell your story of your experiences, beginning and finishing wherever you believe is appropriate and including whatever is important to you. Consider this interview to be an opportunity for you to tell me the next episodes in your story.

As the study progressed the students became more at ease as they became familiar both with me as interviewer and the process and procedure of the research interviews. This was indicated by comments such as 'this is the only time I get to talk about myself for an hour' and 'I look forward to these interviews, they help me make sense of things'. I also believe that there was a growing trust between the students and myself as they were reminded of the absolute confidentiality of the study at each interview and they became more comfortable with the process. The students also began to talk in greater depth about their personal issues and concerns rather than just focusing on their learning experiences.

Throughout the study I was therefore aware that I was developing a closer relationship with the students than I had in previous mixed methods studies in which I had utilised single interviews. I believe that this added to the study as without the growing trust between us, the students would not have shared their personal experiences with me and I would not have the data that I have presented within this thesis. I was, however, very clear about the boundaries of the interviews: they were not counselling sessions and I did not at any stage attempt to counsel any of the students within the context of the interviews. When the students raised particular concerns that I believed could be helped by the university support services, I made a note as the interviews continued. At the end of the interviews I explored these issues with the students and

then directed them to either their personal tutor or to the relevant student support service for further in-depth discussion.

2.7 Interview process and context

Stories in formal interviews are assembled and told for a particular audience in a particular setting; the stories are not simply conveyed but given shape during the course of the social interaction with the researcher and the particular context (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Both storyteller and listener have a particular role that is shaped by the process and the setting of the interview. These roles and processes inevitably have an impact upon the narrative that is told and narrative interviews become a collaboration between researchers and their subjects over a period of time, as stories are lived and told to give context to a situation and interaction. People live stories, as all experience is narrative, and then tell them in a particular context to help others understand their behaviour (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Within the context of this study the students were telling their stories to help me as researcher gain an insight into their learning experiences. What was included in the telling of the story, as well as what was left out, informed me as a listener of the connections that have been made in a process of personal change (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I believe that it is therefore important to describe the details and conditions of the 'narrative occasions' within the interview setting, if the narratives in this study are to be understood (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009).

The majority of the students' interviews included in the study were completed on the university campus, so as to provide an environment that was both familiar and comfortable to the students (see Sim and Wright, 2000; Domholdt, 2005). Once the students had been welcomed to the interview room, been given an opportunity to read an information sheet and signed the consent forms I outlined the narrative prompt and the students began their stories. Each interview was recorded using either audiotapes or a digital recorder to allow for greater depth of analysis.. During the interviews I also made brief notes of points of interest that I used to guide the narrative probing final section.

After the first year of the study, one of the students (a young male) moved some distance from campus to live with his family and was subsequently unable to find a convenient time to attend for interviews on campus, as he had to travel with friends. In order to continue to include him in the study during his second and third years I arranged to conduct telephone interviews with him. I used a recording system that plugged into the phone line and conducted these interviews from a quiet room on campus whilst he was at home. Although I had interviewed him three times face-to-face during his first year and established a rapport of sorts, it was inevitably more difficult to give non-verbal encouragement over the phone and these interviews were shorter in length than those that were conducted face-to-face with the other students. They also required greater prompting and the initial narrative section of the interview became shorter. I believe that these changes were to some extent inevitable as it

was much more difficult to establish a connection over the telephone; however, on reflection he was the student that I had had the most difficult interviews with throughout the first year of the study. He was a young male, from a Muslim culture and had a slight speech impediment so I had always had to listen intently to his narrative. Having a further 'distance' between us created by the environment of the telephone interview added an extra barrier to our communication.

After the interviews were completed the tapes and digital files of each were transcribed verbatim by an experienced MMU transcription service. No transcription process can completely capture a research interview (Elliott, 2007) but in an attempt to provide the best possible representation I made reflective notes on each interview and directed the transcriber to include para-linguistics, pauses and laughter within the text. I was aware that the transcription process was connected to how the analysis would be carried out (Elliott, 2007) and did initially consider transcribing the interviews myself, but following the pilot interview I realised that each interview would generate a considerable amount of data and I decided instead to focus my efforts on the analysis of the interviews rather than transcribing them. I wanted to review the transcription of each interview before the next interview and realised that I would be unable to do this if I transcribed the interviews myself.

To ensure the accuracy of each transcript and to add to my understanding I then reviewed the transcripts as word documents on a

computer screen, whilst simultaneously listening to the tapes and digital files as suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (2009). Any discrepancies and omissions I identified were subsequently amended at this first read through so the narratives were ready for analysis. Study identification numbers were used throughout the transcripts and on the recordings so only I was aware of the identity of each of the students, and pseudonyms have been used to hide the identity of students and locations when presenting the data.

2.8 Sampling and recruitment

The sampling frame for the study was a sample of convenience and consisted of all students enrolled on the undergraduate Physiotherapy degree programme at the start of the 2009/10 academic year. In order to give all the students an opportunity to participate in the study I gave a presentation to the cohort at the end of a lecture (Appendix 3) and any students who wished to participate were invited to add their names and contact details to a sign-up sheet and to read a study information sheet. All the students who had volunteered to participate in the study (26) were subsequently allocated a number alongside their name on the sign-up sheet and a random number programme used to generate a sample of eight students (10% of the cohort) from those that had volunteered. I subsequently telephoned each of the selected students to confirm their participation in the study, to answer any outstanding questions and to arrange a first interview date. In addition each of the students was

emailed a further copy of the information sheet so they were aware of the parameters of the study and could withdraw if they wished.

My decision to use a random sample from those students that had volunteered was taken after a prolonged period of deliberation. I had originally planned to use purposive sampling but believed that the sample I gained from this would be framed by my beliefs as to what an 'appropriate sample' was. By choosing instead to use a randomly generated sample from the list of volunteers I considered that I was effectively equally valuing all the students who had volunteered as they would all have individual perspectives that would add something unique to the study. In addition I did not want to collect details of gender and age on a sign-up sheet as I surmised that if I asked the students to reveal details about their personal circumstances I could possibly limit the number of students who were prepared to volunteer to participate in the study.

My decision to use 10% of the cohort was based on the study aims of the original mixed methods study design and the time frame of the study. I was aware that by planning to interview eight students I would generate lengthy interview transcripts and that I had to set a boundary as to what was a reasonable quantity of data to analyse before the second, quantitative, stage of the study. When the study was redesigned as a narrative inquiry I had already completed the first round of interviews with the students and I therefore discussed at length with my supervisory team

if my sample size would be appropriate. I was not seeking to generalise the stories to the general population as I was researching individual stories of experience, to gain an understanding of individual student's 'being'. I reviewed a number of similar studies that I had found to be meaningful (for example Bryson and Hardy, 2012) and eight students as a sample was in-line with previous samples. In addition I analysed the interviews as the study progressed, to check for data 'saturation' as each student's story confirmed the main elements of the others (Elliott, 2007:40).

Each of the eight students selected by random sampling attended for their first round of interviews in October 2009, the first term of their first year. One of these students subsequently left the programme in January 2010; I contacted her by telephone to invite her to participate in a second interview but she declined and asked to be removed from the study. All of her data was subsequently destroyed and she took no further part in the study.

2.9 Data analysis

Narrative inquiry can broadly be considered as a mode of inquiry where the process of analysis flows from the research questions (Josselson and Lieblich, 1999). As such, narrative analysis refers to a range of methods for interpreting texts that have a storied form, with a range of different perspectives (Riessman, 2008). These texts may have started as spoken accounts but via transcription take a textual form with the features of the

stories found within the text (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Within all such narratives there is temporality – a sequence of actions over time – and the consideration of this ‘sequences of action’ within stories separates narrative analysis from other types of analysis (Reissman, 2008). The goal of narrative analysis is therefore to uncover the overarching ‘topics’ or ‘plots’ that develop within the storied form over time (Webster and Mertova, 2007). The analysis of narratives thus becomes a way of analysing individual lived experiences to discover narrative linkages (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009).

Both Reissman (2008) and Frank (2010) stated that there is no single method of narrative analysis, or a prescribed set of steps to follow. However, Frank (2010:87) defines a good interpretation as one that ‘seems to fit the story, complementing it’ and Elliott (2007) provided a framework for classifying methods of narrative analysis that are focused on the different properties of narratives. Within this text Elliott described three different approaches to analysis:

- a focus on content
- a focus on the form or structure of a narrative
- a focus on narrative in its social context.

Within this study, data analysis was an on-going process throughout the three years of data collection followed by a year of writing. After each interview reflective notes were made and read with the interview transcripts to ensure that the transcripts were correct. Preliminary

analysis, in terms of defining and categorising the 'topics' of the narratives subsequently began at the end of the first year when each student had attended for three interviews. With 21 transcripts to analyse I read extensively on the variety of different methods of narrative analysis. This reading identified a range of different perspectives, hence as my data collection was to continue for a further two years I resolved not to commit to one particular analysis but to consider several options. I believed that it was important not to reach interpretive closure when I had only completed one year of data collection. As described by Frank (2010:86), 'both tellers and listeners constantly interpret each other'.

Riessman (2008) emphasised the need for 'close reading' during this time and each interview transcript was read and re-read with attention to both detail and language. The students' narratives were mostly complex, extended accounts with some running to over 20 pages of transcribed, convoluted stories. The data analysis was therefore an iterative process where the students' transcripts were read as a set to gain an impression of the dominant 'topics' within the individual stories and subsequently annotated with significant sections highlighted. In summary this was a four-step process:

- I read each of the transcripts several times as individual texts to gain an understanding of the students' stories as a whole.
- I subsequently read each student's transcripts as a series of 'episodes' to explore the 'topics' that ran across the interviews over

time. I then looked at how each 'episode' was related to the others in the sense of understanding the 'whole story'.

- I identified and highlighted sections within the texts which I believed were representative of 'orientating topics'.
- The identified sections were read together to identify the dominant 'topics' that were central within each student's story.

I was aware throughout this stage that I would be interpreting and presenting the stories based upon my own research frame and that other researchers may reach different conclusions that readers could agree or disagree with me. Therefore the on-going analytical process over the following two years was guided by the underlying principle that the analysis of the narratives would be to maintain each student's story as 'narrative coherent' accounts (Squire, 2009), rather than fragmented into common themes or experiences. Several different methods of analysis were tested and evaluated. Initially a thematic analysis was undertaken, and a framework approach was used to identify common themes with a number of different students' data contributing to each individual theme. On re-reading and reflection, although this method accurately presented the students' experiences I believed that it obliterated the individual narratives and it was therefore discarded. I considered that narrative study relies on lengthy accounts that are preserved and offer comprehensive insights into experience (see Riessman, 2008), and although there were common topics across the narratives, using a thematic analysis fragmented and destroyed the individual stories. I

wanted to capture 'the whole story' for each student with 'intervening' stages rather than just focusing on themes across the set of interviews so the final stories presented would maintain their truth and be well grounded (Webster and Mertova, 2007). The narratives were communicated lives and my goal was to ensure that I linked past, present and future to assemble the students' stories as meaningful accounts (see Gubrium, 1993).

A second analysis summarised each of the students' interviews in their entirety; this method maintained the individual narratives over the three years of the study but on review was very repetitive and lengthy. After further reflection and reading I selected an approach that presented the narratives under overarching orientations. Initially I used the orientations of 'academic' 'social' and 'personal' integration to present the narratives, these orientations aligned with the findings of previous literature (Tinto, 1973, Yorke and Thomas 2000). However, as I further analysed the narratives the individual orientations of the students' experiences cut across these three areas.

One of my aims during the analysis was to identify 'broad patterns of meaning' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) and throughout the analysis of the interviews I read a number of different narrative books and papers. One such text was Lieblich's 1993 study 'Looking at Change' (Lieblich, 1993). This book chapter details the narrative of a 21-year-old Russian student who was a new immigrant to Israel. The story begins with an

introduction to 'Natasha' and her circumstances, effectively presenting her 'back story' to orientate readers to her particular situation and environment. The introduction also describes 'Natasha' and is followed by excerpts presented as narrative fragments from a series of interviews. The narrative fragments are interspersed with short summary paragraphs and indicative headings to make narrative linkages and add coherence to the story. The chapter thus presents a series of narrative interviews with 'Natasha' succinctly whilst maintaining the narrative coherence of the individual story.

A second author that had a major influence upon the form in which I have presented the narratives in this thesis was Gubrium and in particular his 1993 study with care home residents 'Speaking of Life' (Gubrium, 1993). Although narrative analysis is effectively 'case-centered' in that it maintains individual stories, it can generate categories or general concepts (Riessman, 2008). As my analysis of the students' narratives continued over time, I noted that although each narrative was unique I could identify broad 'orientations' in a way similar to the approach used by Gubrium (1993). The stories of nursing home residents within this text are maintained as coherent stories with an initial introduction that familiarises readers with the individual residents' experiences and 'back story' by describing broad details of their circumstances and orientation. The individual stories are then subsequently presented within a broad orientation expressed over a series of interviews without detailing each aspect of their experiences and making the results too repetitive. In this

text the orientations effectively make narrative linkages across each series of interview transcripts with an individual resident, whilst making readers aware that the chosen orientations were common across all cases to some extent. The orientations are also grouped into pairs and threesomes to demonstrate the variety of experiences within the same orientation.

On reflection I believed that if I used orientations to present the students' narratives in a manner similar to Gubrium, I could demonstrate the central topics within each student's experience. After several cycles of analysis and reflection I identified four orientations across the interview sets within this dissertation. There were elements of these four orientations within each of the students' stories. Therefore whilst each story was unique and individual I believed that by presenting common orientations I was highlighting the pivotal influences upon the students' learning experiences over the course of the study. These four orientations were of greater or lesser importance for each of the students, and each student had several 'orientations' within their story. Within the confines of a thesis I realised that I could only present a 'slice' of the students' experiences over time. I therefore chose to use orientations that were common across the students, but with each orientation presented by using students whose narrative had a particular orientation dominant within their narrative. Two students are therefore presented within each of three orientations (peer support, financial difficulties and learner self-direction) and one student alone within the fourth orientation (personal relationship difficulties).

These four orientations were common to all the students to varying degrees over the three years of their studies as plaited strands running through the narratives. There were also other minor orientations but each of these presented here had a profound impact upon the individuals and as such framed their stories.

2.10 Data presentation

My deliberations on how best to present the data generated from the interviews took some considerable time. I acknowledge that the interviews undertaken for this study are a collaboration between me as interviewer and the students as storytellers and that the environment and the context of the interviews has shaped the stories.

As both an audience for the narratives and the researcher analysing them, I have inevitably had an influence upon the stories. However, as far as possible I wanted to present the narratives as individual student stories and I have not included any of my own conversation within the narrative fragments presented here. I wanted the stories to be presented as unified productions that would engage readers, and although I had a role as listener I wanted to focus on the students themselves. As the project continued over the three years of the students' undergraduate studies I said less and less and listened more; and although the stories were not single, unified accounts, I do not consider that my gradually reducing prompts added sufficiently to the stories to make them worthy of inclusion within the orientations.

2.11 Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for the study was sought and obtained from the MMU, Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care ethics committee (Appendix 1). The primary concern during this study was to safeguard the students that participated and ensure that they were given enough information to give their informed consent if they chose to participate. A presentation about the study was given to the whole cohort during their induction sessions; this presentation outlined the study, explained the data collection strategies and detailed the ethical considerations. Study information sheets (Appendix 2) were also made available at this session.

Following the random selection process, further study information sheets (Appendix 2) were emailed to all the students who were selected for participation. The researcher's contact details and that of an independent third party were included in both of these and the students were assured that participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any time without prejudice or fear of future implications. This presentation was given in the second week of September 2009 so all students had at least two weeks to consider their involvement before they were invited to attend for their first interview. All participants recruited to the study were assured that their data would in no way contribute to either the formative or summative assessment of their academic performance and would not be shared with the Faculty staff.

All interview participants were given a further information sheet that was produced in line with the COREC (2005) guidelines and gave explicit details of the interview process and data handling procedures when they attended for each interview and they were invited to ask questions if they wished to clarify particular points. After they had read the interview information sheets the students were asked to sign a consent sheet before the interviews began and initial sections within the consent sheet that specified that their anonymised data and direct quotes could be used in the study. The students signed a consent sheet each time they attend for interview to ensure that they were giving explicit informed consent for their data to be used within the study on each occasion.

In addition the students were verbally informed that they could stop their interviews at any time and decline to answer questions if they chose to. Confidentiality of the interview participants was maintained by using study identification numbers on the tapes and transcripts, known only to the participants and the researcher. All the data recorded was stored on a computer at the University which is password protected and paper-based material in a locked filing cabinet that only the researcher has access to. Within the written analysis of the data all identifying details have been changed, with pseudonyms used for identifiable people and places.

As an additional safeguard for the students I identified an independent third party who had a counselling qualification who I could direct the students towards if the interview procedure prompted the students to

become upset. The students were made aware of this third party via the study information sheets and via verbal reminder at each interview.

Following the change of design of the study, guidance was sought from the Chair of the Faculty ethics committee. The chair gave permission for the replacement of the original quantitative survey with further rounds of interviews with the students using the same narrative prompt question that had already been approved (Appendix 1). Each of the students was subsequently contacted via email to invite to participate in further interviews.

2.12 Summary

In summary, the design of this longitudinal study was a narrative inquiry over a three-year time frame with the underpinning philosophy of pragmatism. The method was a series of narrative interviews with a sample of eight students conducted throughout the students' undergraduate studies, with each student being offered a minimum of five interviews (although one student subsequently left the university and thus the study after the first interview). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed to present the students' stories under four orientations that were identified during the iterative data analysis process.

Chapter three – Findings

3.1 Introduction to findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the students' learning experiences and investigate 'being a student' for these seven participants. The aim of this findings chapter is to present the students' experiences depicted through their narratives to demonstrate their individual experiences of 'being a student' and to use the stories to frame the students' experiences to reveal their underlying needs as they aimed to achieve their goals.

The stories presented here are based on the students' narratives and exhibit the aspects of their lives they chose to share with myself as interviewer. They are not therefore life histories that accurately describe the students' lives but a rendition of how the students perceived their own lives to be on the occasions that we met. Consequently, they will not represent the exact 'truth' of the students' experiences as they give a single perspective that was shared with me as researcher over a series of interviews. Nonetheless they offer an insight into how the students' personal histories and aspirations shaped their learning experiences and their thoughts, feelings and goals throughout the three years of this study.

Each of the seven students who volunteered to be included in the study was interviewed on at least five occasions and at each interview they were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences as a series of 'episodes' beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate. This narrative prompt

provided an opportunity for the students to speak about themselves in relation to their experiences over time and convey from their point of view their experiences of 'being a student'. At each interview the students were asked to tell the next 'episodes' and I believe that the stories the students told allowed me to view holistically their learning experiences in all their complexity and richness. Once they had graduated, a brief telephone interview provided an epilogue of their experiences.

The students' perspectives were considered to be paramount throughout the study as I was interested in what was being said by the students in these narratives rather than how they were told, and whilst acknowledging that there are a variety of different approaches to narrative inquiry, I wanted to explore the lives of the students by considering their own stories of their university experiences. Although the individual stories varied, there were patterns and common topics that appeared over time, reiterated across the narratives as dominant themes or 'orientations' (Gubrium, 1993). The aim of the analysis of the narratives was to determine how the narratives could best be presented to depict these orientations to 'being a student'.

My analysis of the interviews with each student identified four prominent orientations that were within each of the narratives:

- Students' development as self-directed learners.
- The importance of peer support.
- The impact of financial concerns.

- Personal relationship difficulties.

These four orientations exemplified the students' experiences during the three years and the narratives are therefore presented here under these orientations. Overall these orientations were at the core of each of the narratives and therefore inform us that these are the pivotal influences on these students at this time. The four orientations were shared components of each of the seven students' stories; all the students included elements of each orientation within their narratives as they progressed through their three years at university. The narratives were not however uniform or one-dimensional, as each student chose from a wide range of personal, social and educational experiences in forming their narratives. Indeed sometimes the narratives included interrelated orientations and narrative-linkages.

Although there was similarity across the data set, repeated analysis and review of the transcripts identified that for each student there was a central orientation that impacted significantly upon their 'being'. These significant elements changed the trajectory of their university experiences and the impact this had on their personal development throughout the three years is conveyed through the stories. Therefore although the individual stories were multi-faceted and personal challenges transpired in each narrative, I have chosen to present each student under the orientation that best exemplified their individual experiences.

This decision has necessitated that I discard aspects of each individual story and the narratives presented here are effectively a small segment of each student's experience. I acknowledge that whilst the stories focus on one particular orientation, each student combined multiple orientations within their narratives and the meaning of university life changed during the course of the study for several. For some the development of a peer support network was an on-going primary orientation whilst for others, although this was initially important, as they progressed through the programme it was only rarely mentioned. For other students financial difficulties and personal issues were so prevalent that peer support relationships became relatively unimportant. A few students struggled at times to engage with their studies and for all of the students their role of student in these stories cannot be considered separately to their lives as peer, 'significant-other' or low-income worker. Meaning was made in the narratives through the linkages the students made between the different orientations and aspects of their lives, and the differing stories give an insight into students' 'being' as they progressed through their undergraduate studies.

There were other emphases within the interviews overall. A shared overarching orientation across the data set was assessment, as the students repeatedly framed their experiences according to their assessment results and their progress in completing unit assessments. As these students were all studying on a Physiotherapy degree programme, another shared component was their aspiration for an

eventual career working as a Physiotherapist. Although these were common linkages they were set aside as I considered that all Physiotherapy students that are asked to talk about being a student would make reference to assessment and an eventual career at some stage. Rather than concentrating on the assessment results and career plans themselves, I focused on the impact these had upon the students and how they influenced the students' stories as a whole.

Each of the students' narratives are presented as a series of interviews incorporating verbatim quotes to give an overview of the storied nature of the students' experiences and how their perceptions changed over time. Six of the students are presented as pairs under three of the orientations: learner self-direction, peer support and financial concerns to allow a degree of synthesis. One student is presented alone as a special circumstance under the heading of relationship breakdown, as although this student included elements of both peer support and learner self-direction within her narrative the devastating impact of her marital breakdown was all prevailing. Towards the end of the study when she was separated from her husband her emotional distress during a difficult divorce significantly impacted on and changed the course of her academic achievements; all other orientations became insignificant.

In studying these narratives I have gained an insight into the students' lives and come to understand better their on-going learning transitions of 'becoming' a student and 'being a student'. The role of myself as

researcher within the interviews was to elicit the stories and then to listen. Although I acknowledge that as both an audience and researcher I have influenced the manner in which the stories are framed, as far as possible I wanted to reduce my presence so the focus was on the students' experiences. No attempt to influence or refocus the individual stories was therefore made during the interviews and after the initial narrative prompt question I aimed to say nothing until the second questioning stage of the interviews.

3.2 Interviewees

All the interviewees included in this study were students on the BSc Physiotherapy programme who had volunteered to be interviewed following a presentation outlining the study and a letter of invitation delivered by email. To maintain their confidentiality, the interviewees were all allocated an identification code number at the start of the study (that only the researcher and interviewee had access to) and also a pseudonym that was aligned with their gender and ethnicity.

To protect the identity of the students all the personal information within the narratives presented here has been altered. However, in order to give readers an overall impression of the individual students, I wanted to include some basic demographic data. I believed that this information would allow readers to gain a greater understanding of the individual student's perspectives and experiences. Therefore Table 1 below provides information on both gender and age band of each student. In

addition each student is presented at the beginning of their narrative using a brief overview of their earlier lives using aspects of their identity that they chose to foreground.

Table 1 Interviewee profiles

Name	Gender	Age band	Orientation
Jack	M	18-21	Development as a self-directed learner
Adnam	M	18-21	
Alice	F	18-21	The importance of peer support for learner engagement
Sara	F	18-21	
Oliver	M	24-30	The impact of financial concerns
Paul	M	24-30	
Maria	F	24-30	The impact of personal difficulties

3.3 Development as a self-directed learner

Students sometimes say that one of the most difficult aspects of their transition to higher education is the necessary adjustment to a more self-directed style of learning, as they develop as independent autonomous learners. This is particularly true for those students whose prior learning

experiences have been teacher-led, with regular prompts about deadlines, guided study and frequent formative feedback.

Jack and Adnam, the two interviewees considered in this section, had both recently completed their A-levels within a didactic teaching environment before they came to university. They both separately pronounced this experience as '*spoon-feeding*'. Repeatedly during their interviews they explained that they had subsequently struggled during their transition to independent learning. They expressed a desire for greater direction and support from the academic team which would necessitate less effort from them, whilst they acknowledged that they could appreciate the positives of autonomous learning. Throughout their interviews they described how they struggled to engage with the programme, get started on assessments and were easily distracted from their studies.

For both of these students their transition to higher education was the beginning of a time of greater freedom, an experience to be relished. It was an interlude between the controlled environment of school and the commitments of work. Therefore their narratives initially focused particularly on the social dimensions of their lives and making friends was a key priority throughout the first year. For them, the assessments were considered as an inconvenience and occasionally completed at the last minute during overnight writing sessions.

Detailed stories were given during these narratives of nights out and developing friendships, often with much laughter. In their first year, living in halls of residence they both had extensive social networks. They started the academic year working reasonably hard at their studies but academic endeavour dwindled throughout the first year and towards the end of the year assessments were seen as something to pass rather than harbouring ambitions of a high grade. By May of the first year both were very aware that they only needed to get 40% in each of their first year assessments to proceed into the second year.

During their second and third years their academic efforts and subsequently achievements were intermittent, and both attained higher grades on placement than they did on their written assessments. At times both struggled to engage with the programme and complete assessments.

I interviewed both these students on three occasions during their first year, once every term. I also interviewed them in their second and third years: Jack by meeting him on campus and Adnam via telephone as he had moved back to live with his parents and was only on campus for taught sessions. All the campus-based interviews were conducted in meeting rooms and lasted for about one hour. The telephone interviews were recorded on audio-cassette and were shorter as it was more difficult to establish a rapport over the telephone. Jack was a very willing and talkative interviewee throughout the study. Adnam was quieter and

occasionally needed prompting, particularly during the telephone interviews.

3.4 Jack

Jack's narrative was a collection of convoluted stories as he detailed the adventures and near misses he had during the three years. He was a natural storyteller and talked at length without any prompting, sometimes getting lost in his own thoughts and stating '*Where was I going with that?*' or '*Remind me what I was talking about again?*' His narrative is that of a confident young man as he makes the transition into adulthood with an accompanying move to a new country. University meant a new era to Jack, he had always expected to go to university so it was a natural progression, a time when he would enjoy life and mature into an adult. His primary orientation was that of his struggles to engage with his studies, a pattern repeated from his school days; he had few financial or personal concerns and had a large group of peers straightaway. He was largely content throughout the study and his interviews were somewhat repetitive as he reiterated time and again how he had struggled to connect with his studies and complete assessments, until the third year when in the final term he concentrated hard on his final two assessments.

3.4.1 First interview – October 2009

I interviewed Jack for the first time on a Wednesday afternoon, three weeks after the start of term. He had had taught sessions that morning and met me after lunch in the campus reception. During the interview he talked freely and at length and needed only non-verbal encouragement to

keep talking. My first impression was that Jack was a relaxed and confident, optimistic person; he described himself as friendly, outgoing and easy to talk to. He was of medium build and dressed casually in track pants and a T-shirt.

3.4.2 Early life

Jack was the eldest of three siblings with graduate parents. He *'thoroughly enjoyed'* his school years and had an extended network of friends and a long-term girlfriend. He had always expected to go to university when he completed school *'from when I was a child I was told that's what you do, it just seemed normal to go to university'*. Although Jack had a good relationship with his family, his ambition had been to leave Northern Ireland for his university studies; he *'definitely didn't want to stay at home'* because he *'wanted to experience something new'*. He believed that his parents would have *'just supported wherever I wanted to go'* so when he was deciding which university to apply to he had been focused on attending a university that would give him *'the student experience'*.

Although Jack achieved good grades in his GCSE examinations he performed badly in his AS exams, which was a *'major shock'* and he acknowledged in his first interview that he *'just didn't work hard enough'*. He had also found the A2 programmes in his second year at sixth form to be *'much more difficult'* than he expected as more self-directed learning

was required. In an early indication of his difficulties developing as an independent learner he stated:

I struggled with the step from GCSE to AS but then the step to A2 was even greater. I continued working, but maybe not as hard as I could have done, I just wanted to get them out the way. I knew it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if I didn't get in [to university] this year. I really wanted to go but I thought, sure it's not the end of the world because my girlfriend's back home as well.

3.4.3 Initial transition to university

Jack had been given a conditional offer of three B grades at A Level to gain a place on the programme. He gained two B grades and one D grades and was 'pretty gutted'. He assumed that he had not got a place on the programme and was on the verge of registering to re-sit his A levels when he checked and discovered that he had been allocated a place despite his low grade. He was subsequently delighted:

I couldn't believe it I was so shocked. I was so happy because I was quite down after I got my results, it made getting in almost better, like I was on an even greater high.

Jack's initial transition to university was uneventful. He 'really enjoyed' the first week's social events and made lots of new friends. He had a flat in a hall of residence and went out with several of the other students on the programme in the weekend before the programme started:

The flatmates kind of introduced themselves and said they were going out to the Union so I decided that I'd go because it's the first night and you don't want to miss out on anything. People are making friends straight away so you don't want to be left behind so I went out and it was like just a big group of us. It was good just going out to meet a few people and I enjoyed it. I met a guy on the first night who was on the course, so it meant I knew someone straight away. I had someone to walk to uni with on the Monday. I met lots of new people and it was just what you wanted in your first week of university. I was like, so that's why I am here, because I wanted to experience something new.

Jack was initially keen to start the programme but was surprised to be given work to do in the first week: *'I thought God we're getting started into work already'*. After the shock of his AS and A2 results he had originally planned to keep up to date with work to ensure that he performed well in his assignments but found it difficult to engage with the study tasks from the first week:

It was like we got these study tasks and I was like yeah I'll try and do them by Thursday or something but I just left them until Sunday ... I didn't do any work.

In the first few weeks Jack enjoyed the skills sessions *'because they're easier'* and the tutorials because *'you get the chance of small group work'*. However, he struggled to keep up during the large-group lectures and looked forward to the study days when he did not have to come into campus:

The lectures I find a bit more difficult to concentrate in just because there's so many people. It can be difficult especially when you're getting like that lecture at four o'clock that can be difficult to keep concentrating I suppose. Also, one of the reasons why I chose here is because I liked the layout of the timetable and stuff because it gives you those two days off, I like having those two days off and they're not days off they're for studying but it's good having that.

At the end of the interview I asked Jack what his goals were for the end of the academic year. Overall he wanted *'Just to enjoy, to take the course seriously but to enjoy everything that I do'* and within this he identified three priorities: to do well academically, to establish some friendships and achieve success with the football team he had joined:

I definitely want to do well. I want to do well in the assignments. I know some people come into the first year with the attitude like

they want to just scrape through kind of thing but I don't want to just scrape through. My aim is not to have to do any re-sits I've had enough of them and to have a solid group of friends as well because it's kind of difficult at first. In the first few weeks you're kind of just making friends with everyone kind of thing. Maybe making friends with people you kind of like them but you know that you're not really going to be friends with them at the end of year so it would be good to have established a solid base of friends. And I'd like to win the six aside league that I'm in but I can't see that happening but that again is just to do with having fun as well.

I drew the interview to a close.

3.4.4 Second interview – January 2010

Jack and I met for a second time on a Tuesday afternoon just over a week after the start of the second term. He seemed happy and relaxed as he knocked and walked into the room; he wore jeans and an un-ironed t-shirt and looked slightly dishevelled. I asked him to continue his narrative and he began by talking about how much work there had been to do in the first term and how he had not always been committed to doing it or up to date:

Since I left you I got a bit of work yeah, this course has moved so quickly. It was a lot of work, a lot of work and I definitely didn't do enough of it. It's just with every skill you get taught a little and then if you don't do the study they don't check up, you just get found out on the day of the exam really.

He continued talking about the study tasks and then moved on to talk about the assessments that he had undertaken in the first term. He had received his assessment grades just before the Christmas break and had passed both assessments with marks of 50 and 55. He acknowledged that he had not worked as hard as some of the other students and had

only started revising just before the date of the practical exam. One of his friends on the programme had even teased him about his 'it will be alright' attitude to studying:

I had the [practical] exam which I passed so I was happy to pass. I don't really get too stressed out which is mainly a bad thing at times because I tend to leave things until the last minute. I have one friend in the class Dave and I didn't even realise I said it all the time but I said "oh I think we'll be alright" and he said you said that for the last exam [laughs]. I was "I think it'll be alright" even though I hadn't done much work for it, so it was all last minute revision leading into the exam, too much last minute, but obviously I knew enough to pass which I was glad about.

Jack had also struggled to focus on the written assessment he had had to complete in the first term. Even though he had eight weeks in which to complete the essay he described his preparation as 'a major case of left things to the last minute' and talked about the experience in detail:

I just put it off and off and off until the very last day basically. I'd done about a thousand words and then I decided I'll just get it done for the Friday but that didn't happen. I thought I've got a thousand words to write and I thought right I'll stay up and then I decided no I won't, I'll not bother staying up I'll take the day off tomorrow. I'll get a good sleep and then I'll be able to work hard tomorrow. I got up at half five or six and just turned out a thousand words but even still... It's really bad because even at that stage my concentration is so bad. I can't seem to sit at a computer screen I just get distracted really easily and I can't sit there for more than thirty or forty-five minutes without having to get up. Even though the pressure is on I still couldn't get myself to sit and do the bloody thing. It was really frustrating but at the same time I got it done and I got fifty in it so I passed it.

He continued to talk about the assessment and as he reflected, concluded that he did not want to be in the same position again because he had found the whole experience stressful. He was also annoyed because he had lost easy marks by not following the university referencing system:

I was quite worried about it but once I'd finished it I was kind of reading it and all I kept thinking was I will not be leaving stuff like that again because that was very bad. I got 50% but if I'd worked harder on it I know I could've done better. The referencing thing I kind of looked through it briefly. I've read through the comments and stuff the referencing annoyed me because I thought I don't know why I did this but I had things in italics and then I took them out because I think I saw someone somewhere whose referencing wasn't in italics and obviously I got marked down on that. You want to get the easy marks the marks for referencing and stuff.

As Jack continued to reflect he acknowledged that although he had passed both of the assessments that he wasn't happy with his marks. He went on to resolve to try harder for the next assessments and planned to speak to his personal tutor about his assessment feedback:

I'm happy to pass obviously, not great marks, but I think in terms of what people around me seemed to do it was around what they were getting. That was kind of first term out of the way and stuff so I know now that I need to work harder. I definitely need to work harder. I would say that I'm very happy to pass but no I definitely want to move up and improve on that.

The next topic in Jack's narrative was the forthcoming two-part assessment. He had been allocated a group for the first part of the assessment the day before and was reasonably pleased with the group he was going to be working with. He believed that being part of a group would spur him on to work harder as he did not want to let the other students down:

I think most of the groups will be very good because we're friends anyway I think in general people do seem to be quite happy with the groups. One of my friends got in a group and he reckons he's going to have to do most of the work but I mean he's not complaining about it he's not devastated. I guess that's just the way it is.

The second part of the assessment was a short piece of reflective writing on the group experience that had to be written over the Easter break whilst Jack was at home:

It will probably be left until the Wednesday morning [the hand-in day], no I'm only joking [laughs]. I'll get it done whenever, it's only 750 words so I'll try and get it written as soon as possible after the exam. I might even do a bit on the plane.

As Jack brought his narrative to a close I encouraged him to review the goals that he had set in his first interview. Overall he was content; he had made a group of friends and was still playing football but acknowledged that his academic efforts needed to improve:

I've made a good group of new friends definitely. Hopefully I'll have worked a bit harder [by the end of the year] that's one thing I want to do. I'd like to get my marks up a little bit especially for this presentation and stuff because I've got two more assignments I think. I'm only 52% [average mark] at the moment, it's hard to say but I'd say in the presentation I'd like to be getting at least 65% but I don't know, I mean it is doable. I guess I'd like about 60% so I'll have to work [laughs].

3.4.5 Third interview – May 2010

Jack's third interview took place two weeks before the end of term on a Thursday afternoon. He was preparing for his final two assessments and planned to visit the library after his interview. Jack was his usual cheerful self and greeted me by remarking on how quickly the year had passed since we last met *'the first year has just flown by, two more weeks and that's me finished for the year'*, and remarking on how much Manchester now felt like a second home *'I guess it feels like home kind of here as well'*.

