The Psychological Contract as an Explanatory Framework for the Student Experience at Sunderland Business School

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A thesis submitted to the University of Strathclyde in fulfilment of the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2002

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the following people who helped with this research.....

My supervisor, Professor Hugh Foot, for his expert advice and encouragement.

The students of Sunderland Business School who patiently completed questionnaires. and especially to those who agreed to be interviewed during their preparations for final exams.

Tom Cuthbertson. for helping with those interviews.

My colleagues at the Business School who allowed time in their classes for students to complete questionnaires.

Dr. David Sanders and Dr. Jan Lister from the Psychology Department at the Business School, for their help with the statistical analysis.

Susan Scanlon, for her expertise with the university student record system.

Jeff Evans, for providing a crash course in desk-top publishing

Quinn, Adam, Holly and my 'research assistant', Abigail

Most of all to Trevor, for his belief in me.

Abstract

Under a 'widening participation' agenda, universities are currently being encouraged by Government to admit students from under-represented groups and those with non-traditional qualifications. The University of Sunderland has been one of the most successful in attracting students from these groups, but has been less successful at retaining those students and helping them achieve. This research investigates the reasons for this lack of success. It tackles the issue in three phases:

An initial investigation into student stress showed significant differences between A-level entrants and non-traditional entrants to Sunderland Business School. Poor person-environment fit and unmet expectations were identified as important sources of stress.

A subsequent investigation of student expectations again revealed significant differences between A-level and non-traditional entrants in areas relating to the academic experience, with A-level entrants showing lower levels of enjoyment of learning and poorer match with expectations, accompanied by a significant fall in the academic performance of the A-level entrants over the first two years at university. The research concludes that there is poor academic integration of A-level students into a system that has been adapted over recent years to cater for the needs of non-traditional entrants.

Other expectations were reported as widely unmet by *all* students, and these were further investigated using the concept of the psychological contract. The findings suggest that many students have an incongruent psychological contract that can result in their under-achievement at university. The research proposes a model of the student/university psychological contract that can be used as a framework for further research into this issue.

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Preface

The origins of this thesis lie in my own personal experience when I joined the teaching staff at Sunderland Business School in 1993. I had previously spent some time teaching in the School of Health Sciences – mainly on the Pharmacy or Pharmaceutical and Chemical Sciences courses. The courses were typified by small classes (just enough students to fit safely into a laboratory, numbers governed by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society), and by highly motivated students with a strong sense of vocation. Even in the first year, students tended to identify with a course – they were already 'the pharmacists' or ' the chemists', or whatever. Most students came from professional families with a tradition of higher education. Drop-out rates and referral rates were low.

The difference when I joined the Business School took me by surprise. Here, the Government's emerging ideas on 'widening participation' had quickly taken hold. The majority of students were from the lower social classes, with no tradition of HE in the family. There was a high proportion of overseas students – 15% coming from Greece alone. Entry requirements for the business programmes were two 'E' grades or equivalent at A level, compared with three high grade A levels for the sciences. Many students gained entry with GNVQ qualifications, or a mixture of GNVQ and A level. A modular scheme with a wide variety of options ensured that there was little sense of 'cohort' amongst the students. Class sizes for core modules were large, but outside of these the students would be with a different peer group for each option. Here, failure rates for some of the core modules were exceeding 50%, and almost one quarter of students failed to complete their course.

The problem of high failure rates was a cause of serious concern for management and academics alike. The costs of referrals and drop-outs had significant effect on the School's finances, and academics were struggling to find ways of making this non-traditional body of students successful. Traditional methods certainly were not working, but many tutors were ill-prepared to think outside of these methods. It was the easy option to blame the low standards of entry, but that would not solve the

problem. Widening participation as a policy was here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, so something positive had to be done.

Along with many other organisations at that time, the Business School decided that a course of 'study skills' training would help solve the problem. The theory was that by running such a course in the first semester students could be 'transformed' into the more traditional type, able to carry out critical analysis, research, report writing and so on.

This is where my involvement began. I was charged with setting up and running a 'tutor group' scheme to provide a system of pastoral support combined with study skills training. Individual academic tutors would meet their tutees in groups of twenty five every two weeks for an hour-long session. The success or otherwise of this scheme is not pertinent to this study. However, in my role as lead tutor I came into contact with many more students than I might otherwise have done in my usual teaching role, and by the very nature of the job these particular students tended to be those who had problems of some sort. I was struck by the range of problems that students were experiencing and the effects that they were having. One might have expected that money problems and workload would be the main issues, but whilst these did feature strongly there were many more issues that seemed to be making my students unhappy. The more contact I had with the students, the more convinced I became that poor entry grades were too simplistic a reason for our high failure rates. We had many bright and articulate students. Some had achieved poor grades at A level, not because of any lack of capability, but because they had simply 'messed around' in sixth form, and had not done enough work. Many entered the Business School chastened but full of enthusiasm, having been given what they saw as a 'second chance' at a university place. Yet, by the time they reached their second year, this enthusiasm had died in many of them. It almost seemed that it was something that *we* were doing to them that caused this demise.

Around this time I attended the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE),where I listened to a presentation on stress amongst dental students. Most of the theoretical causes of stress seemed to fit my students: poor person/environment fit, inability to cope with change, lack of control, and

workload all seemed relevant. There were also clear links between stress and performance. which suggested a possible cause of high failure rates at the Business School. This, then, was how the investigation started. My objectives were:

- To identify factors that were having an adverse effect on the students' experience of higher education
- To develop an explanatory model of these factors with a view to identifying 'at risk' students and providing possible strategies to improve the student experience and performance.

My initial findings indicated some interesting trends in the stress levels of the students. However, when these were followed up with interviews it became apparent that student *motivation* was really the key issue, and within that student expectations was a significant factor. It was this topic that I focussed on for the major part of this research. Chapters one and two therefore provide a summary of the context within which this study took place, and a brief report on my initial investigations up until expectations emerged as a key issue; thereafter, the thesis reports on the structured investigation into student expectations and their effect on student experience.

The quality of our expectations determines the quality of our action

Andre Godin

Chapter One: The Historical Context

1.1Recent changes in Higher Education

Since the end of World War II successive governments have been steadily introducing legislation to change the education system in the UK. During the last 20 years of the 20th century the changes were particularly dramatic, far-reaching, and rapid. The basis of this change has been:

- A move towards more industry-centred education
- A move from literary, cultural or historical interests to science and technology
- A re-branding and targeting of education, making it more selective.

At the same time, government, with its eye on the nation's purse, has been seeking to make education more efficient, and this has led to profound changes in the structure of the education system. In the Higher Education sector, with which this thesis is primarily concerned, the main changes have been:

- Replacement of the dual system of polytechnics and universities by a single university system
- A radical overhaul of the funding system, which is now based on performance indicators
- A significant increase in student numbers, without a proportional increase in resources
- An increased emphasis on 'off-campus' learning, such as open learning and work-based learning
- Changes in student funding, with a shift from grants to repayable loans, coupled, in England, with the introduction of tuition fees for the majority of students

Surrounded by all this change, a student entering Higher Education at the beginning of the 21st century undoubtedly faces a far different experience to a student of the 1970's or 80's – those, in fact, who now form the main body of academics teaching in universities. It is likely that many of these academics will still be immersed in the old methods and traditions of H.E. (We will see later how little incentive there has been to change their ways). It therefore does not seem unreasonable to assume that

at the present time, there is likely to be some degree of 'strategic drift' in the delivery of H.E. – on the one hand, a rapidly-changing environment presenting quite a different student experience to the traditional model, and on the other, the deliverers of teaching sticking to the old models that have worked so well for so many years.

The students, of course, are caught in this strategic gap, this mis-match between the system and the practice, and there is clear evidence that many are struggling to cope in this situation. It is this issue that is investigated in this study.

1.2 Reasons for change

The changes in Government policy that affect today's student population can be traced back to the end of the second World War. At that time it was the Labour Party that was seen as the true 'moderniser' of the education system. The party's doctrine of post-war reform was that of economic development hinged on a more widespread provision of education for all social classes. This doctrine linked individual interest with economic need, by proposing that there should be an increase in opportunity for everyone, supported by an expansion in education. Some of the major reform implemented by Labour to support this theme was the introduction of comprehensive education and the establishment of the polytechnics. It was thought that by increasing opportunity, particularly for the working classes, the 'human resources' that they together embodied could be used to effectively support the expected economic growth, and thereby meet the needs of industry. In 1984 Lyotard suggested:

> The transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an elite capable of guiding a nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles in the pragmatic posts required of institutions. (Lyotard, 1984, p.48).

However, despite the changes that took place, there emerged a growing discontent amongst industrialists that the education system was *not*, in fact, meeting their needs – an argument that was supported by a number of academic studies. It was argued

that the system still maintained a weakness that had persisted for over a century – that of a remoteness from (and in some cases. hostility to) industrial policy: industrial training had always been rudimentary: H.E. had neglected the research needs of industry. and schools lacked an interest in technology.

So. it would appear that much of the talk of reshaping the education system to support economic growth was empty rhetoric. One theory as to why this was so is offered by Ken Jones (Jones, 1989) He argues that at that time there were no calculations made of the relation between educational expansion and economic growth – that 'manpower needs' were never translated with any clarity into educational objectives. The reasons for this were, he believes, due to the existence of other commitments and ideals held by the policy-makers – belief in equal treatment, objections to privilege, and protest at wasted potential. This all resulted in an undifferentiated expansion of education that was not formally or deliberately targeted on specific manpower needs or particular social groups, and, as we have seen, the industrialists' viewpoint was that this approach did not meet the needs of the economy.

When the Conservatives came to power in 1979, education immediately came under the spotlight, primarily because at the time it was found to be absorbing more than 14% of GNP- 3% more than defence spending. It therefore became a prime target for monetarist attention, and it is at that time that the first ripples of change appeared that were to grow into the tidal wave that is now engulfing education.

Over the next ten years, first under Keith Joseph and then Kenneth Baker, the Conservatives implemented policies that they believed would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our education system, and in the process set about dismantling the established pattern of undifferentiated expansion of education. They favoured a much higher degree of targeting and selection, and implicit in this policy was the fact that there were some groups who were not targeted for favourable treatment, and had to accept a lower level of education. At first sight this seemed like a step backwards towards a very traditional approach, where only the privileged few had

access to high quality education – for example, the Black Papers of the 1970's (Cox and Dyson, 1971; Cox and Boyson, 1977) targeted only 5-8% of the state school population. However, the Conservatives' policy included a much wider range of selection, such that the system was intended to include the majority of the student population in schools, and positive selection was not just limited to those at the top of the educational pyramid, but also a large middle section. It was intended that this should be achieved by the introduction of alternative systems of education – the NVQs and GNVQs being the main example – and by creating schemes such as 'Investors in People' to encourage companies to take responsibility for the continuing education of their workforce. The initiative was driven by a set of learning 'targets' published by the Government. So, by increasing the selectiveness of education by widening the options beyond the traditional academic routes and providing alternative vocational courses, the Government sought to increase considerably the percentage of the population who would be formally educated beyond compulsory schooling.

Hand-in-hand with these reforms, which were intended to make the system more *effective,* came a squeeze on the finances of education, in an effort to make it more *efficient.* Funding of the education system itself was completely overhauled and made competitive; funding of the students themselves changed, with (in H.E.) a move from grants to repayable loans. Student numbers were dramatically increased without a corresponding increase in resources, and there was a shift towards more off-campus methods.

The speed at which these changes were implemented within a system as bureaucratic as that of education was quite remarkable. The process was driven by a clear strategy for change; by 1988 the Conservatives had a set of policies that was wide-ranging and unmatched in their attention to detail. They covered issues of curriculum content, of standards and assessment, of the control of the teaching force, and on the educational system's relationship to the world of work. The overall aim was to transform the whole system and culture of learning.

One may question why the Conservatives would want to expend so much effort in these educational reforms, when after all the party did not embrace the principles of social inclusion so closely as Labour. The answer lies in the economic environment, and in particular the pressure of international competitiveness. Over a number of years Britain had experienced a prolonged decline in competitiveness relative to other trading nations. By 1992 we were ranked thirteenth on a league table of international competitiveness indices behind not only the nations that we might expect, like Japan, the USA, and Germany, but also the likes of Ireland, Belgium and Finland. (Rajan, 1993)

Considerable research has gone into discovering the secret of success in the international competitiveness stakes, and one of the main findings has been that those countries that have experienced the sharpest rise in relative competitiveness have also developed strong approaches to encouraging the foundation skills of young people, and learning throughout life for all. Researchers and analysts have pointed to the low levels of technical attainment and qualifications at all levels of the British workforce as a key factor in the nation's competitive decline:

> *'....a major barrier to upgrading and even to sustaining competitive advantage in industry (has been the way) the British educational system has badly lagged behind that of virtually all the nations we studied. Access to top quality education has been limited to only a few, and a smaller percentage of students go on to higher education than in most other advanced nations...'*
>
> *'...The more serious problem is the education of the average student. British children are taught by teachers less qualified than those in many nations, receive less training in maths and science, put in fewer hours, and drop out more'*
>
> **Michael Porter**
>
> The Competitive Advantage of Nations, Macmillan, 1990

In addition to this 'skills gap', the nature of the environment is also exerting an influence on the *type* of skill and education now needed by our workforce. Consider:

- In today's environment, new knowledge is being acquired at a greater rate than ever before, so that knowledge gained only a short while ago can be useless or obsolete.
- Technology is changing extremely rapidly, and workers have to constantly adapt to keep pace.
- Jobs are less secure- gone are the days when a worker could expect to stay in the same job, or even the same type of job, throughout his working life. In today's world it is not uncommon for a worker to have two or three changes of career.

It follows that a traditional education that emphasises the attainment of a discrete body of specialist knowledge is no longer so relevant in this rapidly-changing world. Employers now seek individuals with flexibility and innovative ability as well as basic technical competence, and they expect workers to be capable of learning new things as they come along. Again, the nations that have been most successful in terms of competitiveness over recent years are those that have developed this ethos of flexibility and 'lifelong learning' in their educational system. They provide an education that is more broadly based than ours, promoting not just narrow technical understanding of a job or academic subject, but competence in broader skills that generate adaptability, creativity, and the flexibility to respond to changing demands.

So, these are the forces that have been driving the reforms of the education system. The changes in the curriculum and qualifications system that have resulted have been intended to:

- Help the great majority of school leavers to reach a higher basic level of achievement
- Broaden both employer and college-based opportunities for young people to encourage many more to aim high
- Ensure that all education and training provision encourages breadth, flexibility and self-reliance for jobs for the future

- Upgrade and improve the skills of adults

1.3 Changes in university provision

The university system that exists today bares little resemblance to that which existed up until the late 70s. The changes have been so dramatic because the new educational policies have been driven by a set of Government targets that have exerted powerful and often conflicting pressures on universities. Most notable of these are pressure for:

- Expansion
- Meeting the needs of industry and the economy
- Producing a 'learning society'
- Improved efficiency

1.3.1 Expansion

Expanding participation in post-compulsory education is probably *the* overwhelming pressure on today's universities. By 2010 the Government aims is that 50% of young people should be in Higher Education. It is intended that this should be achieved by two mechanisms that are often (wrongly) used interchangeably:

> *Improving access:* This requires that universities provide 'non-standard' modes of entry into higher education such as access courses, credit schemes, accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), and schemes for targeted groups of students (e.g. mature students).
>
> *Widening participation:* This concept is more specific than that of improving access, in that it targets particular groups with the aim of increasing

> participation of under-represented and socially disadvantaged categories of students. These include social classes IIIm-V, those from deprived socio-demographic areas, ethnic minority groups, multiple disadvantaged groups, and disabled students. (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001).

It is clear that improving access may or may not lead to widening participation; widening participation requires special effort, and is harder to achieve than mere expansion. The motivation to expend this special effort has varied greatly across the university sector. In general the 'old' universities (i.e. pre-1992) have been able to achieve their expansion targets by admitting 'more of the same'. Demand for their courses is such that there are adequate numbers of 'traditional' students to fill places. In a recently published report, *Widening Participation in Higher Education in England (*National Audit Office, 2002), it was claimed that much of the £77 million available for improving access in 2001-2002 went to middle-class graduates returning to Higher Education instead of to poor first-timers, and higher education minister Margaret Hodge stated that 'Over 85% of those who go to top universities come from the top three income groups' (THES Jan 18th 2002).