He began where he had finished the last interview by talking about the group assessment he had been set. He had enjoyed the unit as *'we didn't really have that much work'* and when his group had presented the work

they believed they had done well, so he was slightly disappointed when he got their results:

First big thing I guess was the presentation, I had a good group for that and we did a fair bit of work on it and well we thought that we'd done better when we got the grades back. I mean we did OK but we thought when we'd actually done better. In the end, we got 57% or 58% for the presentation which at first I thought was a bit harsh really, but we only kind of started to do it three days before the exam ... but when we got the marks back, we saw that maybe we weren't at times focused enough on the question.

The other element of this assessment was a personal piece of reflective writing on the presentation and although Jack again left this very late he was pleased with his grade of 55:

For my own reflective writing, I got 55% so I got an overall grade of 57%. I would've liked better but I didn't do anything on it until the Tuesday [the day before the deadline]. I did it on the Tuesday and then was finishing it off on the Wednesday.

After this assessment he had studied for a respiratory unit which he had 'thoroughly enjoyed' even though the workload had increased. The only downside for Jack was the unit assessment, which was a written exam and he wasn't sure how well he had done:

That was our first written exam for the year which was my first written exam since last June, since my A levels. It was a bit strange same old revision pattern I suppose, just leaving it, well not quite leaving it. I went in the exam feeling quite confident that I knew most of the stuff but then when everyone was in, just two hours seemed like so much to begin with but then by the end of the time I still needed more time. It was partly my own fault because I thought I had too much time doing the first question so I was kind of a bit slow probably, so the last question was a wee bit rushed. I still think I've done OK in it, fingers crossed anyway. Obviously, I felt I could've done more revision but at the same time, I felt that I knew enough. I wasn't getting worried really but I knew I needed to be doing a bit more work.

Straight after this exam Jack had flown home for the three week Easter break. Due to flight disruptions he struggled to get back to Manchester

missing the first two days of the Neurology unit he was studying. He was initially worried because *'whenever I did biology I couldn't understand all the stuff'* but had been surprised how much he had enjoyed the taught sessions:

At first I always find it tough and I still do find it tough but it's actually getting interesting at the same time concentrating on pathologies and that kind of thing. Simon is an absolutely brilliant teacher, everyone in our class has been saying he's been so good and we've learned so much with him.

As this unit was coming to an end he had to meet the deadline to complete the written unit assessment as well as the assessment for his final unit. Again he had struggled to engage with the work and get started. He left the writing of both assessments until the last week so had to find time to complete both pieces of work:

We have two assignments to do at the minute. It's only a couple of weeks to the end so I should get started on the assignments I guess, but yeah one has just been hanging over my head a bit. I'm definitely going to do that starting today and then definitely finish by Sunday or Monday. I'm not really a big fan of assignments. I don't really know why [laughs] so yeah that's the fun that's awaiting me. I'm kind of starting to work a bit harder on it.

To conclude the interview I invited Jack to reflect on what he had achieved in his first year compared to the goals he had set in the first interview, he smiled and said:

I want to have passed the year that would be good, I don't want to fail anything. I don't know really apart from pass everything I mean the first year is about getting settled in and enjoying yourself and I definitely have enjoyed myself and I have settled in. We won the league last Sunday! I mean there is nothing much apart from passing everything and just enjoying myself and getting my assignments in on time. I did want to get a 2:1, but I mean I don't know how it's going to go for this assignment. I did think for the group presentation that it was possible and obviously that didn't happen which was a bit annoying. I doubt it will be as high as 65 but I reckon probably I've done OK.

We concluded the interview and Jack went to study and organise his summer observational placement that he had to complete before he could progress into the second year.

3.4.6 Fourth interview – October 2010

I met Jack for his fourth interview almost exactly a year since our first meeting. He was pleased to be back in Manchester *'it has made me realise that I made the right choice coming here'* and had moved into a shared house with some of the other students on the programme. Jack was also pleased to be back at university and was gradually getting used to studying again after *'four months of not doing anything'*.

Jack had spent a large part of the summer break working to earn money to support himself during his second year and had had a week-long holiday in August. He had planned to study over the summer to review some of the topics that he struggled with in the first year but even though he had taken books with him had not managed to get started:

I brought books with me and planned doing some work, that didn't go too well [shakes head]. You think you will have loads of time but you end up doing things, doing work and you're always knackered after work. On your days off you don't want to be doing work you just want to relax. I didn't get too much done.

The other significant event for Jack during the summer holiday was that he had almost failed to complete his observational placement *'I screwed up the first time'*. He thought he had arranged the placement at a hospital in Manchester via email but when he turned up on what he thought was the correct day he was informed that he was a week too early and that

the hospital were unable to accept him. Jack had arranged to start a job the week after so had only just managed to complete his placement at the end of the summer break, just before term started:

I turned up and I was there for a few hours and then at lunchtime Rachel who is the Physio who was organising it, said you are not supposed to be here. I thought she was joking but it turned out that there had been a mix up in the emails. Instead of replying to her I replied to my own email because I was the last person to email. I went home and checked my emails and it was only after that I realised I had emailed myself so I was a bit annoyed. I didn't actually do my placement until the week before we started back at uni.

After describing the events of the summer break Jack moved on to reflect upon his academic results from the first year. He had handed in his last two assessments on the deadline date '*late as usual as I left the last assessment until the night before*' and had passed the year with a 2.2 average grade. On balance he was content with his achievements:

I only got 56 but I was just glad I passed. I was glad that I passed everything first year so that was good and I am proud of that. I had said that I would like to get over sixty but I was just happy just to have passed everything. I obviously worked last year but not as much as I am going to have to this year.

Although he was reasonably pleased with his results, with some prompting from his parents, he had resolved to try harder in his second year:

I know I have a lot more work to do. I know I didn't work anywhere near enough or as much as I should have. My parents were very pleased but once they got over being pleased, they were like you need to work now. I'm just glad that I made it through the first year relatively unscathed ... I work well under pressure put it like that but I better not do that this year.

At this point Jack smiled and acknowledged that he had resolved to work harder and do better during every interview. He reflected that this was an on-going pattern since when he had been at school:

I was just a bit too relaxed when I shouldn't have been. I always do it, every single year I'm like right I'm not going to. I always think, like I fuff around in an evening, then I am too tired so I think well I'll just get up and do it in the morning. I have been like that since I was a kid. Every year I say, like my New Year's resolution is I will not do work in the mornings but it's happened already this year. It's just a matter of channelling my time a bit better, using my time a bit more wisely. I don't know I just do nothing rather than do work. So, it needs to change.

As Jack talked at length about his results he began to reflect on how he could improve his grades during the second year. As he talked he realised that he had not collected his assessment feedback from the course work receipting office:

I completely forgot about the feedback after I came back. I probably should go talk to my personal tutor about it. I suppose that would be useful for an assignment, it might help me to plan what I need to do for this assignment coming up? I just completely forgot because it was so long ago so I suppose it is just a matter of going through it with my personal tutor just to see where I am going wrong, where I need to improve and that sort of thing.

As Jack talked about the feedback he remembered that he had previously been advised by his personal tutor to talk to the library team about Harvard referencing as he had lost marks on this aspect in all of his written assessments:

I need to see about one of the Harvard Referencing sessions because that is something that I don't really know what I am doing. I think I went to one before and she gave me a sheet on how to do referencing but I still struggle. I use the sheet and try to do it as best as I can using examples, but I still struggle. I always have ideas but then I don't follow them through. I'm good at thinking about things but not good at following through so it is something that I need to work on big time.

When Jack came to the conclusion of his narrative I asked him to reflect on the goals that he had previously set and consider what goals he wanted to achieve by the end of his second year:

I'm not making any rash claims this time, I suppose the main objective is to try and get a 2:1 anyway, definitely no re-sits. I need to start pushing if that is what I want to get. I think, I don't know, it is hard for me to tell, I can imagine that I would do well on placement, probably more so than I will do in assignments. I don't like assignments at all. Sitting down for hours at a time and doing all the research and stuff and then putting it into words. I know this year there is not much room for messing about, no more goals of enjoying myself this year. I need to get my head down a bit and actually do some work this year. This is the year for work I hope anyway.

3.4.7 Fifth interview – January 2011

Jack and I met for his fifth interview at the start of the second term of his second year, just after he had returned from the Christmas break. He began by talking about his assessment grades and about how he had struggled to adapt during his transition into the second year:

We're kind of expected to do even more this year of our own. Last year I found it really enjoyable and I now I feel like we are expected to remember a lot of the skills that we'd done last year cos the lecturers didn't go over the basic skills as much this year so it was kind of we had to do a lot of stuff on our own. I think the lecturers kind of expect more because you're in second year. I suppose in a way it's good doing self-learning and stuff but umm, I don't know, it might be nice to have a wee bit more, a bit more of a helping hand. I think for me anyway [laughs] I need to just kinda get on with reading more journals and get used to reading journals more often and that kind of thing for research cos at the minute it's not something that I do that frequently.

These problems adapting to level five study were evident in his assessment grades as he had only gained 47% in his first assessment of the year. The assessment was an essay in which the students had been required to read and critique a number of journal articles and Jack had found it difficult to engage with the task:

That was a struggle, we were looking at journals and that kind of thing and finding journals and trying to critique them and find the appropriate ones which is something that I found quite difficult and

then obviously leaving like, struggling to get round to doing the work as well is always a problem. By the time I finished I thought I was, well I was relatively pleased, I thought it wasn't too bad, I thought I'd done enough to pass anyway. So I ended up getting 47% in that which is my lowest mark so far and I was pretty disappointed cos especially cos this year I was looking for 2:1s.

Jack was 'pretty disappointed' with the grade and planned 'working on' his writing to prepare for his next written assessment which would be in the third year 'I really need to do well then, and I really need to pick up by then'. As Jack reflected on his experience he explored the factors that might have contributed to his disappointing grade. He only had taught sessions on two days (Tuesday and Thursday) and had found that he struggled to be self-directed and plan his study during the other five days. He had also found that there were more distractions now that he was living in a shared house rather than a hall of residence:

Having five days off in the week is just so much time off... I mean obviously some people use their time wisely but I don't. You get off on a Thursday, Thursday evening at five o'clock and you're like, "brilliant" and have a four day weekend and then all of a sudden it's Monday, nine o'clock on Monday night and you're like, "where has the weekend gone to?" I just, I don't know, it's really bad the way I've got like there's always distractions, just doing things that aren't work related. I mean often I do find myself just standing around talking ... so, I wouldn't say it was a hard transition, it's just different this year.

The second assessment in the first term had been a practical exam. Jack had felt that he 'needed to do well' after his first result and had been 'very much focusing on getting a 2.1'. He had spent longer than usual preparing for the exam and had put in 'a decent amount of revision', missing taught sessions on the day before his exam to 'focus on revision' when he realised that he 'didn't know what I was doing'. As he had left preparation late he did not have time to practice all the possible skills that

he might have been examined on. He therefore focused his time on a small selection of skills and was delighted when he arrived at the exam to discover that he had been lucky enough to choose the correct skills to revise:

I couldn't believe my luck when I looked down and got the one that I wanted [laughs]. So umm, it actually like, so I was kind of nervous going into it but I didn't want to get too nervous cos I knew I needed to do well in it, obviously. I felt kind of comfortable enough in the exam like and the time absolutely flew. Then the marks came out the following day, I got my first 2:1, which I was over the moon about, I got 65 [laughs]. I was just really happy that I finally got a 2:1 and not just scraping into a 2:1 as well, it was like a solid 2:1, so then I was kind of annoyed that I didn't get an extra five marks just to get up to a first [laughs]. So yeah so I was so happy I actually, I'm hoping that I'll kind of be able to replicate that in the next exam and for placement as well.

These reflections on his practical skills and narrative linkage to placement prompted Jack to talk about his forthcoming placements; something that he was 'really excited' about:

But yeah so, a bit more hard work for us [his final exam was in two weeks] and then yeah gee's that's it, university life's over for a few months which is strange. But I can't wait to go, I'm really excited about going on placement. I s'pose it'll depend on the clinical educator that I get but I am excited about going out there and I'm just looking forward to actually being a Physio and that cos I can't wait to actually you know, learn things and actually, and properly know them, cos everyone says like placement is where you properly learn like and it'll kind of stick in my head and I can't wait to be able to do that.

At the end of his narrative I again prompted Jack to set goals for the end of the academic year. This time his main focus was to perform well on his clinical placements:

I'd like a 2.1 [for the end of year grade] anything above that would be a bonus but I definitely, I'd be really disappointed with anything lower than that. Lower than that I would be disappointed but at the same time because I am kind of struggling with it at the minute. I mean I think, as long as you're putting in the effort the clinical educators will see that, they'll appreciate that you're putting in the

effort. Just doing a bit of reading around some of the extra stuff and if there's something that I see during the day that I'm not too sure of going away and actually reading about and coming back to them the next day and talking to my clinical educator about it and hopefully those 2:1s will come with a bit of hard work.

3.4.8 Sixth interview – October 2011

I met Jack for his sixth interview on a Monday afternoon, just less than two years since our first meeting. As usual he was upbeat and relaxed. It was nine months since his fifth interview and he had completed the three placements in his second year and had a summer break: *'feels like the longest summer I've ever had'*. He was delighted to start the interview by telling me that his overall grade for the second year had been a 2.1. Despite only getting a third on the practical skills exam he had been revising for when we last met as he had achieved firsts for all of his placements.

In the end I made it and I managed to get a 2:1, 64%. So it wasn't even that I just scraped it so I was very pleased with that, if I can keep hold of something like that for the end of this year I'll be absolutely delighted. I managed to get the placements out of the way and yeah that was the start of the long summer. The skills exam, as I say I was fretting, and it didn't go so well but I did manage to pass. I was convinced when I'd done it that I had definitely failed it. I just gave myself up for a re-sit. So it was kinda nice when I found out that I'd passed, scraped a pass.

Jack had enjoyed each of his placements and he rationalised *'I always thought that when I got out on placement that I would be a lot stronger than I had been academically'*. He talked at length about the patients that he had spent time with and the opportunities that he had had for personal development. He believed that he had improved his communication skills and was *'getting to feel quite confident and competent'*.

One of the key factors in Jack's engagement and development during his placements was the frequent formative feedback and one-to-one support from his clinical educators. He described his first clinical educator as 'really good' and noted that 'he was really good with me, lots of contact and lots of support whenever I needed it'. Jack described one particular example of this level of support:

I had to do a presentation and that. I left it until the last minute as usual, a night before job [laughs]. It was a bit of a nightmare when I was doing it because the projector wouldn't set up. But again my educator was really good with that. He gave me input beforehand and stuff. Umm, to make sure it went well. And on the day he was beside me giving me support as well.

Jack also described his other educators as 'supportive' people who had given 'good guidance'; he formed good working relationships with all the staff who he had 'got on well with'. He achieved high grades for his clinical performance, which had been reduced slightly by the lower marks he had achieved on the written element of each placement. He had been 'pretty disappointed' at this as it had 'brought me down' but was delighted that he had still achieved three firsts. His struggle with engagement with written work was still evident despite his enjoyment of the placements on which the written work was based:

The reflective writing was difficult enough, I didn't really put a lot of work into that last piece and I suppose I kind of took my foot off the gas because I'd gotten all top marks apart from one in my placements. Obviously not the best approach to take but it was just the mind-set at the time, the summer was so close and I knew I wasn't going to do too badly. I mean even if I didn't do great in the reflective I'd still get a good mark.

As Jack concluded his narrative I asked him to reflect and to set goals for the end of the year, he was determined that he would work hard for the rest of the year and graduate with at least a 2.1 degree classification:

This is probably going to be the toughest year I've ever had like. So I'm just going to have to do my best to try and stay on top of it because I can't really afford any messing around, but I just know it's going to be extremely tough this year. Hopefully I will have survived the course that will be one thing, to continue to improve on the experiences I've had on placement. I don't want to have any regrets when I come to June – wishing that I'd put in more work for my dissertation. I don't wanna be sitting there wishing because you don't get a second chance. I hate setting these goals [laughs] because I know every time I say the same thing. But yeah I just want to be able to say that I've given all that I can and hopefully that I'll come out with a respectable degree. I can't have any lower than a 2.1, I know that and any higher than that well I'm realistic and I'm not really holding out too much hope. I'll work as hard as I can and see what I come out with. But I mean anything under a 2:1 and I'll be very disappointed.

3.4.9 Follow-up telephone interview – November 2012

Jack was delighted to graduate with a final degree award of a first:

In the end I got a first so that was absolutely brilliant, I was absolutely ecstatic with that.

He had a part-time job straight after graduation followed by a holiday; when I spoke to him in November 2012 he had had several interviews but was yet to find a job as a Physiotherapist:

At least I have got a couple of interviews, it's all experience really having the interviews has been good experience and that will help for interviews coming up.

When I asked Jack to reflect on his undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences he immediately identified the impact his friends had on helping his learning develop:

The people I lived with made such a difference, I wouldn't have done as well if I hadn't have lived with the people I lived with. They

always worked really hard and helped me when I was struggling; we all helped each other. I certainly would not have got a first if I hadn't lived with them, they tried their best to get me to study and keep focused [laughs] they banned me from playing on the computer for the month before the dissertation was due to be handed in, I've always been a last minute man and they tried to get me going [laughs]. I really struggle to get started unless it is right on the deadline.

3.5 Adnam

Adnam's narrative differed from Jack's in that he was nineteen when he joined the programme after spending a third year in sixth form college to improve his A level grades, *'I did an extra year just to come and do Physio'*. He was initially nervous and quiet at his first interview, although with growing trust he relaxed and from the final term of his first year was far more talkative and forthcoming.

Throughout the first year, when Adnam lived in a hall of residence, there was a sense of excitement to his narrative as he enjoyed many new experiences. In his second and third year there was a noticeable change as he moved back to live with his family and only commuted into Manchester when he had taught sessions. The transition to university meant freedom and an opportunity to enjoy experiences that were unavailable to him within the small community he lived in with his extended family. His orientation was his enjoyment of his new freedom and how this impacted upon his engagement with his studies. He had struggled to get the grades required to gain entry to the programme and subsequently struggled intermittently to engage with his studies and gain high grades throughout the three years.

3.5.1 First interview – October 2009

I met Adnam for the first time on a Tuesday lunchtime. He did not have any taught sessions on that day, but as he lived in a nearby hall of residence he had been happy to walk into campus. He was slim and wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Half an hour before the time we had arranged to meet he sent me a text checking the time and when he later arrived he walked slowly, rubbing his eyes as we strolled towards the interview room and I got the impression that he had only just got out of bed.

Once we were settled in the room I outlined the narrative prompt to Adnam and he began by describing his sixth form experiences. My initial impression was that he was quiet, almost shy, as he sometimes struggled to make eye contact and I had to prompt at the start of his interview. However, once he had relaxed, he talked at length about how much he was enjoying being at university and relishing the social life with his new friends.

3.5.2 Early life

Adnam described himself as a British Muslim with both of his parents having moved to the UK from Pakistan when they were younger. Prior to coming to university he had lived with his extended family in a small town in Lancashire within a large community of British Muslims. He was the second eldest of seven children, with five sisters and a younger brother. As an only boy for most of his childhood he had been '*spoilt quite a bit*' but now his younger brother '*gets all the attention*'. His older sister was

also studying at university and his other sisters were in primary and secondary education.

Adnam got lower grades than he needed to get into university the first time he studied for his A levels and had had to re-sit all of his subjects: *'it was all a bit sickening'*. During his re-sit year he had worked hard to develop his interview skills as he had not been offered a place in Manchester the first time he had applied and had been keen to get a place. His reflections on the experience give an early indication of his engagement:

I didn't do too well in the interview [the first time]. I didn't really prepare myself well enough you know so, the second time I knew what was coming. The first time, I didn't really prepare well and everything, I probably should've done, but I'm happy now anyway so. I was too relaxed and thinking oh yeah I'll take it as it comes along and stuff. I took it too easy I think my first time round.

3.5.3 Initial transition to university

Adnam had chosen to study in Manchester *'because it's quite near'* and also because *'you hear from a lot of people oh it's good to go to Manchester, they said it was really good so I thought why not?'* He arrived in Manchester the day before he was due to start the programme, during Eid. He had left his family celebrating at home and travelled to Manchester with one of his cousins to move into his flat and continue the celebrations in nearby Rusholme:

I set off about half past three to get here. I got here about half four and chucked my stuff in my room and left it. No point unpacking all my stuff on the first day, I just threw it in my room. I just met my flatmates and they seem really nice and I was with my cousin and a few friends anyway so it wasn't too bad coming to university.

Adnam had subsequently enjoyed the first few weeks at university:

I came in and made some friends really easily, gone on from there really. Really good, I really enjoy it. I get to go home every weekend so obviously I don't miss my family too much. I'm really enjoying it, yeah it's a nice phase to go through in your life, I'd definitely recommend it to people. Go out there and experience it all, living for yourself, doing everything for yourself not relying on other people and meeting so many new people, everyone is so friendly, the more friends made the better it is. On the nights out as you can imagine we went to a lot of places, I've heard Manchester is a really good night out and stuff and I wasn't disappointed it was really fun.

A number of Adnam's friends were studying art subjects and he was the only one to be given study to do within the first week of the programme:

I was quite surprised to be getting so much work to do straight away. So far it's a bit harder than I thought it would be, some of the lectures were a bit tedious but you can't help that can you especially in the first week.

As Adnam reflected on his learning experiences on the programme he contrasted the experience with his sixth form studies:

A levels they basically tell you everything that you need to know in the class while here in your lectures you've got to make sure that you add on to your own notes because they just cover the basics. If you need to ask more they are there to help, you can ask them and they will tell you but you're supposed to go home and make your notes better and more detailed and learn up on stuff that you don't know. Whereas, with A levels they told you everything that you needed to know about your studies and then set you homework on what you already know. While here mostly your studies are new materials it's really different ... there's a lot of difference.

Adnam particularly struggled during the tutorial session where the students had to work in small groups and contribute ideas from their studies. He found the contrast between these sessions and his A levels to be the most stark and spoke several times about his longing for a more didactic approach:

The tutorials are like A levels where the tutor or lecturer or whatever is telling you stuff, but even then it's more a group interaction. In there I stay quiet all the way throughout the lesson, us teenagers just find that quite hard. There's no way you can expect us teenagers to do group interactions. Everything is like, learning, I like things done for me so I prefer they taught us everything but that'd take so long.

He had already covered some of the research topics that he was studying in his A levels and was therefore struggling to engage with those sessions:

I know most of that already so, for me, it's just like recapping. I think I know most of it anyway so I just need reminding again. Obviously if I learn new stuff then I would listen a bit more but at the moment, what we've covered, someone who has done A level psychology would know anyway.

Adnam had recently been given the title for the first written assessment and had found it difficult to get started:

I've planned some of it out, just struggling to make like, a start at the moment. I think once I get going on it I'll just get my head down and just keep my head down and keep focusing on my task. I just need to get started really.

When Adnam came to the end of his narrative I ask him to set goals for the end of the year. He wanted to achieve good results but also wanted to get a part-time job and continue to enjoy his social life:

Well the first thing is that I don't just want to pass I want to do really well, I hope this should be really easy for me ... do it well rather than just think oh I need to get 40% I just need to pass, scrape through. I'd like to go to a few Manchester United games that would be good, that was one of the reasons I chose Manchester as well and I'd like to get a job hopefully somewhere. I've got an interview next week so hopefully I'll get a nice part-time job. The nightlife in Manchester? I've done most of that already, but now it's all calmed down a bit there's honestly not much ... I'd like to go and see a 3D film in the Print Works maybe.

3.5.4 Second interview – January 2010

My second interview with Adnam was on a Thursday afternoon, in the second week of the spring term. He seemed a little uncertain and shy again and began by saying *'I've not got much to say really because I've just been going through uni'*. There was a short pause where I restated the narrative prompt and assured him that I was interested in whatever he had to say and then he continued talking about his studies:

Generally it's just been going through the work like and the exams and that, most people were busy doing revision because it is quite hard. Since then it's been quiet we don't really have much work to do outside of lectures and stuff. It's generally been quite easy after that, I didn't go out much and like I just said not much has happened it's been quite boring.

At this point he stopped talking and I prompted him to reflect back on his experiences during the first term. He seemed to relax a little and started to talk about his assessment results:

I got 63% [in the first written assessment] which I was quiet happy with. I started it may be a bit late and I could've done probably better although, it wasn't too hard but it wasn't easy. It was quite similar to college work. I started a bit late but once I get going that's the main thing with me once I get going I'm alright, I was happy with the result really, I think it is down to how much effort you put in.

Whilst writing the assessment he had asked his personal tutor to read a draft and had been surprised to discover that the academic staff did not read drafts and give feedback:

I liked that at college, they all used to read the stuff back and tell you what you needed to improve on.

Adnam had also gained 63% in his practical skills exam. He had found this type of assessment more difficult as he was unfamiliar with the format and found it hard to revise all the work:

I got 63% in that as well, I did a lot of work for that as well. I kept on top of most of it I think there was only one section where I dropped off a bit but all the others I was always on top of it. It was a new experience but it was quite useful in a way, it was a bit like an interview you know.

He had spent some time practising for this exam with his friends, although they *‘tend to mess about a lot and I prefer to be on my own really when it comes down to learning stuff’*. He had found these sessions useful ‘once we got into the frame of mind’ but was easily distracted: *‘I’ll do anything but not do the work basically, anything ... but not do the work’*.

Adnam continued talking and explained that he had gone home to stay with his family over the Christmas holiday. He had been there when he got his results and his parents had been reasonably happy with his grades:

I was home [when I got the results] and they were quite happy as well. Definitely pleased yeah, my dad always wanted me to get a first but he was pleased enough.

He had enjoyed being at home spending time with his family and friends but had missed the freedom of living in the halls of residence and had returned early to start work at his part-time job and to meet up with friends:

It’s fun being away from home it’s a new experience meeting up with everyone and going out with everyone. At first I really missed home, I really missed it but then after you have been home a bit you want to come back to uni, I look forward to it because I enjoy being here.

In common with the majority of the other students I interviewed, Adnam had struggled to engage with the unit he had been studying since

returning to university: *'I don't find it that interesting because there are no skills but like I said it's not too bad'*. The assessment for this unit was a group presentation and Adnam was not looking forward to it because he did not enjoy presenting his ideas: *'I do talk but not presentations, no'*. He also revealed that he had been allocated a group with two of his friends, and none of them were particularly engaged with their studies:

They're two people who I know don't ever do much work so that's that but I know them well enough that they will get the work done. I'm not too bothered to be honest, they are capable you just need to get them motivated a bit. They don't really come in [to taught sessions] I think they just mess about a bit now and again yeah, I do that myself but I know they are capable.

Adnam brought his narrative to a close and I prompted him to reflect on the goals that he had set in his first interview and to set goals again for the end of the academic year. He paused to think and then said *'my goals are probably the same as I said last time'*. He paused again and then said:

I don't know to be honest, I'd be happy if I got 63% all the way through. Yeah I would be happy with that yeah.

Despite prompting he was unable to think of anything else and I brought the interview to a close.

3.5.5 Third interview – May 2010

Adnam's third interview took place in the final week of his first year. It was a sunny day and he had walked to campus from his hall of residence to meet me. He seemed much more confident in this interview and talked at length, sharing stories of activities he had undertaken with his friends. He had been working throughout the spring and summer terms so had had a

lot more money to spend on enjoying himself. He began his narrative by declaring that he had *'just been waiting to finish the four months really'* and went on to explain how he had struggled to engage with his studies:

It's been fairly easy and tedious sometimes and you're still in the holiday mood after you come back like at Christmas because we didn't have anything to do over that either. You just carry on relaxing and I find it hard to get out of that once I'm in it. I was like that in the fourth unit and I just kind of kept on going in that mood which is not good. Not much has happened really it's been the same coming to uni the same three days a week, going to work, it's been alright. Nice Easter break did loads of work to earn some more money and that was about it really.

After this brief summary, Adnam then went on to talk about his assessments in detail. He had been preparing for a group presentation when I last met him in January and he started by reflecting on this:

We had the group presentation, which went quite well actually, we got a 2:1 in our group. I didn't do great on my reflective writing but I was happy with the presentation. We all know each other in our group anyway so I wasn't too bothered who I worked with. One of them I knew really well and the other lad and girl I was on quite good terms with and we all had all the different bits that we were good at. It was a lot better than I thought it was going to be to be honest as our group is known as slackers so it was alright.

He paused and smiled and I gave him a non-verbal prompt:

All of us in that group, we're not slackers but we're not known to put the most in probably. Within the students anyway, I don't know what the teacher's think of us. We kind of know ourselves. Everyone knows who are the hard workers and who are the slackers or whatever, I think we are maybe in between but most likely in the slackers kind of thing sometimes.

He was clearly pleased to have performed well in the presentation, but had subsequently struggled to engage with the reflective writing element of the assessment and his final grade had been slightly lower:

We got a 2:1 for that and then I think it was a 2:2 for my reflective writing. Overall, I think I got 59% so just under a 2:1. I didn't really know what to write, because our presentation had gone well I

knew I'd done really well in that so I was taking it a bit easy. I thought we'd done quite good in that so I'd be alright.

Adnam then continued to reflect on the assessments that he had undertaken in the first year. He had struggled to prepare for the written exam he had had in the spring term and was hoping that he had done enough to pass:

I probably didn't do as many study tasks as I should have or much reading but I think I did alright in the exam, I've got a pass I reckon. The exam turned out easy if you knew your stuff and obviously I hadn't revised as much but I think I had enough knowledge to get through. I will work harder with these two assignments that I've got now.

As Adnam reflected on this experience he explained that he had resolved to try harder with the remaining two written assessments that he had to complete, as he had struggled to engage in his studies in the spring term:

I've learned my lesson. I just couldn't get out of that frame of mind of just not doing anything all the time, I just got lazy to be honest and it just carried on. I did do some of the work but I'm just too relaxed and couldn't do much, the whole term was a bit heavy for me.

Although he had two written assessments to complete in his final week he believed that he would be able to complete them and hand them in before the final deadline. He had almost completed his first assessment:

I've nearly completed one essay, I will probably finish that today and then start my next. I started a bit late to be honest but as I said, I'm in that holiday mood so I find it hard to get out of that easy frame of mind thing, it's not really that hard and I'll get that done tonight hopefully.

Once he had completed this assessment he planned to start work on the final written assessment based on the unit he had just completed:

I'm going to do better in my other essay. I looked at the question and stuff and it doesn't look too taxing so I'm hoping it won't be when I start it. I'm starting it tomorrow. It's a lot harder than any of

the other modules I think it's the hardest module, [laughs] not doing much of the work isn't helping.

Adnam went on to explain that one of the reasons for his lack of engagement in his studies was that most of his friends had completed their first year and had gone home:

Everyone else is finished like, all of my mates are "oh are you still at uni?" and I'm sat on my own doing work and I don't feel like doing it. All my mates, most of them have completely finished so they've all gone home and everything and I'm just here sometimes on my own.

As Adnam talked he acknowledged that he had not worked particularly hard during his first year and planned to review and catch up on his studies over the summer break:

I'm going to try and gain quite a bit of knowledge and update for when I get back. I'm going to try and revise quite a lot over the summer actually like all the stuff I've not done before for when I come back in. I want my knowledge to be as good as it can be, I don't want to be slacking next year definitely.

Adnam's narrative came to a close and again I prompted him to reflect on the goals he had set for the end of his first year:

I've gone a bit less motivated throughout the year. I've let my standards drop a bit which I'm a bit disappointed about but at the same time I don't blame myself, I don't know why, but I've got a lazy personality which needs to change over the summer. I still think I could get a 2:1, but it will probably be just about rather than a comfortable 2:1, I definitely could have worked harder this year. My dad is always saying you want to be the top of the class you want to get a first, whatever I do, he always says you've got to do better which is good but they won't really be disappointed. If I get a 2:2 then I'd probably get a bit of a lecture so I best try with these next two assignments I've got.

We concluded the interview and Adnam went back to his hall of residence to finish his assessment.

3.5.6 Fourth interview – October 2010

I spoke to Adnam for his fourth interview one day short of a year since his first interview. He had moved back to live with his parents during the summer and although he had initially planned to live in a shared house with his friends in the second year he had subsequently decided to stay at home. This decision was made partly to save money, *'I thought I would be spending a lot of money for rent'*, and partly because he had been ill throughout the summer so had been unable to organise the house share, *'I was just not allowed to go anywhere, which kind of ruined things'*. He was therefore commuting into Manchester *'with some mates'* which took just over an hour, *'it's not too bad, it takes about an hour and fifteen minutes'*.

As he was commuting with friends he found it difficult to set a time for an interview on campus so I had arranged a telephone interview with him. Inevitably it was not as easy to establish a rapport over the telephone and Adnam needed prompting in the interview. He began by talking about his assessment results from the first year. He had achieved grades of 51%, 53% and 50% in his final three assessments and overall he had gained a 2.2. He was pleased not to have to re-sit any assessments; however, he had wanted to achieve a 2.1 overall. He admitted that he had done less work in the spring and summer terms as he had gained 64% in his first two assessments and knew that he only needed to gain 40% overall to pass the first year and progress to the second:

I enjoyed the first few months, worked a lot harder than I did later on because it was easier as well because of the 40% thing and

knowing that I had done really good in my first ones. I thought I'd take it a bit easy and I got into that mind-set. I think I got about 57% overall which was a bit lower than I would have liked but I am still pretty happy with it. I think it was between January and March really that let me down, I am not sure which was the lowest grade but I didn't put as much effort into those assessments. I know I can do a lot better and I definitely need to start doing that but I was pretty happy with it in the end really. My parents were fine, I explained to them that I didn't try as much and obviously, my dad had a go at me and said you should've tried blah, blah, blah. They didn't mind too much, but they want you to be top of the class.

Adnam went on to explain that he had also found the transition to level five work in the second year difficult initially. The students only had taught sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays and he had struggled to complete the required work on the study days:

It's been hard work to be honest. I was doing work over summer but I didn't expect to rush into it so much as we have done we have a lot more work than we had last year. It has not been the best of starts for me personally but I am getting there, even though we are only in two days, we get loads of work to do out of hours. I'd prefer to be in uni another day at least or something, I tend to do more when I am there. We get work on Thursday and then I think I can't do it on Friday I've got another three days, then on Saturday, I'm at football from twelve to five. I come back and then I'm too tired I can't be bothered so it just leaves Sunday and Monday. Honestly, I've still not got up to it, but I need to work harder this year.

Before he could go out on placement after Christmas Adnam had to complete a written assessment and two practical exams. He was not too concerned about the written assessment but was already worried about the practical exams he would complete in the spring term:

We've got a 2000 word assignment I am not too worried about that to be honest. I think I should be alright with that, I am more worried about the next two exams coming up. If I don't pass, I can't go on placement. I prefer them [written assessments] because you get to look at textbooks, as far as I see it, you shouldn't go too far wrong if you can have a textbook in front of you. As with the other two you have got to actually know it all, understand it all and then get it all out in one. I am not too fond of that, there is a lot to learn and

stuff so I will see what happens, I'm going to have to go over all my work from last year.

Despite his concerns about passing the assessments he was looking forward to completing his clinical placements later in the year:

I think it is a lot easier doing it in person than having to actually learn everything from a book and stuff, you can narrow it down to certain things. I know you are going to have to do it when you're assessing patients as well but I think it is a bit easier, it seemed like it when I was on placement anyway. I'm going to have to go over all my work from last year and stuff to get it up to scratch.

Adnam came to the end of his narrative and I asked him to think ahead to the end of the academic year and set some goals that he would like to achieve:

I think I would go for the same again really. If I get a 2:1, I would be more than happy I couldn't really wish for more than that. Just, make sure I don't have any re-sits to be honest. I don't think I've got anything in my social life at the moment. I'm just looking towards passing second year. Hopefully, just get through the second year and take everything as it comes. I'd say now I should and could have done a lot more work over the summer, I guess you just have to look to the future now don't you?

3.5.7 Fifth interview – January 2011

Adnam's fifth interview was another telephone interview. This was a very brief interview as we seemed to struggle to establish a rapport and he was anxious to go and meet his father. He began by talking about how he had found the work difficult in his second year as he had had to do more research and preparation '*most of the written stuff we actually have to do ourselves this year*':

You do get a lot more work and you do, like I said before there's a lot of theory work you have to do yourself in second year and it's a lot more skills and you've got to do a lot more background research and stuff. At first it does seem like quite a big jump so it

kind of gets to you, you have to get used to how much work load you have.