In contrast, many of the post-1992 universities have struggled to fill courses, and have embraced the ideals of widening participation as a means to meet targets. This can be demonstrated by recent figures produced by Hefce (1999):

Figure 1.1: Student intake by type of university (1999)

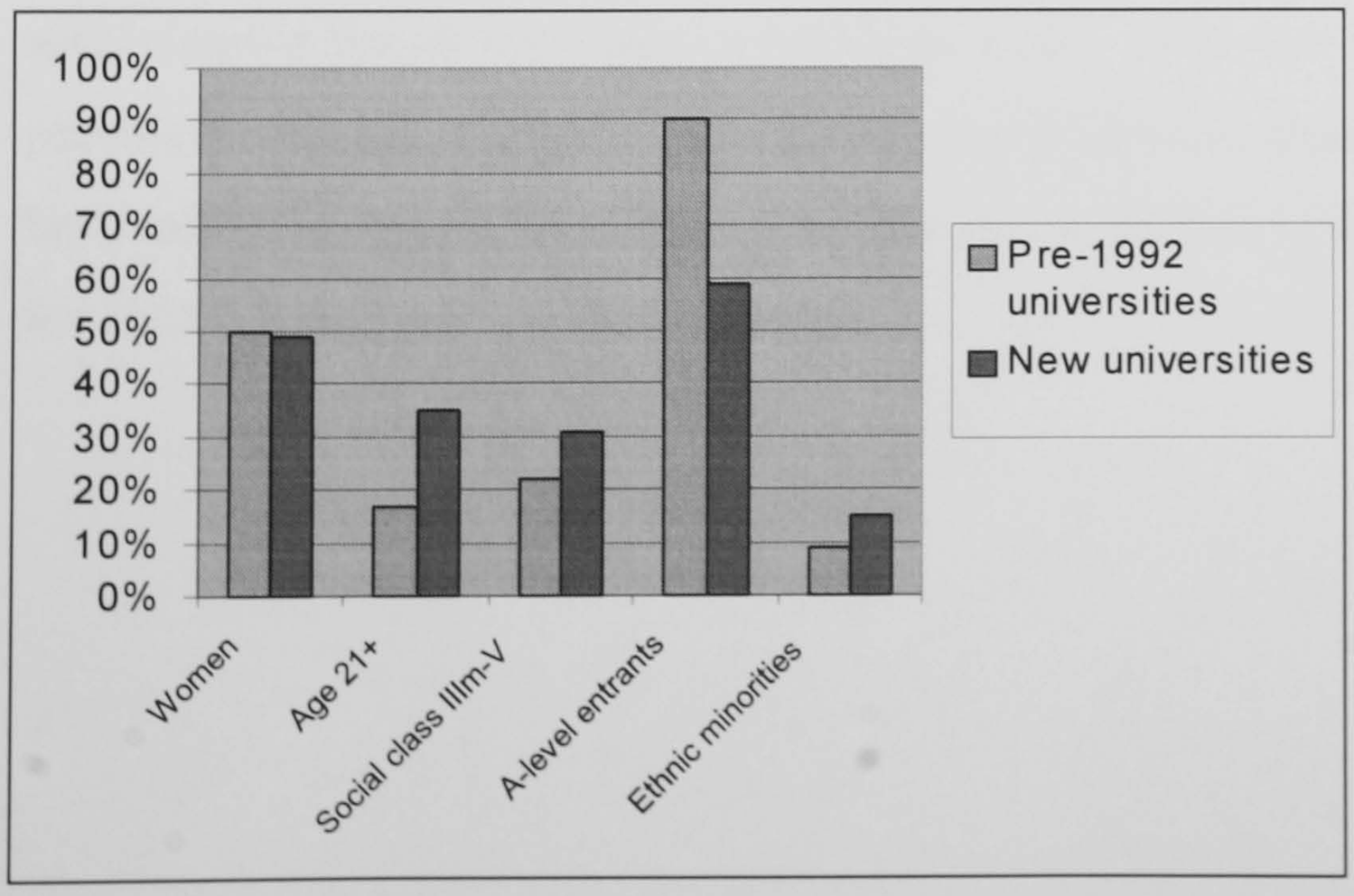
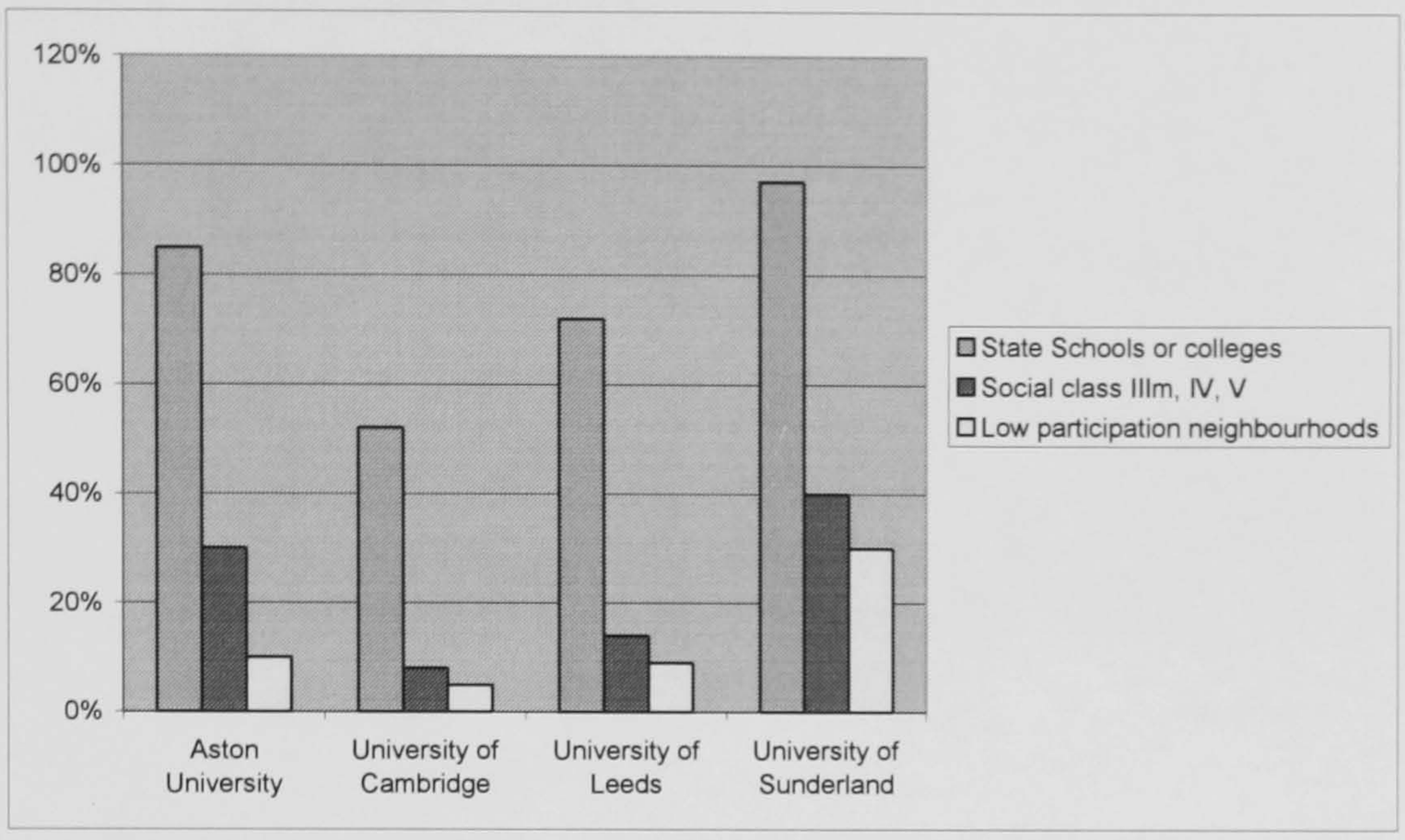


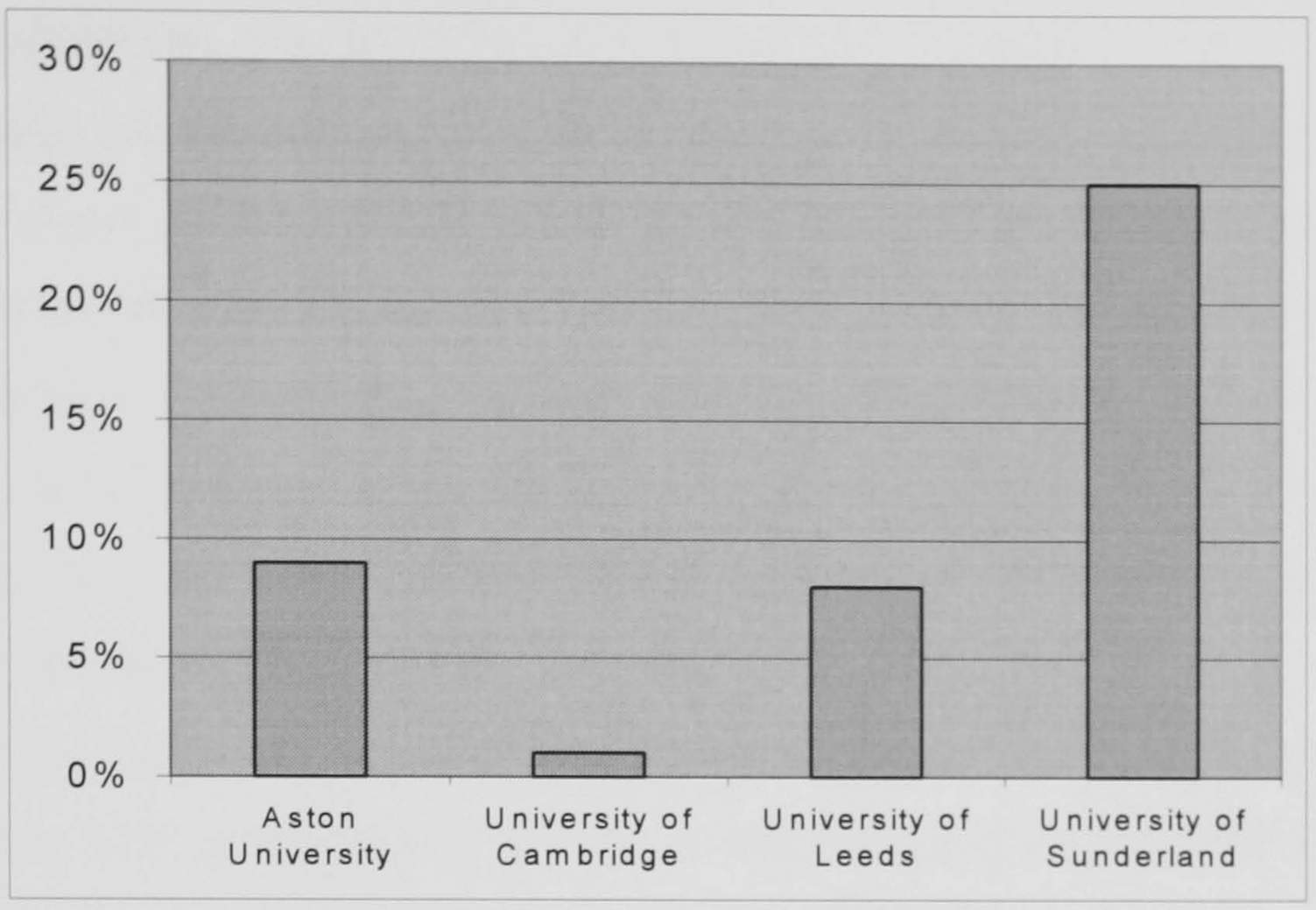
Figure1.2:Participation of under-represented groups in Higher Education (1999)



Here, we can see that the student population of the pre-1992 universities comprises almost entirely of traditional A-level entrants, whilst mature students and lower social class groups represent a significant proportion of the new university sector intake. These figures would suggest that, despite the Government removing the binary divide in 1992, the two extremes of the system are still operating in very different ways.

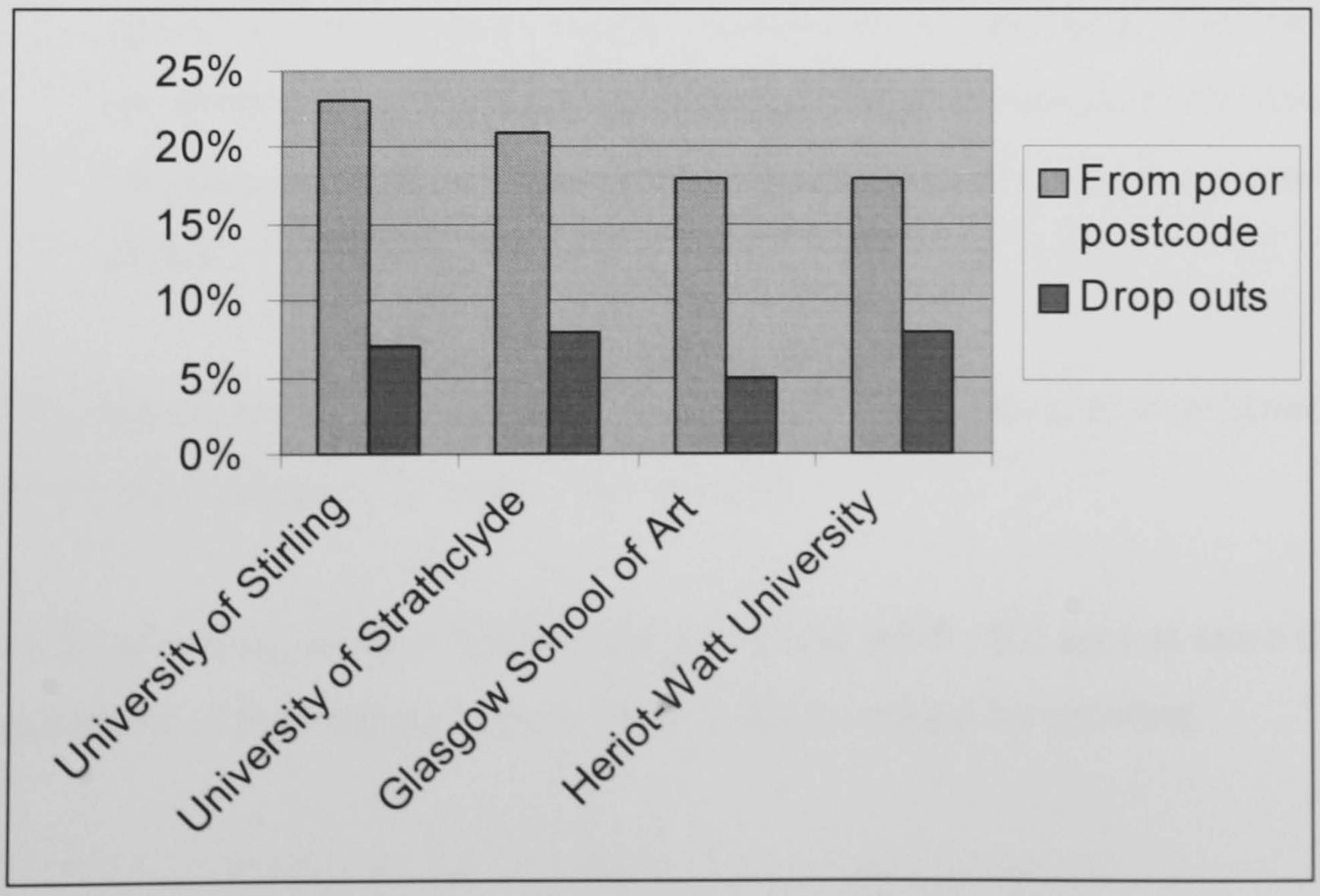
It would appear, then, that the 'new' universities have been particularly successful in achieving the aim of widening participation in HE. However, this belies a more pessimistic picture, for whilst the numbers non-traditional students *entering* HE have indeed increased, the figures for those *successfully completing* their courses are not so good, as figure 1.3 demonstrates:

Figure1.3: Drop-out rates 1999 (Source: Times Higher Educational Supplement, Jan 18th 2002)



It has been common within the sector to blame the students themselves for this poor performance, but this argument is confounded by figures from some universities that have been very successful in both widening participation and achieving good completion rates. Figures for the most successful are shown in figure 1.4.

Figure1.4: Top four UK universities for retention relative to non-traditional intake (Source: Times Higher Educational Supplement, Jan 18th 2002)



The key to success for these universities is the flexible approach that they take to meeting the needs of students. They offer a climate in which non-traditional students can succeed, rather than offering a traditional course to students with no family background in HE (THES, January 18th 2002). Examples include the provision of funds to help students from poor backgrounds (Strathclyde), integrated student support services from entry to graduation (Sheffield Hallam), and flexible, modular systems appealing particularly to mature students (Stirling). Common to all of these, though, are systems that encourage academic staff to understand and support the needs of non-traditional students, for example through innovative staff development programmes.

These figures show that widening participation *can* work, but to do so Universities must have a commitment not only to extended recruitment effort, but also to changing the way they do things once the students are admitted.

1.3.2 Meeting the needs of Industry and the Economy

The pressure for Higher Education to better serve the needs of industry was introduced in section 1.1. The election of a Labour Government in 1997 did not break the continuity of thinking on education introduced with Conservative policy over the previous years. A white paper, issued shortly after the election, stated:

> Investment in learning in the 21st century is the equivalent of investment in the machinery and technical innovation that was essential to the first great industrial revolution. Then it was physical capacity; now it is human capital. (DfEE, 1997, p15)

Two areas of development are particularly important to this aim: *development of skills and preparation for work; and research*

The development of skills has become a key item on the HE agenda since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997,which argued for growing

interdependence between HEI's. the economy. employers and the state. The Dearing Committee made a specific recommendation that all institutions should increase the extent to which courses prepared students for the world of work. The Government endorsed this view that enhanced employability should be one of the aims of Higher Education, and subsequently supported a range of projects designed to encourage the spread of key skills development and work experience. In a speech made in 2000, the then Secretary for Education and Employment further strengthened this vision of HE serving the needs of employers by defining what institutions should do, specifically, to prepare students for work. This included a minimum period of work experience for each student, a requirement that every student study a module that gives insight into the world of work. and a graduate apprentice scheme designed to integrate study with work-based learning.

Various employers' organisations have voiced strong support for the inclusion of skills development in HE, as exemplified by a number of 'wish lists' that have resulted from employers surveys conducted over the last ten years (e.g. QHE. 1993. 1994; Harvey et al 1997). Overall. employers have been very successful in influencing Government policy on the purpose of Higher Education, to such an extent that, in 1996. the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) made a joint declaration with the Confederation for British Industry (CBI) and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), asserting that most British people, most educators, and most students believe that it is one of Higher Education`s purposes to prepare students well for working life. However, it has been questioned what evidence was used to underpin this declaration (Dunne et al. 2000).

This policy of allowing industry to define the purpose of Higher Education is not without its critics. as one might expect. Many see it as a means of disenfranchising discipline-based academics of their expertise and allowing the Higher Education system to become merely a servant of the state (see, for example. Barnett. 1994 and Gubbay. 1994).

Along with a lack of willingness to adopt the new agenda. there also appears to be a lack of knowledge or expertise that would allow academics to fully embrace the

concept of skills development. As part of the ESRC's programme of research into 'the learning society' a study was undertaken to gain enhanced understanding of skills acquisition in Higher Education and employment (Dunne et al, 2000). The study uncovered some fundamental barriers to the promoting and development of skills:

- There were a number of different terms used to describe sets of skills that were deemed important to employers, such as core, transferable, personal, common, or key skills; or personal, core or generic competencies: or personal attributes. Each of these terms could be used to describe different 'lists' containing different numbers and combinations of skills.
- Academics had varied understanding of the different terms. For example, some considered 'core skills' to be discipline- specific, whilst 'generic skills' were cross-discipline, such as communication and numeracy.
- Academics were unfamiliar with the notion of transfer of learning, and found it difficult to articulate their understanding of how students learn.

Dunne et al concluded that the discourse on skills is 'confused, confusing and under-conceptualised'. They argue that recommendations set out by Dearing can not be achieved unless future action is founded on theoretical underpinnings of skills, and, significantly, that a continuing process of training and professional development for academics is introduced, to ensure that their teaching is underpinned by understanding of learning theory, and that they intentionally teach for transfer.
Of course, this type of commitment will require significant resource, and the difficulty of this becomes clear when considering the other area in which Higher Education is charged with supporting industry, and that is in terms of research. Promotion of research has been actively encouraged via the research assessment exercise, with considerable financial reward for those departments who achieve a top place in the league tables. As a result, individual academics themselves are rewarded for research achievements. New appointments and promotions are made largely on the basis of research record in order to enhance the research capability of the department. In contrast, there is little recognition for those academics who

dedicate themselves to teaching: and in some cases are actively criticised for attending to teaching rather than research (Dunne. 1995).

1.3.3 Producing a 'learning society'

This objective is closely allied to the two discussed above. Within Western industrialised societies the rate of social. technological, and economic change has become so great that few people will hold the same job (or even type of job) throughout their lifetime. More than seventy years ago. the educational philosopher of education, A N Whitehead, commented:

> ...in the past, the span of important change was considerably longer than that of a single human life. Thus mankind was trained to adapt itself to fixed conditions.
>
> Today, this time span is considerable shorter that that of a human life. and accordingly our training must prepare individuals to face a novelty of conditions. (Whitehead, 1929. pg 118)

Within many vocations changes are occurring at such a rate that an individual's initial occupational preparation can become obsolete within a matter of years. The implication of this is that the need for learning throughout life has attained heightened importance. As Gooler suggests, '...individuals may need to engage in a lifetime of learning not as a matter of choice but as a matter of survival. In the future, individuals may lack the option to choose *not* to engage in learning activities throughout the lifespan' (Gooler, 1990. p 321).

The urgent need for professionals to stay up to date with rapidly increasing bodies of knowledge was articulated well by Australia's Economic Planning Advice Committee in its background paper No. 31. *Education and Training in the 1990s.* Here. the argument is made that knowledge depreciates at a rate of ten percent per annum. therefore 'knowledge appreciation in the workforce must be greater than the depreciation effect to offset the decline in the stock of knowledge,' so that 'we need

to achieve a skill appreciation in the existing workforce of over eleven percent, to maintain the 2001 stock of skills to the year 2011' (1993, p 48)

Graduation is increasingly being seen not as the end of the learning process, but as the start. Employers in business and industry want their graduates to come equipped with a range of transferable, generic skills. These include the ability to go on learning, to adapt to new circumstances, and to acquire industry-specific and firm-specific knowledge and skill.

Thus the concepts of lifelong education and lifelong learning have become increasingly commonplace in the educational literature over recent years, and are now informing policy in Higher Education. The Government's vision of lifelong learning was set out in the White Paper *Learning to Succeed:*

> Lifelong learning can enable people to play a full part in developing their talent, the potential of their family, and the capacity of the community in which they live and work. It can and must nurture a love for learning. This will ensure the means by which our economy can make the successful transition from the industries and services of the past, to the knowledge and information economy of the future. It also contributes to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people develop as active citizens and in which generalisation disadvantage can be overcome. (DfEE, 1999, p1)

The universities are faced with the alternating pressures of specialisation and generalisation. They have to equip students with the appropriate specialist knowledge to equip them for a specific career, but at the same time they can not afford to disassociate professional skills and knowledge from the wider implications and linkages with other professions. Institutions have adapted, to varying degrees, by accepting mature students, encouraging people to return to study on an intermittent or recurring basis and by providing courses in a variety of formats, for example short courses, part-time courses, and distance learning. This in turn has

driven a change in the way education is delivered, and there has been increasing use of educational broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, interactive teleconferences, computers, and virtual reality.

Some changes have been encouraged by individual initiatives. One example is the Enterprise in Higher Education Scheme which started in 1987 as a result of the recognition by educational policy makers that 'in order both to expand and to respond to demands from the employment market, UK courses would have to be broader, more flexible and give deliberate prominence to what Bradshaw (1985) calls 'transferable personal and intellectual skills' (cited in Wright, 1992, p 204). In a more general way, universities have adapted to the need for lifelong learning by providing increased opportunity for postgraduate studies, offering non-award continuing education that may be career-related or for personal enrichment, and through conducting their programmes in a way that enables their graduates to continue learning throughout their lives. Some have placed 'learning to learn' skills at the core of their programmes.

The changes adopted by the universities have not only had impact upon the way programmes are delivered, but also on the nature of the student body. Many universities have a significant proportion of mature students who are mid-career. They have an effect on the overall ambience of the university, as they bring with them a wealth of life experience and organisational knowledge. Some are primarily interested in learning specific subjects or even parts of subjects, to meet immediate personal or professional interests, and increasingly these experienced students are seeking accreditation for learning acquired elsewhere. This all presents universities with new challenges about the way they teach and how they interact with other training or educational providers. Indeed, the change in the nature of the student population presents universities with perhaps one of their biggest challenges at the current time, so this issue is considered in more detail in the section 1.4. However, the challenge that perhaps preoccupies the minds of most of the managers in Higher Education today is the subject of the next section.

1.3.4 Improved efficiency

Until very recently Higher Education could rely on a stable, reliable method of financing from the public purse. However, that purse has become increasingly stretched as the demand from all public services has increased. In response the government has cut the size of the education grant to universities and introduced efficiency gains. The result has been a 50% decline in per-student funding since 1980 (El-Khawas, 2001). This 'productivity increase' has largely been achieved via increases in staff-student ratios and a squeeze on academic salaries, such that they have barely risen in real terms since 1987. Many institutions now rely on part-time and lower-paid staff. In 1996 a report from the CIHE noted:

> The percentage of GDP going to tertiary education institutions is amongst the lowest of all OECD countries. Staff remuneration is also amongst the lowest. (p.27)

Institutions have adapted to this squeeze in different ways; some have taken the 'belt-tightening approach', looking for efficiency improvements and analysing every spending decision to fit with the university goals. Others have become more entrepreneurial and developed alternative sources of income. However, a harsh reality of this scenario is that some institutions have been much more able than others to secure outside sources of funding, and this has led to very different conditions of work (for the staff) and of study (for the students) in different areas. Overall, per-student funding is much higher for the 'prestigious' universities than for others. At the other end of the scale the funding crisis is acute, despite the fact that it is here that one might argue that greater funding is required. Generally it is the new universities that have taken the major burden of the widening participation load, and it is here where new technologies and teaching methods need to be developed to meet the needs the new and expanded student profile if the continuing debate about falling standards is to be halted. Vast increases in student numbers have generally

been responded to by introducing more efficient methods of teaching, with little regard for their effectiveness. However, the limits to this process are evident from the ever-decreasing retention figures from many institutions. The MacFarlane report (CSUP, 1992) noted that it is possible to deliver cheap learning via lecture classes, standard texts, minimum interaction and minimum assessment. It concluded, however, that:

> .....the product of this system, would be students who not only have been hardly educated at all in a broad sense, but whose understanding of the courses studied would be very limited and hence their ability to transfer knowledge effectively to new contexts would be very poor.

Thus it is likely to be those very students that the new educational policy targets that are suffering most at the hands of the funding reforms. This is further emphasised by perhaps the most controversial of the new funding policies – the introduction of student contribution to their education, in the form of repayable loans and tuition fees. There is evidence to show that students are discouraged from enrolling, especially those from families that have no experience of university study. The Cubie Report (The Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance, 2000), in Scotland, has emphasised the disadvantages posed by requiring students to pay tuition fees.

Another response to the funding crisis has been the pursuit of auxiliary income, for example additional income gained by putting under-utilised resources to alternative use or by enrolling overseas students. This is a strategy that has been extensively used by Sunderland Business School, to the extent that over 15% of undergraduates are from Greece alone, and further significant numbers come from non-EU countries such as China and Pakistan. Whilst this policy has its strength in increasing the international flavour of the School, it produces its own problems for staff already having to cope with an increasing diverse student population – an issue covered in the next section.

1.4 Changes in the student population

As a result of expanded access and higher rates of participation, today's students are diverse in their range of interests, motivation, circumstances and academic preparation. The extent of change in the student body has been graphically illustrated in a report *University Challenge: Student Choices in the 21ST Century* (IES report no.306):

- Between 1988/89 and 1993/4 British universities grew by 54% compared with only 15% in the previous five-year period
- Full-time student numbers grew by 66%
- Student numbers in post-1992 universities and HE colleges increased by 63%
- Postgraduate numbers increased by 76%, and part-time postgraduates were up by 98%
- Full-time undergraduate students aged 21 or over at entry more than doubled
- International students on first degrees at post-1992 universities and HE colleges increased by 154%

In addition, the report noted the growth in non-A level qualified entry to full-time undergraduate courses and entry via the FE sector, an increasing tendency for students to remain within their geographical region or stay at home during their HE studies.

Clearly, these data represent significant change from the days when University education was the preserve of only a small minority of the population. However, a more subtle change is also evident within today's student population, driven by the measures that require students to make more of a financial contribution to their education. 'Consumerism' is fast creeping into the educational literature, as students become more demanding, more value-conscious, more interested in the outputs of courses on offer, and more questioning on the relative value between study at FE or HE. (See, for example, Johnson, 2000, Locke, Gallagher and Sharma, 1992, Hill 1995). There is a shift in the relationship between tutors and

students, with students now increasingly considering themselves to be customers of the university. and tutors as service providers.

Thus the universities and academics working in them are faced with the dual requirement of delivering efficient and effective education to a mixed student group, whilst adapting to the new (for this business) concept of 'customer satisfaction'.

1.5 Conclusions

Many universities have accepted the implications of the political and economic agenda, at least at the level of policy (Drummond et al, 1997). However, change has been slow. Arora (1995) argued that whilst some universities had *seemed* to adopt the new climate of change, no *real* changes had taken place:

> 'While the rhetoric has indeed changed in some places, deeply entrenched assumptions and philosophies remain in place. These cannot be countered by good will alone; it needs systematic deconstruction of attitudes, behaviour and procedures' (p. 32)

An explanation as to why many universities have been slow to respond to the new environment can be offered by considering the issue from the academic staff perspective. Many believe that it is not their job to provide skills for employment, they have little sympathy for the newly emerging definitions of quality in Higher Education, and they do not embrace the current climate of accountability in universities (Gubbay, 1994). Whilst the student population has changed quite radically over the last ten years, many of the teaching and management staff have not changed; these are people who were the traditional elite in their days at university, and their own values derive from this personal experience. Becher (1989) has commented in his studies of HEI culture that the university is no simple organisation with 'homogeneous' staff. The academic staff view themselves as belonging to different disciplinary cultures, which Becher has called 'tribes'. There

is a tendency for academics to associate more strongly with their subject discipline rather than the particular HEI to which they belong. They are committed to work in their field, and are likely to identify strongly with similar specialists in *other* organisations (Gouldner, 1957). Most respondents surveyed by Rowland (1996) in his study of the cultures of HEIs were convinced that they or their departments were in some way 'special'.

The important point to note in terms of my own study is that it has been shown that in many cases these so-called 'academic tribes' acquire their culturalisation from their *own* experiences as undergraduates (Becher, 1989). Thus, it could be assumed that their expectations of their own role and those of others could be acquired fifteen, twenty, or even thirty years before they reach senior management positions (Johnson, 2001). With the amount of change in the structure and aims of Higher Education discussed earlier, it is easy to see the potential for conflict or rejection of the new organisational expectations about the role of academics. Examples of this are given by Halsey (1992) who has described the 'decline of the donnish dominion', and by Nixon (1996) in terms of a 'crisis of professional identity'. Little wonder, then, that the changes have often been slow to take shape within the institutions themselves when the personnel who are responsible for driving the change are suffering this identity crisis.

It is within this context that my own study has taken place. Sunderland Business School has been at the forefront of the changes described in this chapter. Belonging to a post-1992 University, it has struggled to survive in a region where there is great competition - there are four other universities within commuting distance for students. The Business School is awarded the lowest level 'd' band funding for students, and as the School has expanded resources have been increasingly stretched. Meanwhile, university strategy requires that the School build research capability, so most academic staff appointments are made with more of an eye on a candidate's publication record rather than teaching capacity.

At the same time, widening participation has been high on the university agenda, with the University as a whole taking nearly 40% of students from the lowest social classes, and over 25% from areas with lowest participation. However, the university loses a quarter of these students before they complete their courses.

With the university aiming to meet all aspects of the new HE agenda there are clearly a number of conflicting and competing forces that are hindering the very changes that might help the largely non-traditional body achieve greater success.