Adnam then went on to talk about his assessment results. He had not done as well as he had hoped but was philosophical and acknowledged that this was because he had not put enough time and effort into preparing for his assessments. He was just pleased to have passed everything so that he could still start his placements:

The assignment, I started it early but then I had like a patch where I didn't do any work so then, it kind of went to the usual bit where I know I've left it late again so I ended up doing it on the weekend before, again. The second unit I sort of did quite decent in that as well, put quite a bit of effort into it and stuff, got together for a lot of like, group study sessions and stuff with mates. Then we had two weeks off; I didn't do much work and I'd forgot what we did before so when I come back it was like, kind of, starting from scratch again. But I just had that exam on Tuesday, and got the result today so ... I've got all my three results now, I got 58% in my first one [written assessment], 57% in my second and then 45% in the one that I did yesterday. Yeah I think they all kind of reflect how much effort I kind of put in. I knew I hadn't put much work in it but I'm just happy with a pass now, and go on to placement.

Adnam continued talking and reflected that despite not putting a lot of effort into preparing for his assessments he was determined to try hard on his placements:

I don't know what it was, it was like this was definitely the hardest exam but for some reason I'd put in the least effort which was a bit weird. I mean I was lucky in a sense, I got 45% which was how much I felt I put in which obviously wasn't enough but it got me the pass which I need to be able to go on placement and I know when I get into stuff like placement I'm working and stuff I always put like maximum effort in so hopefully that'll pay off for me. But I've got a lot of work to do before I go on placement, next week.

As Adnam talked it was clear how eagerly he was anticipating his placements. He had managed to get two placements close to home so would be travelling less than if he had been coming on to campus in

Manchester which he was looking forward to. He also believed that the transition to the workplace would help him mature and develop his skills:

I think I'm looking forward to it now really cos I think we've all had enough of being in uni and learning and stuff so we just want to get out there and do all the stuff. We all feel like we do know a lot of the basic stuff and then, like I said we do tend to mess about and stuff but it's totally different when you get out there, so we just want that experience of being out there. I think I'm definitely going to have to be a lot more mature in the practice placement area, like I said, just when you're in uni you're always messing about and stuff you can't do that [on placement].

As Adnam finished talking I prompted him to look ahead and plan goals for the end of the academic year:

Going to the placements my goal would be just to get better on my speaking to patients cos I've not had the experience yet but I'm sure I'll improve or I'm sure I'll learn a lot more. I probably, I think I'm averaging about 53/54% now so if I maintain that I'll be reasonably happy by the end of the three placements but like I said I do hope to put in a lot more effort when I'm actually out there.

Adnam paused briefly and then added:

It's a really enjoyable course, it really is. It is hard but, you have so much fun like doing it you don't really realise it's that hard, it's just when you have to revise and stuff and you'll end up getting what you put out of it, if you put the effort in you'll get the grades, if you don't you won't get as good but umm, the main thing is, it's always been fun and it's been quite a big surprise really cos I've never really enjoyed education.

We drew the phone call to a close and I arranged to speak to him again in October when he started the third year of the programme.

3.5.8 Sixth interview – October 2011

Adnam's sixth interview was also a telephone interview that took place two weeks after the start of his third year, just before he went out on

clinical placement. He was nervous about making the transition from level five to level six working whilst on placement:

We're only in for a few weeks. And I think most of it so far has been help with doing better reflective writing cos they are moving it up a grade this year to level six from level five. So it has been hard to make that transition from level five to level six.

He had decided to remain living with his family for his final year and was still commuting into campus two days a week when he had classroom-based sessions. Living at home during his second year had been much easier for Adnam as he had requested local placements and been lucky enough to be allocated placements that were closer to home than university. He then went on to describe the clinical placements that he had completed since we last spoke to each other in January at length. He had been awarded a 2.2 grade for the second year overall even though he had gained better results on his placements than on the assessments he had completed earlier in the year. He talked at length about each of them and how much he had enjoyed the learning experiences. He had difficulties completing the assessed reflective writing aspect of each placement:

My first placement was in outpatients. It was pretty good, it was quite nervy at first cos it was the first placement and I didn't know what to expect. But everyone was really friendly there and I clued in quite quickly. I struggled a little bit at the beginning with some of my handling and stuff, because I'd forgotten a little bit, but I think once I picked that up it went generally smooth. I got pretty good marks in it, I was quite happy with that placement. My second one was a paediatric placement which, again I didn't know what to expect because we don't do much paediatrics at uni. So I was going in again a little bit nervous thinking I don't know much about. But same thing again, everyone was really friendly and they knew we hadn't covered much so they kinda eased me into it and it was a bit less workload than the first one. But again it went really good, what let me down on that one was the reflective writing, but I got a pass anyway so I managed to get through.

The last one I probably didn't enjoy it as much as the other two, but the team was nice again and I got a good grade in it and everything. I struggled in the reflective writing again which surprised me, I'm just not that fond of putting it down on paper. I think you learn a lot, lot quicker while you are on placement because you are constantly doing the same kind of stuff for, say five weeks of that placement. You have to do all the hands-on stuff, apply all your knowledge, if you make any mistakes you can learn off them straight away cos there is no room to make any major ones, so you better be sure in what you do.

In common with Jack, Adnam had particularly liked the one-to-one support that he had been given on placement:

I think having your goals set out early is a really good thing with the educators, because then you know what the aim is to achieve by the end of it, and whether you've done that or not. So I think having that set up really early is key so you know what you're working to and how much you need to study and a lot of that is for the educator, so you have kind of a good bond with them. I think that definitely helps cos I had that throughout all three of them [placements], a good supportive team definitely is good.

When Adnam finished talking about his placements I asked him to look ahead to the end of the year when he hopefully would graduate, his response revealed mixed emotions:

I kind of do and kind of don't want to finish at the same time. I mean obviously I want to become a Physio and get a job, earn money and whatever. But umm, I think I'm going to miss summer holidays really, not having two months off is going to take a bit of getting used to. Hopefully I've done well and get an overall 2:1 and get a degree with no problems, I'd be happy with that. I'm not particularly looking forward to doing my research project because I've not got an idea, I'm just looking forward to graduating to be honest.

3.5.9 Follow-up telephone interview – November 2012

Adnam graduated with a final degree classification of 2.2. He was somewhat disappointed with his final grade having repeatedly stated a desire to graduate with a 2.1 but was philosophical:

If I am left to do stuff on my own I am probably not as reliable as when I have to do stuff at a set time. When it comes to giving me a bit more free will I am a little bit more lazy to be honest but that has improved over the three years, well it had to especially with placements but I have learnt a lot about that. You can't rely on others the whole time you have to do it yourself in the second and third year on the days off I know I didn't do anywhere near enough work.

He repeated a theme from earlier interviews about the importance of placements for enhancing his learning and engagement:

Placements are important, you learn a lot more on placements and that probably had the biggest impact on my learning ... I'm not the best to judge university sessions as I am not too bothered myself, working in little groups was quite good to share ideas and probably the best thing really ... Just being in an environment where you have got to almost sink or swim I will get work done. I am definitely a lot more proactive on placement, I have got a short attention span and didn't really pay attention to everything I should have, but when it came to placement you have to be professional and I always put in 100% effort.

3.6 The importance of peer support for learner engagement.

Alice and Sara, the two interviewees considered in this section, both included descriptions of supportive families and happy schooldays when they began their narratives. Both also made reference to strong friendships and parents with whom they had close, positive relationships several times within their interviews. Family and friendship were very much part of their identity and Alice in particular repeatedly described herself as 'homely' with a mother who was her 'best friend'. For both of these students developing new friendships at university was an important early goal. When they reflected on their experiences during their first year the initial transition to university contrasted negatively with their past. Their secure, nurturing relationships were temporarily replaced by

loneliness and isolation as they struggled to establish supportive peer relationships.

Both of these young women stated that they had started university anticipating a new beginning where they would build new friendships and a supportive network of peers as an extension of their previous relationships. They perceived their transition to university as a new beginning and an opportunity to make lifelong friendships. Their initial experiences were, however, in stark contrast to their expectations. Alice had been unable to get a place in university halls and had a flat in private halls that she shared with one other student who was studying on a different programme. Sara shared a flat in university halls with three students studying on Arts programmes. Both found it difficult to establish strong connections with their flatmates. Both also struggled to integrate fully with the other students on their programme initially, as the majority of the other students shared accommodation together and Sara and Alice did not have the same points of contact in the evenings or weekends.

Alice initially described herself as being '*excluded*' from the other students in her tutorial group; referring to the other students as '*they*' throughout her first interview, using the collective noun to indicate her exclusion from the group. By contrast Sara chose to manage her loneliness by excluding herself and she returned home the first four weekends of term to visit her family and friends.

Fortunately, as the first year progressed, both Alice and Sara developed close friendships within the cohort. For Alice these friendships came from an unexpected source; she had initially hoped to develop friendships within her own age group but eventually had a close connection with a group of mature students who had families and travelled to campus everyday – referred to by Alice as *'The Commuters'*. Sara developed friendships within her tutorial group following a group assessment and at Easter moved accommodation to share a flat in a hall of residence with her new friends. For both these students the establishment of a close group of supportive peers who assisted their learning and development was a key factor in increasing their engagement with the programme. In their second and third years these friendships continued to encourage and enhance their engagement and contribute to greater academic success. They both attributed the support from their peer group as helping them improve their academic grades several times within their narratives.

I interviewed both these students on three occasions during their first year, once every term. We also met in their second and third years. All the interviews were conducted in meeting rooms on campus and lasted for about one hour. Both students were initially slightly nervous and quiet, although willing interviewees. With growing trust after repeated interviews they relaxed and from the final term of their first year were far more talkative and forthcoming; at times talking at length about the emotional dimension of their experiences.

3.7 Alice

Alice's narrative is that of a nineteen-year-old direct-entry student, studying close to her family home. Her narrative represents a double transition; her transition from sixth form to higher education as she simultaneously commences the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood. There is a sense of nervous excitement and hopefulness throughout the narrative as Alice looks forward to new experiences, which is balanced with uncertainty as she takes a step into the unknown. University life meant a new beginning, self-improvement and the possibility of a rewarding career described by Alice as '*you're on the path*'. The orientations within her narrative included both financial difficulties and her development as a self-directed learner but these were secondary to the dominant orientation of peer support.

3.7.1 First interview – October 2009

I interviewed Alice for the first time on a Friday afternoon, three weeks after she had started at university. Coincidentally this was the day of her nineteenth birthday. My initial impression was that she appeared to be quiet and nervous yet happy. She smiled easily and talked quietly. She was of medium build and height, with long wavy hair and was wearing jeans and a cardigan; she carried a small bag and folder. At our first meeting I was sitting on a high stool at a table whilst I waited in the campus refectory. Alice recognised me from across the dining area and walked over to introduce herself. I had booked a nearby room for the interview and once we were settled began with a request for Alice to

introduce herself. She was very brief and nervous and stated her name and age and then looking expectantly at me. I outlined the narrative prompt and asked Alice to tell her story and she began by describing her family and school days

3.7.2 Early Life

Alice was the eldest of three siblings, her parents were separated and she lived with her mother and siblings in Greater Manchester. She described herself repeatedly as a *'homely person'* from the start of her first interview and this continued throughout all of her interviews; she was in daily contact with her family and made decisions in close consultation with her mother and her extended family; she described her mother several times as her *'best friend'*. Alice's maternal grandparents lived close to the family home and provided financial support and she began her narrative by referring to her parents: *'My mum and dad encouraged me to go to university because they never went so they wanted me to go.'*

It was clear from the first interview that Alice's transition to higher education was therefore a shared one. As she is a first generation entrant, *'going to university'* has been an ambition for the whole family and Alice's parents and grandparents were all *'overwhelmed'* that she was at university and *'very proud and supportive'*; they had always wanted *'someone medical in the family'*. Alice also had a long-term boyfriend from sixth form who lived close by in another hall of residence; this was a vital connection for Alice:

I think because he's quite near, I feel a lot safer. I mean, it might sound daft but I feel like, I know a lot more people.

3.7.3 Initial transition to university

After the initial prompt to tell her narrative Alice began by talking about how she had first become interested in going to university, framing this within her ambition to become a Physiotherapist that started when she was about 14 years old. In common with the other direct entry students I interviewed, Alice talked about her school life and national exams.

However, unlike the other students, Alice centred her narrative on her family talking about her parents and their ambitions for her to go to university and *'build-up a good profession'*. It was clear straightaway that they were a close family and that her parents had significant influence and input upon Alice's decision to study at university. Hers was definitely a collective transition as the whole family moved forward towards a new experience.

Alice continued with her narrative by talking about choosing a university in the context of the distance she had wanted to be from home; it soon became apparent that the most important factor in her decision making had been her desire to study at a university close to home:

I'm quite a homely person so I wanted to be quite close to home and I think if I had gone to somewhere which was a lot further away I wouldn't have enjoyed the course so much. I would've missed home too much you know. I wouldn't have been able to concentrate in that aspect.

Applying to UCAS was new to the family and it was a process that they completed together, indicated by Alice's use of 'we' throughout the section of her narrative on the application process:

Nobody else in my family had been to university, the whole system of it was quite new to us so we weren't sure when you should look early or what time of the year you should look. We left it quite late.

Establishing a social network was important to Alice from the beginning of her transition to university. In her first interview she returned to the topic of friendships twice; she believed that it was good to 'get to know' other students and staff and wanted more social activities in the first weeks of term so 'we could get to know a lot more people'. There was also a clear indication in her narrative that she felt excluded from the main cohort that were living in shared accommodation together: 'they have their own little group of friends'. She expressed regret that she was not included within this group:

I wish I had been able to go to those halls of residence because I know that all the other students are there, so a lot of them know each other. They have their own little group of friends because they're always there which is why I wanted to go there initially but I can't change it now can I?

Alice also talked at length about building relationships with the programme team and was pleased to have already met her personal tutor who she already felt 'comfortable' with:

I think it's good with your personal tutor as well that you got to meet them. If you hadn't met them in the first week and you needed to speak to them you just wouldn't know the person so you wouldn't feel as comfortable talking to them.

I got the impression that Alice was trying to establish a support network similar to the family and friends she had at home:

Meeting new people as well that's a good thing because my friendships at home have sort of dwindled and everybody's broke off so now to be able to meet new friends. I like meeting new people as well from different walks of life.

Alice seemed to want to have lots of friends and support from the cohort – a replacement family. She found the transition to degree-level working difficult *'it's a shock'* and wanted to be part of a peer support group to discuss the programme.

When I asked Alice what her goals were for the end of the academic year she identified three priorities: to be *'more academic'*, to get a *'new group of friends'* and to *'mature a lot as a person'* becoming *'more of an adult rather than being a child'*.

3.7.4 Second interview – January 2010

My second interview with Alice was during a lunch break just over a week after the start of her second term. She had finished her taught sessions for the day and planned to travel home to see her family after the interview as she had a study day on the following day. We talked briefly about the occasion when we had first met and then I ask Alice to continue her narrative. She talked initially about her studies and how different they were from her school experiences repeating the word *'shock'* for emphasis and to intensify meaning:

Yeah it was a big shock to everyone. There is so much to learn I think everybody was like "oh my God" there's so much work, everybody was like oh I don't know if I want to do this now because it was really hard and you were just thrown in at the deep end really. I think the amount of information that's a shock especially in such a small space of time. You're thinking "oh how am I going to be able to fit all this in" that's probably the main thing that's the shock.

The next subject within Alice's narrative was her performance in the two assessments that she had completed in the first term, which were both different and difficult compared to her previous educational experiences. She had completed a viva exam and an essay; she found the viva exam to be particularly difficult because it was an assessment format that she had never experienced before:

That was really scary. I was so nervous on that day, it was completely different to anything that I'd ever done. I passed my exam, I think I got a 2:2, I didn't pass it really well but enough to pass so I'm glad about that.

She was also disappointed with her grade for her written assessment as this was a method of assessment she was familiar with and yet she had actually gained a slightly lower mark:

That was hard. I thought I'd done a lot better in my assignment than I did in my practical to be honest. I thought I've got all my text books here and I'd do ok, but I didn't I did worse I think or I did about the same so really I was shocked. Now I think I know how much detail I need to put in whereas I sort of walked around the edges on my assignment now I need to know what I should put in and how much depth. I said to myself as long as I pass I'm not bothered if I get 42 as long as I've passed, I think I got mid-50s so it made me realise as well how much I need to know.

Alice paused briefly after talking about her assessments and then continued her narrative by talking about the Christmas break that she had spent at home with her family. She had returned home as soon as she finished her viva in mid-December and had continued to stay there for five weeks commuting in on the days that she had taught sessions. Commuting had not been difficult and Alice informed me that she had already decided that she would live at home as soon as her contract

expired with the halls of residence. This decision was driven by two factors, how much she enjoyed living with her family:

It's nice to be at home, you get all your meals cooked and your washing done ... everything is done for you.

and because she was disappointed that she had not made any new close friendships in her first term. She felt isolated in the evenings, as she only saw her flatmate occasionally and they had not established a friendship:

I only live with one flatmate and we don't see each other a lot. I'm on my own quite a lot at uni, I make an effort but she's not very sociable and I just think she wants to keep herself to herself really. I'll knock on her door, I know she's in her room and her telly is on and her door is open but she doesn't answer me. At home I prefer it as there's more of a social aspect, we are a close family.

Alice was also relatively isolated within her tutorial group as she had failed to make any lasting friendships with the other students on her programme. Although they made conversation during the days on campus she only rarely saw these students in an evening or at a weekend and she talked at length about how excluded she felt from the majority of her group who shared flats together in the same halls of residence:

I don't really see anyone to be honest. At first we all went out and I think I've been out once with a couple of girls. I've got a couple of friends like four or five girls and I speak to a lot of people in my group. I think if I would've been in university halls and had a flat where I'd met some really nice friends I probably would've paid the money next year and wanted to stay here but because I've only really been out five times since I started in September I don't think there's much point really. They're in flats with five or six people ... they're all really friendly with their flatmates.

Alice described a clear divide and talked about herself and the small group of students that she had occasionally socialised with as 'we're probably like ... we're none halls people'. She was clearly disappointed

as the only social support that she had in Manchester was her boyfriend who was living close by in university halls:

I think it helps that my boyfriend's in Manchester because I know him really well whereas if I was on my own more and I didn't know anyone then I think I'd find it really hard and I'd probably cry my eyes out all week and get really upset.

However, Alice also explained in her narrative that she went back to stay with her family from Friday lunchtime until Monday morning and also sometimes went home on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She saw her boyfriend at least one night a week and wasn't therefore actually in Manchester and available to socialise with the other students on many occasions:

I think at home I prefer it because there's more of a social aspect all my family are really close and we are quite a close family. It's going to be cheaper and I don't think there's much point living here.

When Alice came to a natural pause in her narrative I encouraged her to reflect on her first term. Overall she was content even though she had found coping with the studies 'hard work' she believed that she had made the 'right decision' and was focused on an eventual career as a Physiotherapist. I encouraged her to reflect on the goals that she had set in her first interview and asked if she felt she was on track to achieve them:

I think what I got this time was 2:2 and I think that was OK but I wasn't fully satisfied with that. I'd really like a 2:1 or a first as my final grade. I think I've definitely matured and like four or five girls now that I talk to at uni so that's good.

3.7.5 Third interview – May 2010

Alice's third interview with me took place when she had finished her taught sessions for the year and was spending a week writing her final assessment before she went home for the summer break. She looked relaxed and confident and greeted me with a broad smile. Again we talked briefly about how long it was since we last met and as Alice reflected on her learning experiences she noted that *'it seems like a long time ago, we have done so much'*.

The use of the plural and her relaxed and happy demeanour were an early indication that since her second interview Alice was much more settled and had some supportive friendships. As she went on to explain, one of her assessments in February had been a group presentation in which students were randomly assigned to groups by the tutor. Alice was allocated a group that included two mature students who she referred to as *'The Commuters'* and their work on the project together had led to the friendship. One of the key aspects of these friendships was the peer support as they shared knowledge and revised together:

Since then I've started hanging around with them a lot more because I need to be doing stuff to learn. These girls are a lot older than I am, I don't know some people might think it's weird but I get on with them really well and we work together really well, we all email each other our work.

Even though these students were much older than Alice they had a shared ethos and were becoming close friends:

I think I get on with them better because they seem to work harder. Whereas some of the younger students who are more my age they're more for "oh we're going out tonight" or whatever. We're not in uni that often are we, so the times that I am in I'd rather be

working and learning and concentrating on what I'm doing rather than thinking what I'm going to be wearing when I go out tonight. I think in that sense it's good for me because they work a lot harder, Emily, she's old enough to be my mother but she makes me laugh and I get on really, really well.

Another point of contact Alice had with this group of students was that they all lived with their families close to her family home. In effect these students were almost like an extension of Alice's own close-knit family; they lived in the same area and had shared values and beliefs. As Alice had already described her mother as her '*best friend*' several times I believed that she was used to relating to older women and had therefore found it easier to establish a rapport with these women than she had with the students of her own age group. By moving back home in her second year and travelling to campus with these women she could create the supportive peer group that she stated as one of her goals in the first interview, just not with the students of her own age group with whom she had initially sought friendship:

They're "The commuters" I suppose so I will be a commuter next year maybe I'll fit with them more.

Alice went on to describe how after the first assessment when they had been grouped together by the tutor she had continued to work with the older women and how they had supported each other's learning:

At the end of March we had our first written exam ... we worked together as a group of four on the question and I found it really useful because we emailed each other and we all added bits. We came in one Monday when we were off and talked about it and researched and added more ideas to it so it was really useful. If I'm struggling with something and they find a bit of information that might help me then we'll all email it each other and help each other out where we can.

There was a clear change in the tone of Alice's narrative and she was much more engaged with her studies. She had finally established the peer support that she had been looking for since she started university in September, both friendship and learning support. During this section of the interview she briefly reflected on her earlier difficulties making friends with students in her own age group:

I suppose I don't really hang around with the people that are more my age group now. I'd rather be at uni and work really hard than come into the session and not do as much as I would like to really. I think in a way for me it's good because I need to be doing that work and if I didn't I wouldn't have a clue what I was doing in the day. Whereas if I was probably in the halls I'd be messing around with people and chatting all the time.

As Alice drew her narrative to a close with exit talk, I reminded her that she had outlined some goals that she had wanted to achieve in her first year during her first interview in October. I asked her to reflect back and consider if she had achieved her goals, again she made reference to her family:

I think a lot of them have come true to be honest. Now I have a group of friends amongst the more mature students and my mum said I've become more independent so I have become more of an adult. I do more things for myself. I probably have become more academic because I've got more time to study. I've passed all my exams; I think I roughly have a 2.2 so far so I must be more academic than I was.

To conclude the interview I invited Alice to set goals for the next six months, after a short pause she replied:

Hopefully to do better in these exams than I was at the beginning because by now I should be getting used to writing assignments and stuff like that. I don't know if that's true or not or if it will happen but I hope it will. I suppose my life is going to change completely like commuting to uni will be completely different from what it is. It will be harder.

We finished the interview and Alice went back to the library to finish her assessment. Once she had handed the assessment in she planned to move out of her flat and spend the summer with her family at home. Alice had clearly struggled at times living away from her close family during the first year, even though she returned home for three days a week. In part I believed that Alice had contributed to her own isolation within the cohort as she had only been in Manchester infrequently and thus the close friendships she had developed were with older women who lived within the same area as her family. I surmised that several factors had contributed to her difficulties making friends: she had been relatively isolated geographically, she was somewhat lacking in self-confidence and she had limited finances. Ultimately though she had developed a supportive peer support group that replicated to some extent her relationship with her other *'best friend'*, her mother, perhaps this is what she had been looking for all along.

3.7.6 Fourth interview – October 2010

I met Alice for her fourth interview almost exactly a year since her first. As she arrived I noticed that she was wearing a sweatshirt with the university logo across the front; it seemed to be an outward sign of her commitment to the institution. She had moved back home in July, and the family had converted a small room into a study area for her to work, *'I have my own little area now so that's good'*.

Alice had found some difficulties fitting her studies into family life but now she had a routine where she started studying early in a morning when her siblings left for school. She found it difficult to work in the evenings and weekends as her siblings *'distract me completely'* and *'every night is busy at home'*. Despite these difficulties, overall Alice believed that her decision to move home had been positive and that her mother *'still treats me like an independent'*. One of the key benefits of living at home was that she has been able to save some money and she reflected that she was surprised that she managed to pay *'£4,000 for accommodation!'* last year when she lived in private halls. As she continued her narrative she noted that she was *'mature for her age'* and although she had initially stated that she wanted friendships with the younger students she now acknowledged that perhaps she had limited points of connection and turned her initial isolation from the majority of the students in her group into an advantage, stating:

If I was more friendly with people that lived in halls I think I would probably feel left out now because they would be going "we're off to such and such a place tonight do you want to come?" I would think "oh I've got to go home" ... I suppose for my age I am quite mature anyway, I'm not a person that likes to go out and get stupidly drunk, I don't tend to socialise really with the younger people in my group because they are all a group together and a bit of a clique. I'm quite shy and I wouldn't interrupt and say can I come out with you anyway. I am quite happy with that to be honest.

When I prompt Alice to continue her narrative she started by reflecting on her assessment grades and believed that her grades *'got better throughout the year'* as she finished the year with marks in the 60s rather than 40s. Overall she gained a 2.2 but was aiming for a higher grade this year:

I think I need to aim for a 2:1. I still need to carry on working and pushing it rather than just stay there. I was a bit disappointed in that respect that I only got a 2:2 average but knowing how hard it is I think, I've done well to say I passed everything in my first year.

As she continued she made several references to the advantages that she had gained from working with the group of older students:

We tend to work together and one of them has set up a Yahoo group or something where we can drop files in, it is really helpful because sometimes you think like with the study tasks you're thinking "oh I've got six pages to do for next Tuesday". If you can sort of split it and then put it together you get more time to spend and can put more detail into it. We all get on really well and I think because we all commute as well we're sort of a little group. I think it has worked out well that way ... we've all got our different things that we bring to the group.

These were now firm friendships, Alice had continued to meet up with a couple of these students over the summer break and she planned to continue working with this group throughout the year. A new assessment task had just been released to the students on the morning of this interview and they had already arranged to meet up later in the week to start work on it:

We said we are going to come in on Friday and look at the assessment and see what we can put together ... I find it really useful, other people think of ideas that I would never think of and vice versa, I suppose so it is really useful.

Alice continued to talk and began to reflect on how she worked with her peer support group in comparison to the other students. She outlines a clear demarcation with the group where informal peer groups had been established; by the start of the second year there was very little movement between groups:

In tutorials, there is pretty much a divide in where you sit. It's divided into mature boys, mature girls and then the group of students who are my age. It is a divide, but I think personally we like to stay in a group of four girls because we find that we work

really well together. If we were put in a group with other people, we would worry that other people won't do the work but within us four, we know that it will be done and then we have the work to share; other people probably wouldn't do it as thoroughly as us.

Alice believed that these relatively closed peer support groups were driven in part by the students' engagement. Her perception, rightly or wrongly, was that the mature students wanted to work hard all the time, whereas she believed that the younger students were less focused at times:

I'd say the mature students that I work with are very focused. Whereas the other students, they have spurts of being focused. When it comes to assignment time, they're probably really focused but in between assignments and tutorials and study tasks, they are a bit hit and miss.

Again, as we concluded the interview I prompted Alice to reflect on her achievements over the previous 12 months. Although it appeared she had adapted well to degree-level working she again expressed how she had found the transition difficult; she emphasised again the importance of peer support for her learning:

I think the university as a whole it's a shock how much we've got to learn and how much you are getting from the tutorials. I don't think a lot of us expected it to be as much self-learning and finding out for yourself. I tend to learn better when I'm taught so it makes it a lot harder work for me having to teach myself and try and understand things. I think it helps working as a group now, a group of four girls, because if there is something that I don't understand then one of them is more likely to understand it.

I again encouraged Alice to set herself goals for the forthcoming academic year; her narrative revealed some anxieties about starting her placements were she would be separated from her peer support group:

I'd like to have passed all my modules and made the most of my placement and used it to its full potential and that I have not come away and thought that was a waste of six weeks and I have not learnt anything. Hopefully, I don't know if it is possible to move my

grades up from maybe a 2:2 and aim towards a 2:1, I want to stay as I am working really hard and making sure, I am doing everything, not feel satisfied with the work that I do.

3.7.7 Fifth interview – January 2011

Alice and I met for her fifth interview at the start of the spring term, shortly after her return from the Christmas break. She had almost completed her campus-based sessions for the year and was about to start her clinical placements, which would continue to the summer break. She had enjoyed living at home and the commute had not been too difficult as she only had to be on campus two days a week; she also shared the driving with one of the mature students who commutes. Alice appeared confident and happy and after the narrative prompt began by reflecting on how pleased she was with her academic grades so far in her second year:

Academic-wise this has been my best time, on my essay I got a 2:1 which I was really impressed with. On my exam I got 90 out of 100 so I got a first so I was like ridiculously happy, so now hopefully I'm just trying to keep it at that level but I mean like 90! But I think everything's falling into place now, last year I got like one 3rd, a couple of 2:2s and a 2:1 is where I'd be happy being really.

She again attributed her academic success to moving back home and working with the group of mature students:

I've definitely worked a lot harder this year than I did last year. I think being at home's helped as well like, it motivates me cos I know, like when you're in your flat all day on your own it's a bit like, "oh I can do it later" cos I'd know I'd still have the time whereas now it's like I know I've got to get up, get it done, get in early. I think working in a group's helped me cos when we revised as like a group of four of us and we were continually like practising so we pretty much knew what we were doing. I've spent a lot more time doing things but umm, it's adapting your knowledge ... and that is what I've started to do now [for the next assessment].

Again a central theme of Alice's narrative was her reflection on how being part of a peer support group had helped her develop new strategies for learning. She began by describing a mismatch between herself and the other direct entry students; she had always worked hard to prepare for the taught sessions whilst they had sometimes put in less effort and had wanted to borrow her notes. She raised an interesting concept of 'fairness' and explained that in her opinion peer support groups only work when there is an equivalence of effort. I wondered if this had also partially contributed to her difficulties making friends within her own age group in the first year:

I'd say last year, I definitely didn't work as a group and I liked to do my own stuff, umm, I'm probably a bit mean really, I don't like giving people out my information. If I know I've worked really hard on it and they don't do anything and they're like, "oh can I just borrow this, can I photocopy it?", I'm one of those people, I'd be like, "no, cos you've not put any effort into it", there's a lot of people that do that and I'm the person that doesn't like that cos I don't think it's fair. But now working as a group where we all work really hard together and with people's past experiences on different courses we can all pull in information, so I'm definitely much better at working as a group and it has been really good for me.

Setting goals at the end of the interview Alice was determined to keep up her recent academic successes and maintain the friendships she had made:

I'd like to do well on my next assessment for a start and hopefully get like 2:1 or above and pass all my placements so I can get the summer to chill out and I don't have to re-sit again and I can refresh myself for my third year. Just stay focused I think and even on my placement like keep in contact with the group that I work with now cos we've really made good friends. Ideally I'd like to graduate with a 2:1 so, around that area or above I'd really be happy with so if I can maintain that and pass all my placements ... start looking at jobs maybe, that'll be next year, gosh that's scary!

3.7.8 Sixth interview – October 2011

Alice and I meet for her sixth interview almost two years since our first meeting. It was the start of her third year at university and a week before her 21st birthday. Since our last meeting she had completed three of the required five-week clinical placements and had a summer break. Her year group were back on campus for just three weeks before they spent the ten weeks until Christmas completing a further two clinical placements. She began by talking about her first placement in March. She had enjoyed this placement and on reflection believed that it had been pivotal in her development. Recurring throughout this section of her narrative was a theme of support. On her first placement Alice described an encouraging atmosphere with a small group of staff who were both helpful and sympathetic and who had helped her develop as a member of the team. These staff also encouraged her learning and engagement and became a replacement for her peer support group, effectively a learning community. Having spent the beginning of her first year socially isolated Alice was pleased to be *'part of the team'*:

I got on really well with the team, you were instantly made to feel like one of them, you weren't thought of as "the student" you were part of the team and that's what I really liked about it. I absolutely loved it and I think that placement made me feel like, "yeah I'm actually gonna be a Physio now" ...Just being really welcoming to you and treating you on their sort of a level. They always really supported me and that made me feel comfortable, it made me feel like I fitted in if you understand what I mean.

Although she found the placements demanding and time-consuming Alice had also enjoyed her second and third placements where again the staff were welcoming, although I detected a small undercurrent of anxiety when she started each new placement and wanted to *'fit-in'*:

It's mind boggling at first to take everything in, cos you want to show that you're willing to learn and you're listening to what they say but it's worth it, I've enjoyed it and I've learnt so much. I've been so lucky with my placements, on my second placement the team was so relaxed, so that was really good and I got on really well with them and on my third placement everyone was really nice and my clinical tutor was really good ... I feel like it's like having a new job every six weeks or something like that. You're trying to fit into a team, you're trying to meet new people, you're trying to show people what you're capable of and what you're not capable of or what you don't feel confident in. So I find that hard really and I think this week, cos I know next week I'll be on placement, it's quite nerve-wracking really thinking, I don't know what these people are gonna be like. I know that sounds a bit odd but it's just hard settling in I think, cos it takes you at least a good week to settle in.

As well as finding the placements rewarding and stimulating experiences

Alice had gained excellent grades on all three of them:

In my first placement I got 90 in my placement mark and then I think my other two were in the 80s ... this year I got a couple of 2:1s and then I got a first in each of my placements so I've done so much better in my second year than I had done in the first year anyway.

As she reflected on her academic success Alice again stated her belief

that her peer support network had been instrumental:

Working as a group has helped me loads, things that sometimes I'm stuck on, they'll help, they'll explain it to me and put it in a way that I can understand it. I'm just hoping that I continue to improve as I go along. I think working together, I've probably told you this before but it has helped me loads cos I work better with others, cos I spot things that they won't spot and vice versa, and we get on really well as friends as well so it's really nice to work together ... whereas in my first year I was a bit in-between friends really, I never fitted in the group, or the popular people ...

As her narrative concluded, I again encouraged Alice to reflect on her achievements to date. She restated the importance of her current friendships:

I know I wanted to do better in my grades, so that's been achieved, cross it out [laughs]. Umm...I can't remember any others really ... I think I've made a lifelong friend in Emily and I don't think really, if I

probably would've lived in Manchester I probably would've talked to Emily as much because of that divide in the teaching group between commuters and people who live in halls.

3.7.9 Follow-up telephone interview – October 2012

Alice was pleased when she graduated from the programme with a 2.1 grade in July 2012. In the months immediately following graduation she worked in temporary non-physiotherapy positions and had recently accepted a full-time, permanent Physiotherapy post. She was delighted to have secured her first job which was based close to her family home; all of her friends had also managed to find employment.

I asked Alice to reflect on her undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences she immediately identified support from her placement experiences and the academic staff as well as the role of her peer support group:

I'm a practical learner so going on clinical placement was great for me and made it a really good learning experience. It was a massive change from being at college and I found it quite difficult so everything fell into place when I was on placement. Later on because the work load is so intense without sharing the workload with my friends I would have struggled more, yeah that little triangle of friends was really good to be able to practise things, it really helped.

3.8 Sara

Sara's narrative differed from Alice's in that she joined the programme after deferring entry to travel for a year. Her narrative was initially more complex as it represented multiple simultaneous transitions, her transition from leisure time back to academic work, her transition to a new city and her transition from independent traveller back to being part of a group.

There seemed to be a sense of inner turmoil throughout the first two interviews as Sara adapted to her new environment and experiences. She was the student in this study who initially seemed the most unhappy during her initial transition and towards the end of her first year mentioned that she had seriously considered leaving several times. She had two orientations within her narrative, peer-support and her development as a self-directed learner. These orientations were co-dependent but the core of her development and eventual academic success was the support she gained from the close friendship group she eventually developed.

3.8.1 First interview – October 2009

I met Sara for the first time on a Thursday morning three and a half weeks after she had started the Physiotherapy programme. She did not have any taught sessions that morning so had arranged to meet me on campus at 9.30am and planned to start work on her first assessment in the library after the interview. As she was unfamiliar with the campus I met Sara in the campus refectory before we went to a meeting room and my initial impression was that she appeared to be confident yet a little nervous and guarded about her comments; she spoke softly.

Sara was slightly built, of medium height, with long hair. It was a cold October morning yet Sara had been wearing flip flops with leggings and a shirt and when I had remarked on this she said she could not get used to wearing shoes after a year spent travelling wearing only sandals. On reflection I felt this was an outward sign of her struggling with her

transition, she was reluctant to let go of a very visible sign of her recent travelling when she had been happy.

I began the interview with a request for Sara to introduce herself for the benefit of the tape. She smiled and replied:

Ok. I'm Sara I'm nineteen so I'm a year older than the average student. Yeah, I don't have a lot to say about myself to be honest.

I subsequently outlined the narrative prompt question asking Sara to tell her story.