My aim in this study is to:

- identify the factors that are having an adverse effect on the students' experience of higher education
- develop an explanatory model of these factors with a view to identifying 'at risk' students and providing possible strategies to improve student experience and performance

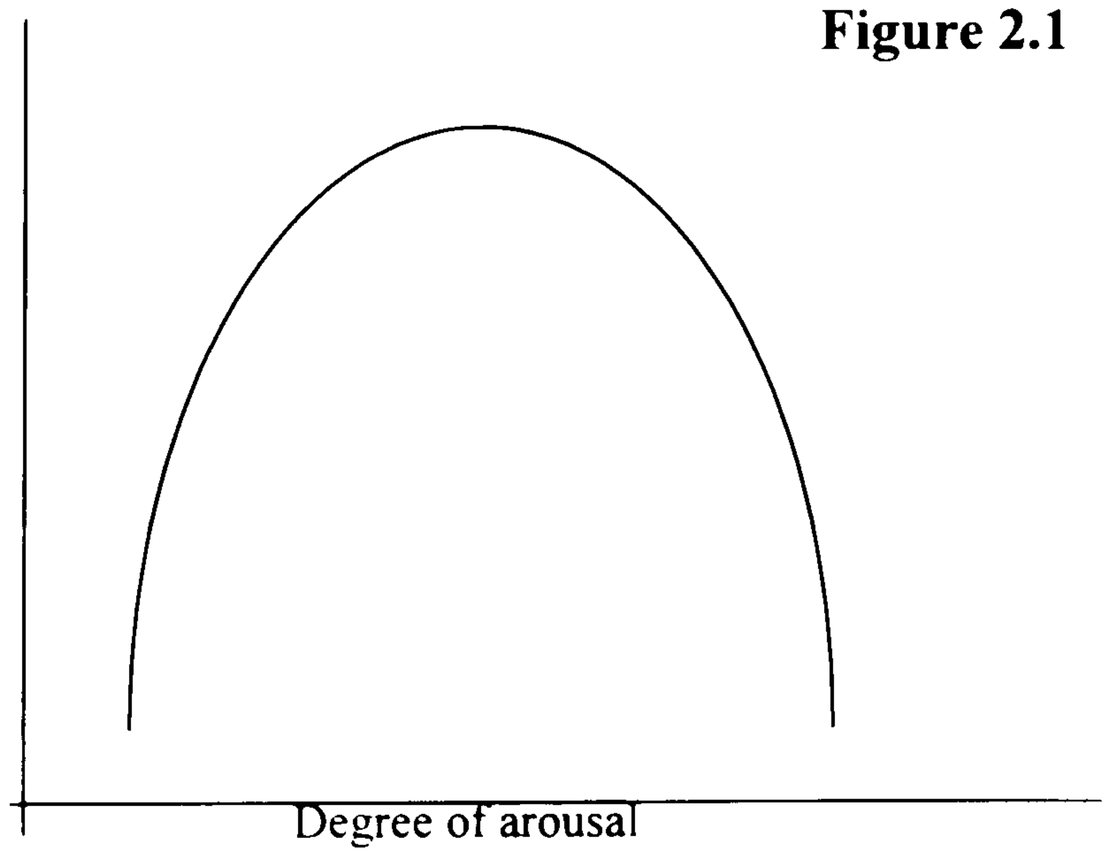
Chapter two: Preliminary investigation

2.1 Theoretical background

This study aimed to identify issues within the 'new university' environment that were having an adverse effect on student performance. At the time of the initial investigation, student stress was coming very much to the fore in the literature. Most studies at the time focussed on the effects of extreme stress and issues of mental ill-health. However, in management research it was well recognised that lower levels of persistent stress, whilst not having a serious detrimental effect on mental health, could affect the experience and performance of workers. If these ideas could be extrapolated to students, it may help to explain under-performance and levels of dissatisfaction with the university experience. This provided the starting point for the investigation.

Researchers in this field have long acknowledged the two faces of stress. In the 1950s Selye defined 'negative' stress as *distress*, and 'positive' stress, (what we might consider in layman's terms to be the 'pressure' that makes us work better), as *eustress* (Selye 1956). As long ago as the early 1900's, the relationship between degree of stress and performance of an individual was described in the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Yerkes and Dodson 1908). Here, the relationship is expressed as an inverted 'U'- shaped curve which describes how performance first increases, peaks, and then declines with increased arousal .

Figure 2.1



So, it is possible to be under-stressed as well as over-stressed. Clearly, to achieve optimum performance in individuals, we need to expose them to the right amount of pressure. If we consider how this might apply to students, we must exert enough pressure to motivate them to work to their best ability, but must ensure that they are not pushed over the 'peak', when their performance is likely to deteriorate rapidly. Exposure to high levels of stress can lead to serious consequences not only for the student, but also for the university itself . The most obvious examples here are the increased resources required to manage referrals and the financial consequences of high drop-out. In a study by Fisher and Hood, it was reported that 9% of all students questioned had considered leaving university because of stress (Fisher and Hood, 1987). Although less well established, research suggests that exposure of students to too little pressure could have similar consequences

What complicates the problem is the fact that the Yerkes-Dodson curve can shift to the left or the right for different individuals. In practical terms this means that, given the same amount of pressure, some people will become over-stressed very quickly, whilst others will remain insufficiently stimulated to work to their potential. With the huge diversity of students that we have in the majority of universities today, it is a much greater problem to find just the 'right' level of pressure than it is in organisations with a more homogeneous student population - say, for example, in a medical or dental school (where, incidentally, most of the existing research into student stress has been carried out).

To add to the problem, the very individual nature of people's perception of stress makes it a difficult subject to research. Nevertheless, there are a number of common denominators that can be used to identify key stressors in the university environment, and it is these that I used to structure my initial investigation:

It is widely accepted that stress is created by an imbalance between **demand** or environmental pressure, and the **capacity** to meet demand. One model presented by McGrath (1974) proposed that a person who feels that adaptation to a new situation is within his or her capacity would be expected to feel less stressed than someone who feels unable to meet that demand. Thus a person with high capabilities might be able to cope with a broad range of environments without feeling stressed. This theory has implications for the many students who now enter H.E. from a non-academic background and with non-traditional or poor entry qualifications. This type of student may be less likely to feel that the demands of H.E. are within his or her capabilities, and may suffer stress as a result. Nor should we ignore here the student at the opposite end of the spectrum, the one who had been expected to secure a place at an 'old' university, and for one reason or another didn't make it. He or she may feel resentful of having to 'make do' with a place at a so-called new university, may face pressure from parents or peers because of a perceived lack of achievement, and may consequently feel that they do not fit into their new environment.

Life change is another widely-researched cause of stress. The changes associated with moving to university usually causes significant social disruption for the student, and it has been argued that this can lead to and maintain raised anxiety (Fisher, 1994). Fisher proposed that life change leads to a reduction in control that an individual has over their life-style. It is widely-documented that a person who perceives that he or she has no control over a situation is more likely to become stressed. In this situation, even small and seemingly insignificant events can become stressful. Indeed, Lazarus has argued that 'daily hassles' can be more damaging than major events (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Finally, stress levels can be affected by workload, and this has two opposing aspects. Work overload is perhaps the most predictable cause of stress, but this itself has two elements which have been described by researchers. 'Quantitative' overload occurs when an individual has *too much* work to do, and 'qualitative' overload occurs when

the work is *too difficult* (Cooper. Cooper and Eaker, 1988). Work underload is the second problem we must consider. Cox has described how ill-health can result if an individual is not sufficiently challenged by work. (Cox, 1980).

I have discussed earlier how different individuals can be affected quite differently, despite the fact that they have the same pressures from the environment. This individual response results largely from how a person copes with stress. Coping is strongly linked to an individual's personality characteristics, but an important factor which impacts upon a person's ability to cope with stress is the emotional and social support they receive from people around them. Numerous studies have shown that people who have many social ties (spouse, friends, relatives and group membership) live longer and are less likely to succumb to stress-related illness than are people who have few supportive social contacts (Cohen and Wills, 1985). This opportunity for social support is greatly reduced in the modern H.E. environment; modularisation has removed the consistent peer-group support associated with traditional degree classes, staff-student contact is strictly limited, and many students fill their non-study time with one or more jobs, thus limiting their opportunity for socialising or family contact, and increasing time pressures.

2.2 Student stress

There is much published work identifying sources of stress among students and attempting to measure their effect, but most has been carried out in the U.S., and has mainly focused on specific groups of students (for example, ethnic minorities), or on specific stressors, such as exams. Little research has sought to identify the effects of stress in the diverse student population that we have today in the UK, with its non-traditional H.E. environment as found particularly in some of the 'new' universities. There are many features of this new and still-changing environment which suggest that it is likely to be stressful to students. Nevertheless, stress in students has long been recognised as a feature of university life, and early work done in this field can provided a basis for modern studies.

In the 1960s work done by Ryle found that stress in students leads to academic failure, unemployment, health problems. under-achievement and non-completion of course (Ryle, 1968 & 1969, Ryle & Lunghi 1968). At around the same time Sidney Crown, working from the London Hospital, was conducting research concerned with student stress and the measurement of study difficulty in students. His interest in this field arose because complaint of work difficulty was found to often form parts of the symptomatology of groups of students displaying psychiatric disturbances. and indeed was often the presenting symptom. The work of Crown and his colleagues revealed some interesting though complex findings about student stress and performance that have relevance to the present-day student population. One study used the relatively new Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire (Crown & Crisp, 1966, 1970) to relate personality to selected psychosocial characteristics of undergraduates (Howell, Crown, & Howell, 1973). Two particularly interesting findings emerged: amongst female students there was a suggestion that fell just short of statistical significance that girls from different types of school may show different degrees of emotional stability at university (the finding was not evident in boys in this sample); and there seemed to be a higher incidence of psychological illness in Arts students than in Science students. It was suggested that the latter finding may be due to Science students having a well-defined career structure and prospects; university for them is seen as a period of professional training and thus they may suffer less role ambiguity and anxiety than the Arts students. Role ambiguity is recognised as having a negative impact on an individual's morale. performance, and well-being (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983). It is possible to see how these findings may be relevant to the student population at Sunderland Business School, where students are drawn from an increasingly varied pre-university educational background. and where, following graduation. there is no pre-ordained career path. However. the researchers urged caution in interpretation of their findings, noting that there were likely to be complex interactions between such factors as sex. social class. and personality that may contribute to the trends observed.

In a second study with different colleagues Crown aimed to develop a systematic method of describing and measuring study difficulty and to test the hypothesis that within a population of undergraduate students study difficulty related both to psychoneurotic difficulties and to motivational difficulties (Crown, Lucas, & Supramaniam, 1973). Findings showed that psychological difficulties did indeed account in part for study difficulties, but indicated that motivational factors were likely to be more important, with high scores attained on a measure for low motivation related to lower academic performance.

A follow-up study (Lucas et al, 1976) tested two groups of students - those who had made appointments for emotional problems at a college health centre, (termed 'patients'), and a control group. The results showed no overall difference in academic performance between the patients and controls, which the researchers used to suggest that it is largely the more serious types of psychiatric illness that impair performance, rather than the relatively mild psychosocial and psychosomatic disturbances displayed by their patient group. However, motivational factors again featured strongly, in fact assuming greater prominence than in the previous study. The study also included a factor termed 'sylbism' or 'syllabus-boundness', which describes one aspect of the way students work and function. It differentiates between students who function more effectively in a 'divergent' thinking situation (syllabus-free) and the 'convergent' thinkers, those who perform more effectively when required to choose the correct answer from a limited number of possibilities (Hudson, 1967). Syllabus-free students are comfortable with courses that require them to read around a subject and conduct independent research, whilst syllabus-bound students prefer a tutor-led approach. Lucas *et al* showed sylbism to be a relatively independent trait, with a significant negative relationship to work satisfaction in both the 'patient' and control groups. With today's Higher Education institutions moving more and more towards student-centred learning, this factor could assume increased relevance to the present-day student population.

Studies with students have been used on a number of occasions to investigate the relationship between stress and cognitive failure as defined by everyday slips and lapses (see, for example, Reason and Mycielska, 1982, Reason 1984, Broadbent *et al*, 1982, Kane, 1987). There has been some disagreement about cause and effect, with a 'stress vulnerability' hypothesis first proposed by Broadbent (*ibid*), suggesting that high cognitive failure scores are related to increased vulnerability to externally imposed stress, whilst those that do not accept this hypothesis argue that stress *causes* cognitive failure. Nevertheless, there seems to be clear evidence that stress is indeed some way related to cognitive failure, and whatever governs general proneness to everyday slips and lapses also contributes to stress vulnerability (Reason, 1988). Reason accepts that whatever this factor is, it eludes capture by laboratory investigations, but it seems to be associated with the deployment of limited attention resources. (That is, when faced with a reasonable demand for everyday 'multi- tasking' some individuals will cope better than others). This has implications for the university students who, on joining university, are faced with a hugely increased demand for multi-tasking when trying to juggle work and the new experience of looking after themselves without the parental support to which they are accustomed.

The impact of separation from parents also forms part of the research into transition to adulthood, which in turn has links to stress, and indeed to motivation. Transition to adulthood has been the focus of a number of studies. Levinson (1978, 1986) has proposed that the period of early transition, which is from the ages of seventeen to twenty-two years (corresponding with the age of most university experience), is the time when the individual seeks autonomy from parents and forms a vision of his or her life goals that provide motivation and excitement in respect of the future. Levinson argues that if the vision remains unconnected to his or her life, it may simply die, and with it his or her sense of 'aliveness and purpose'. At the same time the individual is undertaking the process of separation from parents which is accompanied by new attachments to other young adults, which may be in the form of strong friendship or romance. Attachment forms a strong base from which to

tackle life stresses. (Bowlby 1988, Levitt 1991). Individuals who do not form attachments are lacking in social support and may be more susceptible to stress.

Transition has also been a feature of the work done by Fisher and colleagues, though here it was transition to university and the effects of homesickness that were the main concerns. Of university students experiencing homesickness, about one third experienced loss of concentration, had poor attendance at lectures, or handed in work late. (Fisher *et al* 1985). There was also evidence to suggest raised levels of absent-mindedness, as measured by the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (Broadbent *et al* 1982). Fisher and Hood (1987) showed in a longitudinal study that homesick students have raised levels of psychological disturbance after transition to university, as measured using the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire (Crown & Crisp 1966). There was also evidence of lower adaptation to university, which the researchers felt indicated lack of commitment to the new environment or high levels of inefficient behaviour.

The work done by Fisher provides a reasonably up-to-date perspective on student stress, but concentrates on particular aspects. There have been few recent studies that take a more general view to identify stressors and stress effects in students within the modern higher education environment. Much of the recent work on academic stress has centred on lecturers rather than students. One study which has taken a more generalised approach was conducted with students at Nene College of Higher Education (Dabney, 1994). The researcher used interviews, diaries and questionnaires to elicit information from full-time undergraduates. The key stressors were found to be, in order of frequency, lecturers (related to their attitudes and behaviour both in and out of the teaching situation), academic work (with particular emphasis on volume and pace), resources and facilities, personal worries, finances, accommodation, and child care. It is interesting to note that finances appear quite far down the list, given the emphasis placed on student financial problems by the media and various lobby groups.

Perhaps the research most relevant to my current study is that done by Monk at Glasgow Caledonian University (Monk, 1996). Two hundred and ten students were given a problem questionnaire. the General Health Questionnaire 30, and a symptom checklist. Emotional lability was a finding, often accompanied by self-destructive thoughts. Anxiety seemed to be a prime manifestation of unresolved stress. A considerable number of students found the burden of coursework more difficult than anticipated, which led to serious consideration of dropping out. Financial suffering was evident, but not sufficiently so to be connected to emotional distress, which supports the findings of Danby's study. Interestingly, severity of psychological manifestations had little bearing on academic results. In-depth case studies showed that coping resources did not fully explain this finding, and the researcher proposed that a more pertinent explanation appeared to lie in the theory of activation, allied to motivational concepts and personality. This highlights arousal as an explanation for highly-stressed students doing well in their course.

Summary

The research shows that the whole subject of student stress is very complex, with many factors contributing to the phenomenon. Researchers often disagree on the effect of some of the factors involved. Perhaps the most important of these in terms of my own study is the effect of stress on academic performance and progress. There have been studies that have reported that stress causes academic failure and achievement, whilst more recent studies have shown the opposite effect. There is the question of *degree* of stress involved here. The academic performance of students who are extremely stressed and psychologically disturbed is indeed interrupted, but for those students who display mild forms of stress (and studies show that this could mean *all* students) the effects could be either positive or negative.

From the research into the stressors that may cause these effects some key themes have emerged. Students from different types of schools have been shown to differ in their vulnerability and response to stress. So too do students on different types of university course, with Arts students being more susceptible than Science students. Role ambiguity is thought to play an important part in this effect.

The transition from childhood to adulthood has received some attention from researchers because it is a time when life change may make a significant contribution to an individual's vulnerability to stress. One aspect of this is social support. This is a time when students are separating from parents and making new relationships. Those that are not successful in this process lack social support and are thereby more vulnerable. With the separation from parents goes the increased responsibility of having to take care of the everyday tasks of life. For most students the move to university is the first time they will have had to manage finances, housekeeping and so on, whilst at the same time coming to terms with a new environment and juggling new work demands. This type of 'multitasking' has been shown to link to cognitive failure, though there is some disagreement about whether this *causes* or is *a cause* of stress. This period also coincides with the individual formulating a vision of their own future and developing expectations of what that future might hold. When the reality does not meet with these expectations the individual is likely to become demoralised and depressed.

Other factors that have been shown to act as stressors are workload, interactions with lecturers, personal problems, and issues to do with the environment, such as not being able to get books from the library. Surprisingly, financial issues do not feature as strongly as might be expected.

Despite some clear themes emerging from stress research, efforts to develop predictive models to identify which students may be most at risk have been largely unsuccessful. It is thought that contributing factors such as sex, social class, and personality variables complicate these efforts. These same factors can be used in

part to explain why students respond differently to low levels of stress, but they also impact upon motivation, and motivational factors have emerged as an important issue when trying to explain differences in academic performance of students.

2.3 Initial investigation

2.3.1 Method

The measurement of stress presents a number of difficulties to the researcher, largely because there has been considerable confusion concerning the definition of stress, particularly in the early days of research in this field. Stress has variously been defined as a *response* (e.g. Selye, 1956), as a characteristic of specific environmental events (*stimuli)* acting on an individual(e.g. Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and latterly as *transaction* between person and the environment, in which the individual considers that the situation is in some way exceeding his or her resources, and is thereby presenting some threat to his or her well-being (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is this transactional definition that has gained most popularity with researchers in recent years, and from this three key domains have emerged as a focus for stress research: Features of the environment, most usually considered as the independent variable; characteristics of the individual, such as personality, (moderating variables), and the effects of stress on the individual, most usually considered as the dependent variables.

A further problem confronting stress researchers is the question of approach - the choice between laboratory or field studies. There are arguments for and against both approaches, with advocates of field research pointing out that laboratory studies are subject to limitations such as restricted ecological validity, an inability to examine stress processes over time, the limited duration, severity and complexity of stressors that are ethically feasible in a laboratory study and artificial constraints that must be placed on variables. (See, for example, Coyne and Lazarus, 1980). Proponents of laboratory research, however, would argue that field studies suffer from poor control

of extraneous variables. a limited ability to determine causal relationships between variables. and high vulnerability to threats to validity. (See Laux and Vossel (1982). for discussion of these issues).

Field research was considered to be most appropriate for this study because of the requirement to investigate the responses of a large population (of students) over a period of time. The initial investigation sought to determine two things: a) whether there was sufficient evidence of stress amongst students . and b) if so. could causes be identified?

In seeking to answer question (a) an appropriate measure had to be found that could be easily and reliably used with a large number of students to identify stress effects. Four categories of measures are variously used to explore stress effects:

Behavioural measures are based on the premise that exposure to stress results in reduced performance in a variety of tasks such as proof-reading written material for errors.

Psychophysiological measures determine such things as changes in heart-rate. blood pressure and skin temperature in response to stress.

Biochemical measures use changes in the endocrine functioning as a measure of stress response.

All three of these are normally used in the laboratory, and were therefore inappropriate for this study.

The final category of measure, *self-report,* has been widely used in field studies to investigate stress. and was considered to be the most appropriate for this phase of the study. Indeed, the vast majority of published psychological studies into stress have used self-report measures to assess the outcomes of stress. and there is a plethora of scales available for this purpose. Their popularity is undoubtedly based on the fact that they are inexpensive and easy to administer to large numbers of participants. However. none has gained widespread acceptance. partly due to problems in establishing validity and reliability. and also because there is no all-purpose scale - different scales are used in different circumstances. They are subject

to criticism on the basis that they are highly susceptible to bias, both in terms of participants' overestimate of symptoms due to increased awareness or concerns when experiencing stress (see Baum et al. 1982), or in terms of participants underestimating or minimising symptoms. Despite these concerns, the self-report measure was considered to be appropriate for the purposes of this study, in that it could present a broad indication of the occurrence of stress in the student population, and in terms of its ease of administration.

The choice of self-report measure had to be considered in the context that it was to be administered to the general student population, a significant proportion of which were from overseas and did not use English as their first language. Thus, it was important to use a measure that employed easily-understandable language. Care also had to exercised to use a measure that was not too 'targeted', since the study was not selecting students who had reported symptoms of stress. Many scales have been developed to measure symptoms in psychiatric patients, and focus on physical illness and psychiatric disturbance. However, a number of scales have been developed to measure a broad range of stress responses, such as depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and these have been demonstrated to be sensitive to low levels of symptoms in normal populations. Widely-used measures of this type include the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972), and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist, HSCL, (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickles, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974), which has been used in both a 58-item version, and as an expanded 90-item version to include hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism (Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973).

The Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire, MHQ, (Crown & Crisp, 1966) is similar to the HSCL in that it was designed to measure psychoneurotic disturbance. However, it provides a less limited tool than the HSCL, which in its original form was designed to measure changes in clinical status rather than to *identify* cases of disturbance, and focussed predominantly on depression and anxiety. The MHQ, on the other hand, was designed as a simple-to-use diagnostic tool to identify

psychologically symptomatic individuals and covering a wide range of neurotic symptoms. As a British scale, it was felt that it would be more appropriate for use within a British university, in that it would be more likely to use terms that were easily recognisable by the sample population, and because, importantly, the designers had deliberately used common speech in the questions, rather than more clinically more accurate but stilted speech. In addition, it had been designed to take only five to ten minutes to complete, and was capable of being rapidly scored.

The MHQ has received some criticism because, although it incorporates subscales to measure different aspects of 'psychoneurotic personality', i.e. free-floating anxiety, phobic anxiety, obsessive-compulsive traits, somatic symptoms, hysteria and depressive symptoms, attempts to demonstrate that the scales identify separate dimensions of psychopathology have failed (Dohrenwend et al 1981). However, though this criticism may be levelled by those seeking to use the tool for psychiatric diagnosis, it was not considered to present a disadvantage for this study, which required a measure simply to identify general trends in stress outcomes. Indeed, Dohrenwend et al coined the term 'demoralisation' to describe the general domain of psychological disturbance measured by the rating scales, asserting that they were useful in identifying psychologically symptomatic individuals and pointing to the existence of problems without allowing diagnostic specificity. Demoralisation could also be used to describe the emotional state of the students that first prompted this enquiry, and this adds further to the argument for using the MHQ in the first part of this study. A copy of the MHQ is provided in appendix 1.

The second question to be answered in the first part of this study was: 'What were the causes of any stress identified in the general student population by administration of the MHQ?'. To answer this question, semi-structured depth interviews were used.

The overall aim of this phase was to gather information to form the basis of a second survey of the Business School student population. The objectives of the interviews were:

1. Identify the most important stressors in terms of students' appraisal of those stressors
2. Identify the effects that stress is having on the students
3. Identify how students cope with stress

Objective 1 : *Identify the most important stressors in terms of students' appraisal of those stressors.*

This objective posed three major difficulties:

- The problems with the definition of stress meant that any questions asking directly about stress may have been unlikely to meet with consistent understanding and interpretation from all respondents, and therefore information gathered from these questions could be of limited value.
- Stress still remains a somewhat taboo subject in this country, and so stress-related questions may be perceived as threatening, and elicit less than honest responses.
- Open questions asking about the respondents' experience of stress were likely to receive a wide variety of responses, and thus the resulting information would be difficult to code and interpret.

To avoid these problems, the section of the interview dealing with stressors was designed around the key variables that have been established through research and widely accepted as being stress-inducing. (See 2.1: Theoretical Background). These are: *change, control, person-environment fit, work overload,* and *daily hassles*

Of these, the topics of 'control' and 'person-environment fit' are also difficult concepts to define. In an attempt to minimise the problems that this might cause during the interview, a freelisting exercise was carried out with a sample of students. The aim was to identify issues important to the students under these two headings.

and to describe them using vocabulary that would be meaningful to students, whilst avoiding explicit use of the word 'stress'.

The freelisting exercise required students to prepare four lists:

- Things within the university environment that made them feel comfortable, 'at home' or that they 'belonged'.
- Things about the university environment that made them feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or 'out-of-place'.
- Things within the university environment that made them feel that they were in control of their own lives and progress.
- Things within the university environment that made them feel that they did not have control of their own lives and progress.

For each list responses from all students were pooled and then grouped into categories, for example: 'academic staff', 'administration' , 'fellow students'.

The responses were used to design interview questions addressing the issues of control and fit.

Objective 2: *Identify the effects that stress is having on students*

Effects were addressed under the headings of:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Perceived effect on learning
- Effect on progress (within the university course)

Objective 3 : *Identify how students cope with stress*

Coping was investigated under the headings of :

- Appraisal of stress
- Students' perception of ability to cope
- Coping style (adaptive/maladaptive)
- Coping strategies (distraction/ruminative/negative)
- Status of the individual
- Support systems

All respondents were asked for some personal details, including entry qualifications, at the start of the interview. This information was used during analysis to interpret findings.

Because the main aim of the interview was to gather as much qualitative information as possible about students' experience of stress, mainly open questions were used, and so the interview schedule was not pre-coded for scoring, and response counting was the method used in the analysis of the findings.

To aid interpretation of results, the interview was structured using the headings described above. However, it was recognised that there was likely to be some overlap between different topics - for example responses under the categories 'control' and 'change'.

The interview schema is included as appendix 2. Questions 10-34 address the issue of *change*. Questions 10-15 looked at how planned the change to university was; 16-34 investigated reality vs. expectation. Questions 35-51 covered *control*, and *'fit'* was covered by questions 52-80. The final questions investigated *coping*.

Students from all levels were invited to take part in the interviews. Twenty five volunteers were forthcoming: of these, ten were A level entrants and the remaining

fifteen had a variety of other entry qualifications, ranging from GNVQ to APEL. Fifteen of the interviewees were female and ten were male.

2.3.2 MHQ findings

This part of the study took place during the 1995-96 academic year. The MHQ was administered to students from the business school in core lectures in order to capture data from all courses and levels. Time was allowed for completion and collection of the questionnaire within the lecture slot to ensure a good response rate. In total, 316 completed questionnaires were returned.

Responses from the MHQ were scored and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Results were categorised under the headings of the six subscales measuring free-floating anxiety (FFA), somatic symptoms, obsessive/compulsive symptoms, phobic symptoms, depression and hysteria. Initially histograms were prepared for each of the subscale results to identify any patterns in the responses. This was carried out for the full set of data, and then by sorting data by level, by course, and by entry (A level and 'other'). Level data were then sorted by course and by entry.

The data showed that whilst most students exhibited what might be considered as normal levels of stress, there were considerable numbers showing indications of very high levels. In addition, as predicted, some students showed extremely low levels of stress. No patterns were noted amongst the different sets of data apart from those sorted by level and entry, where there appeared to be notable differences in the patterns for some of the subscale responses. Data exhibiting these patterns showed significant differences between A level entry and 'other' entry students for several subscales at each level. At level one, 'other' entry student (which comprised predominantly GNVQ and BTEC entry) showed significantly higher responses for phobic symptoms (t- test, $p<0.01$), somatic symptoms (t-test, $p<0.01$), and depression (t-test, $p<0.001$). At level two this pattern apparently reversed, with A-level entrant students showing the higher levels for free-floating anxiety and phobic

symptoms, although to a lesser degree of significance (t-test, $p<0.05$). At level three there were few differences noted, except for obsessive/compulsive symptoms, where 'other' entrants showed higher levels (t-test, $p<0.01$).

2.3.3 Interview findings

Change: Two aspects of change were investigated during the interviews conducted with twenty five students : whether the change (to university) has been planned for, and whether the reality of the change met with the students expectations. Both of these aspects have been established as important factors in determining how stressful the change will be.

All but two of the students interviewed had planned to come to university, most stating that they saw it as 'natural progression'. The two students who had not planned to come to university felt that they had been coerced into coming by tutors and family. Both exhibited discontent with all aspects of university life, and said that they frequently considered leaving the course. One, a final year student, said that he still felt like this even though he knew he only had a few weeks left at university. The other, a first year student, was planning to leave at the end of the current semester.

The most significant responses came when the students were asked how the reality of university had differed from their expectations. Thirteen respondents (50%) felt that the academic staff were different to what they had expected, and seventeen students (70%) said that the work was different. The majority of the views expressed about the staff centred on the issues of support and personal contact. Students were surprised and disappointed that they did not have the same level of personal contact with tutors that they had previously at school or college.

'I thought they'd be a lot more user-friendly. Some lecturers are very remote and back off. It makes me feel frustrated sometimes, although I'm used to it now.'

Of the students claiming that the work was different to what they had expected, only one thought it was harder that he had anticipated, and many felt that it was easier:

'I managed to do my first assignment in no time, and I got a grade 12 for it. I wondered how I'd managed to get that grade when I put so little effort into it.'

Many students reported that they had found the student-centred system difficult to get used to, and were not prepared for working on their own initiative. There were seventeen clearly negative comments expressed about student-centred learning, seven of which were from A level entrants, and ten from 'other' entrants. Eight positive comments were expressed about the system, evenly divided between A level and 'other' entrants. However, most of the negative comments related to 'preparedness' for the system, and when questioned further all but two of the students stated that they thought that they preferred the system overall, and felt they had probably done better than they would have done under a more traditional system. It took them most of the first semester to appreciate that they did not have as much 'free' time as their timetables seemed to indicate, but once they had adapted to having to organise themselves they appreciated the flexibility.

There were some interesting responses when students were asked how the differences made them feel when they first joined the university, for example:

'It would have kept me interested if the work had been harder. It didn't motivate me to work harder. I wanted to leave'

'At Christmas, I think that everything got on top of me. and I thought about leaving for a while. I felt that I couldn't continue. I was putting three times the amount of work into my language and neglecting my other work. I don't think I was enjoying it as much as I thought I would'

Four students (16%) said that the unexpected differences that they encountered when they first joined the university had made them feel like leaving their course, although only one was still planning to leave.

A level entrants made seventeen comments about expectations not being met. Of these, 35% related to the staff not being as expected, but all but one of these comments was positive - i.e. staff were either more approachable or more informal than expected. The academic work accounted for 41% of the remaining comments. Students with entry qualifications other than A levels made thirty-one comments about expectations not being met. Of these, 26% related to other students, 35% related to staff (split evenly between positive and negative comments), and 38% related to the work (mainly negative comments about the work being easier or less than expected).

Control: Two issues, *lack of information* and *group working*, stood out as being areas where students felt that their personal control was being eroded or weakened, leading to anger, frustration, and anxiety in many cases. More than half the students interviewed felt that they did not have sufficient information about individual modules to make informed choices. More importantly, most students felt that they were not given enough information about assignments, despite the fact that all assignments at the Business School are issued with detailed learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The main gap appeared to lie with the interpretation of these criteria; students felt that they needed some personal guidance and reassurance that they were working along the right lines, and that the opportunity for this type of individual support was not adequate. Typical comments were:

'We need more information. More teachers talking to you as an individual. rather than as a whole group. Make us feel that we really count. Simple things like that - but it's the simple things that count'

'I think we need a bit more contact than we're getting. I feel as if we are only half-heartedly involved in a subject. we aren't really immersed in it'

Group working produced similar feelings of loss of control and uncertainty, but there was a marked polarity in the comments the students made. On the one hand were those students who wanted to take control, but felt frustrated because they had to bow to others' opinion:

> 'There are a lot of people who won't do any work, but if you try to get something done, putting forward ideas, the others think that you're trying to take over. There's a lot more conflict in it.'

'I feel angry when I have to work in a group. It's very stressful.'

At the other end of the scale were the students who felt frustration because they could not contribute as much as they would have liked. There seemed to be varying reasons for this - some students felt too insecure to make a contribution, and interestingly several overseas students said that they felt excluded because of language or cultural differences:

> 'I don't want to say anything because I'm scared of giving the impression that I'm stupid. I don't want people to say that my ideas don't count.'

'As an overseas student, if I'm in a group with British students they talk more quickly and easily than I can, and sometimes I don't understand what they are saying so I feel isolated. They use terms that I don't understand. I just listen, because I think that they don't want to tell me.'

Overall, sixteen negative and five positive comments were expressed about group working, and the issue of group working accounted for 15% of the feelings of anger or frustration expressed during the interviews.

Person-environment fit. Under this heading, students were questioned on how well their needs were met by the university resources . Four categories of resources were looked at: *staff, facilities*, the *local surroundings*, and *peers*. The most significant comments emerged from the investigation of the staff-student relationship. Thirteen (52%) of those questioned felt that they had insufficient support from the academic staff, and eight (32%) felt that the attitude of staff towards students was poor. Most of the comments related to inaccessibility of staff, particularly when help with assignments was needed. Students talked about staff not having time for them, or 'not being bothered' to help them. This one issue aroused the strongest feelings throughout the interviews, accounting for 20% of all negative comments, and 32% of all expressions of anger or frustration:

'It's demotivating and frustrating'

'Sometimes I feel that they won't help me because I'm Chinese, not British. Perhaps if I was British they would help me more.'