3.8.2 Early life

Sara is the younger of two siblings. Her parents were both health professionals and were separated; prior to travelling for a year she had lived with her mother. Sara mentioned her father who lives close to her mother in her second and third interview and referred to meeting him on a couple of occasions during her first year. Sara was financially better off than the other students I interviewed as she did not need to work to supplement her income and she had enough money to run a car. Her parents were *'helping me through with a loan'* as she felt that she couldn't *'survive off the student loan'* although the extra money mainly paid for *'going out'*.

After the initial prompt to tell her narrative Sara began by talking about how she had first become interested in becoming a Physiotherapist when she was sixteen, unlike some of the other students I interviewed, it was

not a long-held ambition. She also made reference to her studies at sixth form and eventual travels.

3.8.3 Initial transition to university

Sara initially failed to gain the three B grades in her A levels that she needed to meet her conditional offer. She therefore had to complete a re-sit exam before she went travelling for eight months, returning to the UK at the end of August. Sara's initial transition to university had been difficult, as she was travelling until two weeks before the programme started. Leaving home to come to Manchester so soon after she had arrived back had been emotionally challenging for Sara:

It was good to come here but as soon as I got here I didn't really want to be here anymore. I didn't enjoy it at all; you're on your own a lot when you first get here.

She had unfortunately missed the welcome pack and letters outlining the initial timetable by the programme team '*I kept waiting for something to turn up and nothing did*'; therefore, on the first morning of the course she had arrived on campus and '*hoped that someone would tell me where to go*'. In common with Alice, Sara had also failed to gain a place within her first choice halls of residence; she felt isolated from her tutorial group and noted that '*all the other Physios live there apart from me*'. Although she seemed to be getting on reasonably well with her flatmates she highlighted the differences between herself and the others, '*it's just everyone in my flat is out all the time and I'm in*'. Sara also admitted to feeling homesick, she stated '*I just didn't fit in, not fit in that's the wrong*

word but I just didn't feel at home' and went on to describe her initial isolation at length:

It's just like everyone has bonded like already, you come in maybe to one or two lectures on the Monday so you're in and then you go back to your flat and you're like well what do I do now? You're just kind of sat there thinking "oh" so yeah, that was hard. The first week was good but it was a lot of getting to know people. I'd say for the first half of the week I hung out with people in my halls. I didn't go out that much actually because it was a bit, I don't know Manchester at all and I didn't want to have to come back on my own as I didn't really know where I was going or where I was at all. I didn't go out much, I went out on Tuesday night with people from my flat and ended up coming back early as it wasn't really my scene ... The first week you have to go out; you are a wet blanket if you don't go out in that first week it's just like Freshers week and you have to go out every night and I don't want to go out every night. So when you stayed in on Freshers week it was like what you doing you can't stay in on Freshers week? I didn't enjoy the pressure of feeling like you had to go out. I did go out but it was the fact that everyone else felt they had to go out and no one stayed in so you were alone when you did stay in. My house mates are party animals.

To cope with the isolation Sara returned home for the first few weekends of term and admitted that once she was at home she had not wanted to return:

I was ok when I got there but then I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to come back here, but obviously I had to. I think by the end of the second week, I still didn't want to come back because home is just so nice and because I've been away for so long and I only had three weeks back it felt like I was just leaving it again ... Although I actually only cried once in the first week because I'm quite a cheerful person!

Despite this initial unhappiness Sara stated that she had enjoyed the programme and was keeping up with the study, although she '*had to work harder than I thought*'. She had recently started working with two other students on the programme to prepare for the first assessment.

In common with the other interviews I concluded by asking Sara to set herself some goals for when she finished her first year in June 2010. She replied:

Gosh. This sounds awful but I just want to get through it and enjoy it. I do just want to enjoy it mainly and come out with something decent like a goodish grade so that I'm ready for second year quite comfortably ... I don't have any massive goals just to be here is great to be honest just to have got this far.

I felt that this statement was indicative of her struggle with the transition to higher education. She was not at the point where she had firm goals and was committed to staying until the end of the first year and it was therefore difficult for her to imagine a future self. Although from her interview she appeared to be quite academically driven she did not have an exact idea of the grade she wanted to achieve at the end of the year. I drew the interview to a close and wished Sara well with her studies.

3.8.4 Second interview – January 2010

My second interview with Sara took place on a Wednesday afternoon in the second week of the spring term. I had arranged to meet her in the refectory again and as I walked in she was sitting at a table chatting to a couple of the other Physio students; after saying her goodbyes she walked over and we went to the same meeting room we had used for her first interview. My initial impression was that she looked far more relaxed and happy than when we had met in October; I was relieved as Sara had been the student that I was most concerned about in the first term as she had seemed to be having a difficult transition.

After the initial prompt Sara started the interview by saying '*October was a really long time ago*'. She paused briefly and then talked about the assessments she had undertaken in the first term, I noticed straight away that she began by using the collective noun 'we':

We did the assignment that was hard, really hard actually because I'm not good at that kind of thing. I worked really hard and made myself really ill so I was off uni for a whole week. I got really behind so I got stressed about that ... I didn't go out for ages but I managed to catch up. It went really, really fast it was a really fast term but I guess there was a lot of work then we had the Christmas holidays.

Sara continued with her narrative but these opening few sentences were indicative of her first term experiences. My initial thought was that she had clearly made connections with other students in the cohort and a social network. The second thing that struck me was that degree-level work had been a big 'step-up' for Sara and later in her narrative she stated that '*the pace is so fast you can hardly keep up*'.

Sara had got her assessment results online at the end of term and was pleased to have passed both assessments, gaining 58% (2:2) in the written assignment and 65% (2:1) in the practical viva exam. She talked briefly about the written assignment and was satisfied to pass, although as she had struggled with it she '*knew I wouldn't have done that well in it*'. She appeared motivated to build on this first assessment experience and gain a better result in the next written assignment at the end of the first year, stating that '*I'll do better in the next one so it's a learning experience*'.

I passed I really wanted to pass. I wasn't ecstatic because it's a 2:2 but it was ok ... The viva was alright but I was absolutely terrified, I was shaking the whole time, I was happy with the 2:1.

Later in her narrative Sara reflected on how she had struggled to settle when she had first arrived in September, but the main point of this narrative turn was to emphasise to me how much happier she now was. At one point she had considered moving to the halls where most of the Physio students were, especially when she was preparing for her assessments and spent most of her evenings over there but was *'definitely happier now, I wouldn't move'*. Sara felt that her relationships with her flatmates had improved and that she *'really gets on with my flatmates a lot better now'*. One important turning point was that Sara had been on a university club holiday and made several new friends:

You meet a lot of people and it's really well organised so it was a really good laugh. I think now I've certainly met a lot more people like me from going on the trip ... yeah I'm definitely happier now.

In common with several of the other students Sara has not found the course work to be interesting or challenging since she returned after the Christmas break. She felt that the first term had been *'so fast you can hardly keep up'* and that it was now *'so slow you don't really know what to do with yourself'*. She had been allocated a group for the next assessment and was happy that so far, all the students were engaging with the project. She made reference to having friends within this group:

I've got people that work hard. I'm someone who works really hard for something that matters for something that's marked but I've got one of the mature students, one of the girls that I'm friends with and one of the lads that's in my building so it couldn't have worked much better for me really. We're all happy to work hard, no one is going to be carrying anyone because I get so frustrated with someone that doesn't do any work.

Sara drew her narrative to a close and I prompted her to reflect on the goals she had set herself at her first interview. She believed that she was more settled and hoped to finish the year with a 2.1, she also hoped to have a wider circle of friends:

I'd aim a bit higher I don't know what I said last time? I'd want a 2:1 at the end of this year if I could get it just to set myself in good stead for next year and hopefully that's achievable after doing what I've done so far. It depends how the rest of it goes obviously ... coming here and only having one group of friends was really odd for me. I didn't really like it but now I've branched out a lot more, I just mean it's good to have friends so that's why I'm really glad I went on the trip as well.

3.8.5 Third interview – May 2010

I met Sara for her third interview on Monday lunchtime at the end of the summer term. She had taught sessions that day and had arranged to meet me during her lunch hour; my initial impression was that she was relaxed and happy as she smiled broadly and opened the door, calling out 'Hi'. I started the interview by reminding Sara of the narrative prompt and the first thing she said was '*I have moved to the [name of hall of residence] with the other Physio students.*'

She paused and then went on to explain that she had developed friendships with the students that she had been allocated into a group with for a unit assessment and when a vacancy became available in the hall of residence she had moved in during the Easter break:

It went really well actually and we all had our strengths and weaknesses so we helped each other out, I think we were all quite motivated just to get it done and out of the way. Actually, from the group I made really good friends with one of the girls I was in the group with even though we'd been in the group the whole year we

hadn't really talked. We became good friends and that is one of the reasons I moved halls and now I am in her crowd of friends it's really good, it's really nice so I'm living with them next year as well. There was never anyone in the first flat. It was lonely and I thought it's time to move and one of my friends had a flat that had a spare room that someone had moved out of. It has been so much better living there. It has made the whole uni thing completely different completely!

The move had clearly had a significant positive impact upon Sara's experience. She had more time to socialise with her peers and had also been using some of this time to develop a peer support network for studying as well, her only regret was that she had not moved earlier in the year:

Now we just go around to each other's for cups of tea just so you are not on your own. I'm never on my own at the moment and I love it. I don't mind my own company but I prefer to be with someone else. You socialise with more people than you would have because you're just there all the time so you just speak to more people. We share study tasks and stuff so that is much better. I wish I'd moved earlier but never mind.

Although she was studying with other students, she acknowledged that now that she had more friends she was spending more of her evenings socialising and was consequently doing less work. Her average grade at this point was 2.1, but she declared that as she only had to pass her first year she would not have been too upset if her final grade was lower than this:

I know I should have high standards. The difference is my priorities have changed back in [name of the first hall of residence] I didn't have anything to do but work or sit around and do nothing, here I've always got something to do, so work has kind of dropped. Next year I know it is going to be horrible, it's going to be a lot of work and not much play so I want to make the most of this year.

When I prompt Sara to reflect on her experiences over the academic year and consider if she has achieved the goals that she set in October 2009,

she revealed that she had wanted to leave the programme earlier in the year when she was unhappy:

I did try and move course at one point just because I hated the city so much. It was not what I pictured but now I am enjoying it a lot more and exploring it a lot more so I think Manchester is more like home now but before it was not for me. My mind-set has changed so hugely this year. At the beginning, I hated it and just wanted to leave and go travelling halfway through. I'm settled finally at the end of the year I'm enjoying my course and stuff I can see where I was coming from each time I said the things [set goals in the interviews] but my priorities have changed a lot. My mum really did worry about me because I was going home quite a lot and obviously she wanted me to go home because she missed me, but she didn't want me to come home because she knew if I was coming home then I wasn't doing stuff in Manchester. I think I've gone back to being the person that I was and I wasn't that person in the first and second term. I felt that I had to change to be more like other people but I've met the right people now.

When I encouraged her to set goals she declared that academic achievement was not a priority and she would be happy just to pass the year:

I want to pass we're back to passing [laughs]. I wouldn't be happy with a third but at least I would have passed. I wouldn't be happy with a third but I'd be happy with a 2:2.

3.8.6 Fourth interview – October 2010

Sara and I met for her fourth interview almost exactly a year since her first. It was a Tuesday lunchtime and I had arranged to meet her in a tutorial room; she knocked and walked in smiling broadly. She had initially moved back home to stay with her family whilst she worked over the summer break and had then travelled for a month before returning to Manchester. She began her narrative by talking about the assessment grades she had achieved in the first year:

I passed first year I got a 2:1. I got one first and one 2:2 I think. I was quite pleased with that because by the end of it I was like “just pass” so I was quite pleased when my results came through and I did actually get a 2:1. It has given me better aspirations for this year. I didn’t try as hard as I could of and I still got a 2:1. I am hoping for a 2:1 this year now.

Reflecting on her grades prompted Sara to talk about how she became friends with the students she undertook a group assessment with. She believed that whilst they had worked together they had ‘gelled really well’ and as a consequence she had moved halls of residence at the end of the first year. This move had helped her develop friendships with the other students in her tutorial group and she now shared a house with them in the second year, this became the main theme of her narrative:

It was so much nicer, I wish I had been there since the beginning. It really did make a huge difference being there, it changed my social life completely which was nice, it was definitely worth it. A lot of the girls I was with I am now living with in a house this year, it is great.

Sharing a house with a group of students on the same programme had also increased her engagement with her studies. They worked together as a group to support each other’s learning and on the days that they had taught sessions they travelled in together and arrived early to prepare for the sessions ‘it’s good because you have half an hour to read up on anything’. She continued to explain how the students studied and revised together. This had been a revelation to Sara and she had found it much easier to learn and engage with the subject now that she studied as part of a peer support group:

The other day we had tons of work, you just could not do it all by yourself. I don’t know how anyone on their own did it; we had enough to split it between us all. We all emailed each other the things that we had done which was really nice and it took us two hours each to do our own little bit, sitting there doing it on your own

you just get so bored. I think it is interesting actually because I have only just found out how to learn, everyone sits there writing notes for ages and I just do it because everyone else does it, I don't learn a thing from doing that at all. I have got away from the writing of notes and started talking it out more because that is the only way I remember. I'm gutted it has taken me twenty years to work that out! Also, when someone else is working it encourages you to work so that is a good thing because you feel guilty they are working and you're not ... I think I have learnt a lot about studying, I have changed the way I learn.

However, although they worked together to prepare for taught sessions, they had a different strategy when they had written assessments to complete as they were concerned about plagiarism. When they had to complete written assessments they all wrote individually but supported each other by proof reading and editing each other's work at the end:

Obviously, we discuss assignments but once we get down to it we just put our heads down and do them. We all read each other's after and do all the spell checking and "this is wrong" kind of thing. Then everyone sees everyone's and if there is something major that you have realised you have missed out from reading what everyone else has done you can add it, so it is a way of doing it without copying. We always cut out [edit] each other's because everyone writes too much so you correct someone's work. It is quite nice that we do that for each other, I think it has improved everyone's work.

Sara concluded her narrative and I asked her to finish the interview by setting some goals for the coming academic year. She was again focused on achieving a 2.1 and in common with Alice was anxious about her forthcoming clinical placements:

I really want a 2:1 but I might be jinxing it by saying that. I think coming out of year two with a 2:2 would put a whole lot of pressure on third year, I am not good with pressure. I really do want to try hard and get a 2:1. I hope that goal does not change so that is one of them. I am really scared about getting a horrible placement, I hope to enjoy it really, if I don't that could cause some problems for my third year. You can't really have that many goals can you? You don't have any time to achieve any of them apart from the grade. Oh, and to get a good placement for elective, sort it out early.

I did not manage to meet Sara again in the second year as she was busy in January and subsequently went on clinical placement for the rest of the year.

3.8.6 Fifth interview – October 2011

Sara and I met for her fifth interview at the start of her third year, two years after her first interview and a year since we had last met. She began by briefly talking about her assessment grades; she had finished the second year with a 2.1 overall, which she was happy with but planned *'to work harder this year and scrape a first'*. After finishing her second year, she had had a relaxing summer spending the first few weeks on holiday and catching up with friends before working for the last month. When we met she had recently returned to campus and was struggling to engage with the university sessions. She lived with the same Physio students as she had the year before, maintaining the peer support network:

It's nice to be around Physios because when you have issues [with university work] it's a lot easier to help each other when you know what you are talking about. All we talk about when we get home is the experiences we'd had on placement. Although we're all bad influences on each other now when it comes to written assessments cos we'll all hand it in at the deadline [laughs].

The main focus of Sara's narrative was the three placements she had completed between March and June. All her placements had been some distance away from where she lived and she had found the travel and the long days demanding:

You've got your housemates and your work and that's pretty much it. By the time you get home at 7pm you want to eat and sleep, that's literally all you want to do.

Again Sara described how peer support during her placements had added to her learning and engagement. She believed that the one advantage of the travel had been that she had shared a car with a group of students who were all based at the same placement site and they had studied together on the journeys, again she emphasised the need for peer support:

I had other people in the car, like one of my housemates and a couple of guys from down the road, so it was almost nice. Having someone in the car like halves the time in your head and we are like sitting learning in the car ... because it's horrible being on your own for five weeks.

Although she gained a first for each placement Sara had had mixed experiences; the first had been 'great' as it had not been demanding and she had 'got a good mark' so was pleased. The second had been 'completely the opposite', she had had to travel an hour each way to get there and she had struggled to build a relationship with one of the placement staff:

Then my second placement that was really, really hard. I did so much work, like so much work, and I didn't really get on with one of my clinical educators. She was very negative, everything was negative that you did. I literally went home and cried because it was that bad. But in the end she did change, like I still got a first from the placement overall, but I worked so hard for that placement, I really made an effort with every single staff member there.

Sara's third placement had also been challenging initially, as she had been warned that the clinical educator could be demanding. However, she had worked hard and enjoyed the experience:

Then my next placement was even further away, and before I went I heard a lot of bad reports from everyone, that it was going to be horrible and I was going to hate it. And one of the staff had a word with me and saying that I would cry and it would be horrible, but not to take it personally. And then it turned out to be the best placement I've ever had. So, yeah I think it's just who you are at the end of the day. I learnt so much, so that was really good and I got really, really good marks in that one.

Unlike Alice, Sara had maintained a close peer support group with the students she had shared a house with and had therefore had no need to build close relationships with the clinical staff. Although she had got on with the teams she worked with and believed that they *'helped you learn and still there was banter at the same time'* she described a clear divide between the staff and the students:

They didn't really want students and we kind of got that kind of, they kind of said to us, "we don't want students but we take them anyway" kind of thing, so that was like a put down. Then they had their next students come in, it wasn't our clinical educators but it was other people on the same unit and they were like "oh God, the students are coming" it was, oh well that makes us feel really great, do you know what I mean. If people don't want students, it's really annoying that they have them because it doesn't give anyone a great experience.

When Sara drew her narrative to a close I again prompted her to think about the goals that she had set in her interviews. She laughed when she recollected the goals she set in her first interview just to get through the year, *'I sound so motivated don't I!'* After a brief pause she then went on to outline goals for when she finished the programme in June. Her initial response was *'Oh gosh, that's scary'*, but after some thought she replied:

That's really hard, I don't know, I really don't know, it's so unpredictable. I want to get a good grade either a 2:1 or a first, that's my goal really; if I get there I'll be, I'll be happy and a job would be nice. I still don't love Physio, I don't know if I want to be a Physio, but we'll see how it goes I've enjoyed the ride.

3.8.7 Follow-up telephone interview – October 2012

Sara graduated with a final degree award of a first; she was delighted. Her friends within the peer support group also graduated with first and 2.1 degree awards. Immediately after finishing the programme she spent some time travelling and undertook a couple of part-time jobs. I managed to chat briefly to her in October 2012 and she informed me that she had recently been offered a permanent full-time Physiotherapy position and was waiting to start work. When I asked Sara to reflect on her undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences she immediately identified the role of her peer support group:

The people that I lived with had a huge influence, having a supportive network around you really helps, I don't think I would have been nearly as successful if I hadn't lived with them. We all helped each other all the time and it was nice just to have that support, we still keep in touch.

3.9 The impact of financial concerns

The narratives of some students highlighted financial difficulties and concerns about debt. According to these students their financial circumstances dictated their engagement with their studies and on occasions preoccupation with finances was central to their narratives. Oliver and Paul, the two students considered in this section, both repeatedly focused on the impact of their on-going financial concerns within their narratives. Both also stated that they needed to have a regular income from part-time work in order to continue on the degree programme. When they reflected upon their learning experiences the impact of financial concerns sometimes overshadowed all other interests.

Oliver and Paul were both mature students who had already completed first degrees. Oliver had completed his degree before working in an administrative position for three years. Paul's first degree was in Biology after which he had spent some time travelling and then completed the first year of a second degree, which he had left to start the Physiotherapy programme.

Paul in particular struggled financially and worked a significant number of hours doing a number of poorly paid jobs during his three years on the programme. Several times during his degree this had a significant impact upon his studies. He missed taught sessions so he could work, was exhausted on placement as he had to work evenings and weekends to earn money and missed assessment deadlines. Oliver managed to get better-paid longer-term, part-time jobs and successfully applied to the Access to Learning Fund. Financial concerns prompted both students to consider leaving the programme.

I interviewed both these students on three occasions during their first year, once every term. We also met at the beginning of their second and third years. Both students were willing interviewees and Oliver in particular talked at length. As the study progressed Paul relaxed and from the final term of their first year was far more talkative and forthcoming, sharing details of his personal life. Oliver's story overall is positive as he manages to secure a regular income from a job that does not impact

upon his studies. Unfortunately Paul's story is less positive as his financial difficulties had a detrimental impact upon his studies.

3.10 Oliver

Oliver's narrative is that of a highly motivated and confident twenty-four year old man who has a clear focus on a future profession as a Physiotherapist. His narrative represents the transition from young professional to second time student with an accompanying move to a new city. Oliver was the most focused student within the study and his narrative was dominated throughout by his unwavering focus on his financial circumstances, he was focused and determined and he was the most static narrative throughout the study. He occasionally mentioned a peer support group that he worked with to prepare for assessments and briefly mentioned his relationship with his girlfriend; however, his primary motivation throughout his studies was on balancing his finances and he talked at length about this every time I met him. Oliver's transition to university meant self-improvement and a financially secure future with an interesting career.

3.10.1 First interview – October 2009

I interviewed Oliver for the first time on a Wednesday afternoon, four weeks after the start of term. My first impression was that Oliver was relaxed and confident as he walked over and gave me a firm handshake. He was tall and dressed more smartly than the average student, during the interview he talked at length, with his first response to the prompt

running to almost five pages of transcript before I needed to give any encouragement, he was the most confident student included in the study.

3.10.2 Early life

Oliver made brief mention of his early life during his interview. His parents lived in the North of England and he saw them a couple of times a year, it appeared to be a harmonious relationship but he did not have a strong connection with family, *'I'm not the most sentimental person in the world'*. He began his narrative by talking about when he had studied for his A levels – seven years earlier – and went on to outline his experiences studying for his first degree. Although he gained a first in this degree he was a *'bit gutted'* afterwards when he realised that he was not interested in the career choices that the degree led on to.

After three years of working with a growing sense of dissatisfaction *'I was doing the very thing I didn't want to do'* he had decided to return to higher education and successfully applied to study on the Physiotherapy programme. He moved to Manchester with his girlfriend a month prior to starting the programme and had very clear expectations that his second higher education experience would be different to his first: *'I've done the whole student thing before and wanted to live in a young professional area'*. Unfortunately his living costs were more expensive than he anticipated and he had financial concerns even before he started the programme:

As it happened, to get the quality of apartment we wanted we had to raise the budget by another hundred pounds which I wasn't happy about because it meant it was going to eat into some money that was already coming out somewhere else.

Well aware that he would struggle financially in the weeks before the programme began Oliver began planning his finances and looked for part-time work:

I started drawing up budgets of how much money I was going to need, how many hours I was going to need to work and things like that, getting as much money together as I could.

3.10.3 Initial transition to university

As he had already completed an undergraduate degree Oliver had planned to behave as if his first year at university was a job, '*I wanted to take it seriously*'. Therefore even though he only had taught sessions three days a week he aimed to be on campus nine to five from Monday to Friday and spent any free time in the library studying and working on his assessments. This pattern enabled him to spend the evenings and weekends either with his girlfriend or working and '*just live your life as though you are not a student*'. However, it was immediately clear that he was concerned about the impact that this pattern of studying had upon his finances:

I think the only thing that's quite uncertain now is the financial situation because I am classed as a mature student. Student Loan companies don't finance second degrees which means you're very much left to your own devices; you just get your NHS bursary which isn't enough to make ends meet at all. I think for students in my position it's very difficult because we're encouraged by lecturers not to spend too much time working because it could affect your studies; yet at the same time you've got this balance of earning enough money to simply survive and make ends meet and sacrificing a bit of study time to work those hours to be able to earn that money. I'm finding myself the only worry I have at the moment

is finding that balance because everybody knows there's a certain amount of money you know you need to earn, to actually not go overdrawn or get in debt or anything like that. I think that the amount of hours you might need to work per week is actually digging into my study time at the moment and I think that's the only thing I'm concerned about or worried about really.

Oliver's financial concerns had prompted him to get a job working part-time to try and earn some money before the programme had begun:

I'm doing an administration job it's something I was pretty good in. I'm working around ten hours at the moment but that's going to increase to twenty hours as of early December and that's where I'm starting to worry that I might just not be able to fit it all in but it's going to be a case of tough luck because I need the money without it I can't survive.

Concerns about his finances had had an immediate effect upon his studies as he was unable to buy all the books that he wanted:

I thought I'm not buying all these books because they're expensive and I can't afford them I kind of felt a bit under pressure to buy lots of them really. I thought by the time you've added them all up it'll be costing well over two or three hundred pounds so I thought I'll just use the library that's what it's there for.

Oliver stated very clearly that although he really wanted to complete the programme he did not want to graduate with a large debt. He was adamant that if he could not maintain a part-time job then he would leave the programme:

If I couldn't get work I'd have to drop out of the course, it doesn't make financial sense to accumulate three years of debt to come out of it to have uncertainty of getting a job and having a huge debt behind you.

Although he had financial concerns he was enjoying the programme and had made friends with some of the other mature students 'we're the oldies'. When he drew his narrative to a close I asked Oliver what his goals were for the end of the academic year. Although his main concern

was to do well academically, his pre-occupation with finances was clear as he replied:

I'll be quite outright and honest that I am aiming for a first in this degree and anything less than a first will disappoint me, it will be a huge disappointment in fact. I hope to still be financially stable to the point where I can continue learning during the summer and not have to work full time that would be a huge bonus for me. It would be nice to keep that really but really the main thing for me, the main 90% of what I'm looking for to achieve by the end of this is my overall classification of a first. If I don't get that I'm probably going to have to realistically rethink my working situation and things like that really to just put in more hours studying.

3.10.4 Second interview – January 2010

My second interview with Oliver was on a Friday afternoon in the second week of the spring term. I reminded Oliver of our first meeting to which he replied '*October seems like yesterday to me, the time is going that quickly*'. He began by talking about his first assessment, which he described as '*the first real milestone*'. Although he had passed this written assessment he had achieved a lower than expected grade and was surprised and disconcerted:

I was disappointed with the first assignment, I think some of my academic writing had let me down but I can see straight away what I've done so I can sort of learn from that. I was so shocked because I spent so much time on it, I thought maybe they had been a tad harsh but I've realised it's not the amount of time I've spent on it because what I'd realised is the more time I spent on it the further away I'd moved off the subject ... I think I've benefited more from doing badly than I would of if I'd have done really well.

He had performed better in his second assessment, an oral viva in which he gained a first. This type of assessment was new to Oliver and he had been '*scared and excited*' yet confident that he had prepared well for the assessment:

It was good, I felt confident, I came out of it afterwards you know, I was really happy I just felt like I'd done a good job to be honest.

He immediately went on to make a narrative linkage to his need for part-time work and how he was worried about the impact of working on his studies:

In terms of projects alongside uni there's not much work to be had really you know to sort of to make some extra cash, just finding it is next to impossible without sacrificing entire evenings working in bars and things like that; which is far too disruptive on learning and studying.

He continued to reflect in depth on the change in his financial circumstances since he had returned to higher education:

I got used to having money; I got dependent on a salary each month. I had a budget, I knew how much I could spend on going out and buying things. Since coming here you're constantly insecure, one month you might not know if you're going to be able to afford the food, well you do, of course you do, it's not that bad it's just you never have any real, I don't know security or anything like that. You don't know how much money you'll have. Striking that balance is difficult, last year in semester one there was no chance I could've worked. I couldn't have even mustered up the time to make an eight hour shift never mind work enough shifts or enough hours to make a hundred pounds a week which is probably a minimum amount to get by on.

Fortunately he had recently been offered a short-term job and he was hoping that this would eventually turn into a significant number of hours. He had also successfully applied to two funds and received grants from both:

It's always a constant problem it's a constant balancing act between how much to budget for the month and how much to spend. I've got a definite income from the NHS Bursary but it's not enough to kind of survive on, so I've been quite savvy about it. I've applied for the Access to Learning Fund and I've sent an application to an Educational Foundation and I've had grants, quite substantial grants from both, which is going to pretty much fix that problem.

Despite this funding he was still concerned about his ability to manage financially whilst studying and was constantly vigilant and planning ahead to manage his finances:

I've been sort of self-funding and it's all good but I know full well it will run out and I think I might just be able to make it to the summer and then I can work full time through the summer and hopefully start the whole process again, reapply, you know work part time, but it's the same problem really ... It makes it easier but I think without that there would've been a possibility of saying I can't do it. I'd have to drop out for financial reasons and that would be really bad.

When Oliver's narrative came to an end I encouraged him to reflect on the goals that he had set during his first interview, academic achievement and financial stability remained his goals:

What I want is a first but I want a first average. I appreciate that I might not get a first in every single assignment but I don't think employers are going to be at all interested in the under achievers. I'd like to maybe have some more financial stability but I'd just be happy with that really, I'd like not to work but you know it would be impossible to do that really. My goals are pretty much to do with stability and security really, I'll feel happy if I get the grade that I want I'll feel secure in the course, I'll feel safe, I'll feel as though I'm achieving and I can set a new target and maybe go a little bit higher. I need the money obviously to allow me enough time to study to get the grades that I want.

3.10.5 Third interview – June 2010

Oliver's third interview took place slightly later than the other students, just after the first year of the programme had finished in June. He had managed to get a full-time administrative job over the summer and I arranged a time that fitted in with his work commitments.

Overall he had enjoyed his first year and had felt that he had been *'learning at a level I was comfortable with'* although he was disappointed

that he had not yet got his results and *'there were no feed-back sessions'*.

He had gained a first for his grade for the group assessment and he

believed that since February when he started to get regular work

'everything has got better and better':

I feel like I'm waiting for something to level out or come back down now because it seems too good. I've got a good job, good finances and I'm really optimistic for my marks at the beginning of July.

Oliver had got his current job in April and had been offered flexible hours

to complete a project so worked full time during the holiday periods and

two days a week during term time. Although he was delighted to have a

regular source of income he had been concerned that his working

commitments were impacting negatively on his studies:

I secured this job two days before the exam and I remember being really annoyed but happy at the same time because they wanted me to work the day before my exam. I was working the day before my exam so I didn't do any revision the day before but how much of it would have gone in I don't know anyway. Over Easter, I worked more or less about four days a week on the first week and the last week just my regular two days and then carried on two days until the summer break.

In addition to the income from his job Oliver had got a final payment from

the Access to Learning Fund in the summer term and this had helped to

ensure that he was financially stable. Again he reflected that without this

payment he would have considered leaving the programme:

After Easter I'd got my last payment from the Access to Learning Fund and that really helped out without that, without a question, I would have had to leave because there is no way I would put this course on a credit card or worked up an overdraft. You knew that anyway because I'd told you that if I didn't get money I would have had to leave. It wasn't like I would have had to go tomorrow I would have had a month left, I've always been good with my money I'm not someone who will work up debts because I just know that it is not healthy to lead that sort of life. The Access to Learning Fund really helped as well.

He was already concerned about how he would manage his finances in the second year when he would be studying full time on clinical placement for four months:

I enjoy it [this job] and I hope to keep it but they don't know I'm going to be doing a placement in February. I am annoyed because I'm going to have to leave such a good job that fits with my timetable so well. My plan is to work full time all summer and save up as much money as possible and then once I have to leave in February do my placements and then I suppose start again looking for something else and I will apply to the Access to Learning Fund in February when I start my placements that's the plan.

To conclude the interview I invited Oliver to reflect on the goals he had set in the previous two interviews and tell me if he believed that he had achieved them:

I can't answer for my grades (as I don't have them yet) I definitely have applied myself as much as I feel I can, I'm really happy with the amount of effort and commitment I've put in. If I haven't achieved it, it is because I haven't identified learning needs not for lack of effort. I'm financially stable now which is really good I've made some good friends, friends that I think could be definitely for life. I think I'm halfway there, I would like to study more but I think that's the realisation that I need to work to use half of my wages for living and the other half to put away for the placements.

He paused briefly and then continued talking, outlining his goals for the second year and beyond:

Yeah, financial stability, stability and security to secure good marks and a job hopefully, that's the idea. I don't want to be the graduate without a job for more than five months after qualifying. I can't afford to do that, I want to maintain full-time work through the summer and save enough money for my placements and work part time from September to February that is a big goal.

I concluded the interview and we arranged to meet again in October at the start of Oliver's second year.

3.10.6 Fourth interview – October 2010

I met Oliver for his fourth interview a year after his first. He was working part time doing the same administrative job two days a week so I met him during his lunch break. Oliver had worked full time throughout the summer break and *'every week was more or less the same in terms of structure'*. He was delighted that he had managed to work so much and began his narrative by describing how this work had enabled him to become financially secure for his second year:

It has just been working full time; It has been good actually, because the opportunity I have had has balanced my finances and put me in very good stead for the placements. I have been able to put away savings from the summer, which will actually see me through the entire placements without having to work at all. If I had said to you this time last year if you had asked me how I was going to get through my placements I would have said I don't know. Probably at some point, I would have had to get a loan or something that would have messed me up for when I finished the course. I couldn't be more grateful for this. I think if it wasn't for that, I might not be here today I am managing time, money and study, I am not falling behind.

The only disadvantage to a summer spent working was that Oliver had struggled to adjust to the less structured routine of studying and attending taught sessions on campus when term started. He felt less engaged with the programme and was also missing the extra money that had been available to spend on enjoying himself:

I definitely noticed coming back that I am not as engaged, definitely. A lot of the time, I can switch off in a session and think about work or think about anything really. I do feel very withdrawn from the group. I am not participating in conversations; usually I would be quite eager to give answers to questions. Most of my friends worked full time and found the same problems I had with getting back into the routine, giving up that extra bit of money you had through the summer. There is no transition into it, it's just one week you're doing it and the next week you are not.

After reflecting on his transition back into studying Oliver talked briefly about his academic performance in the first year. He was disappointed that he had only achieved a 2.1 rather than the first that had been his goal. Oliver's desire to do well academically was clearly linked to his desire to be financially secure by getting a job when he graduated:

I'm not talking about passing. I want to pass with flying colours and do well. I have got it into my mind somehow, that in order to get a job that I need to be very strong academically in order to compete with the other graduates going for jobs.

As Oliver talked about graduating and getting a job this prompted him to ponder his future:

I am studying something I am passionate about, something I enjoy, but run the risk of messing my finances up. Finance is a massive issue; I will be 27 when I finish this course. If I come out of this course with £10,000 debt because of bank loans that is three years' worth of payments on a Physiotherapist's salary, that takes me to the age of 30. Finance dictates this university course because I cannot have a student loan. I've had one before. I get the bursary but it is not enough to live on. I got such a minimal bursary last year because I earned too much money the year before. This year I have a little bit more but it is not substantial, it is not enough to live off.

These reflections on his financial situation prompted Oliver to consider how he had always been concerned about his personal finances; he made a narrative link to memories of financial concerns during his childhood:

Finance will always remain a big issue, I've never been in debt, I don't want to be in debt. I don't buy something if I can't afford it, I don't have the typical credit mentality so it is not an attractive option for me to be in debt. It's all a balance I suppose isn't it? I mean it is not because I am a worrier about money. I don't get worried or stressed because of it I just like to be on top of things. As I got older, I cottoned on to financial problems at home and things like that, you understand these things and you pick them up. I mean when I was a kid I used to moan at my dad for a new bike all the time. Apparently, I later learned about 15 years later that it got him really stressed out, me asking for this expensive bike ...

You want your parents to be proud of you don't you? Well, I certainly do anyway. I would like to say to my mum I'm doing good for money you know I don't need this and I don't need that.

Again, as we concluded the interview I invited Oliver to reflect on the progress that he had made in the goals he had set and to plan ahead and set some goals for the end of the academic year:

All I would like to aim for next year is to get better from my results, get better again. I want a year-on-year improvement. Placements could be a potential catastrophe, a real downer on the course. Financially I would like to be where I predict I am going to be around mid-June when I should have received the tax rebate. I don't know if I will have a full-time job but I will definitely be looking.

3.10.6 Fifth interview – January 2011

Oliver and I met for his fifth interview at the start of the second term of his second year. He had almost completed his campus-based sessions for the academic year and was about to start the first of three clinical placements. He had done well academically, gaining two first grades and a 2.1 in his second year assessments in the first term and had subsequently spent the Christmas break working full time apart from five days when he had spent some time relaxing with his parents:

There was no stress, I could just relax I didn't think about uni, I didn't think about work, I didn't think about cash, I just relaxed.

although he was still preoccupied with ensuring that he had organised paid work to keep himself financially secure:

Christmas which was really just a lot of work in an office again and then I've been organising my placement which I'm quite looking forward to. I'm not going to be working through the day during my placements, but I've got five weeks' work, I can do the work whenever I please, but financially this year has just been great.