'They don't care, and that makes me angry and upset. I *want* someone to care.'

'It makes me bloody angry. I want to smash them in the face sometimes.'

'They don't want to get close. They keep away from you as much as they can. It makes me feel a bit pushed-out. That's one of the reasons why I'm so unsettled.'

Workload. On the whole, the majority of students found both the quantity and level of the work 'manageable' A small minority found it either too difficult or too easy, but all of those who found it too hard had found a way to cope. It was those students who found the work too easy, particularly in the first year, who voiced the greatest concerns, feeling that they weren't motivated to do well, and consequently were not prepared for the jump in the level of work between the first and second years:

'I want it to be harder. If the work is so easy, I won't feel as if I've accomplished anything.'

'I want a feeling of being under pressure, but I can't get that here. There isn't any pressure to do anything.'

'I would love to feel motivated by the work like I did last year *(at college)*. I would love that feeling again. It gives me an adrenaline rush.'

Overall throughout the interviews there were one hundred and eighteen clear negative comments made about the university experience. Forty of these came from A level entrants, and seventy-eight from the 'other' entrants. Eighty-three clear positive comments were made: forty-one from A level entrants, forty-two from 'other' entrants. Of the negative comments expressed by A-level students, 3% were related to reality vs. expectation, and 48% were related to person-environment fit. Of the negative comments made by the 'other' entrants, 14% related to reality vs. expectation, and 50% related to person-environment fit.

2.4 Discussion

The MHQ was administered to students to identify if there was evidence of stress in students, in order to decide if this investigation was worth pursuing. The results clearly showed symptoms of stress, particularly amongst first-year students. There also appeared to be some interesting patterns in the results, with the more traditional

A level entrants appearing less stressed than those entering university through other routes. This is perhaps not altogether unexpected, since the 'other' entrants are likely to include a greater proportion of mature students returning to education after a break, overseas students who are experiencing a new culture and trying to study in a foreign language, and students who have come through the BTEC or GNVQ routes and are less traditional 'academic' students. In addition, this clearly has parallels with the findings of Howell *et al* (1973) on the effects of school background, and perhaps also reflects some kind of role ambiguity in the 'other' group. One might expect traditional A level entrants to have a clearer identity with the HE environment. However, the patterns may well be complicated by personality factors. It seems not unreasonable to assume that personality type plays a part in an individual' s selection of school qualification route, as indeed it has been shown to play a part in selection of university education. (Lucas *et al,* 1976).

The patterns at levels 2 and 3 were not so pronounced, and should be treated with caution, since there could be many confounding factors that affect the results. For example, the level 3 group would comprise a mix of students who had just returned from placement, and those who had come directly from level 2; some would have transferred into the course after successfully completing their HND, and some would be direct entrants from local colleges, again having successfully completed an HND. However, the level 1 results are interesting in two respects: firstly, even regardless of the source, students are showing evidence of stress, and this has practical implications for the university, both in terms of its obligation of care for the students, and in terms of drop-outs and referrals. Secondly, if non-traditional students really are at greater risk, as these results seem to imply, this problem will increase as the university's policy of widening participation takes greater hold. A further point to note is that the histograms from the results indicated that there were some students showing very low levels of stress; it was discussed earlier that this in itself can have implications for an individual's motivation. If there are some groups that are being insufficiently challenged by their university experience, then this may also be impacting upon drop-out and referral rates. So, although the results from the

MHQ could not be used to draw detailed conclusions about at-risk groups, there was sufficient evidence of stress in students to justify the next stage of the study.

The next stage of study, the interviews, was designed to investigate the key stressors responsible for MHQ results. However, the links with student motivation quickly became clear when reviewing the responses. When we consider the feelings and opinions voiced by the students on many of the issues, we can see that there are some things that are discouraging them from doing their best, and reducing their enjoyment of the university experience. The issues of ***control*** and ***person-environment fit*** generated the strongest feelings in the students I interviewed. Of course, there are clear parallels here with the traditional theories of motivation - anyone familiar with the Hawthorne Experiment (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) will appreciate that individuals work better if they have some control over their work and feel that they are a valued member of the working environment. As well as impacting upon stress, person-environment fit is an important motivational factor and as such has been given some attention by management researchers. For example, studies by French and colleagues (1982) pointed to a U-shaped relationship between some aspects of person-environment fit and indices of morale and strain. Studies in education have identified similar features. In their research into study difficulty, Lucas *et al* (1976) noted:

> Motivation is not purely an individual personality attribute, but relates to the goodness or badness of fit between a student and his whole environment. This may include his family and their aspirations, the college and its aspirations, the student's own ambition, his attitude to the educational and examination system, and other factors.

In addition to the individual issues that emerged, two key themes ran through all areas of the interviews: the staff/student relationship, and student expectations. The students talked about not feeling in control because they didn't get enough information or help from staff; of feeling frustrated because staff didn't have

enough time for them; angry when a member of staff was offhand; and demotivated when they realised that a member of staff didn't know who they were or what they had achieved. There was an overall sense that the staff did not care about them as individuals, and that this made many students try less hard or become down-hearted.

The students' comments on the staff at first appeared to be very damning, but an interesting finding emerged when I pressed the students further on this issue. In almost every case, it seemed that their attitude towards the staff had been formed as a result of one or two isolated incidents, often very early in the students' university career. Final year students recalled in detail the hurt and anger they felt when they had been treated in a way that they felt was unfair, perhaps in their first semester at Sunderland. Although the majority of students conceded that most staff were helpful and approachable, these isolated bad experiences seemed to have overshadowed the positive points, and often made students much more reluctant to approach any staff member subsequently.

This issue of not giving students individual attention also seems to be affecting what I would term the 'under-stressed' student. By this, I mean the students who report finding the level one work too easy, and who become demotivated as a result. It seems that these students needs are being neglected in our efforts to bring everyone up to the same level during the first year of the course, and it could mean that we risk losing some of our more able students because of this. Linked to this was the issue of expectations. Many of the frustrations concerning the staff/student relationship seemed to arise when students had come to university expecting the same level of interaction that they had with staff at school or college. They were unprepared for the 'independent learner' approach being encouraged by the university. Perhaps here issues of syllabus-boundness are playing a part (Lucas *et al*, 1976). Ability to cope with the work was also linked to the students' expectation – whether it was harder or indeed easier than anticipated, any variation from

expectation caused concern. Interestingly, some features of student life that one might have expected to cause students stress did not, because they *were* expected. The most important example of this is shortage of money. Few of the students interviewed raised the issue of money during the interviews, and when they were asked about it specifically they generally noted that it was a problem for them, but one that they had expected, and thus they did not consider it to be so stressful as other issues. Five students *did* cite lack of money as a problem, but three of these were mature students who had worked for between one and six years immediately prior to starting their degree, and these students were finding the drop in income difficult to cope with.

Overall, from this preliminary investigation there appeared to be a pattern emerging of a different experience of HE between students who enter via what we might term the traditional route of A levels, and those that enter via other means. However, in contravention of conventional wisdom this does not seem to stem from the qualification *per se*. It is normal to think that A level students might be more suited to HE and more able to cope with the academic work, but in this study the non-A level students voiced concerns that the work was *too easy in the first year*. This could be an anomaly of the very vocational nature of the degrees at the Business School, which adopt similar teaching and assessment methods to GNVQ courses. However, the study pointed to the issue being much more complex than a simple traditional/non-traditional split in the effects on experience, and it also seemed to indicate that, rather than stress being a key issue in performance, motivational issues were much more predominant and may provide a more fruitful focus for following work. Two issues raised during the student interviews, *person-environment fit* and *expectations*, bridged the gap between stress and motivation, and also offered a potential for investigation of the differences observed between traditional and non-traditional students, so these were considered as possible routes for investigation. Of these two, expectations could be most clearly defined and therefore more rigorously investigated. Expectations also *influence* person-environment fit. It was

therefore considered that the aims of the study may best be achieved by continuing the investigation with a focus on expectations.

Chapter three : Expectations

3.1 Introduction

In the first part of this study expectations were voiced as a cause for concern by students interviewed in relation to their experience of stress whilst at the university. This raised the questions

a) why were the students so troubled by unmet expectations?
b) why were their expectations unmet? Did the fault lie with the organisation, or were the expectations unrealistic in the first place?
c) how were their expectations formed?
d) in addition to inducing mild or moderate levels of stress, were there likely to be any other important consequences of unmet expectations?

A review of the theoretical issues relating to expectations helped to answer these questions and indicate an approach for the next phase of the study.

3.2 Expectations and behaviour

Expectations have long been a subject of interest for researchers in a variety of fields investigating aspects of human behaviour. Psychologists studying learning, and in particular operant conditioning, have used expectations to explain the phenomenon of avoidance learning (Rescorla and Solomon, 1967; Seligman and Johnston, 1973). Thus, if an individual associates an unpleasant event with a particular stimulus, they will respond by taking action to avoid that event as soon as the stimulus occurs. Then, if the situation changes such that the unpleasant event no longer occurs following the stimulus, the individual will nevertheless still respond with the 'avoiding' behaviour. They have learned to *expect* that by responding they can avoid the unpleasant event.

Interpersonal expectancy effects have also been given extensive consideration by experimental researchers in psychology. These are based on the hypothesis that person A's expectation for person B's behaviour can affect B's behaviour in such a

way as to increase the probability that B will behave as expected: the so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton 1948). This research field originally derived from a concern about the effect that experimenters had on the results of their research - i.e. the tendency for experimenters to obtain results that they expect, not solely because they are genuine results, but because they have helped shape that response through their expectations. So, when behavioural researchers expect certain results from their human or animal subjects, they subconsciously treat them in such a way as to increase the probability that they will respond as expected. Merton (ibid) described the self-fulfilling prophecy as:

> '...in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true' (p. 194)

There have been many hundreds of experiments conducted to investigate interpersonal expectancy effects, ranging from animal learning experiments to everyday human life situations. Although the theory had some dissenters, in 1978 all experiments reported to that date were compiled and reviewed by Rosenthal and Rubin, who concluded that 'The reality of the phenomenon is beyond doubt and the mean size of the effect is clearly not trivial' (p. 385)

It is clear, then, that both an individual's expectations and the expectations of others for that individual can be important in determining the individual's behaviour. This concept has been used and extended by researchers investigating workplace performance and motivation (Vroom, 1964; Porter and Lawler, 1968; Lawler, 1973; Hall, 1976).

Motivation has traditionally been looked at from three perspectives:

Content approach: Maslow's theory of motivation is classed as a content theory because it adopts a package approach to human motivation. Content theories are open to criticism because they do not recognise individual choice and social

influence. Maslow's theory is also a *universal* theory because he argued that it applied to everyone. Universal theories attract the criticism that they do not explain the differences between individuals or between cultures. Whilst it is likely that these theories were applicable to many workplaces at the time of their formulation, they became much less applicable as workforces became more diverse and multi-cultural. Other explanations for workforce behaviour had to be sought.

The *Expectancy approach* to motivation avoids the criticisms of the content approach by trying to explain motivation whilst taking into account differences between individuals. It is a *process* theory because it does not assume that individuals come complete with a package of motives to pursue. Expectancy theory is also *cognitive* ie it assumes that individuals are aware of their goals and behaviour, and considers human beings to be purposive and rational (providing an alternative to the *behaviourist* theories which adopt a stimulus-response approach, considering human behaviour to be reflexive and instinctive, driven by unconscious and inherited drives.)

Vroom produced the first systematic formulation of expectancy theory in 1964, developing a way of measuring an individuals motivation. The formulation was:

$$F = E \times V$$

Where:

F = motivation to behave

E = the expectation (subjective probability) that the behaviour will be followed by a particular outcome

V = the valence of the outcome

So, in essence,

- Expectancy theory states that human behaviour results from a conscious decision making process that is based on the individual's subjective probability

– the perceptions that the individual has about the results of alternative behaviours

- Expectancy theory, as it is based on individual perceptions, helps to explain individual differences in motivation and behaviour, unlike Maslow's universal content theory

- Expectancy theory attempts to measure the strength of the individual's motivation to behave in certain ways.

- Expectancy theory is based on the assumption that human behaviour is to some extent rational and that individuals are conscious of their goals or motives. As people take into account the probable outcomes of their behaviour and place values on these outcomes, expectancy theory attempts to **predict** individual behaviour.

Social perspective: The third perspective is that motivation in an organisational context is a social process in which some people try to influence others to work harder and more effectively. This links closely with expectancy theory, because the experience of work can affect the individual's perception of the terms of the expectancy equation. By changing the design of a job it is possible to change an individual's perceptions and create a different expectancy calculation, which preferably (for employees) increases need satisfaction and preferably (for employers) increases performance.

In recent years the ideas about expectations influencing behaviour and motivation have been used to great effect in a more specialist area of management research, looking not at workers, but at consumers. As industry and commerce have become increasingly consumer-led rather than producer-led, business strategies have begun to focus much more heavily on quality and marketing. Fundamental to

strategies in both of these business areas is the expectation of the customer: where customer expectations are met, the product or service is perceived to be of quality; where expectations are not met, dissatisfaction results. One of the modern definitions of 'quality', and one that is adhered to by most successful companies, is 'the degree of fit between a customers expectations and their perception of a product or service'. (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Implicit in this definition are a number of problems. Firstly, quality is subjective. Different customers will have different expectations and different perceptions of the same product, so quality becomes difficult to supply and measure. Secondly, quality is dynamic - expectations change with time as a consequence of experience, rising quite readily, but rarely falling. It is important, therefore, for any organisation whose aim is quality to constantly monitor customer expectations. Marketing research plays a primary role in this function, and one of the main tools applied is gap analysis.

Gap analysis sets out to measure levels of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, to identify the source of dissatisfaction when it occurs and to eliminate it. The central issue is how customer expectations develop, and what are the sources of unrealistic or inappropriate expectations (see Parasuraman et al, 1985, and Zeithaml et al 1990 for detailed explanation of the technique).

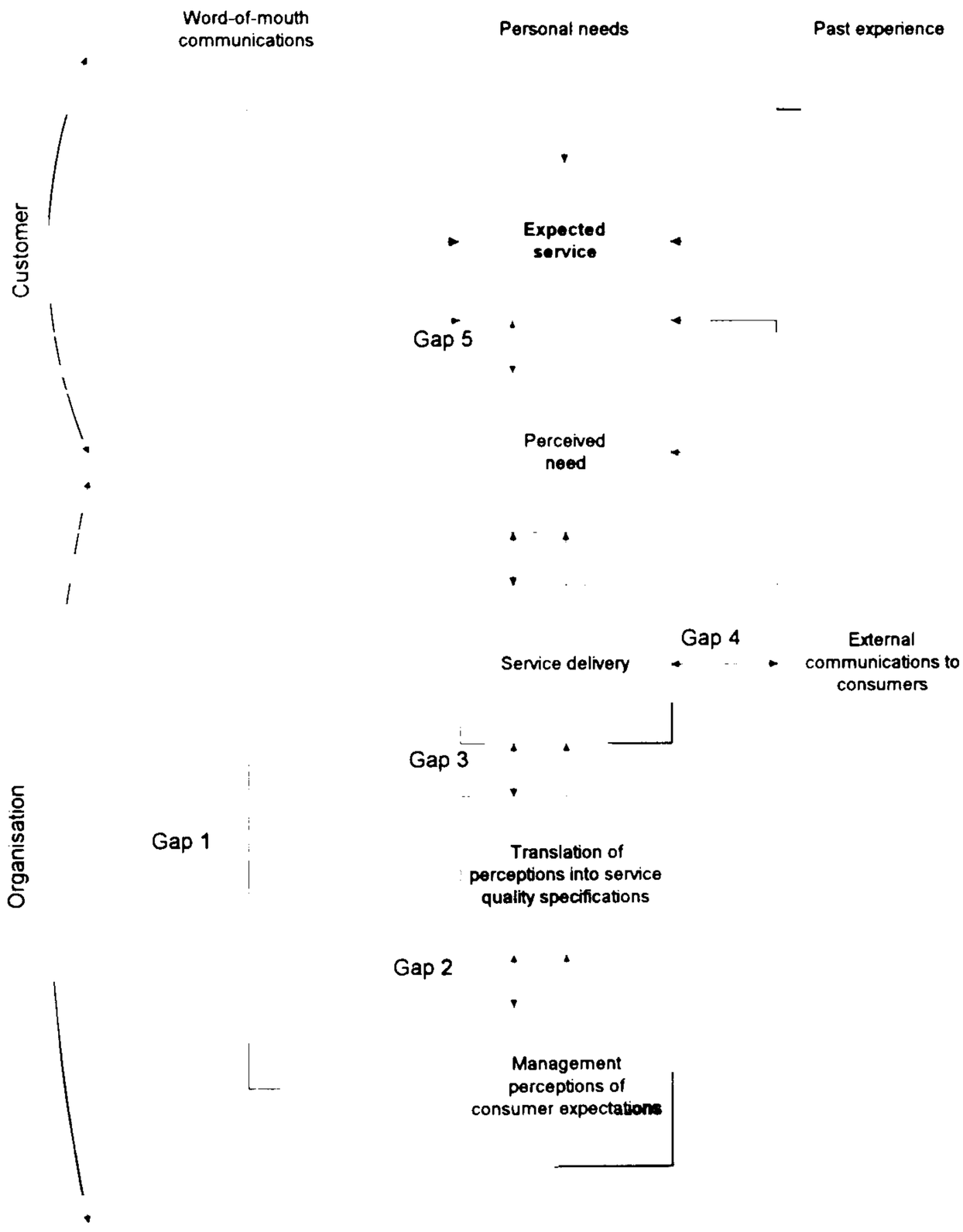
What expectations are raised largely depends upon how an organisation treats its customers. An organisation that is product-led will start with its own beliefs about what the customers wants and design its product or services accordingly. Thus the product or service will reflect the organisation's perception of quality rather than the customer's. In this instance the 'quality gap' is likely to be large, resulting in customer dissatisfaction and lost custom for the business.