Again Oliver reflected at length about his financial circumstances, reiterating that if he had been unable to work full time in the summer he would have considered leaving the programme. The impact of his financial situation is clear as he talks about *'butterflies in his stomach'* and describes himself as *'not in any immediate danger'*:

I've got more work than I can manage at the moment, I'm just holding onto it, you know, it's great, it's made my time at MMU possible. I think I could definitely say that without it I would not have been able to continue cos there's just not enough funding available. There was a massive, massive worry around the beginning of summer last year at the department I was working for and nobody really had that security of a job, God it was like, umm, just butterflies in my stomach thinking if this falls, you know, I don't have any immediate back up and, and umm...I knew what I could've done, you know, there's last resort stuff for finance, you know, there's banks, loans, but it's just stuff you don't want to do, you know you kind of, it's your last resort, you know, I think I'd even consider asking parents before the bank but I survived and in that summer I stockpiled money, I saved money, and now I've got back up so I reckon I could last at least six to eight months. This summer I'm not too worried although I've not got anything concrete lined up for the summer in terms of work, I've got back-up and I feel good about that so I'm not in any immediate danger.

As well as working during his second year Oliver had developed closer friendships with a couple of other mature students. Their point of connection was partly financial and partly academic, as they all needed to work and were focused on gaining the best possible grades they could achieve:

Two of them are in a similar situation to me in that, you know, they've got financial restraints and stuff and it seems we've all come into quite a lot of success. My good friend has almost got a job lined up immediately from when he leaves and it's quite lucrative as well. So we've all kind of come into a bit of luck. But we're all kind of, at the same time we recognise that at any one time we're always under a threat of having that taken away and we're all quite level-headed in that we have savings, you know, we wouldn't buy anything too flash at the moment, you know, and just watch it, you know, and we're aware that, you know, we're umm, we need to be cautious with cash and stuff.

As he drew his narrative to a close, I prompted Oliver to reflect on the goals he had set in the previous interview and to set future goals. He was content that he had met the goals he had set previously and was hoping to maintain the same level of academic achievement and stay financially secure:

I will have completed three placements and to have scored high firsts. Financial situation, I don't really need to set a goal cos I'm fairly set, you know, and not much could go wrong between now and June so for once that's not my goal, my goal financially is just to be happy in what I'm doing. But maybe set something up for the following year. I don't want to set too many goals, I think they're not too ambitious this time.

3.10.7 Sixth interview – September 2011

Oliver and I met for his sixth interview a week after he had started his third year, and he began by talking about the three placements that he had completed since we last met. He had enjoyed each of them especially as they gave him an understanding of what his future career would be like *'it was sort of having a sense and a feel for the real job'*. However, the financial orientation was still evident, six months after his first placement he could tell me exactly how much he had spent travelling to his placements:

I enjoyed them [the placements]; I didn't have too many issues with travel. I was lucky though because the first one I could walk to, it was within walking distance. The second and third, I had no real issues with those to be honest, got through them, I planned for them quite a lot so everything went quite smoothly, you know, allocated money aside when I had it for travel. I think I totalled travel spend at about £190 going to and from my apartment on the Metro and then the bus but I'd allocated money aside for that so that wasn't too much of an issue. I claimed that back from the NHS Bursaries and I got that back within six weeks which was good.

Following his placements Oliver had again worked full time during the summer break, doing the same administrative job as previously; he referred to the income as 'a lifeline' and repeatedly stated how lucky he feels to have continued working:

My years almost fall in a pattern really, study, work, study, work and this year's been no exception. I've worked full time all summer, which has been very lucky, I feel like I've been lucky every single year. Each year there's been a situation where it's coming up to the beginning of the summer and I've been very lucky, the way I've been employed. I'm now at a stage where the summer's over, I've gone back to part-time working, I'll go on placement for ten weeks, and I'll just do the odd bits and bobs from home and I've got guaranteed work when I come back.

As he continued his narrative Oliver again reflected at length on his financial circumstances. The centrality of finance to his undergraduate experience is clear as he summarises by saying that he has 'had his finance hat on all the way through':

I am very money orientated, it's just the way that I am. I've budgeted until July next year and it amazed me that I'm gonna come out of university and I won't be in any debt if I keep working and that is amazing for me considering my biggest worry when I came to Manchester was finances. If we were having this conversation in September 2009 I'd have been thinking I'm going to have to have loans, I'm gonna come out of this whole process with several thousands of pounds worth of debt and in fact it's been the complete opposite. It's just been really good actually and it's easy to say that now, I'm sure there's been periods, small periods where I have been very stressed about money. It's not made me lose sight of anything else such as academic achievement and what the end product is from university but I've just had, you know my finance hat on all the way through.

One of the factors that Oliver believed had contributed to his financial security was the Access to Learning Fund:

I've submitted my final application to the Access to Learning Fund I got it in on the opening day. That fund has been absolutely outstanding and it's a very nice little treat at the end of the scheme when they have the money left and they share it equally between all of the applicants so I'll get my three instalments of the award

that I get and then around about June I'll get a letter saying the remaining funds have been shared out. So that's certainly helped with placements costs and it's almost like a buffer fund really, without going overdrawn, without going in the red on credit cards.

Returning to campus-based learning following the placements had been a difficult transition for Oliver. His focus was on working as a

Physiotherapist and he had struggled to find value in the taught sessions:

So when we've come back for these two weeks I almost feel, I have feelings or almost it's a time-filler, if I can describe it. I don't feel engaged with the university at the moment because the amount of information and the benefits of the placements is perhaps ten-fold compared to the university, in terms of what you learn. You know, having the experience of actually doing the job, so therefore university becomes less valuable in terms of learning; the value of university has gone down compared to the placements. I definitely feel less of a student and there's definitely a want in me to no longer be a student.

Oliver's clear focus was on employment at the end of the academic year.

He wanted a job as soon as possible after graduation and had already started reviewing his options:

My absolute objective is employment just because being without money for a period of times dramatically reduces your options in terms of what you can do. So I have two options really if I want to stay in Physiotherapy I have to get a job offer pretty quick, within a month or two of qualifying. I'm going to start applying for jobs I think just before I graduate and I'll apply within a region across that northern band really. It's just got to be where the opportunities are these days, which I really hate actually, I really hate that my career can be dictated by the need for money rather than the ambition for a career.

As his narrative concluded I encouraged Oliver to reflect on his

achievements in relation to the goals he had set at his interviews:

I wanted to achieve an academic first, to not go into financial debt I think and to make some friends wasn't it, to keep some friends I think. I think I've done that, yeah, well so far I have. Last year I achieved academic firsts for the whole year, I didn't go into financial debt and I made some friends. But I didn't see them over the summer actually cos they were busy working as well but it's, I think if I had more money we'd sort that out.

3.10.8 Follow-up telephone interview – October 2012

Oliver was pleased to graduate with a final degree award of a first. He started a part-time job in finances immediately and when I spoke to him in October 2012 he informed me that he had decided not to pursue a career within Physiotherapy as the starting salary was not sufficient. Instead he had found work within a healthcare company, managing a team of health professionals and his salary was somewhat in excess of that of a newly qualified Physiotherapist. When I asked Oliver to reflect on his undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences he immediately identified the impact of his finances:

Money always was a key influence and fortunately I always seem to land on my feet when it came to work, if I hadn't have got the work when I did things could have been very different. I feel lucky that I always managed to have a steady income and maintained a balance between studying and working.

After a short pause he added:

Also time-management having clear-focused goals and the support of my friends, the other mature students.

3.11 Paul

Paul's narrative differed from Oliver's in that although they were both mature students committed to a new career, Paul appeared to lack a clear focus and lived his life in what he described as 'chaos'. An early indication of this was when he cancelled the original interview date we had arranged and therefore had his first interview at the start of November. He arrived for that interview 15 minutes late and breathless.

His narrative was initially more complex than Oliver's as he detailed his transition from the first year of a degree programme in another city to starting the Physiotherapy programme at Manchester, with a last-minute holiday between the end of one programme and the beginning of the other: *'my life is often a bit chaotic, I kind of thrive on things like that'*. On every occasion that we met Paul made me laugh with stories of his adventures and I frequently felt inner despair as he described last-minute traumas that impacted negatively on his studies.

Without doubt the primary orientation of his narrative was financial; he only had a minimal bursary and worked as many hours as he could throughout his studies to afford rent and food. Secondary to this primary orientation was that of personal relationship difficulties and peer support. On a couple of occasions he briefly mentioned relationship problems but never in any great depth, and in contrast to the other students talked repeatedly about how he preferred working on his own. His circle of friends did not include any of the other students studying on the programme and he did not seek out peer support at any time. He had already completed one degree and was intermittently an engaged and self-directed learner, unfortunately his need to work impacted negatively on his studies throughout the three years. The transition to university meant a new career and a financially sound future to Paul.

3.11.1 First interview November 2009

I met Paul on a Tuesday afternoon. He was slim and smartly dressed and when I asked him to introduce himself for the benefit of the tape he immediately started talking, detailing the last eight years of his life. He repeatedly talked about adventures and excitement:

I've done quite a few things really ... I think I've got this kind of personality where I always feel that I need excitement in my life, I like to change things all the time.

3.11.2 Early life

Paul had lived in a small town during his childhood, moving to a city when he was 18 as he started his first degree. When he graduated he had spent a few years travelling and teaching English. He returned to the UK after the breakdown of a long-term relationship and had initially worked in a customer services role before applying to study on a healthcare programme '*to have hands-on experience of helping people*'. Whilst completing a placement on that programme he had learnt more about Physiotherapy and decided that he wanted to change programmes: '*I thought it would be more of a challenge and more interesting to me*'. He was delighted to get a place to study Physiotherapy in Manchester.

3.11.3 Initial transition to university

As Paul continued his narrative he described the months between June and October 2009 in detail. During this time he had been very busy trying to pack up his life in one city and organise a place to live in Manchester before he went travelling for two months:

It was more of a panic for me then because I had to pack up everything within about three weeks and I had to organise a flat down in Manchester before I went away travelling. Luckily I found a flat that I really liked so I organised that just before I left and then went off travelling and so it was just a total rush for me. I packed up my stuff before I left because I had two days when I came back to make it down to university in time. Yeah, so it was all just mad chaos for me and even when I was travelling I was worrying about what was going on at home and getting everything organised and starting university.

Paul's initial transition was affected by this disorganisation as he eventually arrived on campus three days after the start of term and then felt like he was 'catching up' for two weeks:

Initially, I felt, I know it sounds silly but because I'd missed those couple of days I felt like in my head I was almost like the naughty one who had missed a few classes. I was all harassed, I missed a lot of important stuff but I've caught up since. I was a bit gob smacked with it all. It was quite difficult to start because I was slightly delayed behind everyone but I like my life to change really drastically so that's how my life often is, a bit chaotic.

Paul also struggled initially to make friends within the cohort as he lived about an hour's walk from campus and due to his late start he had missed out on some initial social activities:

With regards to meeting people, I think people had met each other already just in that short space of time so I was kind of joining a little group that had already formed. Everyone in the class seems quite nice but just by chance I speak to the people that are slightly older in my class.

Although Paul did not initially have the same focus on managing his finances as Oliver, getting a job to support himself was important from the beginning of his move to Manchester. He was not eligible for a student loan and realised that he would struggle to live just on the bursary, he was therefore working in the evenings and at weekends for a catering company:

I work; I have a part-time job here. I work for a temping agency it's a hospitality agency and I work as kind of bar and waiting. I like my job as well, it's flexible so it doesn't interfere with my studies.

From his previous degree experience Paul was aware that time spent working could detract from his need to study so was trying to maintain a balance by keeping one afternoon and one evening a week free for studying, although occasionally he left studying until the night before a teaching session:

I study on the Friday afternoon a lot of the time because it means that I've got the weekend free to work. I work on Tuesday as well, but Friday afternoon I don't usually do much so I put a lot of studying aside for then. Often I will just leave it to the last minute as well, like for instance I'll look over what we have to do and then if it looks like it's not going to take too long I'll do it on the Sunday night.

At the end of the interview I asked Paul to outline his goals for the academic year and he was clearly focused on academic success:

I want to feel part of this university. I'd like to know the staff and be comfortable completely with fellow students in the class. I'd liked to have achieved good grades as well just have a good friends base as well and be generally comfortable and know my way around. I'd like to get at least a 2:1 after my first year and if I don't do too well in the first assignments then I'm going to work harder in the next. I know that first year doesn't count towards your second and third year grades but I think it helps to get off on a good start from the beginning try and work hard to get good grades in the beginning.

3.11.4 Second interview – January 2010

Paul's second interview with me took place on a Tuesday afternoon during the second week of the spring term. He appeared to be happy and relaxed and talked in brief about visiting friends and his family during the Christmas break. When we began the interview, I reminded Paul of the narrative prompt and he began by reflecting on his assessments.

Although he was '*happy to have passed the first set of exams*', he had not done as well as he had hoped in his viva exam, only gaining a 2.2 because he had been working a lot at that time:

The exam was OK – I wasn't, I didn't think I was as prepared as I should've been for it. I mean I still passed the exams but kind of mediocre not as well as I thought I would do but I think I was working a lot at that time. It was the run up to Christmas and I was kind of over-exerting myself, just working part-time jobs and doing university at the same time ... I had higher hopes for myself but then again like I said, I wasn't giving myself enough time because I was more worried about finances towards the end of the term. I think I was just burning the candle at both ends really working late at night and then coming into class in the morning. It was difficult because the bursary was so small that I was receiving and it was quite exhausting as well. I felt quite run down a lot of the time as well. I was trying to work as much as I could but I wasn't being paid that much.

He had also missed two days of taught sessions at the end of term as he had misread the timetable and organised to work on those days:

I missed those two days actually because I'd already planned to work so I couldn't cancel the shifts. It was just two days that we had and usually we don't have a Tuesday so I usually plan my work days to work on the Tuesday and the Thursday. So, I couldn't go to those days and I started the course the next week.

Unfortunately Paul had only managed to get low-paid part-time work with a catering company and he had to work many more hours than he wanted to in order to earn enough money to support himself. He hoped to get a job that would also give him some relevant healthcare experience:

I was working for a temp agency where they put you in different events and I'm still going to work maybe one shift or two shifts a week. I'm working tonight actually but just a four-hour shift so it's not too bad. I was speaking to my personal tutor actually I was saying that because she was mentioning work experience I thought I'd rather try and find something that's a bit more worthwhile rather than busting my arse working for a job where I don't get very good wages and it costs you travel expenses as well. Like I said it's a lot of hard work for a pittance really waiting jobs.

Paul went on to explain that he had to work a larger number of hours than he had originally anticipated because he only received a small bursary, based on his father's income. This limited the amount of time he had to study, although he hoped to get this recalculated, when he could provide proof of independent income:

My bursary was calculated on my dad's wages. I'm 26 so technically I should have been an independent student but because I'd worked overseas I didn't have three years' worth of proof of my earnings saying that I've been paying tax myself and not been receiving money from elsewhere. They had to base it on my dad's earnings, so even though I'm not asking my dad and I'm not taking any money from my dad they were basing me on his wages. Hopefully, I'm not going to have to work as much because it's been recalculated. I'll have more time to prepare because I'm not planning on working nearly as much this term so that's good.

Paul's financial needs were so pressing that over the Christmas break, after spending a few days with his family and friends Paul returned to work to earn some money for the spring term:

I was working a few days as well just in this firm that I used to work in and I worked New Year as well. I usually have a great time and go out at New Year but it was in a club environment so it was kind of fun anyway and I was with friends. I worked and made money, so it was OK.

As Paul continued to reflect on his first term experiences, he reasoned that part of his need to work was linked to the fact that he was used to having a regular income from paid work and wanted to maintain a similar lifestyle. He had enough money for essentials from his bursary but wanted to continue to have new clothes and holidays:

I think also because I have worked full time before I'm used to earning a certain amount of money so I'd like to try and maintain a certain lifestyle, eat good food and be able to go out at the weekend or be able to buy clothes or whatever or even go on a small holiday etc. I think I do try and work as much as I can just so I can live that lifestyle, but I suppose study comes first.

Returning back on campus for the second term had been initially difficult for Paul. He had ‘almost forgot about university’ during the three weeks away and ‘kind of had anxiety a little bit, dreading coming back’ on the Sunday evening before term started:

There was nothing really to come back for, you kind of almost forget about university it's three weeks away it's like going on holiday in a way and you're dreading coming back to work or whatever. Yeah I remember thinking oh I kind of had this anxiety a little bit on the Sunday before university on the Monday but then once I got in it was fine. I just got back into the routine of things. It's been good to have the time again rather than working all the time.

When Paul drew his narrative to an end I asked him to reflect on the goals that he had set at his first interview and to set goals for the end of the academic year:

At the beginning of the course I think you just feel God this is a lot to take in almost. I think by the end of this year I will feel a lot more competent and like yeah I'm definitely going to be a Physiotherapist. I'd like to improve on the grades that I've achieved now yeah just come out with a good sense of I've done well, I've tried my hardest and my grades reflect that. I'm going to guarantee that I'm going to have better grades then.

3.11.5 Third interview – May 2010

Paul's third interview took place when taught sessions on the programme had finished and he was finishing his final written assessment of the year. I met him in a tutorial room on campus and he walked in smiling, tanned from the recent sunshine and wearing a smart polo shirt and jeans. He seemed happy and relaxed and talked at length as he reflected on his first year. He had enjoyed the final term of his first year as he had worked a lot of the Easter holiday and consequently could work fewer hours once term started:

Actually I just worked over Easter. I didn't spend my Easter holidays working for university at all I thought I would do but I started this job in retail doing 12 hours a week, two shifts a week sometimes three. Sometimes I'll do up to 15 hours but usually just two shifts a week, which is OK and I kept my other job on as well. I was doing two jobs just to make some money over Easter.

He went on to talk about the grades he had achieved in his assessments.

Again he had not done as well as he had hoped to do in his assessments.

The first one he talked about had been a group presentation:

I got a 2:2 in the group assessment, there is nothing that I can do about it now it's been and gone and I passed it. It was still a 2:2 level but the last time I spoke to you, I said I'd like to have at least a 2:1 in everything ... I don't think I did actually learn all that much from the group presentation, I didn't think our group got on very well it wasn't that we disliked or had any problems with each other; it was just quite silent a lot of the time. It was more a solitary thing, we'd go away do work, come back in and then look over it together.

Paul then went on to talk about a written assessment he had completed for another unit. He had finished that assessment early and then subsequently forgot about it until the hand-in date. On the hand-in day he arrived on campus to print out a paper copy of the assessment and then realised that he did not have any credit on his student print account and no money to get his card topped up. A last minute panic ensued as he dashed around to get money for his printing:

The fifth assessment, I don't know what kind of grade I'll get. I finished the assignment about five days before the deadline but I completely forgot about it so decided to go and print it off on the day it was due in. I went to print it out and then I realised I had no print credit in my account. I panicked because I only had 15 minutes before I had to hand it in. I ran and tried to top it up but I didn't have money so I had to run to the cash machine down the street and run back to university but then I didn't have change. I was in a state of panic and then this woman in the library said you could top it up via debit card so I did that quickly. I hadn't line spaced my essay, I just, printed it out and stapled it all together. I think the rest of it is fine but the reference page starts halfway down so that's something I've been worrying about but that is what

you get for leaving things until the last minute. I'm stupid like that, I leave things until the last minute.

After talking about his assessments Paul went on to discuss his finances at length. He believed that he had had an exhausting term as he had managed to get a new job in retail and had had an overlap where he had two jobs at the same time:

I've got a job in retail now working there a few days a week. Here and there I've been doing two jobs at one time. I have been pretty shattered, sometimes exhausted actually. We don't get a lot for our bursary, mine covers the rent basically almost and then I just have to work to make up the rest. I think with work and finances and stuff it has been difficult. It sometimes gets to you with regards to having to do uni work and stuff and being tired in uni but I think that is just the way it is isn't it? I have never been jobless for years I always like to have a job and I always like to be able to afford to do nice things or go places. I like the thought of trying to make enough money to do things.

When Paul concluded his narrative I prompted him to reflect on the goals he had set in previous interviews:

I remember I said I just want to feel comfortable in the university and I want to have good grades. I think I have to be honest I have done OK with regards to my grades. I remember being disappointed with them and my personal tutor said other people would be happy with those grades, I can achieve better. I think maybe ask me this question after I've received my exam results and I'll know what I've achieved. In general I think I've achieved everything I wanted to, it's just putting that effort in and maybe finding the time to make sure that you do well academically. Next year is when it properly counts with regards to your degree so you have to put in the effort and you have to do well otherwise you're going to suffer at the end.

3.11.6 Fourth interview – November 2010

I met Paul for his fourth interview just over a year since his first. Again I met Paul slightly later than the other students as he cancelled the first meeting we had arranged. He began his narrative by exclaiming that he

was surprised at how long the summer break had been ‘*God, we do get a long time for summer don’t we!*’ and I got the sense that he had almost disconnected from his studies and focused instead on working and having fun:

I actually did quite a lot when I think back, I saw a lot. I got caught up in the summer actually, I completely forgot all about coming back to uni. It’s been fun to chill out and do that and earn some money at the same time. I got kind of swept up in it and then we stated back at the end of September.

Paul went on to explain that he had originally planned to spend the summer in his home town staying with his partner but this relationship had ended and he returned to Manchester ‘*we broke up a week after I got there so I came back*’. This had been a difficult start to Paul’s summer break and he was ‘*a bit unhappy for the first month of my uni break*’. He returned to Manchester for a few weeks to work and then went to Europe to work in a bar for a month followed by a two-week holiday, ‘*I did have a good time the rest of the summer*’. When he returned from his holiday he had started work with the catering company he had worked for during his first year:

I came back to the UK, worked here. I just did my job, my job is good in that it is flexible and I can work when I want and they welcome you back. It is a temp agency so I just got as many hours as I could through them.

After describing his summer holiday Paul went on to talk about the assessment grades he had received in his first year assessments. As before he had not done as well as he would have wished, he was disappointed but philosophical as he realised that he would need to spend less time working and more time studying to improve his grades:

I was pleased that I didn't fail or anything. I wasn't ecstatic about my results because I said to you that I wanted at least a 2:1 and I didn't have that overall grade of a 2:1. I was Ok with it; I didn't get below 50. It's OK but if you think about it, it's not that good in my head because it is 50%, that's all I got, it's half correct. I was thinking to myself I know that I am clever enough it's just applying myself to get excellent grades, cutting down on work etc. and putting in more hours at university.

As Paul continued to reflect on his results he revealed that he had already handed in the first assessment of his second year a day late and his mark would therefore be capped at 40% '*which is not good because this is the second year*'. Even though he was aware of the hand-in date he had found that he was unable to motivate himself to start writing the assessment, he made a narrative linkage to his distress at the end of his relationship during the summer break as he believed that this had influenced his motivation:

My last assignment I handed in a day late, I was screaming at myself honestly, I was actually shouting at myself saying work just work. I didn't know what was wrong with me and I got so angry with myself. I think as I said before I had this break up and it was kind of coming back to me for some reason. I am starting to be happy but, sometimes it did get me down and I think I lost motivation from it because it was long term and things like that affect you. I was annoyed with myself because I was just staring at the page and in my head when I was thinking about the essay I knew exactly how I was going to do things. It was a kick up the backside for me so I think even though I do regret it I'm not going to be too down on myself. It's just going to have to spur me on to do a lot better.

Paul went on to talk about his financial situation. He was frustrated as his bursary had been reduced to take account of his father's income and he had disputed the amount of bursary he received at the start of the academic year. As he was disputing the funding he had not yet received any bursary and he had had to work even more hours than previously to

pay for rent and food, he acknowledged that this could also have impacted upon his studies:

Again, same as last year I had problems with funding. I have still not got my bursary through actually, because I disputed it. I wanted to apply to be an independent student, I am 27 years old now I'm not 18 and I am not reliant on my parents. However, the way that the NHS student-funding thing works is that you have to prove that you have worked for 36 months before coming to university. I was working abroad for two years and I didn't have proof that I had been working there. It took me ages but I've got something coming to prove that I paid tax when I was abroad. I have been working a lot more this last term trying to earn money for rent and living in general; that has impacted a bit on my studies as well just because we have study days and I think oh that is good, it is an opportunity to work. I have been working more to pay my rent and bills.

To make enough money Paul was working two jobs, which equated to four full days a week. This left two days for attending university and one day for studying, he was looking forward to getting his bursary payments sorted out so that he could reduce the number of hours that he worked:

At the moment I have been working lots because the bursary is not through. I have got two jobs I work Saturday and Sunday every weekend regardless. I really love this job actually, it is an easy job and it is not stressful or anything, it is guaranteed hours because I had the Monday and Friday off [study days from university], I was taking those days for my other job, which is the temp agency. It was kind of filling up my time trying to make ends meet. Hopefully my bursary is going to be in soon and then I will not have to work as much, I will just be working Saturday and Sunday. Last year I found it a struggle because then I would be working at night during the week and doing uni at the same time. It was quite exhausting towards the end so it is better to work during the day.

Again as we concluded the interview I encouraged Paul to reflect on his achievements over the previous 12 months and set goals for his second year. He started by declaring that he had found the goal setting exercise to be a useful tool:

I learnt from the goal setting, I think meeting up with you helped me a little bit. It made me think what more I could do to achieve

those goals, I think it made me think a little bit more just having met with you actually. This has helped me as well, by the end of second year what do I want to have achieved? This is what I say every time, I want a 2:1 at the end of the year. I want to feel confident about going out by the end of these placements. Hopefully having those placements might give me an idea about what I like and what I don't like.

Paul paused briefly and then, for the first time revealed that he felt uncertain about finishing his degree and what his future career may be:

I want to feel confident about finishing my degree because at the moment I don't know for sure how anything is going to turn out. I know that this is what I want to do but I want to know which direction it is going to go and what kind of thing I would like, obviously that is not what everyone is going to do and you might just have to take whatever job is going at the time.

3.11.7 Fifth interview – October 2011

Paul and I met for his fifth interview at the start of his third year, just under two years since we had first met and a year since our last meeting. He began by talking about how he had started his second year '*intending to be amazing as always*'. Unfortunately he had not done as well as he had hoped in his assessments, '*I had peaks and troughs as always*', and he had failed some of his assessments:

Everything is always complicated but I kind of enjoy that in a sense it's never boring, I think I did ok in the first module of second year then I didn't pass an essay, and then as a result I had to have a delayed placement because even though I could've just rewritten the essay probably within about a few days the University's policy was that they had to give me the right amount of time to do that. So in the New Year instead of going on to placement with everybody else I had to have a delay so I just worked and saved up a bit of money. My first placement was at the same time as everyone's second placement, just after the Easter holiday.

As well as failing the written assessment and having a delayed placement, Paul had also failed one of his practical assessments:

Also, I failed a respiratory module as well so two things, within a few weeks of each other. I got like 38% or something so again I missed it by a few marks but then I'm glad I kind of got the chance to re-sit it cos one of placements was in respiratory quite soon after, it kind of gave me a kind of ego boost as well and made me think that I can do what I want to achieve as long as I put my mind to it.

As well as struggling academically, Paul had struggled financially during his second year, which was probably an inevitable connection. When he had been studying on placement he had been busy nine to five, Monday to Friday and had therefore had to work every weekend in order to earn enough money to afford his rent and food. His three five-week placements totalled 15 weeks and during that time he had effectively worked seven days a week and some night shifts as well, at the end he was exhausted. The outcome of working so hard was that he had forgotten to hand in another written assessment and again his eventual grade was capped at 40%:

The whole time I was working seven days a week basically for 15 weeks, cos £270 bursary is not gonna go far. At the time I felt really ok with it, especially for the first two placements but as the third one came along I was beginning to just be shattered. I was on that placement and I was working seven days a week and I was working nights as well a lot of the time because again two days' work a week is not a lot of money either so then I just felt like I didn't even remember where my head was; I'd written my essay and I didn't hand it in! I just completely forgot to hand it in. I printed it out and I just forgot all about it, yeah it was a complete panic cos it was about a month and a half later and I didn't know what to do and I was just panicking, I'm sweating now thinking about it. I begged, I wrote to ask if I could hand it in and they said it was too late to hand it in so I had to wait for the board of examiners to give me a fail basically. I don't know what I'm going to do actually, you have the right to appeal which I'm going to try and do because I feel that it was a silly mistake and it was one silly mistake, although I've made other silly mistakes but umm, I feel that that is one silly mistake that felt like it was out of my control and it was just, I was stressed out without knowing it, I had just been working like every day for 15 weeks and just was very stressed out about things and I didn't realise that until I stopped placement and I kind

of relaxed a bit and worked less days. So I'm just waiting on the result of that.

Paul paused and then went on to tell me about another example of how he had been forgetful when he was exhausted; he had also forgotten to hand in the grade booklet for one of his placements, even though he handed in the written assessment and that mark would therefore also be capped at 40%:

So yeah that was panic and like this is another example of me being stupid and forgetful ... with the booklet and the essay for placement two, I had them both in my hand and I handed the essay in for placement two and obviously everything's filled in for the booklet already but I forgot to hand in the booklet for that one and then I realised like a week later and they said, "there's nothing you can do". I just handed the essay in and obviously put that in my bag and walked off with that in my bag so then I got a 40, that's annoyed me as well cos I get a 40% for that and that's just down to my stupidity. So to be honest can't wait to graduate and have a nine-to-five job and have the weekends off.

Paul's narrative then turned to the forthcoming placements that he would start the week after his interview. He looked forward to the placements but was concerned about the financial implications of reduced working hours:

I'm kind of not looking forward to going back on placement to some degree, financially it always annoys me but you knew that when you signed up for this degree so I'm not gonna complain about that. On the last placement it was say £25 a week on travelling and normally I'd be walking to university, it's only £100 over the course of the month but when you're only a student and you've not got a lot of money coming in that can make a difference but it was more the fact that I couldn't work. I got certain shifts but I couldn't do night shifts as much unless they were short shifts, you don't have the time to work so it's a burden in that sense and you're tired a lot as well. I think that that's what the financial burden was more than anything, just not being able to do extra shifts here and there.

When Paul drew his narrative to a close I again prompted him to think about the goals that he had set during his interviews. I encouraged him to

reflect on those goals and to set some goals for the end of the programme in June 2012:

My grades in first year were not, they were kind of mediocre, second year I know from the grades that I can get, that I can achieve a lot better so I have to do well this year. It's set out in a different way this year so I don't know if it's gonna make it easier that we will just get placement over and done with by Christmas. I want to achieve, I want to aim for firsts or 2:1s. I know that I've kind of messed up second year so I think that I'll just have to base all my grade on third year and then just work really hard this year. I want to achieve at least a 2:1 cos I know that I'm capable of that and I know I'm probably capable of a first but I don't know if that's possible with working. I worked quite a lot over the summer and I've got delayed things like commission and stuff from work and I think financially I'll be in a better position the next few months whilst on placement because that's all coming in so I'm not gonna have to work as much, so I'm glad about that.

3.11.8 Follow-up telephone interview – October 2012

Paul graduated in July 2012 with a 2.2. He was somewhat disappointed that he had achieved a 2.2 and believed that he could have done better:

I was a wee bit disappointed but to be honest, sometimes I think I was kidding myself. I was working so much and then with uni at the same time, when I was on placement I was seven days a week, so I was just shattered really. I scraped my way through in the end I suppose but I still enjoyed it and had a good time despite it being difficult. I'm not a good multi-tasker I think and I just found juggling jobs, working and lifestyle and uni all at the same time all quite difficult. At the moment I am enjoying being stress free and not having any worries.

In order to earn money he had increased his hours with the company he had been working for during his studies in the summer and this had developed into a full-time job. He had no plans to work as a Physiotherapist in the immediate future as this job was better paid than a grade five Physiotherapist job. When I asked Paul to reflect on his

undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences he identified the impact of his financial difficulties as having a significant impact:

I think as a whole it was enjoyable; the staff were great and I made a good bunch of friends with the other mature students. Outside of the university I don't think I really felt like a student, I suppose working all the time that had a massive impact but that is technically my own fault and I know that it made me not as successful as I know I could have been, I suppose that was the biggest influence, work definitely limited certain aspects of university life.

3.12 The impact of personal difficulties – Maria

For one student in this study there was a special circumstance to the orientation of her narrative: the emotional journey of the breakdown of her marriage. Maria was recently married when she started the programme and although she was initially happy and optimistic her narrative detailed worry and unhappiness, leading to eventual separation and divorce. This emotional journey was so central to her narrative that it overshadowed all other orientations. She is considered here as a stand-alone case; presented in this context to recognise that some students bring with them lives that contain domestic upheaval and unhappiness that impact significantly on their engagement. University initially meant a new beginning, personal development and the achievement of a long-held ambition to Maria, but her personal circumstances negated these dreams. In the first year she occasionally mentioned both peer support and her difficulties adapting to a self-directed style of learning but by the middle of her second year her personal difficulties were her sole orientation.

As an international, recently married, mature student Maria's story represented multiple overlapping transitions: her transition into higher education and her transition as a mature student back into education, set in the context of her transition to the United Kingdom and the transition to becoming a wife following her marriage. Naturally there was a loss of the familiar in all of these transitions and this was compounded by their overlap and impact upon one another. At times Maria's narrative betrayed this sense of loss and her vulnerability as she made the necessary adjustments required to negotiate her academic transition within the framework of the others. Her transition was not simply that of an individual as her husband's narrative was interwoven with hers when she detailed the protracted breakdown of her marriage over an extended time frame.

3.12.1 First interview – October 2009

I met Maria for the first time four weeks after she had started at university. My initial impression was that she appeared to be a happy, confident person although as the interviews progressed throughout the study I realised that this was just a veneer of confidence with numerous hidden anxieties. Maria wanted to succeed academically and was worried that she might not achieve the grades that she wanted. She smiled a lot and talked very quickly and earnestly. English is her second language and I noticed that she listened intently whilst I was speaking to ensure that she understood my conversation.

After we were settled in the interview room I outlined the narrative prompt to Maria and she gave me a brief summary of the last 15 years of her life – her back story. She began this narrative by stating ‘*I hope it is not too boring*’ and then described her life from when she was in secondary education. This was the first of several major transitions she had undergone throughout her life and during a time when she was undergoing numerous simultaneous transitions she chose to frame her story by initially talking about this first significant transition.

3.12.2 Early life

Maria was working in South America when she met her husband to be, who was on holiday. After a relatively brief relationship interspersed with periods of separation when he returned to the UK they were married and moved to the UK. Leaving her home country was not an easy decision for Maria as she had wanted to stay with her family and her husband had initially agreed to apply for residence. However, he was unable to find work and decided to seek work in the UK, Maria makes reference to the disagreement that took place:

Well one of the reasons I got married is because he agreed that we were going to live in South America but then after that he changed his mind. So we had this big argument and I thought I’m not going it’s too cold, I know how cold it is. I want to be on the beach, I want to have fun and I want to enjoy and he’s like no I can’t do anything here so I said you said you were going to stay here. He was like “No, I can’t just lay around I need to go to work”. So, in the end I agreed to come and so he came in June and for me to come as a wife three months later because I couldn’t come as a tourist anymore.

Maria went on to reflect that this had not been an ideal start to her marriage, although she believed that the disagreement would help make their relationship stronger:

So as you can see it was a bit of a not beginning of a relationship but it was in a way it made us stronger though because then we had to get into an agreement, if we didn't do that then anything else in our life wouldn't have an agreement because that was one of the biggest agreements that we had to do. I decided to come.

3.12.3 Initial transition to university

Maria's arrival in the United Kingdom also coincided with a recession and she initially struggled to find employment. She had arrived at the beginning of the English winter with no prospects of employment and her only option was to stay at home searching job websites, she was deeply unhappy during this period. Whilst unemployed Maria began to read a lot and gradually began to consider the prospect of returning to education; her husband encouraged her to apply '*he started to talk about why don't you go back to university*' but Maria was apprehensive:

I was like I'm too old I'm 30 years old I can't possibly be you know six years without reading a book and not self-learning so I didn't think I was capable of going back and studying again.

She was eventually persuaded to apply and was offered a place to study Physiotherapy starting in September 2009, a couple of months later.

Returning to education was stressful at times, particularly as she was used to a didactic form of teaching. She spent many hours studying on the days she was not on campus and described the experience as '*crammed in and rushed through*':

I didn't think it was going to be so self-learning as it is and I got a bit disappointed about a week ago because I thought we were

going to have a little bit more guidance. I had this rushing feeling and I got so stressed the first two weeks trying to keep up with the work. It took a lot for me to keep up and I was right on it but it took a lot of me, a lot of effort, a lot of energy. It's almost like paranoia you just sit down and study you don't want to stop, you don't want to waste any minute any time, at least for me, and a couple of mature students are saying the same they feel a lot of pressure.

Maria continued her narrative and talked at length about studying and the difficulties of learning complex anatomical descriptions in a second language. In her own words she wanted to '*make sure that I get the right answers*' and therefore prioritised studying over having a social life. She had also started a part-time job and was working three days a week so consequently had very little free time.

In addition Maria was struggling to write in English and described feeling '*very lost at first*' when she got the title for the first written assessment. She had spent some time studying in America and when she read the assignment guidelines that specified what she called '*British English*' she was very concerned. Her husband helped by proof reading her work:

I know that I'm not a good writer and because of not doing it for so long I just lost my confidence that I could do it. Every time I try to write something my husband criticises me because it's all American it's not right, it has to be the British way, the right one. He always goes over what I write to make sure it's UK English he says we don't say this like this, we say it like that.

I conclude Maria's interview by asking her to set some goals for when she completed the first year. She replied:

I want to be ready for placement, I think in theory I want to be very strong as well. I need to really work hard and now I want to get A's [a first]. I'm also looking forward to going back home in the holidays.

Maria was clearly committed to working hard and achieving the highest grades for her work.

3.12.4 Second interview – January 2010

My second interview with Maria took place on a Wednesday afternoon two weeks after the start of term. My initial impression was that she was pleased to see me as she smiled broadly and she seemed at ease and happy. She had been back to visit her family with her husband over the Christmas holiday for three weeks and had returned a week after university started. Although she had enjoyed being on holiday '*it was really nice, very sunny*' she thought the break '*was actually a bit long*' and during the final week when the term had started she had worried about what she was missing:

I was really worried that week, the holiday practically ended for me because then I got really worried that I was missing out and also with work as well. It's not a good experience, you feel like you're missing out and you're all lost and you can't get into the same track as everybody else and you're like I read it somewhere but it doesn't go into your brain as easy as if you were in a lecture and listening to people that know how to show the information to you.

After initially talking about her holiday Maria began reflecting on her learning experiences and declared, '*well, university was exciting at first and then it got a bit overwhelming and then it went easy again*'. She continued to talk as I listened but I was struck by this sentence, on reflection I felt that she was conveying the roller-coaster ride of highs and lows that must have made up her transition to university in the first term. It was a statement indicative of some of the joys and success and also of the difficulties that she had encountered.

Maria continued talking about how hard she had been working to keep up with the programme. She had received grades of 65% and 78% for her assessments and was relatively pleased; however, the amount of self-directed learning had been a 'disappointment' when she had been expecting more support or as she said 'pampering':

I found the course very structured, very good, fast paced a bit more than expected and a bit more self-learning than I expected. In a way I was a bit disappointed but then I realise that it's actually better for me to go and look for the information not that I didn't do that already. I'm the type of person that likes to find out for myself but I was just expecting a bit more pampering. I can adapt really well to different situations so I think I have adapted to the course really well. I wouldn't say the course is exactly how I expected it to be but it's turning out to be better than I expected and I'm adapting really well.

During these reflections she revealed how the long hours studying had impacted negatively on her relationship with her husband:

In terms of my private life outside of the university life, I've found myself so into studying I wasn't giving my husband enough time to talk to relax or even myself time to relax.

It was clear from these reflections that Maria's return to education and the subsequent loss of free time was having a significant impact on her relationship with her husband. Also, unfortunately since her last interview he had been made redundant and his father had died:

My husband was made redundant so he's mostly at home now and then his father passed away so he was dealing with all of that situation and that took a few months because it was a bit confusing at the time. It's just started to get sorted out now meanwhile he was applying for a new job. You apply and wait so it takes a while, so he's working on that one and at the same time being a house husband.

Despite these difficulties Maria believed that he was supportive of her studies:

He understands the fact that I have to sit down sometimes and sometimes I'll sit down for a good six hours and study and he doesn't put any pressure on me because we're not doing anything together. He is understanding in that way, his family also, social life is a bit slow now we decided not to go out and spend as much money. We have fun when we see friends, we don't drink so it's not like we go to the pub every day or have the weekend just to socialise. We socialise in different ways. We go hiking, we go walking with family or all of our friends.

Maria stopped at this point and I felt that she had decided that to continue with this particular topic would be inappropriate and it was clear that the subject was closed as she moved on to talk about her part-time job. She spoke briefly about her job and then drew her narrative to a close. I prompted her to reflect on the goals she had set at the first interview:

Well I went back to visit my family, I know I didn't achieve As this unit but I was able to analyse it and go back to it and analyse why so that I won't do the same mistake. Yes, I still want to be ready for placement.

3.12.5 Third interview – May 2010

I met Maria for the third time on a Tuesday morning in the final week of the programme. She seemed happy, smiling broadly as she walked in smartly dressed and with her hair loose. She began the interview by reflecting on her academic performance and how much time she had spent studying:

I was working quite a lot since I got back from holiday I didn't have a day off. If I wasn't here, I was working including Saturdays and Sundays. It was quite busy and I was quite stressed out towards the end.

She had clearly been working hard on her studies and managed to achieve grades of 55% and 68% in the two assessments she had undertaken in the spring term. She was disappointed with the grade of

55% for the group work presentation, where her grade had been affected by the reflective writing element of the assessment:

We had a good grade for the group; but I didn't have a very good reflective writing paper. I didn't get a good grade what I did I had to sit down and cut it down to 700 words. I cut down pretty much the main points that I should have kept in. When I got the results with the comments, I remember reading it and thinking I remember writing this, I wrote about this. I looked back on my original one that I had saved on my computer and I realised I had written it down but cut off the wrong pieces. I understand about the grade, it was my own fault, I will learn for the next time to be able to do it properly.

Maria then went on to talk at length about what she termed '*personal issues*'. She felt that she had '*got quite distanced*' from her husband during the first year of the programme and that now she had finished the first year they were '*trying to get back into a normal routine and do things because it was really tough*'. She told a long story about a day trip which had finished in an argument with her husband:

We had this argument and he said "I can't believe we drove three hours and you were only in the water 15 minutes".

Maria then went on to elaborate, explaining that the distance between the couple had grown because she had found it easy to become absorbed in her studies and could easily spend many hours working '*eight hours will pass studying and I don't even notice*'. The couple had stopped doing anything together as she prioritised her studies and she now felt that this had been detrimental to her relationship

I can prioritise things and leave other things behind quite easily. I don't know if that is good, but if you leave your husband behind it is not nice, you know what I mean, it's not ... in a bad way.

At the same time she felt that her husband had not tried to encourage her to go out or have a break from studying

He gave me the space, he never asks can we go out tonight, can we do this, he never asks so it is easy to sit down and study for eight hours and not worry about what is going on.

Instead he had just sat around the house watching TV and this had obviously lead to disagreements as she didn't like to see him doing nothing '*I don't like to see him sitting still*'. Her husband was unemployed at this time and she had felt frustrated as she saw him achieving less and less, even though at the beginning of the year they had made plans to sell a property, which would be his responsibility. Maria had tried to cajole her husband into getting on with the house sale but despite frequent reminders he still did not start the process '*we spoke about it a couple of times and still he didn't do it, I thought he was just getting lazy*'.

Eventually her frustrations at his inactivity had led to '*that type of argument*' and she had told him how she was feeling:

I sat down with him and said you know how busy I am and everything, well I don't like to see you sitting around, I don't like people sitting around. It annoys me to see people just too comfortable and not achieving something. He was putting on a little bit of weight ... I didn't mention that, he did and I agreed, he didn't like it.

In hindsight Maria felt that part of the problem had been that her husband was becoming depressed as he had recently failed a work exam and had a family bereavement. She discussed the situation with one of the other mature students in her study group '*to get a male's point of view as to what is going on*'. This conversation had really helped her to see that she needed to spend more time with her husband as he was probably feeling de-motivated and left behind as her life moved forward at university so now they were spending more time together as a couple:

Now he is exercising with me which is good so he is up in the morning and we go running, we go cycling, we go swimming. He has got more energy and he is really into it. I think he must have been a bit down or depressed. I noticed his activity levels going from very high to really slowing down and that was when we had a chat and I think he realised.

After this comment Maria paused and smiled and I was relieved that she had now apparently sorted out the 'personal issues' that had affected her earlier in the year. She drew her narrative to a close and again I prompted her to think about future goals; she began by reflecting on her progress to date:

I think I have achieved most of it but not to the fullest achievement but I have covered most of it yeah, I think I remember wanting to graduate with very good grades. I remember also saying I wanted to get better at my academic writing. Over summer I want to get a bit ahead just study a bit and not put pressure on myself and on placement, I want to have a very good impression on my clinical educator.

Without prompting Maria went on to state that she had found attending for the termly interviews and talking about her experiences beneficial:

I remember having quite a lot of trouble expressing myself and I think by talking about it I have overcome it a bit more during these interviews actually. I think it just helps when you put your feelings out it helps you to understand and analyse yourself.

We concluded the interview and I arranged to meet Maria at the start of her second year.

3.12.6 Fourth Interview – October 2010

Maria's fourth interview took place a year after her first. She seemed tired and more subdued than at her previous interviews. She began by talking about her first year experiences and although she was glad to have gained a 2.1 believed that it had been a difficult year:

I pushed myself so hard in the first year, I was asking so much of myself, it was hard, I must say it was hard.

She also believed that *'the second year is already three times more intense than the first year'* and was struggling:

To be honest this first week and a half it has been so rushed, there is so much more information given each day and there is so much more to study in between. Just being given loads and then I get confused and mixed up and have study given too fast and too rushed, it just confuses the head and then you have to go back and re-do it again.

I was surprised at her comments but as she continued talking it became apparent that she was not getting on well with her husband and this was impacting upon her studies. It was a difficult interview and she cried on a couple of occasions although she insisted that she was happy to continue talking to me and did not want to stop the recording.

Maria explained that she had spent the summer holiday doing extra part-time work and had gone to visit her family for a month without her husband. She had spent time during this trip pondering her future in the UK and although she was not happy had decided to stay and complete her studies:

I took four weeks' break and went visit my family so that was good. I got to spend some time with my family. I wanted to go, I wasn't very happy in England, I just could not cope with being here for so long because here I don't have people I can talk to. I wasn't sure England was the place for me to stay and I was thinking once I graduate what am I going to do and I might not want to stay. I had a life changing experience, I went home and I was talking to my father, I opened up and I realised yeah I have some good potential to build up my career in England, I actually wanted to come back. I realised I have good potential here so I am ready to take on living in this country for a longer time without being upset about it. It is not just about passing and graduating there is more, I realise that if I am here I have to accept that I am here.

Since returning from visiting her family the couple had been trying to sort out their difficulties

He started working more so he has got something to do instead of being at home and not doing much. We are busy now and I go up in my study room and lock the door and come down for dinner. I am trying to balance that side a bit because he is starting to focus on his course and I am starting to focus on uni this month so we need to increase the time that we spend together. I came back and we had a week to spend together before uni started, so now it is just a matter of balancing. We are getting there, I think he went through a low phase, I wouldn't say depression but a slow downslide so I think he is getting back now.

Maria continued to talk about her relationship; when she came to a conclusion, I prompted her to think of goals for the end of the year:

I definitely want to pass second year get more organised with my studies, make sure that I am on track. I think I have done well in the first year considering it is the first year. I think I can do a bit better. It's not pushing myself hard, it's just a couple of things that I noticed last year that I am pretty sure I can do better.

3.12.7 Fifth interview – February 2011

Maria and I met for her fifth interview at the start of the second term of her second year. She looked tired and unhappy as she walked into the interview room and her eyes filled with tears as she began her narrative. In summary her relationship with her husband had broken down and she had been diagnosed as suffering from depression by her GP. She was struggling to continue on the programme, even with extensive support from her personal tutor and student support and counselling services.

Despite her illness and personal problems Maria wanted to remain within this study and I continued to meet with her throughout her three years on the programme. She believed that she benefited from the interviews as

they provided an opportunity for her to talk about her experiences without interruption or judgement from me. Although I completed all the interviews, following discussions with my supervisory team I have chosen not to present the data collected at these sessions as part of this thesis. Maria gave written consent at each of the interviews; however, I believe that it would be inappropriate to present any further excerpts from her narrative here.

3.12.8 Follow-up interview – November 2012

Unfortunately Maria did not do well in her subsequent assessments. She managed to pass the second year following a leave of absence but struggled throughout her third year and failed an assessment. She did not graduate with the rest of her year group but passed her re-sit exam and was awarded a 2.2 final grade:

I had a hard time but I was pleased to pass. I got my results in September. I would say I had a difficult final two years; emotionally I am back to normal now I would say. Much, much stronger mentally, physically and all respects really and my physical symptoms have disappeared. We have to go to court so it will take a while to get sorted but I don't see him; it will go on for a while.

She had not yet been able to get a job as a Physiotherapist and was earning money by working several part-time jobs:

I am working as an assistant and I have a number of other part-time jobs. I have been applying for jobs and trying to get experience but am still waiting to get a Physiotherapy job ... I am really hoping to get a job.

When I asked Maria to reflect on her undergraduate experiences and identify the key influences she immediately identified the impact of her relationship breakdown:

I do think about this and I think what I went through emotionally had a big impact in a sense that my confidence now is not where it should be because in the last two years I feel like I have missed something. Even though I did learn I feel like I have missed something and sometimes I wonder whether I should have taken a year break and let everything cool down and then come back to it or whether I did the right thing of going through at the same time as everything was happening. In a way, if I had stopped I think that anything else in my life in future I would have been "oh I need to take a break now" whereas now I think that if anything happens I can go through with it cos I have done it. So when I got my degree the first thought was "Did I have to go through that to get a degree?" One thing I have got is the ability to be a self-learner, to step back research, read and apply but I wonder if I should have gone through everything altogether to get a degree. I know I have learnt but it is just being confident, it will come back to me when I start work.

After I brought the interview to a close and wished Maria well she stated:

I will miss these interviews; they put me on track every time. It made me realise all the good things that were happening as well as the bad.

Chapter four – Discussion and implications for practice

4.1 Introduction

As stated previously I began this dissertation with a desire to explore Physiotherapy students' perceptions of their learning experiences and gain an insight into 'being' and 'becoming a student' by listening to students' narratives over the three years of their degree studies. There was an initial focus on academic engagement; however, as the study progressed my understanding of concepts of being matured, and the study design was adapted to enable a more in-depth, longitudinal, qualitative study. I wanted to listen to students describe their own journeys in their own words, without imposing a particular time frame or targeting a particular aspect of experience; to present a temporal, multidimensional view of student experiences. I wanted to get 'whole stories' of experience, to offer some new insights into the process of becoming and being a student; the study aims were:

- To listen to the students' stories and subsequently investigate the students' perceptions and beliefs relating to their learning experiences.
- To determine what university life meant to the students through their narrations of 'being a student'.
- To investigate how this meaning came across in their 'own' stories of their experiences.
- To explore how that meaning changed, if at all, over their three years of study, with an 'interpretation' of time as the possible horizon for understanding.

- To consider the transferability of the findings to other comparable settings.

Central to the entire study therefore, was my aim to listen to the students tell their stories in their own words, as they developed and transformed over time so I could analyse everyday experience by providing students with an opportunity for reflection. I subsequently presented the lives of seven students as they chose to portray them, as they each navigated academic and personal challenges during the gradual process of becoming a student. Their temporal narratives offer an insight into what university life was like for those undergoing it, providing a greater understanding of what 'being a student' meant for these individual students.

This discussion chapter will demonstrate with questions and examples that I have therefore achieved what I set out to achieve and that the study has consequently met its stated aims. It begins with a reflection on why these stories were significant and what they have added to the forefront of knowledge on students' experiences. There is a consideration of how my study links in with other research that has explored healthcare students' experiences of 'being a student' and an exploration of concepts of 'being' (Heidegger, 1926/62). This is followed by an examination of what my interpretation of the findings in relation to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger has added. In addition, the implications that the findings

have for the development of my teaching and learning practices and the transferability of the findings to other settings is discussed.

4.2 Why were these stories significant?

All of the students in the study generously shared their stories and experiences and the personal narratives presented within this thesis offer an insight into both the fragility and endurance of being and becoming a student in a time of educational change. Each of the students chose to share stories of aspects of their lives that they considered to be significant. Maria shared a great deal of her personal life with me in an effort to aid her own personal reflection and meaning making, as she articulated some of her inner turmoil, also perhaps wanting me to understand the complexities and complications of her difficulties whilst 'being a student'. Paul and Oliver shared details of their financial concerns because such average everyday experiences were pivotal to their learning experiences and had an on-going impact on their very 'being'. Alice and Sara detailed their troubles with personal friendships and both Jack and Adnam gave honest accounts of how they had struggled to academically engage with their studies during the process of becoming a student.

As described by Barnett (2007) students undergo a continuous process of becoming and the 'average everyday' (see also Heidegger, 1926/62) is therefore what transforms experience over time. Consequently, 'being a student' is not simply a linear procedure, but a gradual process of

'becoming', as students change and adapt over the three years of their undergraduate studies. In addition it is not an abstract undertaking that only occurs when academic studies are undertaken; 'being a student' is a broad context interwoven with 'being' in general with both individual and social contexts combined; hence, students' experiences are constantly mobile as changes occur. I believe therefore, that these 'whole stories' were important because experience is essentially continuous and dynamic, and as noted by Bryson and Hardy (2012:27) there is a relative paucity of studies that adopt a '... focussed, in-depth, longitudinal, qualitative approach' to exploring 'being a student'.

For example, both Sara and Oliver ultimately enjoyed their studies and graduated with first class degrees; however, during the first year both students articulated their worries and explained how they had considered leaving the programme: Oliver was concerned about his financial situation and Sara was troubled by her lack of a peer support network. If I had only interviewed these students in the first year their experiences could have been considered less than ideal. Sara stated in her first interview *'It was good to come here but as soon as I got here I didn't really want to be here anymore'* and *'I just want to get through it'*, clearly articulating that she was not enjoying the first term. In Oliver's first interview he stated

If I couldn't get work I'd have to drop out of the course, it doesn't make financial sense to accumulate three years of debt.

However, when I had follow-up interviews with each student after they had graduated, they were both delighted with their final results, and each

acknowledged how a change in circumstances had contributed to their success. Sara commented on how the development of friendships within the programme had helped her:

The people that I lived with had a huge influence, having a supportive network around you really helps, I don't think I would have been nearly as successful if I hadn't lived with them.

Oliver acknowledged again the impact of continuous part-time employment:

Fortunately I always seem to land on my feet when it came to work, if I hadn't have got the work when I did things could have been very different.

Thus, by interviewing each student at least five times over the three years of the study and again after they graduated using an open narrative prompt, I had provided opportunities for them to reveal how their 'being' developed over time with a focus on what they considered to be significant events, as one thing happens in consequence of another (see also Frank, 2010). In essence this allowed me to examine their 'whole stories' as their narratives unfolded throughout their undergraduate experiences; and to gain a unique insight into what influenced their perceptions and beliefs and their on-going learning transitions.

I believed that experience and therefore stories of experience were not static, and as the students entered this liminal stage of learning transitions (see Turner, 1982) they underwent a 'process of becoming' (see Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Consequently, as individual students moved forward in their studies from one stage to the next, their transitions were not only a change process but also a transfer to a new

identity (see also Ecclestone et al., 2010). As described by Frank (2010:15) in his book 'Letting Stories Breath', 'people have to tell stories about lives that are always in progress' and 'the capacity of stories is to allow us to be' (Frank, 2010:44). As such, by allowing the interviews to be led by the students themselves, I considered that I had gained an insight into their authentic lives, rather than directing the students towards issues that I assumed were important. Without such an examination of everyday narratives over an extended time frame, I believe I would not have achieved an understanding of what it was 'being a student' for these seven students and their lived experiences across the three years of their undergraduate studies.

On reflection, I therefore reasoned that my study was original research in that no previous study of Physiotherapy students has used narratives to explore students' stories across the three years of their undergraduate studies from the first term through to their first employment. Bryson and Hardy (2012) and Askham (2008) have carried out similar longitudinal studies with other student groups (Business, Art and Design and Humanities students and work-based learners respectively), but without the use of narrative inquiry specifically. In addition my study was the only study of this type that had considered 'being' and 'becoming' a student in terms of the philosophy of Heidegger (1926/67). A perspective that I believe is vital in starting to understand 'being a student' in a time of educational change. Barnett (2007) does discuss 'being a student' in terms of Heidegger (1926/67) but not in terms of empirical data.

I was also prompted to contemplate the value of these stories that I have presented within the thesis. I had presented the narratives of seven students that describe their development over the three years of their studies during their 'being' and 'becoming' a student, but what did these narratives add to the knowledge on students' higher education learning experiences? I returned again to the literature I had reviewed as I had initially developed the study and re-read, in particular, the work of Heidegger (1926/62) and Barnett (2007) whose work explores 'being' and my reflection on this is presented in the next section.

4.3 What does this research add to the forefront of knowledge on students' experiences?

The purpose stated within the introduction was to listen to students' experiences and to add to the literature on Physiotherapy students' experiences and engagement, through an exploration of student narratives told over their three years of undergraduate studies. I wanted to explore the individual lives of the students, to expand my understanding of what it was to 'be a student'. I had begun this study because whilst there were numerous studies within the research focusing on the institutional perspective of higher education, the policy changes, the pedagogy, the research and the funding, I believed that what we did not hear enough of were the personal stories of student experience. To improve practice I believe that we needed to listen more to the voices of those whose lives are affected by it, as only the users of a service can

truly give an insight into its on-going impact. As described by Frank, (2010:99) 'participants are experts, at least in their own lives'.

The institutional language that described the 'student life cycle' was common in the higher education literature and it was used to describe the annual cycle of the institutional processes from recruitment through to graduation. However, I considered that this was essentially an institutional view of students' experiences, appropriate for managers and academic teams, but not for individual students. Students do not have a 'student life cycle', for them 'being a student' was part of a personal life journey. As such their experiences and 'being a student' were personal, and individual.

Indeed, although much of the recent discussion and debate about students' learning experiences has focused on ensuring that we give attention to the concept of 'the student voice', it had become an enigma, interpreted and applied in diverse ways. Little acknowledgement was given to how individual experience is nuanced and complex, and as suggested by Carter (2004) in a study exploring children's pain narratives, powerful academic discourses that are certain and authoritative were presented and disseminated. As stated by Barnett (2007:8), 'Of the individual student with his or her own challenges and struggles, we gain little sense.'

Whilst I do not wish to devalue the previous work of others, I would like to suggest that generic views of experience are only part of what is needed (see also Carter, 2004). What became clear to me was that a student's learning experiences were so much more, and I wanted to show that 'being a student' was a dynamic situation influenced by multiple social and personal factors during the process of 'becoming a student'. 'Being' a student was temporal, varying in response to both curricular and extracurricular activities; it was not a simple, measurable academic concept and each of the student narratives presented in this dissertation demonstrate this. All of the students experienced both challenges and successes, and across the three years of their studies were at times both despondent and delighted. As described by Maria in her second interview, 'being a student' was a fluctuating, unpredictable state: *'University was exciting at first and then it got a bit overwhelming and then it went easy again.'*

On reflection then, I believe that what these stories have added to the knowledge on Physiotherapy students' higher education experiences is a new student-focused perspective that will enable the further development of effective strategy and practice throughout a consideration of individual student journeys. The orientations of social, personal and financial factors are identified as being important in influencing 'being' and 'becoming' and so is what the student 'brings' with them in terms of their ability to be a self-directed learner. A holistic view of student experiences and engagement needs to take into account each of these four orientations

and the impact upon students' academic achievements and sense of belonging to an institution. Students' engagement will vary over time as personal and social factors impact upon experiences; and future projects that aim to promote student engagement need to be sensitive to these and take into account the entirety of students' on-going experiences.

However, to return to my desire to question what I had achieved during this study, I subsequently considered what the students' stories revealed about their perceptions and beliefs and therefore what had university life meant to the students through their narrations of 'being a student'.

4.4 What had university meant to the students?

Each of the interviews gathered rich and detailed evidence about students' perceptions and experiences and the diverse experiences that influenced them. Hence once I had analysed the transcripts, I was able to present the students as selves that were constructed during the interview process, as they navigated through the academic and practical discipline of Physiotherapy. Thus by following the students over time, I had described what it was like becoming a Physiotherapy student and gave some insight into the individual student's sense of self and the challenges they faced 'being a student', with a view of the whole undergraduate experience.

As described by Barnett (2007) 'being' is a key concept in any serious examination of students' experiences and listening to students describe

their experiences; to explore what 'being a student' meant to them was central to this project. The narrative prompt provided an opportunity for the students to speak about themselves in relation to their experiences over time and convey from their point of view their own learner experiences of higher education. At each subsequent interview the students were asked to tell the next 'episode' and the stories the students told allowed me to view holistically their learning experiences in all their complexity and richness as their stories unfolded across the three years of the study.

Each of the stories portrayed the way in which individual students interpreted and narrated their experiences of 'being a student'. Consequently the stories are each unique accounts of individual development and learning that reveal how experiences shaped the students' sense of being a student. There were varieties, variance and difference throughout the narratives yet they also overlapped and I identified commonalities; both academic and personal dimensions were identified as impacting upon the students' experiences and engagement. Care in listening to, reading and re-reading the constructed narratives of the seven students subsequently identified that whilst individual experiences were multi-layered, 'being a student' for each student was dominated by a specific orientation – peer support, financial concerns, learner self-direction and personal issues. Within each of these orientations, however, I also recognised the uniqueness of each student's story.

Some of the students had just a hint of particular orientations within their narrative whereas others had orientations that were so substantial as to sweep all others to the periphery, and some at times combined orientations with diverse narrative linkages. However, I acknowledge that none of these orientations exclusively determined the individual student's experiences. For each student there were other on-going concerns and challenges and as texts of experiences the stories presented here will be incomplete. The stories were constructed and described by the storytellers to meet the circumstances of the occasioned telling and therefore the stories may have multiple coherences on different occasions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Hence, I acknowledge that these stories are not 'life stories' that depict each event of the students' lives throughout their studies, just fragments that they chose to share with me. As described by Carter (2004) stories are not permanent, they change and unfold over time to reflect on-going, multidimensional experience.

Using the four orientations I had presented each student's narrative as a story. The first of these was students' development as self-directed learners and I considered how two of the young male students managed their personal learning transition as they adjusted to degree-level working (Jack and Adnam). In the second orientation – peer support – I depicted two students (Alice and Sara) who had a personal need for friendship and academic support in order to negotiate successfully their undergraduate

studies and assessments. The third orientation related to financial concerns and I described two mature male students who explored issues around how they managed to balance their academic commitments with the on-going need to undertake paid work (Oliver and Paul). Finally, within the personal difficulties orientations, I detailed how one mature female student (Maria) negotiated her academic studies around the decline of her marriage and the ensuing emotional upheaval. The special circumstance of her experience necessitated that she be presented alone as her personal difficulties set her apart from the other students.

So, to return to my question, I had identified four orientations across the narratives and used these to present the students' stories, but what did these four orientations tell us about the students' perceptions and beliefs? And what does this add in terms of new knowledge on students' learning experiences? In addition, could a consideration in terms of Heideggerian concepts of 'being' and 'time' add a further interpretation of 'being a student'?

4.4.1 Development of learner self-direction – Jack and Adnam

Students may engage differentially with different spheres of their higher education experiences (Bryson and Hardy 2012) with various factors taking priority within the year (Wilcox et al. 2005) and the narratives of both Jack and Adnam demonstrated this. They engaged with social aspects and some academic aspects but at times struggled to develop as independent learners. Learning development was a common strand

across the student narratives as each student talked about their personal adaptation to the particular requirements of studying for the Physiotherapy programme. However, whilst the other students detailed how they had changed and adapted as learners, the storytellers within this orientation were young men who essentially had an on-going struggle adjusting to a new way of learning after prior experiences that were teacher-led. Both students revealed complex contradictions within their narratives as they told of starting work on assessments at the last minute as deadlines approached, not trying their utmost to succeed academically and being satisfied with '*good enough*'; whilst also wanting to be academically successful. There also seemed to be a notion of ambivalence as they described themselves as just '*getting by*' at times in both narratives, particularly in the first year when both students seemed uncertain at times whether to fully engage with their studies or whether to aim for the minimum 40% pass mark.

These two narratives in essence extend beyond the local and personal and bring in broader questions about students' readiness for degree-level working. Academic integration is a broad term that includes students' engagement with academic staff, their peers and resources and their attendance at timetabled sessions (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Two factors essentially combine to influence this integration: the individual student's level of academic preparedness for degree-level study and their experiences of the academic programme on which they are studying (Thomas, 2002). Academic preparedness encompasses students' past

educational experiences, their individual expectations, academic capabilities and personal autonomy which combine to give students a 'state of readiness' for studying in higher education. The academic experience provided by an institution is heavily influenced by the values and practices of an institution (Thomas, 2002) as well as the teaching and learning strategies and relationships with staff on a particular programme. In addition, it is noted in Wilcox et al. (2005) that academic integration is likely to be secondary to social integration in the first year at university.

Previous research has indicated that if there is a 'match' between academic preparedness of an individual and the academic experience, the student is more likely to engage with the programme (for example Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1993 and 1998), and the more a student is actively engaged the more likely they are to continue in higher education (see also Crosling et al., 2008). Individual expectations can have a profound impact upon students' perceptions of their learning experiences (Ecclestone et al., 2010) and new students can need support adapting to the academic culture shock of higher education (Wilcox et al., 2005). As described in Torenbeek et al. (2010) both the degree of adjustment from prior learning environments and the resemblance to previous learning experience can have an effect on achievement. Neither Adnam nor Jack believed that they had been particularly academically prepared for the UK higher education system by their previous educational experiences and they both clearly articulated their struggles to adapt during their narratives

of their on-going process of adjustment; they were also both, periodically, reluctant to take personal responsibility for their academic difficulties.

Jack's narrative was at times a series of convoluted stories that meandered through his undergraduate experiences, sometimes ending up with a wry shake of the head as he forgot the point he was trying to make. But he was also an insightful and honest storyteller who reflected back on his past experiences and looked forward to the future to situate narrative linkages within time.

Throughout all the interviews Jack's dominant orientation was his development as a learner and I soon learned from his narrative that struggling to engage with assessments was a narrative theme throughout his secondary educational studies: *'I struggled with the step from GCSE to AS but then the step to A2 was even greater'*. At times he desired a greater level of support from the academic team but was also aware that he needed to develop as a self-directed learner:

I suppose in a way it's good doing self-learning and stuff but umm, I don't know, it might be nice to have a wee bit more, a bit more of a helping hand.

It is important therefore to consider whether Jack's 'willingness to engage' (as described by McCune (2009) in a study exploring Biosciences students' experiences) was influenced by his perceptions of his higher education learning experiences or whether it was a mind-set that had developed over his previous educational experiences that he brought with him to university. On re-reading Jack's narrative it becomes apparent that

he admitted that he had struggled to fully engage with his studies and assessments for a number of years and was aware that this was particularly apparent around planning and writing assessments:

I'm not really a big fan of assignments. I don't really know why [laughs]. I'm kind of starting to work a bit harder on it but I'll be last minute.

However, it was clear as Jack's narrative progressed into the second and third years that his engagement and interest in his academic studies increased when he was studying on his clinical placements. Exploring Jack's narrative reveals that two factors contributed to this. Firstly he stated throughout his narrative that he preferred practical work to academic sessions and essentially placement education was the practical application of knowledge gained in taught sessions: *'placement is where you properly learn like and it'll kind of stick in my head'*. Secondly on each of these placements he got one-to-one supervision from a clinical tutor: *'my educator was really good ... he was beside me giving me support'*. Other studies have already identified that easily accessible support systems, particularly from personal tutors are highly valued by students (Brown and Edelman, 2000; Price et al., 1999) and this is essentially what Jack got on placement: a readily available dedicated member of staff that was committed to facilitating his learning development.

In some ways Adnam's narrative is dissimilar to the other students, as after the first year I interviewed Adnam by telephone and inevitably there were some dis-junctures and silences within these conversations. At times the narrative was lost and it turned more into a two-way

conversation with me asking questions and prompting. However, during the face-to-face interviews in his first year Adnam depicted himself as struggling to engage with a learning experience that was in marked contrast with his school and college experiences and he returned to this orientation to varying degrees throughout each of his subsequent interviews.

Adnam's narrative closely mirrored Jacks, as he too, clearly articulated a mismatch between his academic preparedness and his learning experiences during the first year:

...with A levels they told you everything that you needed to know about your studies ... while here mostly your studies are new materials it's really different

and he also acknowledged that at times he did not put in the maximum effort: *'I've got a lazy personality'*. He also preferred the practical learning experiences of the placement environment and tended to get slightly better grades for his placements, but his reasons for this were slightly different. On campus in taught sessions Adnam tended to be distracted by his friends *'messaging about'* and therefore believed that the staff and other students considered his group of friends to be *'slackers'*. He therefore acknowledged that he would have to make more effort within the clinical environment:

... we do tend to mess about and stuff but it's totally different when you get out there ... I think I'm definitely going to have to be a lot more mature in the practice placement area.

The narratives of these two students demonstrate that they did not feel sufficiently prepared for the academic demands of their programme and

initially made reference to being '*shocked*' by the workload (see also Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013). The reality of their learning experience was very different to their expectations and they described how they felt unprepared for the challenges and level of self-direction required to study in higher education. Both students at times commented upon how they perceived the support that they received from the academic staff as inadequate for their needs but this may be due to unrealistic expectations, an actual deficit or a mixture of the two.

These two stories can also be considered using Heidegger's philosophy, and in particular the concept of 'Dasein'. Heidegger (1926/62:184) used the concept of Dasein to represent 'being', describing understanding as

... the existential being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of.

Dasein 'always understands itself in terms of its existence – in terms of a possibility of itself; to be itself or not itself' (Heidegger, 1926/62:33) and can choose these possibilities. Heidegger used Dasein to represent a 'possibility of many ways of being' (Heidegger, 1926/62) and Barnett (2007) further explored Dasein in terms of student learning as each student has 'being' as a student as well as a person.

As Dasein we all have expectations of the behaviour of others, the 'they', and of the environments in which we live and work (Heidegger, 1926/67; Miller et al., 2005); for students this also includes expectations of their educational setting (Barnett, 2007). Several of the students described

circumstances in which their sense of 'being a student' differed from their initial expectations and this disparity can lead to a drop in their 'will to learn' on occasions; as noted by Barnett (2007) when a student's will to learn is reduced so are their chances of academic success.

Higher education requires students to be their own agents and develop their own interpretations, judgements and actions (Barnett, 2007); this means that students have to develop as independent, autonomous learners with a will to learn. To achieve this, students have to 'reach into themselves and draw something out' (Barnett, 2007:34) which can lead to a sense of anxiety as some students feel overwhelmed with the tasks confronting them (Barnett, 2007); as stated by Heidegger, 'That in the face of which one has anxiety is being-in-the-world as such' (Heidegger 1926/62:230).

Jack and Adnam made the transition to higher education from a past educational experience of didactic teaching. They had to adapt to their new circumstances during their gradual process of 'becoming a student' as they responded to change over time. Each described difficulties incorporating the required changes into their lives and in some respects both students were therefore between two concepts of 'being a student': the student that developed as an independent learner striving to achieve the best possible grades in their assessments and the student that was directed in their studies by teaching staff.

Initially both Jack and Adnam continued in the mode that all of their previous educational experiences had taught them was appropriate. Adnam in particular began to be less committed to his studies and towards the end of his first year he adapted his learning processes doing what others do possibly to fit in and conform (Heidegger, 1926/62). As described by Barnett (2007), students can only develop as far as their will to learn, and whilst this will is not everything, without it nothing is possible. However, when studying on clinical placement Adnam underwent a rapid process of personal development; a process of 'becoming' as he relished the challenges of the workplace environment and began to take on his own voice (see Barnett, 2007). Effectively he developed a disposition to learn and a greater interest in his studies when he could more easily situate these within the working environment.

Jack underwent a similar transformation of self-becoming whilst studying on clinical placement. With the one-to-one support of his clinical educator his confidence in his abilities began to grow and he moved out of his comfort zone of *'just-getting-by'*. His educational and practical engagement increased as he came into the mode of authentic being and began to immerse himself in his learning experiences (Barnett, 2007). He brought these renewed energies and interest back to his academic studies; during his final year he enjoyed the educational challenges and became more fully himself (see also Barnett, 2007).