In a marketing-oriented company an entirely different approach is taken, starting from identification of what the customer expects. This is likely to be quite varied, but generally the major factors that will determine customer expectations and perceptions are:

- Word of mouth communications
- Personal needs
- Past experience

Once the customer's requirements have been fully understood, they must be applied within the organisation to minimise quality gaps. Zeithaml el al (ibid) have shown the relationship between these factors in the following model:

Figure 3.1: Quality Gap model (Zeithaml et al, 1990)



Whilst showing graphically how expectations are central to the quality process, it also shows how those expectations can, to a certain extent, be manipulated by the organisation via external communications to consumers and via ongoing dealings with the customer and others (past experience and word-of-mouth). This, I

believe, is important, for it shows that the organisation does not have to be entirely reactive, and can shape expectations to suit the organisation's capabilities.

It seems clear, then, that expectations play an important part in the behaviour of individuals in a variety of roles, most importantly those of learner, worker and consumer. Students, of course, are all of those things during their time at university, so it is perhaps unsurprising that the theories outlined above have been extensively applied to research into student behaviour.

3.3 Student expectations

3.3.1 Effects on performance

Some of the earliest research in this field concentrated not on the expectations of the students themselves, but on the expectations of teachers and the so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy' effect discussed above. They discovered that teachers were more likely to obtain the performances they expected from students solely because they *did* expect them (Rosenthal, 1973). Early studies involved experimental manipulation of expectations, and perhaps the most famous of these was the 'Pygmalion experiment' (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). All of the children in an elementary school were administered an intelligence test disguised as a test that would predict 'intellectual blooming'. Within each grade level in the school there were three classes composed of children with below average ability, average ability, and above average ability respectively. Twenty percent of each class was chosen at random to make up the experimental group. Each teacher in the school was then given the names of children from her class that were in the experimental group and was told that these children had achieved high scores on the test for 'intellectual blooming', and were expected to show remarkable gains in intellectual development over the next eight months of school. Thus, the only difference between the experimental group and control group of children was in the mind of the teacher. All of the children in the school were then tested eight months later with the same IQ test, and it was found that those children whom the teachers had

been led to expect greater intellectual development showed significantly greater gains in IQ than did the children in the control group. This led Rosenthal and Jacobson to conclude that the teachers were somehow unwittingly treating the experimental group differently to the control group because of their expectations about them. The opposite side of this argument was that students who were expected to be unable to learn by their teachers really would be unable to learn. This is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the current environment within Higher Education. Anecdotally, many academic staff consider that the non-traditional students entering the system today are not as capable as the traditional 'three A-level' students, and following through Rosenthal and Jacobson's hypothesis, this may mean that they are under-performing as a result of tutors' attitudes towards them.

Such studies of artificially manipulated teacher expectations provide a starting point for understanding expectancy effects within the classroom, but they are not without their critics. The studies reported in the literature have been contradictory and complex. It has been argued that some of the discrepancies have been partly a product of inducing the expectancies artificially, whilst ignoring naturally occurring expectancies. Natural expectancies do not necessarily stop operating when new expectancies are induced, and could act as complicating factors. For example, Dusek and O'Connell (1973) measured both naturally occurring and induced teacher expectations. No significant differences due to induced expectancies and no interaction between natural expectancies were found. Nevertheless, natural teacher expectancies were strongly related to student achievement at three different testing occasions. Various other studies seem to indicate that when artificially induced expectations run counter to naturally-occurring ones , the induced expectations may be disbelieved or considered as incorrect (Fine, 1972; Fleming and Anttonen, 1971; Jose and Cody, 1971).

The second major criticism of the early studies was that they neglected the expectations of the students themselves, seemingly treating them as a blank canvas:

> 'It has been assumed that either the individuals in question bring no expectation with them into the situation, or that their expectations are merely a source of error variance' (Zanna, Sheras, and Cooper, 1975, p.280)

Critics argued that students would certainly bring with them their own expectations to the learning situation, and that these expectations would serve to filter perceptions of the teacher and learning environment (Braun, 1976) and influence such things as interactions with teachers, lessons, assignments and tests (Hamachek, 1978). As a result, subsequent studies began to focus more on naturally occurring expectations of teachers and students, and interaction of the two. This body of work, conducted predominantly in the United States, has demonstrated a clear association between expectations and performance.

One such study that has particular relevance to the Sunderland Business School was that conducted by Smead and Chase (1981), who considered the effect of naturally occurring student expectations on achievement in mathematics. Their study and findings are of interest because it is in the mathematically based subjects that the Business School sees most failures and referrals. Many of our students voice a fear of maths, and seem to accept that they will struggle in these subjects. This is a particular problem, since all levels of the Business programmes contain mathematically based core modules such as finance and accounting, and operations management. Students are unable to progress until they have mastered these subjects, and they form a stumbling block for many. Smead and Chase found that students' own expectations of their likely performance in maths were related to their subsequent achievement at two points in the school year, which led them to argue that a change in instructional strategies might be the most successful way of ensuring student success. If students with low expectations are going to achieve

below the level of their peers with high expectations, the most profitable strategy would be first to build confidence and subsequently higher expectation levels in low expectancy students:

> 'It, therefore, appears that the first step in instruction should deal with the learner. The learner's readiness to learn must include a belief that he or she will indeed be successful with the topic to be learned. This belief could, of course, be induced through clever management of the subject matter so that low expectancy students could alter their self regard in the context of the normal routine of the mathematics class'. (p. 119)

So, here we have a suggestion that by identifying student expectations and then altering them in some way, it may be possible to achieve better student performance. This idea also has implications for the process of preparing students for college or university life as a whole, as well as for individual subjects. An experimental programme at the University of California (Spindell and Dembo, 1976) demonstrated that a group of students identified as having academic difficulties who were put through an orientation programme before admission to university achieved significantly better grade point averages in their first year than those of a control group. The orientation programme also had a positive effect on the experimental group's attitudes towards the university. They reported significantly more favourable responses to the questions:

- How do you feel about the college environment?
- Have you been adequately counselled?
- How do you rate your abilities compared to other students at this college?
- Do you think you will attain your goals?

The responses to the last two of these questions are particularly interesting, given that these were minority students designated as having academic deficiencies. Seventy percent of the experimental group saw themselves as being better students contrasted with 36% of the controls, and 14% of the controls expressed doubt concerning whether their plans would materialise, whilst only 3% of the

experimental group had similar doubts. It seems that a structured programme designed to develop positive expectations can enhance both the performance and experience of students at university, even if they are considered to be initially ill prepared for higher education. Again. this has implications for Sunderland Business School with its high proportion of non-traditional students.

Thus far, the studies discussed have focussed predominantly on students' (and teachers') expectations of academic performance. but this last study has introduced the idea that perhaps student expectations about a varied range of aspects of university life may also be important. In recent years there has been more emphasis placed on identifying what this full range of expectations might be, and how the expectations develop.

Arguing that student expectations fall into two general types: student expectations of their performance in. and benefits from, the course (personal expectations), and expectations about the instructor. Becker et al, (1990) attempted to produce some information about the specific nature of expectations. Working with a group of first-year psychology students, they administered a pre-course questionnaire asking simply:

'Describe in as much detail as you care to six expectations/goals you have for yourself as a student in this course'

and

'Describe in as much detail as you care to six expectations you have of your instructor'

A post-course questionnaire, designed to measure how well the expectations were met, was developed to reflect the most frequent responses from the pre-course questionnaire. Thus, the researchers hoped to avoid any speculation on what students' expectations were, acknowledging that students' and academics' viewpoints may not necessarily coincide. The most frequently listed pre-course personal expectations were to get a good grade/pass the class: learn and

understand: learn more about psychology and develop good study habits/stay awake, whilst the most frequently listed pre-course expectations for the instructor were to make the material understandable; to be patient, open-minded and fair; to make the class interesting, fun, exciting; to give extra help, and to be able to talk at students' level. Results of the post-course questionnaire are published as most frequently met post-course expectations in both categories, and the researchers note that by the end of the semester achievement of a certain grade had slipped from the top five expectations that were met to be replaced by more interpersonal aspects of the course. In terms of expectations of the instructor, the requirement to make the classes fun and exciting had given way to a greater requirement to know the material well.

Some caution needs to be exercised in the interpretation of these finding for a number of reasons. The researchers seemed to have compared two different measures pre-and post-course, with pre-course being a simple count of frequency and post-course a count of expectations 'met', 'not met', or 'not an expectation'. The discussion of the results focussed on expectations met, and the unmet expectations have not been addressed. In addition, there has been no attempt to determine the relative importance of the expectations listed, despite the fact that this factor can determine the effect that an expectation has. This is an important flaw, for despite the fact that the post-course questionnaire was derived from actual expectations listed by students pre-course , the researchers themselves note that students typically could not list six expectations. Yet, when answering the post-course questionnaire they agreed that they had nearly ten expectations met. The researchers comment that possibly the impact of simply having to indicate agreement or disagreement with items listed on the post-course questionnaire resulted in the dramatic increase in the number of satisfied expectations. It would seem that students are responding to items that joined the list pre-course because they were important to other students, even though they may not be so important to them personally. Nevertheless, this study provides a useful insight into the types and range of expectations that students bring with them to a course of study.

Other studies have taken a similar simplistic approach. For example, a study with student teachers (Platz and Smith, 1993) the degree to which expectations were met during teaching experience using a sixteen item questionnaire. The items were generated from previous student teachers as to the types of activities they felt they could or could not be involved with. The researchers in this case draw conclusions about development of student teacher orientation programmes, again without addressing the importance that the questionnaire respondents placed on the items.

More sophisticated research designs give a better insight into the formation, nature and impact of student expectations. The approach adopted by Kunkel, Pittman, Hildebrand and Walling (1994) provides both a novel and more thorough interrogation of student expectations, albeit with a very specialised group of students (gifted students taking part in a summer enrichment programme). Instead of making a priori assumptions, they used the technique of concept mapping to capture participants' expectations. This started by analysing written reports from students about their expectations for the summer programme, to identify particularly meaningful of consistent themes in the participants' material. This analysis resulted in a final list of 97 expectation items that wherever possible retained the participants' original language. Each student was given a pack of 97 cards on which these items were printed, and asked to place the cards in piles according to how they seemed to go together. Subsequent analysis of this sorting exercise allowed the researchers to construct a concept map to show various domains of students' expectations. These domains largely reflected findings in other research (Brounstein et al, 1988), which showed that students' endorsements of the various expectation items loaded on two underlying factors, social and academic motivations. What was particularly interesting, though, in terms of my own study, was their finding that Business students rated value development, self-actualisation and peer interaction higher than did Engineering students. The research team explained this by suggesting that business students had broader motivations for the programme. The concept mapping approach was therefore

useful both in identifying the expectations that students themselves believed were important (and in their own words), and in allowing differences between subject groups to be observed.

There are two important things missing from the research discussed so far:

- Evidence that expectations do indeed influence student performance
- Investigation into how expectations are formed

An understanding of these two areas is vital to the practitioner hoping to use expectancy theories to improve the performance and experience of students within their own institution. Luckily research has been done that links these themes, even in relatively early studies in this field (Aronson and Mills, 1959; Kagan and Moss, 1968; Erkut, 1977; Braun, 1976). Holahan et al. (1982) investigated the relationship of student self-perceptions, perceptions of the university environment, and social comparisons to performance expectancies. Based upon their study on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the team suggested that students will compare their own performance with that of other students, and that the relationship between student expectancies and ultimate performance will be partially dependent on the social comparison process. They further suggested that students will use information concerning other students most like themselves in forming expectations about their own performance. Their study found that student expectations formed before the end of the first semester were related to actual performance at the end of the first year, and that students' perceptions of the demands of the university were the most important predictor of student expectation. The researchers argued from this latter point that students are aware of the press of academic institutions and that their assessments are related to their performance expectations and concluded that if students had an accurate representation of the demands of an educational institution before entering they would be more likely to select an institution in which they would be successful.

The second most important predictor of student expectancies was found to be their self-comparison with students like themselves. This result was considered to be in line with social comparison theory, and indicative that students who are different from the modal student population are likely to be aware of themselves as a unique group.

These findings have a number of implications for Sunderland Business School. Firstly, in terms of ensuring that students have realistic expectations of the demands of the institution; in the competitive HE environment of the north-east of England, there is a tendency to adopt an aggressive marketing strategy that focuses on the social side of university life, to the detriment of painting an accurate picture of the academic demands of the courses. Many students also enter via the clearing process, when there is little opportunity to discuss the demands of the courses in detail before the student has to make a decision. Secondly, the social awareness of the students could possibly be constructively used in targeting programmes and encouraging the groups encompassed by the 'widening participation' agenda, such as mature and minority students.

There are many examples of this type where understanding of expectations has been put to positive and constructive use, but it is worth noting that sometimes expectations can have a negative or detrimental effect on the student if they are not handled properly. A cautionary tale is told by Knighten (1984) in her article on failure:

> 'A 'straight A' student was about to graduate from college on the high honor roll, but jumped out of a window the night before grades were made public. It was a great mystery until it was discovered that he had been awarded the first 'B' of his life in his last semester of college. This brilliant boy was unable to cope with what he considered failure. He felt that making a lower grade was devastating. Constant successes without failures created this rationalization'. (p. 170)

Knighten uses this tale to illustrate her argument that constantly expecting success can hinder learning in gifted individuals. They will tend to protect their position of superiority amongst their peers by not exposing themselves to situations where they know they may fail. For example, in another illustration offered by Knighten, a boy who was 'top dog' in his class deliberately chose classes in which he knew he could beat his classmates. Thus, he always took unchallenging subjects and never stretched himself to achieve more.

This aspect may have implications for certain subgroups. For example, students of Asian origin often have strong parental pressure to succeed. In the study by Kunkel et al, (op cit, p273), the pattern of expectation influences across ethnic groups was found to reflect values of achievement and autonomy, and resultant parental pressure, among gifted minority families.

When students' expectations of the course are not met, their perception of reality can be blurred, with resultant undesirable consequences for the academics involved. In her study of students taking an abnormal psychology course, Bock (1979) illustrated that students' expectations of course content influence their ratings of tutor effectiveness. Students whose expectations coincided with course content were more likely to rate their tutor as highly effective or effective, but students who had expected a different type of course were more likely to rate the tutor as effective or ineffective. This has implications, of course, for the way courses are 'sold' to students, and is particularly important in this era of quality assessments and tutor evaluations. By making sure that students are clear about course content before they start, it may be that tutor evaluations become more clearly related to the true performance of that tutor.

This issue was looked at from a different perspective in an Australian study (Tennant, 1991). A group of 120 adult educators was asked to identify aspects of student behaviour that annoyed or irritated them and aspects of their role that they

feared or felt guilty about. The study found that a common source of conflict was conflicting teacher and student expectations, and a conclusion was that adult educators should have a clear idea of their role and articulate it to learners. This, of course, has implications not only for tutors and students, but also for the management and policy-makers within universities. They need to make clear exactly what is expected of tutors, given that the educational environment is changing so rapidly and that traditional roles can no longer be relevant in many institutions.