It was clear from both of these students' narratives that the process of 'becoming a student' does not always go smoothly. It is an educational journey of learning transitions and at times students can feel both lost and disengaged from their learning experiences. They may find the material too challenging or too easy and become distracted by other aspects of their 'being'. As described by Barnett (2007), studying at higher education level is also a process of self-travel during the process of becoming a student. Clinical placements offered both of these students a 'space' in which they could develop as independent learners with a sustained will to learn and confidence in 'being a student'. They both at times disengaged from their studies but the reality of the workplace environment reaffirmed their commitment to their chosen future profession and thus re-energised their learning.

Within the text of 'Being and Time' (Heidegger, 1926/62) explored how Dasein is linked with temporal presence. Dasein is not confined to its awareness of the present moment but looks both forward into the future and back into the past (Heidegger, 1926/62) and it was as these students looked forward to their future as Physiotherapists that they both began to focus on 'being a student' and eventually 'becoming a Physiotherapist'.

4.4.2 The importance of peer support – Alice and Sara

The narrative orientation of peer support presented some of the intricacies of peer-to-peer relations that impact upon students' engagement and academic achievement. Consideration was also given

to students' needs of support and trust. Each of the seven students spoke on occasions about the peer networks they developed over the three years of their undergraduate studies and peer support was a common and recurring subject. How alliances and friendships were formed and their relative importance, however, varied across the seven students. For some it was a profoundly central issue and until new friendships were formed there was in essence a loss of personal identity. For other, perhaps more self-reliant students, peer support was a marginal issue that was only mentioned sporadically.

Peer support is a multi-faceted and dynamic concept that is underpinned and influenced by individual expectations and sense of identity. It has different meanings and interpretations that are profoundly individual and specific to time. The two students considered within the orientation were both young women in their teens and perhaps this orientation can therefore be seen as focusing on the complexities of young women's relationships with their friends rather than on student peer relations. However, numerous previous studies have highlighted that social integration is a key aspect of a successful transition to university for all students, for example the seminal work of Tinto (1975, 1993) and Wilcox et al. (2005). Other authors have supported this and have suggested that students who fail to develop social networks and do not fit in are more likely to struggle academically and withdraw early (for example Thomas, 2002). Indeed several of the other students in this study both male and

female also alluded to peer-support relationships within their narratives but for these two students they were especially significant.

Social networks have also been identified as important and able to sustain students during times of doubt and uncertainty by both Bryson and Hardy (2012) and McInnis (2005) and friendship, or more importantly the lack of it, is one of the key factors that has been recognised as influencing students' decisions to leave (Thomas, 2002; Yorke, 1999). For Alice, the first student considered under this orientation, peer support was a central and important issue and she was initially lonely and anxious as she struggled to negotiate friendships both within the cohort and with her flatmate who studied on a different programme. At the start of her first year she developed tentative friendships with a wide circle of women but she had a need for familiarity that was unmet by these superficial acquaintances. She therefore existed unhappily on the periphery of a group of students who lived in shared accommodation, clearly demonstrated by her statement that

I don't really see anyone to be honest, they're all really friendly with their flatmates and they have their own little group of friends.

Her narrative also revealed a sense of misplaced trust with her flatmate who initially seemed friendly but within a month was avoiding all communication with Alice. In common with the findings of Wilcox et al. (2005) making initial contacts which may or may not develop into long-term friendships caused anxieties for Alice and failing to get a place in university halls adversely affected opportunities for her to make friends.

Perhaps Alice's need and desire for social support and expectations of her new friendships had been too high and she was searching for an elusive, idyllic scenario. But her narrative raises the issue of personal identity and the acknowledgement of the sameness and difference within student groups, as we all tend to gravitate towards those we perceive as having shared values and are 'the same' as us. Prior to university Alice had always lived at home with a very close and supportive family and she repeatedly described herself as '*homely*' and her mother as her '*best friend*'. Her personal frame of reference was of being incorporated within a supportive network and this perhaps provides a background explanation as to why she initially described feelings of loneliness and isolation when she could not recreate the 'sameness' of these relationships at university.

Previous studies have identified that those students who find themselves unfamiliar with higher education can struggle to develop a sense of belonging to an institution (Foster et al., 2012). Such students can sometimes feel out of step with the majority, can subsequently find it difficult to develop a social support network and are therefore the most at risk of withdrawal (see Yorke, 1999). In addition, as described in detail in the longitudinal study undertaken by Bryson and Hardy (2012), what the student 'brings' with them influences both their sense of belonging to an institution and their learning experiences. Alice was the first in her family to go to university and her sense of personal identity may have been out of step with some of the students whom she initially attempted to develop

friendships with. Although she originally appeared to be looking forward to the difference of the new experience of university life when she stated, *'I like meeting new people as well from different walks of life'*, she struggled when she felt that she did not fit in with *'the popular girls'* as she described them and anticipated friendships failed to materialise in the first few months.

After a difficult first term Alice decided to move back home to live with her family at the end of the first year, a physical return to sameness and unconditional support. She also gravitated towards a group of older female students with whom she had been assigned a group assessment. Eventually she developed a strong friendship with these women, some of whom also lived within the same region of Manchester as her family. These friendships could be considered as being created from narrowing options, or alternatively as Alice inherently recreating a comfortable and familiar relationship looking towards the older women for guidance; again a return to sameness, or possibly authenticity.

As Alice interacted with the older students in the cohort and developed a peer support group she also had a greater degree of engagement with her studies and academic success (see also Astin, 1984, Tinto, 1998). This peer support network that she developed was therefore pivotal as it gave her an opportunity to build relationships that provided both academic support and also eventually a group of friends who supported her personally; essentially they formed a group who had a similarity of

purpose. Once these friendships developed Alice's story took a narrative turn and she focused more on what could be gained from going to university in contrast to an initial narrative that depicted loss as she seemed to struggle without the day-to-day support of her family. Alice's experience was an exemplar of the findings of Tinto (1993) who states that social integration can be a prerequisite for academic integration for some students and Wilcox et al. (2005) who found that making compatible friends was essential for retention.

As the first year progressed Alice's peer support group developed and strengthened and she began to become more successful academically, something she repeatedly attributed to working with her friends:

I find it really useful, other people think of ideas that I would never think of and vice versa. I suppose, so it is really useful.

This then became the narrative theme throughout Alice's interviews – friends working together to support each other's development and enjoying shared success; in accord with the findings of Palmer et al. (2009), building new friendships was central to Alice's transition. There was a continued sense of pride and growing confidence in her academic abilities within her narrative as the friendships developed; and in the second and third years when Alice moved back home to live with her family she also reinforced the bonds with her peer support group as she had become more like them, commuting into campus each day together. Even whilst they were isolated on individual placements the peer support endured electronically and was renewed in the third year as the students

returned to campus-based sessions and she now referred to one of her friendship group as '*a lifelong friend*'.

Sara, the other student considered under this orientation had a similar story to Alice in that she considered close, supportive friendships to be important to her undergraduate experiences. However, her concern was different to Alice's as her parents were both graduates and '*going to university*' was therefore essentially a recognised and understood experience. Sara was struggling to adapt as the 'present' of her initial first year university experiences contrasted negatively with the enjoyable year she had spent travelling:

It was good to come here but as soon as I got here I didn't really want to be here anymore. I didn't enjoy it at all; you're on your own a lot when you first get here.

Essentially Sara felt isolated as she had few commonalities with the students that she shared university accommodation with and did not have a sense of 'belonging' to the institution as she described herself as '*not fitting in*'. At the end of her first interview her reluctance to commit to her undergraduate studies was clear as she emphasised her difficulties engaging with her peers and struggled to set any goals for the end of the academic year and kept her temporal horizons close to the present '*I don't have any massive goals just to be here is great to be honest just to have got this far*'. It is apparent that at this time she did not see a distinctive future self, going forward into the academic year. Similar to the reports of students in Wilcox et al.'s study (2005) she perceived the

relationships with her flatmates as inadequate as they had different levels of socialising.

Eventually towards the end of her first year Sara effectively made a 'new home' and an emotional transition as she moved accommodation to share a flat with friends that she made on the programme. Developing social networks by living with compatible friends was central to Sara's process of 'becoming a student', a finding in accord with Palmer et al. (2009) and Wilcox et al. (2005). From this point on as the supportive friendships developed, and the positives of peer support became a central focus of her narrative, she began to feel that she 'belonged' (see also Bryson and Hardy, 2012). It was a new beginning and the moment when her university experiences began to mirror the imagined future she had had. She began to look forward, to run ahead into the future (Inwood, 1997):

I moved halls and now I am in her crowd of friends it's really good, it's really nice so I'm living with them next year as well.

During the second and third years Sara continued to enjoy a close supportive friendship with the same group of young women. They shared a house together, socialised together and supported each other preparing for assessments. As with Alice this had a positive impact upon her academic progress and she eventually graduated with a first class honours degree. When I contacted Sara in the October after she had graduated she articulated how important this personal supportive network had been in enhancing her engagement. In common with the findings of

Tinto (1993) and Bryson and Hardy (2012) she detailed how social integration had a positive impact on her academic engagement:

... having a supportive network around you really helps, I don't think I would have been nearly as successful if I hadn't lived with them. We all helped each other all the time and it was nice just to have that support, we still keep in touch.

This statement is a clear indication of the importance of supportive peer friendships on Sara's learning experiences (see also Tinto, 1993; Bryson and Hardy, 2012).

When considered in terms of Heideggerian concepts of 'being', central to both of these narratives is the significance of the 'authentic way of being'. Throughout his philosophy, Heidegger (1926/67) explores the concept of 'authentic self', the 'call to consciousness' and 'resoluteness' in his philosophy in relation to 'being'. This sense of authentic self and being was apparent across these students' narratives and it is clear that it fluctuated in response to assessment results, peer support and personal circumstances. At times all of the students effectively articulated how they felt that their authentic self was lost to 'inauthenticity' when they believed that they had to conform to the expectations of others during their first year, and the struggle of whether or not to adapt to what the 'they' did and said (Heidegger, 1926/67). As described by Barnett (2007), it was clear that their sense of self was both fragile and enduring at the same time with an undercurrent of anxiety on occasions. There was also an interesting question here pertaining to whether these students were actually their authentic selves when they commenced their studies but it

was not possible to explore this given that I only had a limited backstory from each student.

This sense of internal striving for 'resoluteness' (Heidegger, 1926/67) was particularly apparent within the narratives of both Alice and Sara when they struggled to develop peer relationships at the start of their first year. They both made reference to occasions where they felt pressured by the anonymous 'they' and both narratives reveal how this led to tensions and an internal struggle caused by the 'stress' of an internal 'call to consciousness' (Heidegger, 1926/67).

Both Alice and Sara demonstrated 'resoluteness' (Heidegger, 1926/67) as they made a decision to return to 'authentic life' and move away from the 'they-self' (Barnett, 2007). Alice chose to move back home to live with her family and relinquish her perception that she would develop peer relationships with the 'popular girls', as she described them. Sara moved student accommodation to be with like-minded students on the Physiotherapy programme. Their internal concepts of 'being a student' underwent a radical change and there was a return to authentic living via a 'call to consciousness' as they instead built friendships with the peers with whom they shared core values and beliefs. As Dasein, Alice and Sara had the possibility of many ways of being a student and after a difficult period, chose to return to their 'authentic self' (Heidegger, 1926/67). As described by Barnett (2007) this reconciliation with authenticity was not achieved lightly and both students spoke at length

about their inner turmoil, whilst they struggled to be an authentic student their consciousness was lost to others and they became essentially 'inauthentic' (Heidegger, 1926/62) as at times they lost their will to learn. However, as stated by Inwood (1997:27) 'this is by no means an unqualified blemish', as for the majority of people this is the normal condition for us most of the time (Inwood, 1997). It would be difficult to stay constantly within the state of 'authentic self' at all times and when they developed peer support groups both students returned to 'authentic being'.

Each of these students, in Heidegger's conception, therefore decided to make their own way, regardless of other voices and perspectives – the 'they' (Barnett, 2007). They chose to 'be a student' in a manner that was authentic to themselves, unencumbered by the perceptions of others and as such both developed as learners and attained academic success. As described by Barnett (2007) to be an authentic student is to 'take hold' of educational experience and make something of it in your own account. Things do not always go smoothly but when these students developed peer support networks and support from clinical supervisors – effectively learning communities – their engagement and will to learn were renewed. Becoming a student for these students was about developing a sense of belonging, and having social support from peers was central to this process for Alice and Sara (see also Wilcox et al., 2005). An essential element of 'being a student' for each of these students was developing a

learning community of their own in which they communicated with and learnt from others.

4.4.3 The impact of financial concerns – Oliver and Paul

This narrative orientation was concerned with conveying how some students struggled with financial concerns during their studies and how over time this could have an impact on both academic engagement and achievement. Being able to manage financially was a mutual necessity for both Oliver and Paul, the two students considered within this orientation, and both narratives conveyed an overriding concern with finances. The majority of the students commented on financial concerns over their three years of undergraduate studies but whereas the dominant thread within the other five student narratives was always linked to academic achievement, for both Oliver and Paul the dominant imperative was always financial and they used words such as ‘constantly insecure’ and ‘exhausting’ to express their financial concerns.

Again, whilst overall there was commonality in these two multi-layered narratives presented within the orientation, the individual lenses were diverse and they were far from homogenous. Oliver’s narrative was one of personal success as he eventually attained both financial stability and academic success. Paul’s narrative was one of uncertainty, financial difficulties were ever present and his narrative account frequently depicted the negative impact that his work commitments had upon his academic engagement.

Throughout his narrative Oliver represented himself as a young professional returning to university to enhance his career options and treating the experience almost as an extended work placement rather than as a second undergraduate experience. There was a determination to succeed running throughout the narrative, but there was also an undercurrent of financial worry, with levels of anxiety peaking as the end of each short-term contract approached and then fading as a new job with a guaranteed income was secured.

Identifying financial difficulties within the narratives was not unexpected, as debt concerns amongst students are not uncommon and were identified by half of the healthcare students in Hamshire et al. (2013). Several previous studies of students studying on healthcare programmes have also identified finances as one of the biggest challenges faced by some students (for example Steele et al., 2005; Glossop, 2002; Brown and Edelman, 2000) and employment has been identified as having a negative effect on time available for studying (Torenbeek et al., 2010). However, what these narratives clearly depicted was the on-going impact of the financial difficulties as Oliver in particular repeatedly used emotive language to portray his financial anxieties. The significance of finances to his narrative was clearly disclosed as he referred to *'finance is a massive issue'* and that *'finance dictates this university course'*. Finances were always dominant and he frequently expressed how he felt lucky that he had managed to find paid employment. Although he was also focused on

gaining a first, finances and financial worry were forever connected to his academic achievements in his narrative.

The on-going impact of these financial stresses was further exposed when Oliver talked about how he had considered leaving the Physiotherapy programme despite his academic success. He was always determined that he would not get into serious debt in order to finance his studies and considered leaving on a couple of occasions in his first year

... without that [work] there would've been a possibility of saying I can't do it; I'd have to drop out for financial reasons and that would be really bad.

This is in accord with the work of Vere-Jones (2008), Cuthbertson et al. (2004) and Brown and Edlemann (2000) who state that financial hardship can be a cause of attrition amongst healthcare students. As was depicted in Oliver's narrative, part-time employment impacts upon students' available time to study, lack of available funds can affect the purchase of study materials and fear of spiralling debt can lead to attrition (Brown and Edlemann, 2000).

In contrast to Oliver, Paul represented himself as wanting to enjoy life, his social life was important to him throughout his undergraduate experiences and the need to work was frequently precipitated by a desire for socialising and holidays. Paul had been used to working and earning money and wanted to maintain his previous lifestyle

... because I have worked full-time before I'm used to earning a certain amount of money so I'd like to try and maintain a certain lifestyle, eat good food.

For Paul financial difficulties peaked when he was studying on placement. Financial challenges can become particularly significant during extended and inflexible placement hours as identified in Hamshire et al. (2012) and this was apparent within Paul's narrative as he had to work night shifts and weekends whilst he was on placement to earn enough money to cover his financial commitments. The ultimate effect of placement working and part-time work was depicted as a sub-theme of a chaotic life within Paul's narrative. At times he seemed on the edge of control as his extended work commitments and subsequent fatigue meant that he forgot to hand assessments in, overlooked assessment deadlines and missed taught sessions as he had arranged to work. As he reflected on his experiences, although he spoke with an air of 'matter-of-factness' there was a sense, at times, of acute frustration and regret, and his narrative was one of financial and academic struggles; an example from his fourth interview at the start of the second year clearly illustrates this:

Last year I found it a struggle because then I would be working at night during the week and doing uni at the same time. It was quite exhausting.

Paul's financial circumstances played a pivotal role in his learning experiences as he struggled to find time for his studies and assessment, findings which correspond with those of Brown and Edlemann (2000), Glossop (2001) and Cuthbertson et al. (2004). Eventually the ultimate impact was on his final graduation grade (a 2.2); when I spoke to Paul after graduation there was a sense of dissatisfaction as he reflected on his experiences and declared that he was '*a bit disappointed to be honest*'.

The wider implications of these financial narratives are important to note as undoubtedly these two students were not alone in experiencing financial concerns. Students studying on healthcare programmes have long cited finances as one of the biggest challenges (Brown and Edelman, 2000) and finances have already been acknowledged as being a factor that contributes towards student dissatisfaction and attrition; however, there is less evidence that explores the on-going impact on students' academic achievements and personal well-being. This study has revealed how financial concerns can have a wide-ranging influence that students can struggle to cope with, and ultimately, as Paul's narrative demonstrated, can lead to upsetting consequences and disappointment as financial challenges accumulate over time. Higher education is currently undergoing unprecedented change and we are unable to predict the fee structures that will be in place for future students. Universities will need to adjust to meet the evolving needs of both students and other stakeholders and although the eventual impact of forthcoming initiatives is as yet unknown, there is a potential significant effect on the finances of future students as most observers predict that fees will only increase.

Both Oliver and Paul had expectations of their futures, of both their immediate undergraduate experiences and of a future career as a Physiotherapist beyond that. Each student brought initial, individual expectations with them to university and these shaped their concepts of

'being a student' throughout their studies. At times they both struggled with anxieties over unmet expectations when they compared the present of their everyday experience with what they had imagined their future experience could be. Their sense of being-in-the-future and being here-and-now were interwoven (see Heidegger, 1926/62).

Each of the students had expectations as they metaphorically went ahead into the future, of both their learning and social experiences. These were based on their previous experiences and the information they had acquired about their programme, institution and chosen profession; effectively their past. They are also further influenced by the expectations and perceptions of their family and friends. Their transition to university and process of 'becoming a student' were gradual processes of change and integration into their chosen profession via both university and practical learning experiences.

Will and commitment are essential for 'being a student'; learning involves the investment of both time and effort and without this, students will not achieve their full academic potential (Solomonides et al., 2012). When Oliver had a secure income from a part-time job he was able to devote himself to achieving the 'first' he had aspired to throughout his degree. Unfortunately without financial stability Paul was distracted from his studies and his academic engagement dwindled, his sense of a future self as a Physiotherapist transformed and after graduating with a 2:2 he began a career in retail.

As these two students progressed through their degree programme there was, at times, a significant emotional dimension to their learning that influenced both their perceptions and experiences (see Case et al., 2010). For Oliver there was a sense of optimism and positive change as his expectations, both financial and personal, were eventually realised or exceeded, but Paul's story depicted difficult and dispiriting times as he was distracted from his studies and his expectations went unmet (see also Field, 2010). Over time this affected each of the students' will to learn and thus sense of 'being a student'. Oliver was encouraged by his on-going academic success; however, Paul's will was not sustained over time and he was disappointed with his final results.

'Historicality', as described by Heidegger (1926/62:41) – the past influencing the present – had an apparent influence on these students as each was 'bound up with temporality' (Inwood, 1997:11). Temporality influenced their perceptions of both their present and future as past experiences informed the expectations that they had for themselves (Miller et al., 2005). Both had several years' experience of working; they had clearly defined expectations of 'being a Physiotherapy student' and at times this both sustained and diminished them. Heidegger (1926/1962:41) suggests, '... any Dasein is as it already was, and it is "what" it already was. It is its past, whether explicitly or not' and it thus understands its sense of being in terms of its whole life (Heidegger, 1926/1962). The students' individual sense of being was at times heavily

influenced by their past experiences with one specific example seen within Oliver's narrative during his second and third years as his preoccupation with finances continued and he began to reveal some of the factors that influenced his concerns. He mentioned that on occasion his family had been concerned about their finances:

As I got older, I cottoned on to financial problems at home and things like that, you understand these things and you pick them up.

This referencing backwards into Oliver's past resonates with Heidegger (1926/62) who affirms that we are temporal beings and that the importance of our historicity cannot be underestimated as it has an effect on all of our future understanding.

4.4.3 The impact of personal difficulties – Maria

Many of the students alluded to personal difficulties during their narratives of their undergraduate experiences. There were various narrative threads of relationship breakups, family disagreements and discord amongst friendship groups. However, although these issues were personally significant for each student at the time they occurred they tended to recede into unimportance over time never to be mentioned again.

For Maria the student considered alone within this orientation there was a significant change in her narrative orientation as her relationship began to deteriorate. She was always an earnest narrator and initially she talked about how she had struggled developing as an autonomous learner and the importance of peer support for her academic success. Then at the

end of her first year her story took a narrative turn and the focus shifted towards the impact of her failing relationship upon her studies and the distressing personal outcome.

As a mature, international student, Maria's narrative is complex and atypical of the majority of the students in the cohort, focusing on a relationship breakdown. Yet it details the personal and academic challenges that can constitute a student's higher education experience, as personal history and expectations have a varying degree of influence on an individual's transition (Ecclestone et al., 2010). Previous studies have already identified that students' initial transitions to university can be an emotional journey, as they manage both academic and social transformation during a time of considerable adjustment (Chase et al., 2010, Yorke and Thomas, 2000), which Maria alluded to in her first interview:

I was like I'm too old ... six years without reading a book and not self-learning so I didn't think I was capable of going back and studying again.

It is also noted that the transition to higher education is not just an individual experience as family and friends will play a role and give a particular context (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Steele et al. (2005) highlighted difficulties of work-study-life balance among mature Nursing students and in particular, they found balancing academic life with family commitments was problematic, with a cumulative and additive nature of such problems compounding the difficulties that the students experienced; Maria hinted at this from the second term of her first year:

In terms of my private life outside of the university life, I've found myself so into studying I wasn't giving my husband enough time to talk to relax or even myself time to relax.

In Maria's story it was not easy to separate her multifaceted individual transition during the process of 'becoming a student' from her connected others and particularly from her relationship with her husband. Her personal history and relationship with her husband clearly influenced her emotional, social and academic adaptations throughout her undergraduate studies and as such her experience of 'being a student'. The analysis of her narrative revealed a challenging story of achievements and disappointments, detailing the emotional dimensions of learning that were on-going throughout her undergraduate studies (see Case et al., 2010) and give an insight into the fragility and endurance of 'being a student' (Barnett, 2007). Her story is threaded through with both worry and determination as she manages the related roles of everyday life.

Maria's main focus throughout the first year was academic achievement and she set herself the goal of achieving a first. Initially her 'being' was closely related to academic achievement and her social and personal developments were to a great extent secondary to this goal. She did develop a social network of mature and international students amongst her peers but this was as a means of supporting her academic progression and she rarely spent time with these people outside of the peer support group meetings.

As previously stated the 'being a student' and 'being a human being' are not separate, each influences the other and as Maria's narrative continued across the interviews while she was concerned to do well academically the overriding story was one of a relationship breakdown. As the study continued she began to elaborate on the subject of her relationship and eventually this was the narrative linkage around which the rest of her story fitted. As described by Barnett (2007), life events such as a relationship breakdown can cause students to come into a new relationship with their lives and reflect on their studies in a new light. Students may renew their efforts and set new goals at this point or even leave their studies (Barnett, 2007), and McGiveny (2003) has suggested that non-academic reasons are the primary cause of withdrawal of mature students from courses.

Maria's story gives an insight into what Barnett (2007) describes as the fragility and complexity of 'being a student'; things did not go smoothly in Maria's life and at times she lost her 'will to learn' and considered suspending her studies to concentrate her efforts on her relationship. Eventually she decided that as her future was so uncertain, persisting with the longer-term horizon of completing the programme gave her a focus and a future with a professional qualification that she would need to gain employment. This determination and will to continue demonstrating the enduring quality of her 'will to learn'.

When Maria's story is considered in terms of the tenets of Heidegger, the impact of discourse is significant. Heidegger describes discourse as 'existentially equiprimordial with state-of-mind and understanding' (Heidegger, 1926/62:203); as such, discourse is a component of Dasein and enables us to make sense of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1926/62). Thus by talking to others we can better understand our own existence by making our experiences intelligible; becoming requires a dialogical form of communication (Barnett, 1999). We all need to be heard by others in order to make sense of our being and if we cannot share discourse we struggle to make our being-in-the-world intelligible. As described by Barnett (2007) 'voice' is required for students to authentically place themselves in the world and through gaining a 'voice', both spoken and written forms, the student can become themselves – effectively gaining their own pedagogical identity.

Each of these seven students' narratives demonstrated how they formed their own individual educational voice during their process of 'becoming a student'. Certain students found it easier to develop this voice within the academic setting and others within the clinical environment. At times some of their voices were submerged in deference to others – for example when Adnam chose to '*mess about*' with friends – but all eventually discovered their pedagogical identity as they attained 'authentic ways of being'.

As a mature, international student living some distance from campus, Maria was the student who had the greatest difficulty finding her 'voice'. She struggled to build a peer support network within the cohort, therefore there were limited occasions when she could explore her own sense of 'being a student' through discourse with those going through a parallel process. As Maria struggled to share discourse with others, she also struggled to make sense of 'being a student' and being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1926/62). In talking, Dasein can express itself and without a 'voice' it is difficult to project oneself and explore 'being'. Similarly with only past experiences of didactic teaching to draw on she struggled to gain what Barnett (2007) described as pedagogical and educational voice – a metaphor for authenticity and becoming oneself. Although she gained knowledge and skills at the start of the programme, she found it difficult to project herself and find voice as an autonomous learner within the UK higher education setting.

Maria needed to be heard and at the beginning of her academic studies she subsequently turned to her husband for mutual sense making. Discourse and hearing constitute an authentic way in which Dasein is open to potentiality-of-being (Heidegger, 1926/62:206); however, over time as her relationship broke down Maria had reduced opportunities for discourse and exploration of her sense of 'being'. Eventually she was isolated from both her husband and her peers so 'being a student' was at times a fragile experience for Maria and her individual 'voice' as a student was for a while lost to her personal difficulties. Without discourse,

learning is not possible and this was clearly demonstrated by Maria's disappointing academic results in her second and third years.

In summary, as I reflected on what my research had added to the forefront of knowledge on students' experiences I believed that I had added to the knowledge base across these four orientations and offered an insight into each of these students' perceptions and beliefs. However, I had wanted to go further and whilst analysing the students' narratives I had also additionally considered them in terms of Heideggerian concepts of 'being' and 'time', to add a philosophical interpretation of 'being a student' to the research on students' experiences. This interpretation had been integrated into my discussion but, to return to my original aim of demonstrating with questions and examples that I have achieved what I had set out to achieve and that the study has consequently met its stated aims, I recognised that I must subsequently consider what had this interpretation of the findings in relation to the philosophied work of Martin Heidegger added to the study?

4.5 What did an interpretation of the findings in relation to the philosophy of Heidegger add to the study?

When considered in terms of Heideggerian concepts of 'being' and 'time' I would like to suggest that at the centre of each of the seven students' stories was essentially a narrative about their own 'authentic self' and sense of 'being a student' related to time. Effectively, how the students' sense of 'being a student' changed and adapted as a response to

'historicality' (Heidegger, 1926/62:41), with each students' individual experiences of 'being a student' in a contemporary world expressed as temporal narratives. Their stories can thus be read as a consideration of how their individual concepts of 'being a student' were expressed through their stories of their learning experiences. Each narrative was in effect, a depiction of the 'average everydayness' of their lives as students during their undergraduate experiences (Heidegger, 1926/62:38) and both the concept of 'being' in terms of 'authentic self' and the impact of temporality on the students' experiences were explored more explicitly within each of the four orientations (Heidegger, 1926/67).

Heidegger offers a different way of considering 'being' and 'time' and his philosophied work can facilitate a more insightful understanding of 'being-in-the-world'. His philosophied work can inform the discussion of concepts of being and prompt us to make sense of lived experiences. Central to this is an investigation of 'being as it is encountered and made meaningful in practical everyday life' (Collins and Selina, 1998:45) and a discussion of temporality of the human being (Dreyfus, 1994). Therefore I believe that I have used Heidegger's work to deepen my understanding of what it was to 'be' a student through an exploration of the average everyday experiences detailed in the students' narratives. Higher education is a process of becoming (Barnett, 1999) and I wanted to demonstrate the gradual process of 'becoming a student' linked to learning transitions as each student responded to change over time; in essence their individual experiences of 'being a student'.

Heidegger asserts that in order to understand concepts of 'being' then we must also consider time, which he describes as 'the horizon for all understanding of being' (Heidegger, 1926/62:39). Dasein is described as 'essential temporal' with 'temporal' always meaning 'simply being in time' (Heidegger, 1926/62:39), and concepts of being cannot be considered separately from time. Dasein is in time, understanding both the present and the future with regard to the past; as described by Barnett (2007), 'being' is influenced by both past educational experiences and the anticipation of future experiences and achievements.

As I gained an understanding of Heidegger's philosophy I began to appreciate how each of these students' narratives were a depiction of their sense of self 'rooted in the phenomenon of time' (Heidegger, 1926/62:40) and how this impacted upon their sense of 'authentic self'. As suggested by Heidegger (1926/62:20), Dasein is not confined in its awareness of the present moment; it goes ahead into the future and is influenced by the past as 'being' is essentially temporal (Heidegger, 1926/62). Hence Dasein runs ahead into the future and reaches back into the past, before making decisions about what to do in the present (Inwood, 1997); as described by Barnett (2007), students are 'in time' and effectively straddle multiple horizons of time. Students have 'being' as a student specifically and as a person generally, these are not separate entities and each affects the other (Barnett, 2007). As such, when a student experiences 'anxiety' over contingent circumstances – for example peer relationships, financial concerns or relationship breakdown

– this infuses their experience of being a student (Barnett, 2007). Each of the students' 'being' was therefore a dynamic, unique sense of self that was infused with other life roles and 'being' a human being (Barnett, 2007). Their narratives therefore demonstrated how their sense of 'being' was influenced by both their past experiences and their expected future selves.

As mature students who had already undertaken years of employment that were inherently unsatisfactory Oliver, Paul and Maria were focused on a better future with new possibilities. For Oliver this was a steady and guiding goal. However, although initially motivated towards a career as a Physiotherapist, Paul and Maria were distracted by financial and personal concerns respectively. Both Paul and Maria adapted their sense of 'being a student' with new knowledge and their experiences and these had a profound impact upon their perceptions of these learning experiences (see also Ecclestone et al., 2010). As younger students, Alice, Sara, Jack and Adnam were less influenced by their past experiences but they all perceived a future self as a Physiotherapist. This may limit the generalisation of the findings to degrees that are professional orientated, however students from other disciplines may also potentially take on the identity of their discipline.

Heidegger (1926/62 cited in Inwood, 1997:70) states that Dasein 'sees his situation and the possibilities it presents to him and makes a decision among them, in light of the awareness'. As described by Barnett (2007),

this involves a student seeing themselves in a time horizon with a will to learn sustained by seeing into the future. All of these students were orientated to the future, but at times some of them lost a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve and experienced difficulties; for example, when Alice and Sara struggled to develop peer support groups, when Oliver had financial concerns and when Adnam and Jack struggled to engage with their studies. This 'will to learn' is closely linked to energy (see Barnett, 2007) and when some of the students' energy resources were at times depleted by external circumstances; for example, due to Paul's work commitments and Maria's relationship breakdown their narratives detail a loss of their 'will to learn' and at times a disconnection from their studies.

To engage with higher education, ultimately students have to give something of themselves (Barnett, 2007) and at times a number of the students failed to become involved as they were either exhausted by their part-time jobs, struggling to adapt or distracted by personal concerns. Hence 'being a student' was not always central to their 'being' and at times they all disengaged from their studies. Those that managed to re-engage went on to be academically successful, those that didn't manage to re-engage and give something of themselves were less successful and did not achieve the academic results they believed they were capable of.

In summary, to return to the question that started my discussions and reflections – what does an interpretation of the findings in relation to the

philosophy of Martin Heidegger add? – I would like to suggest that the four tenets of Heideggerian Philosophy (Dasein, authentic ways of being, historicity and discourse) considered alongside the four orientations within this chapter offer a different consideration of the average day-to-day experiences of 'being a student'. By using these philosophied tenets to inform my interpretation I believe that I have presented a more insightful exploration of the students' experiences to allow me to make sense of being-in-the-world for these seven students. Heideggerian thinking has therefore provided a sense of how the students' experiences were influenced by their concepts of being a student, authentic ways of being and the impact of temporality (Heidegger, 1926/62).

When Heidegger stated that we have a choice of how to be and we can choose from many ways of being (Inwood, 1997) he is suggesting that Dasein can choose an existence. We are then influenced by our own concepts of being and can choose to live true authentic lives or to follow the 'they' and lead inauthentic lives. At times some of the students in this study went along with others even though they knew that their authentic way of 'being' was being sacrificed. However, within the majority of the narratives (Alice, Sara, Jack and Adnam), over time there were turning points where each student effectively 'took hold' of their own 'being' and instead of endeavouring to 'fit in' and compromise their way of being, they took a stand and returned to their authentic selves. Other students (for example Paul) did not appear to question their being and almost seemed to show resignation to a particular way of 'being a student', blocking

themselves off from other future possibilities. Heidegger (1926/62) suggests that this can occur when we become 'engrossed in the world' and it was clear throughout Paul's narrative that he was so engrossed with his financial concerns that he was unable to consider other possibilities and his authentic being was compromised. This is not necessarily wrong and was possibly a coping mechanism as he tried to manage his difficult circumstances; however, ultimately when he graduated with a 2.2 he was disappointed and expressed regret.

I believe, therefore, that my interpretation of the findings in terms of the philosophy of Heidegger has added a new perspective to the knowledge on students' learning. The findings of the study in relation to the body of knowledge have been disseminated by academic publication. A book chapter summarising the study as a whole is due for publication in March 2014 and a case study based on Maria's story is under review. A paper about what this study adds to the research on placement experiences is currently being written (see page 302 in chapter 5); and other papers will also be considered when this is completed. However, I also recognise that this alone is not enough and that I need to consider the implications for practice of this study.

4.6 What are the implications for practice?

Within this dissertation I have explored how seven students viewed their on-going experiences of 'being a student' and in essence it is therefore a celebration of their 'average everydayness' (Heidegger, 1926/62:38). At

each interview the students told their stories and presented narratives of 'average everydayness' as they chose to represent their lives whilst 'being a student'. I believe that listening to these students tell their stories over time has allowed me to gain an understanding of their development during their process of 'becoming a student' and gain an understanding of some of the factors that could influence Physiotherapy students' experiences.

This thesis has explored some of the personal and social circumstances that can influence students' experiences during the process of becoming and being a Physiotherapy student. The individual narratives gave an insight into what 'being a student' meant to these students and emphasised their multiple needs throughout the three years of their undergraduate studies. Their narratives were complex and at times emotional and I have attempted to tell the individual stories through particular orientations to demonstrate how the students tried to find a balance between 'being and becoming a student' and their overall 'being'. As a result I believe that I have gained an in-depth insight into these students' higher education experiences and presented a text that demonstrates the multifaceted nature of 'being' that can constitute undergraduate students' experiences.

Whilst I acknowledge that it is not possible to draw general conclusions from this study of seven students, I believe that it is possible to consider the transferability of the results to other relevant settings, both within

Physiotherapy and beyond. What can be considered as a consequence of the findings presented here are the pedagogical implications that were significant in this instance, including what these students could have done to enhance their own learning. It is clear from both this and previous research that the integration into higher education can be a complex, convoluted process and students need both confidence and commitment throughout to develop authentic ways of being.

Exploring the students' narratives has raised several important issues that impact upon this integration and I believe that a holistic view of student experiences and engagement needs to take into account each of the four orientations discussed within this thesis (students' development as self-directed learners, the importance of peer support, the impact of financial concerns and personal relationship difficulties) and their impact on student learning. There are a number of recommendations for future work as a consequence of the findings presented here and I believe that three areas would benefit from further exploration:

- student engagement;
- the initial induction to higher education;
- supporting learner development.

4.6.1 Student engagement

The students' narratives depicted how their engagement varied over time as both personal and social factors impacted upon their perceptions and

experiences. In accord with the findings of Bryson and Hardy (2012) it was clear that what the student brought with them in terms of personal circumstances influenced both their academic engagement and their sense of 'being a student'. I believe, therefore, that my research gives an indication of where our future efforts as educators may lie in focusing our attention on how we can support Physiotherapy students' 'becoming' and encourage a 'will to learn' whilst 'being a student'. I believe that this study indicates that we need to consider how we can best provide opportunities that facilitate students to become the students that they want to be, whilst considering both our own 'being' as educators and what it is to 'be a university' (Barnett, 2011).

Engaging an ever more diverse student population is not a simple task for any educator or institution; however, further consideration must be given to how future provision can engage, inspire and support students, whilst they are 'being a student' and 'being' in general. As explored within Barnett (2011), we perhaps need to consider 'being a student' in the context of the possibilities of 'being and becoming a university' and the key challenges faced in being an authentic university, that supports students' authentic ways of being.

Future research and curriculum development within my own practice will therefore focus on how concepts of both 'being' and 'becoming' for each individual student can be best facilitated through the provision of learning experiences in which they can explore 'ways of being'. It is clear the

challenges of being and becoming a student for the individual students shaped these seven narratives, and impacted upon their academic achievements and sense of belonging to the institution. Whilst they alone are primarily responsible for their personal and social difficulties, I believe that as educators we need to acknowledge students' personal circumstances and strive to provide an environment in which all students have opportunities to make the most of their higher education experiences. We need to encourage students to draw on their personal resources and acknowledge that on occasion they will need to seek outside support; therefore, providing appropriate access to institutional support services that can offer specialist advice is essential.

In conjunction with this, further work and research around setting student expectations would seem necessary. All students have expectations of their learning experiences based on their previous educational experiences and the information they have acquired about their institution and programme. They are also influenced by the expectations and perceptions of their family and friends, each offering different perspectives. These expectations can have a profound impact upon their perceptions of their learning experiences (see Ecclestone et al., 2010) and add a significant emotional dimension (see Case et al., 2010). Whilst it is reasonable to accept that students will have different expectations of their learning experiences and the amount of help and support they will receive (Gidman et al., 2000), when expectations remain unmet studying in higher education can be difficult and dispiriting (see also Field, 2010).

This was evident within the narratives of Maria, Jack and Adnam, who felt shocked by the academic workload and the need for independent study without the on-going tutor support they had grown accustomed to during their previous studies.

The responsibility of setting student expectations must primarily be that of the academic institution, and previous research emphasises the need for setting expectations early and providing a high level of academic support (McCarey et al., 2007). Therefore, clear guidance regarding the roles of academic staff, the student commitment required, provision of learning resources and support services with robust feedback mechanisms in place to answer questions and clarify concerns is required. This should enable students to more fully understand their own responsibility for their learning and what their expectations of staff and institutional systems should reasonably be.

A closely related area for future consideration and research is the role of peer support and the development of learning communities. Social networks and friendships have previously been identified as important (see Bryson and Hardy, 2012; McInnis, 2005; Thomas, 2002) and peer support or lack of it was significant for each of the students over time and clearly influenced 'being a student' for some. All of the students spoke about the benefits they gained from the informal peer support networks in their narratives, particularly Alice and Sara; therefore, as a priority I will consider how I can create an environment that can further aid the

development of both peer support systems and learning communities. Discourse and occasions to be heard help us all to contemplate our own 'being-in-the-world' and make sense and meaning of our lives; hence, I will review how further opportunities can be embedded to allow students to develop their own 'voice'. As described by Wilcox et al. (2005), greater attention needs to be given to the social aspects of students' experiences and as such, I shall consider how social support mechanisms can be further encouraged and integrated, particularly for those students who are relatively isolated from their immediate peer group.

4.6.2 Initial induction to university

As previously stated this study was practitioner research with an underpinning philosophy of pragmatism. I wanted to use this research to improve provision within my own institution to meet the changing needs of students, and in future I plan to develop appropriate activities that can be directed at the earlier life – pre-entry – of potential students with a careful consideration of the processes of both 'being' and 'becoming' a student. The results of this study demonstrate that the learning transition to higher education can be difficult as students adapt to new circumstances and incorporate change into their lives. Therefore I plan to implement an extended induction period where students can be encouraged to consider their individual sense of 'being a student' and how they can draw on their personal resources to facilitate authentic ways of being.

I aim to develop education practices that encourage a sense of belonging, inspire my students and support a 'will to learn' to facilitate both personal development and peer support for all during their initial transition. Using aspects of this project and work I undertook for NHS North West, I have already developed a board game to help facilitate students transitions to higher education (see Appendix 3) and in future I plan to further develop the game resources to provide on-going support for students both within my own institution and with partner institutions.

Current educational policy and research acknowledges and in particular notes that a period of induction is necessary to help integrate students and facilitate their transitions to higher education during the process of 'becoming a student'. Previous research has also identified that healthcare programmes can be stressful for some students (Bowden, 2008), and this can ultimately lead to attrition (Hamshire et al., 2012). However, despite a substantive body of research in this area we are still unclear about what exactly is an effective induction and when and how it should occur; essentially we are still unsure of 'what works?' for a diverse student population. This study demonstrates that for these seven students their transitions to higher education was an on-going, longitudinal process as one transition followed another: into higher education at level four, development of degree-level learning skills, transition to level five and six; and transition into the placement environment and the beginning of 'being' a Physiotherapist. Each student's transformation and 'being' was individual and as such, this

evidence suggests that the induction of students to higher education could be considered as an on-going series of events that provides a range of different opportunities to meet individual needs and moves away from the 'one size fits all' approach that can currently be seen at some institutions.

Whilst there is no simple formula for easing the transition of a diverse student body, research suggests that first impressions can directly influence students (see Andrew et al., 2008). I believe we should move towards providing a structured space in which students can develop for and by themselves as they become a student over time, with a move to a more learner-centred induction to offer opportunities that allow students to explore how they can achieve a match between our expectations as educators, their authentic selves and their prior learning experiences. A by-product of this research is that the students found the 'space' to reflect on a regular basis provided by the interviews beneficial (see page 295 in chapter 5). Therefore discussions with the programme team on ways such reflection can be incorporated into each academic year would begin this process.

Of particular importance is a consideration of support services, especially for financial and personal issues. Previous research demonstrates that there are a wide variety of personal, social and academic factors that impact on students' experiences (Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1999; Yorke, 1999). The most often cited factors that contribute to the attrition of

students studying on health professions programmes are personal issues, financial problems and academic difficulties (Glossop, 2001) and students have long cited financial concerns as one of their biggest challenges (Brown and Edelmann, 2000). Financial and personal circumstances were important aspects of 'being a student' for the students within this study and further research on these areas would seem necessary.

At my own institution I will consider how induction activities can be developed to enable students to value the diverse range of support systems they can and should draw on in getting through periods of difficulty. I will also endeavour to use the study findings to support the development of personal academic tutors so they are more easily able to recognise students in need of financial and personal support and direct them to the appropriate institutional support systems. Furthermore, I plan to discuss with the programme leader the possibility of working with both the NHS commissioners and Students' Union to set up a placement financial support fund for students, in line with current institutional emergency loans. This could be made available for students at the start of each placement in the form of an emergency loan for those who struggle to manage their finances whilst reducing their paid work hours to incorporate placement work and travel.

4.6.3 Supporting learner development

In line with previous research, the transition to degree-level working was a shock for several of the students in this study and some struggled initially to progress as autonomous learners at times. As previously noted, academic integration is influenced by the individual level of academic preparedness and their experience of the academic programme that they are studying (Thomas, 2002). When there is a 'match' between academic preparedness and the academic experience, students are more likely to engage (Thomas, 2002). If there is a disparity between students' expectations and the academic demands of a programme then students are more likely to struggle to achieve the required academic level (Andrew et al., 2008).

Therefore when reviewing my own curriculum I will also give consideration to developing further systems that help to scaffold students' development as autonomous learners as they make the transition from a didactic teaching background. This will include working in partnership with colleagues across the institution to ensure that the requirements of degree-level study are clearly articulated to all students throughout their programme to help set reasonable expectations and encourage their academic development. In addition I will encourage a stronger emphasis on basic degree-level skills – critical thinking, academic writing and referencing – to develop a coherent set of principles that underpins the whole curriculum.

Finally, I believe the most important implication of this study is the insights that the students' temporal narratives have offered into what university life was like for those undergoing it, providing a greater understanding of what 'being a student' meant for these individual students. As previously noted, experience is continuous and dynamic, and as described by Barnett (2007), students undergo a continuous process of becoming as they change and adapt over the three years of their undergraduate studies. It was only through regularly meeting these students to listen to the next 'episode' in their stories that I was able to explore how 'being a student' develops over time and is interwoven with their 'being' in general. As a result, this study has added a new student-focused perspective to the knowledge on students' higher education experiences and can be included with the limited number of focused, in-depth, qualitative studies on student experiences (see Bryson and Hardy, 2012) to enable the further development of effective strategy and practice.

Chapter five – Conclusions and final reflections

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter provides closing thoughts and reflections on the study, beginning with the conclusions and followed by a reflexive scrutiny of the strengths and challenges. Future areas for research arising from the study are outlined to finish.

5.2 Conclusions

This study began with an interest in Physiotherapy students' learning experiences and 'being a student' and this remains an important issue. In the UK there is a substantial cost for the NHS associated with funding students; and for institutions that provide healthcare courses NHS commissioners represent a major source of income (Urwin et al., 2010). Such overarching financial factors are acting as a driver with respect to exploring students' higher education experiences and ensuring that they have the best possible learning experience. Much has been written on student experiences and retention and we know that students' perceptions are influenced by multiple factors. However in order to enhance 'being a student' we need to gain a greater understanding of how multiple factors impact upon and compound one another to lead to either a positive or negative outcome for individual students.

The use of a narrative as a research methodology has perceptibly shaped and framed this study and influenced the thesis (see Nettleton et al., 2005; Edvardsson et al., 2003). Narrative inquiry gives participants an opportunity to tell their stories and convey in their own words the meaning of their experiences (Gubrium, 1993). As described by Carter (2008),

such stories have personal meaning for the storytellers and can help them make sense of their feelings and responses to events. It is therefore a methodology that is set in stories of experiences with the stories providing researchers with an opportunity to analyse lived experience over time; embedded in multiple contexts of an individual's history (Price, 1999). In such a way, this study has allowed an insight into the complex, individual experiences of seven students told through four common orientations and I have presented a text that demonstrates the multifaceted nature of undergraduate students' journeys, providing a view of the full individual experiences of the students. These narratives demonstrate how students' engagement varies over time as personal and social factors impact upon perceptions and experiences. In accord with the findings of Bryson and Hardy (2012), it was clear that what the student brings with them in terms of personal circumstances influences both their academic engagement and sense of 'being a student'.

Within the results chapter I have attempted to contextualise the students' narratives and my reading of them around four broad orientations to illustrate how experiences shaped and influenced the students' lives. Each narrative was complex and multi-layered but I identified particular orientations within each narrative to help develop understanding of these students' experiences in terms of their differences and similarities. The narratives presented within the results chapter are by necessity a modicum of the students' narratives collected during the entire study. By the end of the study I had many pages of transcript from each of the

student interviews. In order to present an acceptable and accessible research product (see Koch, 1998) and make coherent narratives, I have used orientations developed during the analysis to explore issues around peer support, financial difficulties, learner autonomy and personal difficulties. These orientations were frequently described by each of the seven students and although the narratives themselves did not focus exclusively on one orientation, for each student there was a dominant discourse that influenced the way each story was told – the ‘actual substance’ of each individual narrative.

Over the course of the study, different factors assumed priority at different times within each of the individual students’ narratives but these four orientations were always present and indicate that these are some of the important issues which influenced ‘being a student’ for these individuals. There are of course multiple readings of the narratives but I believe that I have presented an ‘auditable’ account (Koch, 1998) of each student’s story, that gives an accurate presentation of each student’s experience and as such makes a new contribution to the research evidence on Physiotherapy students’ experiences. I acknowledge that the work presented here is my interpretation at a particular point in time and that if I revisited it in the future, or another researcher reviewed the data, another interpretation is possible.

This study has demonstrated that ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student are about students developing a sense of themselves and of belonging to an

institution, consistent with the findings of Wilcox et al. (2005). Ultimately higher education is necessarily a process of becoming (Barnett, 1999) and can therefore be considered as a transformation of 'being' (Barnett, 2007). I was concerned to present aspects of the students' temporal lives that illustrated the complexities of their experiences. Hence the interviews were designed to provide an opportunity for the students to reflect on their experiences and construct an understanding in relation to themselves and others, without a pre-determined interview schedule influencing the narratives. I believed that listening to the students tell their stories on their own terms, over time and analysing the narratives would help me gain an in-depth insight into their educational experiences. As proposed by Heidegger (1926/62:18), 'the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time'. Dasein has a future, a past and a present and surveys its life as a whole from birth to death; as such it is essentially historical (Inwood, 1997). Therefore I believed that I needed to consider lived experience over time to explore 'being a student'.

What this work adds to the body of knowledge is an in-depth depiction of seven students' stories which demonstrate how such a transformation can be on-going over the three years of their undergraduate studies as the students essentially came into themselves and explored 'ways of being' (Barnett, 1999). Their development was not always straightforward and these temporal narratives give an insight into the complexity of individual experiences as each student narrated their learning trajectory

and consider their possible future self during their process of 'becoming a student'. In addition, the incorporation of the Heideggerian concepts of 'being' and 'time' (Heidegger, 1926/62) offered a new perspective on 'being a student'. The research will therefore be used to add to the knowledge on Physiotherapy students' experience and the on-going process of becoming a student and ultimately a healthcare professional.

The narratives were not entirely positive and some of the students encountered both problematic personal and academic challenges. However, the findings are focused on the student interviews and I believe that I have presented an accurate text that demonstrates the multifaceted nature of these students' journeys, providing a view of their full, individual experiences and their 'being'. I tentatively suggest therefore that I have met the aims of this study whilst acknowledging that research into students' experiences is on-going and that other researchers will also add to the discussion as they contribute future research in this area.

5.3 What was my role in the study?

At the start of the first, introductory chapter of this dissertation I indicated that underpinning and running parallel with the students' stories presented in this study was an eighth: my own story as a developing research student. Subsequently, when I began to write this discussion chapter I reflected in depth upon my own narrative and thus my development and progress over the last four years. Effectively within this

study, I have had a number of roles: as lecturer, student researcher and audience for the interviews.

As a lecturer committed to enabling students to have the best possible learning experience, I was interested in exploring what influenced individual students and how they changed and developed over time. I wanted to gain an understanding of how students spoke about and framed their experiences, focusing on narratives given at a range of transition points throughout the three years of their undergraduate studies to offer an insight into the nature of 'student experience'. I was concerned to present aspects of the students' narratives that illustrated the complexities of undergraduate learning experiences and allow students' voices to be heard. The underpinning objective was to improve the learning experiences of the students within the faculty, adding to the body of research on students' experiences and engagement. I was thus focused on finding out how I could enhance students' engagement throughout the myriad on-going concerns of their everyday lives.

As a research student, my philosophical approach and personal location have influenced this study throughout. The project was essentially practitioner research as I explored the experiences of students studying on one of the degree programmes in the faculty in which I have taught for the previous nine years. I have also been researching healthcare students' experiences for the last six years and some of my research outputs have included learning and teaching developments within the

faculty. The study has therefore been guided and framed by both my lecturing experience and by my underpinning research philosophy of pragmatism. When I developed the initial research proposal I planned to study a topic which I believed was important and that was consistent with my own value system as a researcher and lecturer. In accord with the work of Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998), I was also endeavouring to use the research process to 'bring about positive consequences' within my own pragmatic value system. I ultimately wanted to use the findings of the study to guide future developments for subsequent cohorts of students and consider the transferability of the findings to other settings both within my own institution and beyond.

I was also the audience for these stories and they are therefore inevitably infused with my own experience, as an academic with an interest in enhancing learning and teaching. As described by Frank (2010:354), 'acts of telling are relationships' and therefore these narratives tell us about both the storytellers and story-listeners (Carter, 2004). What I had not anticipated when I started the study was the 'potentially therapeutic effects' for the students of participating in the study (Koch, 1998). Again I have learnt both a lesson as a qualitative researcher and gained a valuable personal insight. After the second round of interviews in the second term of their first year a couple of the students made reference to the benefits they gained from being able to have a space in which to tell their stories uninterrupted in the interviews. I was initially somewhat surprised but these students made repeated references to what they

considered to be a unique opportunity to talk and make sense of their lives; and consider their possible future selves. As the study progressed, several of the other students commented on how they enjoyed the opportunity to tell their stories uninterrupted, to someone who was keen to listen. In essence I therefore believe that my 'hearing' of the narratives allowed each of the students to explore their sense of being-in-the-world and therefore gave them an opportunity to contemplate what 'being a student' meant to them.

On reflection, my experiences and perspectives have therefore been inseparable from the research process and fundamental to this thesis. This can be considered both as a strength of the study and as a challenge. Searching for ways in which I could improve provision for future students and add a contribution to the research body on students' experiences I have on occasions privileged aspects of the students' narratives that indicate how I can improve learning and teaching. However, by acknowledging and recognising my own perspective and subjectivity I believe that there has been a separation between these and the students' stories. Although I have presented my reading of the students' narratives I believe that they are 'their stories' and that I have maintained the integrity of their unique experiences. I did not return the analysed narratives to the students for 'checking' but when I spoke with the students after graduation and asked them again to reflect upon their experiences their summaries echoed my reading of their stories.

I wanted to explore the students' experiences and present some of the meanings of being and becoming a student drawn from students' own accounts of their experiences. Throughout the study I considered the students' individual narratives and perspectives to be vital to identify defining moments where personal factors, institutional provision and experiences combined to lead to either a positive or negative encounter. Therefore the emphasis on the students' stories was central to the study, as I believed that the stories conveyed by those whose experiences were being researched would give the greatest insights and highlight the different aspects of the students' experiences.

I believed that by listening to the students talk about their experiences, telling their own stories in their own words would be key to understanding their experiences and enable me to improve provision for future students by discovering more about the students' learning experiences, what influenced them and how they changed over time during the process of becoming and being a student. The temporality of the stories offers a unique perspective into how the students' perceptions and experiences changed over their three years of undergraduate study. As stated by Heidegger (1926/62:19), we are 'essentially temporal' and we (Dasein) live our life in time, understanding both the present and the future with regard to the past, not confined to the present moment (Heidegger, 1926/62:18). As such, these narratives give an insight into authentic ways of being a student.

Without an examination of everyday narratives I believe I would not have gained an insight into what 'being a student' was for these seven students and understood their lived experiences across the three years of their undergraduate studies. I wanted to listen to students' stories to determine what university life meant to the students through their personal narrations of authentic ways of being and from these investigate how this meaning came across in their stories of their experiences. All of the students in the study generously shared their stories and experiences and the personal narratives presented within this thesis offer an insight into both the fragility and endurance of being and becoming a student in a time of educational change.

As the study progressed over the three years of the students' undergraduate studies there were on-going opportunities for each of them to make meaning of their experiences and describe the factors that influenced their learning and their ways of being. Prompted by a narrative stimulus each of the students subsequently gave extended accounts, usually describing their lives in detail. For some students this meant describing their 'back story' to form a storyline, for others there was a focus on the present and future. I endeavoured greatly not to influence the students and enable them to speak in a manner they wished and on topics that were important to them. Overall these accounts were usually shaped by a core explanation based on their learning progress in terms of their assessment results, with interwoven personal stories. Through analysis of the interviews I was able to identify individual dominant

narrative orientations and critically explore some of the issues around undergraduate student experience across a diverse student population. I was thus able to hear similarities as well as considering differences within the individual narratives.

The strength of this narrative inquiry is that it provided an opportunity for students' understanding of their experiences to be heard. Throughout the study I have been committed to making a space for their voices to be conspicuous amongst the dominant discourse of research that focuses upon academic concepts of students' experiences. How the students spoke about their understanding of their experiences has therefore permeated and led the study, making 'the voice' of individual student's experience developing over time possible. By using only a narrative prompt at the start of the interviews I gave the students the power to define both themselves and their experiences. The resultant narrative form illuminated the meaning of the students' higher education experiences (Price, 1999) as they each explored ways of 'being'. The final question that encouraged the students to consider their possible future selves, revealed their representations of 'being' a student in the future.

One important reason I undertook this research was to give voice to the students' experiences and hoped that through listening to their stories I would be able to improve future practice, both within my own institution and others. Each of the students' narratives was a story consisting of a

series of episodes describing their experiences over the three-year time period of data collection. As the students related these stories, a storyline linking the factors that influenced the individual experiences developed. For some students this storyline depicted an upward trajectory and a positive outcome, for others the storyline revealed a series of life events and difficulties that caused exhaustion and distress, but for each there was a predominant narrative linkage (see Gubrium, 1993). These stories each present a particular insight into the process of being and becoming a student and as such offer a way of understanding 'being a student' that is both locally important and potentially useful to the broader higher education environment.

5.4 Challenges

The challenge for this thesis is that the study in its entirety is focused on the narratives of a sample of seven students, although I believe that the use of narrative inquiry has enabled me to gain a richness of understanding of these particular students' experiences and that I have had privileged access to their thoughts and feelings. Inevitably there will have been topics that these students chose not to bring into their stories and opinions and beliefs that they have decided not to communicate as they did not fit with the self that they wished to present. Essentially the students have therefore created the stories for me as listener, the time and location have shaped the stories that the students told. I have had to come to an understanding that the students constructed specific

narratives for me and that the same student stories told in other circumstances would have been different.

Other students who originally volunteered to be part of the study but did not participate may have had very different stories and perspectives. In addition if I had analysed the data within a different time frame or from a different philosophical underpinning I may have viewed the personal narratives otherwise. There are therefore multiple possible readings of the narratives. Although the study included a diverse group of students that in some ways represented the cohort, all experience is essentially personal and therefore there is a tension in extrapolating the research to the student population overall. Whilst I can consider the transferability of the findings, it is not possible to generalise from these personal experiences.

My goal was to present narratives that demonstrate how the students made meaning of some of the aspects of their experiences (Josselson and Lieblich 1999) and focus on the actual substance of the story being told (Price, 1999). I wanted to reveal the students' subjective reconstruction of the experiences they considered relevant to the study (Mizrachi, 1999) to demonstrate the temporality or historicity of the students' experiences (Inwood, 1997). At the beginning of the study I believed that some of the skills that I had gained as a practising health professional and as a novice researcher would enable me to conduct 'open interviews' that provided a place and time in which the students

could tell their stories. I spent considerable efforts ensuring that although I worked within the faculty I would not have any direct teaching contact with the students, and on ensuring that the interviews took place at times and places that were convenient to the students. However, the fusion of roles of researcher and lecturer were inevitable at times and I found that my role of lecturer took over on a couple of occasions when the students made reference to specific difficulties that they were struggling with. On these occasions after the interviews had concluded and I had turned off the recording equipment I spoke to the students as a lecturer, directing them to support services or to online resources. These interactions always happened outside of the interviews and thus fell outside the recorded narratives. In these situations I felt the contradiction of my two roles, but I believed that I almost had a 'duty of care' to the students and wanted to ensure that they were aware of support services that could help them. Inevitably these exchanges will have changed the course of the narratives of the students I spoke to as a lecturer but it was a complex balancing act.

In recognising these dilemmas my personal view is that I have enabled a group of seven students to tell particular versions of their undergraduate narratives of being and becoming a student, creating the stories that were important to them as individuals at particular times. These stories can be valued for exactly this. They give particular insights and I would contest that there are no fixed, definable meanings or exact 'truths' of experience,

only individual readings of particular situations and experiences at particular times.

5.5 Future research

Finally, after exploring these students' narratives over their three-year degree programme, what remains as the study has ended is, for me, somewhat unsatisfactory. Although there is 'the sense of an ending' as the students all completed their undergraduate studies and graduated, there is also for them a new beginning and a new transition. I cherish my memories of the individual interviews and have been personally instructed by each of the students' narratives (see also Gubrium, 1993). The endpoint of the completion of their undergraduate studies is merely convenient for this thesis itself as the students will go on into their professional careers and their narratives will also go forward into the future. Perhaps those that have stayed in Manchester will return to the university for post-graduate studies or continuing professional development programmes as they indicated in our final telephone conversations and I will hear about the next chapter in their on-going experiences.

Thus this exploration of being and becoming concludes with a provisional ending for each student. This ending is also a beginning of their new careers, whether in Physiotherapy or otherwise and a starting point for me as I turn to the task of further developing the curricula on which I teach and future research projects. On a local level, I always planned to

use this research to develop curricula within my own faculty but reflecting on the students' experiences whilst completing the thesis has also prompted me to consider how these and future students manage their next transition – the process of becoming and being a professional – and I plan to build on this study and direct my future research to exploring this.

Parts of the work have already been shared on an international level, at the RAISE Conference 2011, and the Nurse Education Today/Nurse Education in Practice Conference 2012. Discussion with colleagues at these sessions raised interesting debate around student engagement and placement learning. My immediate plans, therefore, following completion of this dissertation, are to return to the student narratives to further analyse them in terms of the students' perceptions of their placement experiences. Clinical placements are central to health professionals' education, providing a real-world environment in which students can contextualise the theory and skills they have been introduced to in academic settings. Much has been written on placement learning and it has been previously identified as fraught with problems (Levett-Jones et al., 2007) and a source of considerable stress (Bowden, 2008; Gibbons, 2010; Timmins and Kaliszer, 2002), with negative placement experiences causing students to reflect on their choice of career and consider leaving their programme (Andrew et al., 2008; Bowden, 2008; Brodie et al., 2004; Hamshire et al., 2011).

Despite a considerable body of literature exploring placement learning within health professionals' education there is limited evidence available on what exactly makes a good placement. Belongingness has been identified as important (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008) but it is unclear how placement environments can optimise learning experiences to enhance students' belongingness and social well-being (Levett-Jones et al., 2007). All of the students within this study valued their placement experiences and for Jack and Adnam these experiences were turning points that facilitated their engagement with their studies. In addition Alice identified the importance of 'belongingness' when she commented on one of her placements: *'You were instantly made to feel like part of the team'*. Therefore, I plan to review the narratives to detail issues around placement learning that were identified as being both positive and enhancing learning and belonging, to contribute to the evidence base on placement provision.

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Appendices

Appendix one – Ethical approval



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

MEMORANDUM
THE MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HEALTH, PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL CARE

To: Claire Hamshire
From: Dr Bill Campbell
Date: 2 September 2009
Subject: Ethics Application 0913

A sequential exploratory inquiry into the experiences of first year
Physiotherapy student transition to higher education.

Thank you for your detailed response to the issues raised in the review of
your ethics application.

The Faculty Academic Ethics Committee is pleased to approve the project
but asks you to submit in due course, the questionnaire for approval by
FAEC.

FAEC wishes you every success with your project.



Appendix two – Student information and consent forms

Interview Information sheet

Title of project: A sequential exploratory inquiry into the experiences of first year Physiotherapy student transition to higher education.

Interview Structure: The interview will consist of a series of questions regarding your views about starting on the Physiotherapy programme.

Interviewer

Claire Hamshire, Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, Professional Registration Division, School of Health, Psychology and Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Purpose of the interview

The purpose of the interview is:

- To explore your experiences of your transition to the Physiotherapy programme
- To explore your experience of the induction sessions and materials
- Identify barriers and facilitators to student transition to the Physiotherapy programme

The topic areas to be covered within the interviews are:

- The Physiotherapy programme induction sessions and materials
- Interaction with staff
- Halls of residence

What am I being asked to do?

You have been invited to attend for an interview at the Elizabeth Gaskell campus, which should last no longer than one hour.

What are the benefits to me?

As you progress through the degree programme you may well benefit from the developments in the Induction materials that arise from this study.

Ethical considerations

- Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained by using a study code number on the interview transcripts which is separate and different to your student identification number.
- Your identity will remain confidential to the interviewer, with the study code numbers being used on the transcripts.
- All the data recorded, will be stored either on a computer at the University which is password protected or in a locked filing cabinet. It will not be possible to identify individual participants from the data presented in the study. The interview transcripts and the data generated from them will be kept for 5 years and then destroyed.
- You can withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason and you may also ask for your data to be withdrawn. Your decision to withdraw yourself or your data from the study will not impact or adversely affect your education in anyway.
- You do not have to answer questions if you choose not to.
- Your data will in **no way** contribute to formative or summative assessment of your academic performance.
- Your education will not be affected by the participation or non-participation in the study.
- Your name will **not** be printed in any publication.
- You will be offered an opportunity to read and make changes to your transcript.

Claire Hamshire

Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow,

Professional Registration Division.

School of Health, Psychology and Social Care,

Manchester Metropolitan University.

Tel: 0161 2472940 C.hamshire@mmu.ac.uk

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Student Consent for interview Form



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Study ID number

Title of project: A sequential exploratory inquiry into the experiences of first year Physiotherapy student transition to higher education.

Principal Researcher: Claire Hamshire, Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, Professional Registration Division, Manchester Metropolitan University.

I have read the student information sheet and I am aware of the purpose of this research study. I am willing to be interviewed for this study and have been given the researchers contact details if I need any further information.

My signature certifies that I have decided to participate having read and understood the information given and had an opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Igive my permission for:

my interview to be audio taped (please tick)

my anonymised quotes to be used in the study (please tick)

Signature.....Date.....

I have explained the nature of the study to the subject and in my opinion the subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

Principal researcher.....Date.....

Appendix three – Conference paper outlining the ‘Staying the Course’ board game

Staying the Course – A Game to Facilitate Students’ Transitions to Higher Education

Abstract: The initial transition to higher education can be difficult for some students as they adapt to the institutional habitus (Thomas 2002) and for many students this can be one of the most significant and difficult learning transitions they will make (Yorke & Longden 2007). To help facilitate this complex transition the authors used the data from a regional student attrition study to inform the design of a board game and companion website. The purpose of the game was threefold: to set reasonable student expectations of institutional systems, raise awareness of support services, and promote social integration.

This paper outlines the background literature that informed the game design and describes how the study data was incorporated into the board. The board game was subsequently linked with discussion activities to prompt players to consider different perspectives and personal dilemmas as they played. The iterative process of how the game evolved during testing and initial evaluation is also described.

Key words: student transitions, healthcare, student experience, attrition, game design

Introduction

The ‘Staying the Course’ game is based on the findings of a mixed-methods, regional study undertaken at nine higher education institutions in the North-West of England. The purpose of the project was to investigate healthcare students’ perceptions of their learning experiences and identify factors that contributed to attrition. The study incorporated multiple strands within two phases. The first, qualitative, phase explored the experiences of current and discontinued students through narrative interviews. The second phase utilised an online survey, developed from a thematic analysis of the interview data, to further investigate the key issues identified. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influenced students’ perceptions and contributed to attrition.

The student sample for the study was drawn from a range of healthcare programmes across the North West of England, which were primarily nursing but also included a range of allied health professions (for example, Speech and Language therapy, Dieticians and Physiotherapy). The data analysis of both phases identified that some students needed greater support during their initial transitions to university, as they described their initial experiences as *‘information overload’* and *‘bewildering’*. In partnership with student representatives the authors

therefore created the concept and design of the 'Staying the Course' board game and website. The underpinning philosophy of the game was to:

- Facilitate social integration in the first term through game play and discussion.
- Promote personal integration by informing students of the institutional systems for pastoral care and learning support.
- Avoid 'information overload' in the first weeks of term by providing ongoing online access to resources and activities.
- Set reasonable student expectations by raising their awareness of academic systems and commonly reported concerns and problems within the first year.

Background

Student attrition from Higher Education is an increasingly important focus for institutions, funding bodies and students as the cost of post-compulsory education continues to increase in the UK. The issue is particularly important within health and social care where attrition can impact upon financial and workforce development targets (Mulholland et al, 2008). There is a substantial research base, built over the last forty years on student retention and success and it is noted that there is no simple formula to increase retention across a diverse student population where attrition is a multi-causal problem that requires a combination of solutions (Yorke & Longden, 2008;Tinto, 1993).

The literature on student attrition suggests that the initial transition to higher education can be difficult for some students as they struggle with both social and academic integration (Harvey & Drew, 2006). Although attrition can occur at any time, the first year is critically significant (Yorke,1999) and whilst there is no simple formula for easing the transition and therefore retention of a diverse student body, first impressions can directly influence students (Andrew et al, 2008;Edward, 2003). The process of induction and building a relationship with students is therefore important (Harvey & Drew, 2006); and programmes that aim to gradually build both academic and social relationships will better support students during their time in higher education. By maximizing positive experiences and managing student transition sympathetically institutions can build positive relationships with new students which Yorke and Longden (2008) consider 'bends the odds' in favour of student success.

A first year programme that is built around information transfer and not relationship building can confuse and dishearten students newly arrived on campus and exacerbate their predisposals to withdraw (Edward, 2003). Therefore the two main aims of an induction designer should be to avoid information overload (Hamshire & Cullen, 2011;Harvey & Drew, 2006) and facilitate the development of academic and peer relationships;

so students feel part of the university community and can become accustomed to the university culture (Edward, 2003). As reported by Yorke and Longden (2008), simply making friends seems to be a crucial part of a positive transition to higher education. Students on Health Professional commissioned programmes have the added complexity of making the transition to becoming a health care professional whilst completing clinical placements throughout their programmes.

The aim of the 'Staying the Course' game was to facilitate students' transitions to higher education by providing an opportunity for both social and academic integration. A game format was used to provide a safe space in which students can interact and make mistakes. The board game was designed to include commonly occurring concerns and problems and is to be played in the first weeks of term to encourage collaborative learning and peer support. Players are embedded in problem solving situations and learn about university systems and services in an engaging informal environment. Opportunities to discuss common issues, dilemmas and concerns are also included. After playing the game, students can access the companion website that includes FAQs, quizzes, videos and student case studies. This provides an ongoing source of support and information.

Design process

The game design was informed by the data analysis of the regional study. The thematic analysis of the students' narratives and comments on the survey about their experiences was used as a starting point and three broad themes used to scaffold the game design:

- Academic issues and uncertainties
- Personal difficulties
- Placement problems and issues

The most frequently occurring problems and concerns from these three themes were developed into quiz questions and dilemmas that became three sets of cards for use within the game, using verbatim quotes from students wherever possible. A fourth set of cards – "Take a Chance" – was subsequently developed to incorporate unusual and unplanned circumstances that students had experienced that had an impact across all three themes (for example illness and robbery), and to add an element of luck to the game play. A fifth set of cards giving information on Student Services was developed to raise students' awareness of the campus-based advice and support services.

Following the design and student testing of the game cards a board was developed. The board followed the course of an academic year and the object of the game was to be the first player to successfully complete a circuit of the board. The design process was iterative with each new board and set of cards tested by students and the Students' Union staff to test usability and appropriateness of game questions. A total of six hour-

long testing sessions were undertaken with twenty-three, first and second-year students and ten members of academic staff. During this process the game was refined to include greater information on university support services and collaborative cards that encouraged peer support.

Players have to move around the board itself by making decisions and answering the questions that are presented on the cards, or by landing on 'chance' squares. Figure 1 below is an image of the game board:

Figure 1: Game board



Initial evaluation

Initial evaluations of the game have been conducted by recording staff and student comments and suggestion during testing sessions. Comments and questions were recorded and used for further development. Initial verbal feedback from students has been positive

and the overall theme was that they particularly enjoyed the debate and discussion prompted by the dilemma questions. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic:

'This is great, I am a second year and I didn't know half this stuff!'

(Second year Psychology student)

Academic and support staff have also commented on how the game turns a process of information giving into a fun interaction.

'I've really enjoyed playing this game; it raises awareness of all the main issues affecting students and is a fun way to inform students about support services.'

(Students' Union Advice Centre Manager)

Discussion

The 'Staying the Course' game is currently a work in progress and confidence to generalise from the study is therefore limited. However, despite this limitation, initial evaluations have been positive and to date both staff and student players have commented positively on their playing experiences. The majority of student comments have focused on their enjoyment of game-play and on their perceptions of having gained greater knowledge and understanding of student support services after play. Observations from academic and support staff included positive feedback on both the game design and content and several constructive comments on how the game could be further developed.

Student attrition from higher education is an international concern and we know that students leave for a range of personal, social and academic issues (Tinto 1993). Whilst there is no simple formula to ease students' transitions to higher education and the retention of a diverse student body all interactions that promote social and academic integration should be encouraged. The findings from the initial evaluations suggest that the Staying the Course game can be used to promote social, academic and personal integrations and this suggests that it could be used to support student transitions to higher education.

Conclusions

Both the social aspect of playing the game and the informal method of raising students' awareness of support services were well received during testing. Further evaluation is planned for the 2012/13 academic session with the aim of additional development of both the board-game and website to meet changing student needs

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