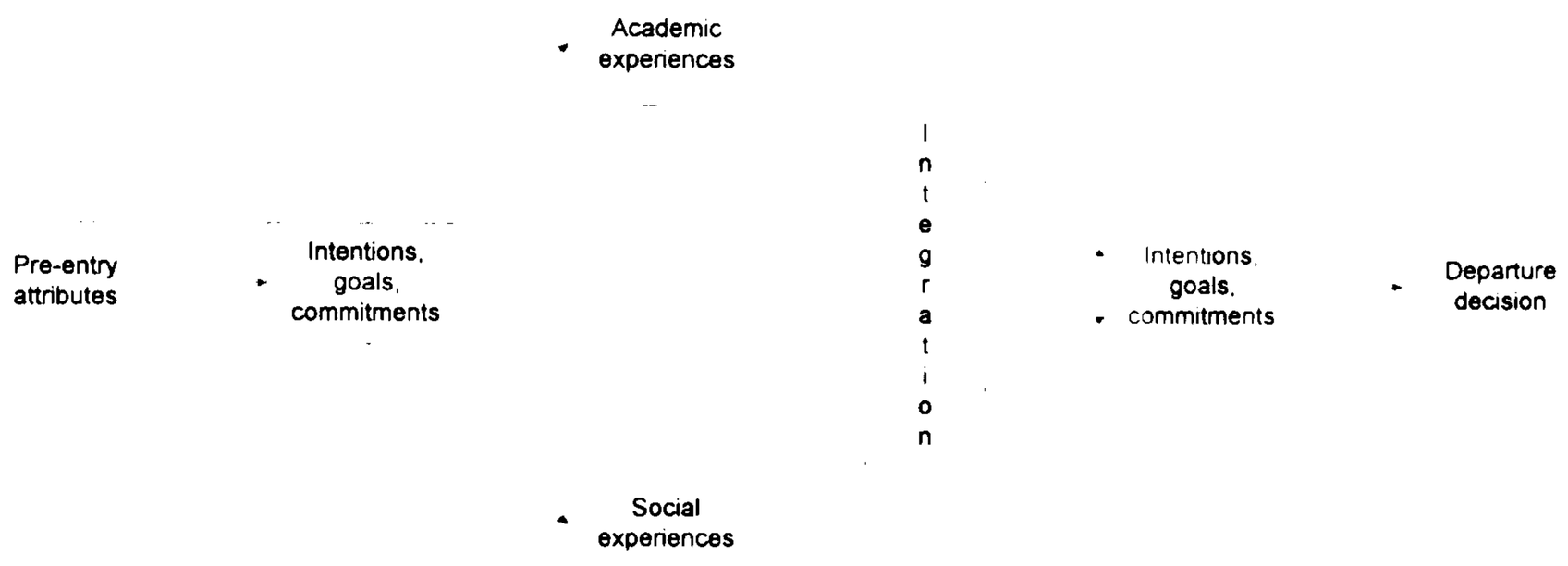
Many of the studies on expectations are suggesting that interventions in the expectation formation process can, and indeed *should*, be made if the educational process is to be successful. Some institutions have tried this through induction or orientation programmes for new entrants, with some success (e.g Krallman and Holcomb, 1997). However, some commentators such as Tan, (1996) suggest that this intervention should take place *before* enrolment. It is difficult to see how this can be done, given the wide variety of choice of institution available to today's students, and the often last-minute choices that students make. However, the clarity and accuracy of information provided to students when making their choices seems to be crucial, and it does seem clear that interventions need to be made very early in the student's university career to help the transition to higher education.

3.3.2 The effect of expectations on transition and persistence

Although this study is primarily concerned with student performance, a review of the work on expectations would not be complete without a discussion of the effect that expectations can have on student transition to university, student/environment fit, and ultimately student persistence and retention. Indeed, this links with findings in the first part of this study, which indicated problems with aspects of student/environment fit.

Some of the most extensive work in this field has been conducted by Vincent Tinto (1993). Tinto has developed a theoretical model of student departure that has found widespread acceptance (fig 3.2).

Figure3.2: A simplified form of Tinto's model of institutional departure (Yorke, 1999)



Central to this model is the academic and social integration of students into the institution. Tinto argues that a lack of integration or 'incongruence' can often lead to student departure. Incongruence refers in general to the lack of fit between the needs, interests and preferences of the individual and those of the institution, and most commonly occurs as a result of poor or uninformed choices on the part of the individual. Choosing a university involves the formation of a set of expectations about the character of the institution. The more realistic those expectations are, the more likely it is that there will be an effective match between the individual and the institution. The student will judge his or her early experiences at university against pre-entry expectations, and when expectations are unrealistic or seriously mistaken, subsequent experiences can lead to major disappointments. Tinto has found that whilst some students will modify their expectations to suit the situation, others may feel that they were intentionally misled by the institution, leading to a feeling of betrayal. This importance of expectations was demonstrated by Braxton

et al (1995) who, in a survey of 263 students in baccalaureate institutions. found the meeting of students' expectations was positively associated with academic and social integration.

Tinto argues two main reasons for incongruence. Firstly, students themselves often make their university choice in a haphazard manner, without accessing all of the information that is available to them. Secondly, even when the student does seek out information, that information is often incomplete or inappropriate. Prospectuses will provide information on facilities. course content, accommodation and so on, but do not provide accurate information on the social and intellectual climates that characterise student life. However, it is the latter information that is most important in forming realistic expectations and appropriate choice.

The predictive validity of Tinto's model has been tested in a number of studies (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1977, 1978). These early studies provide some partial support for the model, but were faulted in that they made only a superficial assessment of the key elements of social and academic integration. A later study used a specifically constructed measure of these two dimensions (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980). A sample of just under 1500 students were questioned about their expectations of a variety of college experiences as they enrolled at college, and the following year the same students were asked about the reality of their college experience. First year students only were included in the study due to evidence suggesting that attrition is heaviest at the end of the first year. Results of the study supported the predictive ability of the Tinto model. Of particular interest, however, was the particularly strong contribution of student-academic staff relationships. This comprised two dimensions - staff accessibility to students and informal contacts, and students' perceptions of staff concern for student development and teaching. Again there are links here with the results discussed in chapter two of this thesis, which indicated that the staff/student relationship was a strong factor in determining students' levels of satisfaction with their experience at the Business School.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have gone on to do an extensive review of the way that HE institutions affected students, drawing some interesting conclusions about the issues of social and academic integration (reported in Yorke, 1999)

- The type of institution is important, with so-called 'commuter institutions' less likely to facilitate social integration than residential institutions. (p 414)
- Social involvement is important in enhancing the persistence of students who have low levels of institutional and goal commitment. As the level of institutional and goal commitment increases, social involvement plays a decreasing role in persistence or withdrawal behaviour.(p 412)
- A high level of academic integration might compensate for a low level of social integration (p. 420)
- Campus integration, and consequently first year persistence, are affected by a group of factors which include the extent to which the student is in employment (pp 407-8). Full-time and off-campus part-time employment is detrimental to campus integration, but part-time employment on campus has a positive effect on retention and completion.

Although this work was done in the United States, it is easy to see the parallels with higher education in the UK today. Increasing financial pressures on students mean that more are living at home, making many universities predominantly 'commuter institutions'; the number of students capable of solid academic integration decreases with improving access initiatives; and student employment is very much the norm.

It is not unreasonable to argue, then, that poor retention rates in UK institutions could in part be due to poor academic and social integration related to unmet expectations.

This argument is supported by the findings of a survey of non-completion in England commissioned by HEFCE in 1996 (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997). Although the report concluded that non-completion was a complex process that

normally could not be explained by any single factor, the five most significant factors were found to be:

a) Incompatibility between the student and the course or institution. When applying to an HEI, students do not always have sufficient information on the institution or course. *This can lead to difficulties if the academic or social reality does not meet students' expectations.*

b) Lack of preparation for the HE experience. Some students do not have the self-management skills to live away from the parental home, or the study skills to cope with HE

c) Lack of commitment to the course. *Parental or peer group expectations are often the main reasons a student applies to HE;* obtaining a degree can often be low down on the list of reasons.

d) Financial hardship. Such hardship was frequently cited as an influence on withdrawal, though the researchers at Keele found that this was not usually the sole reason

e) Poor academic progress.

(Quoted from the executive summary to the report. Italics my own)

So, this is all providing strong evidence to support the findings from the first part of my own study, which suggested that it was unmet expectations that were causing much of the dissatisfaction and unhappiness amongst the students of Sunderland Business School. However, the picture is not complete without considering the issue of expectations from a slightly different theoretical standpoint - that of quality management.

3.3.3 The student as 'consumer'

With increasing competition for a shrinking pool of traditional university applicants, many institutions are adopting aggressive promotional strategies, behaving much like commercial organisations competing for custom. Whether as

a cause or effect of this development, potential students themselves now often tend to behave as customers, comparing the available services on offer from HEIs and taking costs into account in their decision. This consumer behaviour is unsurprising, given that these are largely 'Thatcher's children', brought up in an era of consumer power, 24 hour service, and customer litigation. Like other consumers, students are now willing to complain and even withdraw their custom if the level of service that they expect is not forthcoming. The infrastructure of HE makes this possible more than ever before. 'Student satisfaction' is high on every institution's agenda, and students' views are actively sought on a wide range of their experiences, from teaching quality to the standard of food in the refectory. Credit transfer makes it easy for students to move from one institution to another if they are dissatisfied with the standard of service on offer. They demand a 'quality' service. Key to this, yet again, are expectations. We saw earlier that one of the modern definitions of quality is 'the degree of fit between a customer's expectations and their perception of a product or service' (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Consequently, student expectations are being given increasing attention in the literature relating to service quality and marketing.

The quality perspective is quite an interesting one, because it views expectations rather differently to other disciplines. It takes a more commercial stance, considering how an organisation can actively *manage* its customer expectations so that there is a customer perception of quality, but at an acceptable cost to the organisation. This can perhaps be further explained by considering how the quality management literature categorises different types of expectation. Prakask (1984) described expectations as being either predictive, normative, or comparative. Predictive expectations are defined as estimates of the anticipated performance level of a service, which represent consumer-defined probabilities about what is likely to happen during an impending transaction. Normative expectations are those that refer to how a service *should* be performed in order for the consumer to be satisfied. Comparative expectations are consumer expectations of a service encounter that are based on previous experiences with similar services or brands.

It is the normative. *should,* expectations that are of particular interest in the management of a customer's perception of quality. Customer expectations of what *should* be delivered during a service encounter decrease their ultimate perception of the actual service delivered. (Boulding et al 1993). So, to increase consumer perceptions of service quality, it is necessary for organisations to manage customer expectations of what *should* deliver downward. Boulding et al have shown that by increasing what a customer perceives an organisation *will* provide, the perception of quality is increased after the customer has received the service.

The lessons for HE are quite clear; it is important to make sure that students' expectations of university life are as realistic as possible if they are not to be disappointed by the experience. Their expectations will largely be formed by what they are told about the organisation, both in the literature and by representatives of the organisation itself. There is the danger that, because of intense competitive pressure, organisations are tempted to over-market themselves. When the seller exaggerates a product's benefits, consumers develop unrealistic expectations which lead to dissatisfaction. (Kotler, 1991).

The implications of this will be wider than high dropout rates, as already discussed (although these alone are sufficient cause for concern). Satisfied students are significantly more likely than dissatisfied ones to recommend their university to others; to contribute to and otherwise support it after graduation: and to enrol later in its postgraduate programmes. (Hartley and Berkowitz, 1983; Chadwick and Ward, 1987).

There is already evidence to show that this 'oversell' is occurring. Some university promotional strategies have been found to be unethical and intrusive (Chapman and Stark, 1979; Litten, 1982; Noble 1986). Unrealistic expectations have been shown to result from recruitment literature that is difficult to comprehend, inaccurate, or misleading (Tinto, 1993; Comm and Schmidt 1986; Litten 1981).

Students themselves have not been slow to recognise what is happening. Until about the start of the 1990s, prospective students viewed promotional literature as a trusted source of information about the institution (Dehne 1993). Research carried out for HEIST (Higher Education Information Services Trust) at this time showed that students rated an institution's undergraduate prospectus as the single most important source of information used in their decision-making process (Roberts and Higgins, 1992). Now students have increasingly turned to other forms of information and contacts to verify the claims of the institution. A visit to the university ranks number one in most trusted sources of information, whilst admissions personnel and admissions publications rank seventh and eighth respectively. Dehne has observed that prospective students are aware that the Admissions department is the 'propaganda arm' of the university.

Of course, all of this presents an ethical dilemma to the universities. Most students will already have over-inflated and unrealistic expectations about university, based on their previous contacts, experience, and cultural associations (Shank, Walker and Hayes, 1996; Kearney, 1994). For example, Dehne (op cit, p 23), notes that students are now seeking 24-hour access to campus facilities. Universities traditionally have based their programmes on a typical work day and early evening, but students do not go by 'adult time'. Six out of ten students in Dehne's survey of 4,000 students said that the best hour for guest lectures and progammes is after 9pm. As consumerism increases, the clamour for access will increase. What are universities to do? Do they tell prospective students that they can not meet their expectations, and risk losing them, or do they tell students what they want to hear, and suffer the consequences later?

Proponents of the school of 'honest marketing' argue that it is important right from the outset to inform consumers what is, and what is not possible, outlining the reasons why (Berry et al, 1985; King, 1985; Zeithaml et al, 1990). For example, Habeshaw et al (1992) point out that for many HEIs in the UK 'luxuries' such as fully-individualised written feedback on assignments, one-to-one attention in

tutorials and so on are now a thing of the past due to increasing pressure on resources. Alternative arrangements that we make, such as peer assessment, group working, etc should be fully explained to the students at the beginning of their study, in an attempt to ensure that their expectations of academic service encounters are realistic.

Whilst this is surely the way to go from ethical and quality management perspectives, my guess is that whilst universities are fighting for student numbers, none will take the unilateral decision to adopt honesty as the best policy for their marketing campaigns, and expectations of prospective students will continue to be inflated. I believe that universities will be willing to deal with the consequences later, whist recruitment targets take precedence over retention targets in terms of funding.

3.3.4 Summary

An individual will come to any new encounter or situation with a set of expectations formed from previous experience, personal requirements, cultural influences, and information from others. If these expectations are subsequently unmet the individual's motivation and performance are adversely affected, and their perception of the quality of the experience that they have had is reduced, leading to dissatisfaction and disappointment.

The expectations that others have for an individual can also affect that individual's performance. They will tend to perform badly if they are expected by others to do so: the so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

Although these ideas originate in management research, they have been applied extensively to students in schools, colleges and universities.

Teachers' expectations of students' performance have a significant effect on the actual performance, with those students who are expected to do so actually

achieving better grades than their classmates. Similarly, if teachers expect a student to underachieve, that student is likely to do so. The implication is that expectations somehow affect the way that the teacher interacts with the student.

Students enter university with a set of expectations derived from a variety of sources, including their school or previous educational experience, contacts with family and friends, and information from the university itself. Expectations tend to fall into the two broad categories of academic and social. These expectations are often unrealistic and inflated. This has been shown to affect students' ability to make the appropriate social and academic adjustments to university and is a major cause of attrition.

Literature and marketing information produced by the universities themselves is one of the main sources of unrealistic expectations. Over-factual, incomplete or simply misleading promotional literature can mean that a student does not have the correct information to make the right choice of institution. Students who make the wrong choice as a result often fail to make appropriate adjustments, feel they do not 'fit', and drop out or transfer. Students who do stay find that their perception of the university experience is tarnished by their unmet expectations. Their perception of the quality of the educational experience will be low, and they will have a poor perception of the ability of their tutors.

This review has partially answered the questions posed at the start of this chapter. However, most of the research done to date on student expectations has focussed either on teacher expectations for the student, or has looked at how unmet expectations have led to student attrition. The literature on quality in education implies that students who stay at an institution despite unmet expectations will suffer disappointment and low perceptions of their experience, but thus far there has been little attempt to show how this might affect the performance of those students. Similarly, few studies have tried to identify what student expectations *really are*, as most studies use researcher- designed questionnaires that include

their own interpretation of student expectations. One problem with these studies is that they rarely attempt to identify if these expectations really are those that are important to the students.

Given the serious implications of unmet expectations there is a need to try to identify the true expectations of students entering HE in the UK. and to measure how well they are met. There is also a need to try to determine if there is a link between unmet expectations and performance. Although this presents methodological and ethical difficulties, such information may help universities develop policies to improve university students' experience and performance.

Chapter four: Methodological issues and method of investigation

4.1 Methodological issues

Chapter three has provided some explanation for the findings in the first part of this study, which indicated that unmet expectations were a source of problems for students at the business school. As a practitioner researcher, my aim was now to use this information to help improve the lot of those students. It appeared from the literature review that whilst there was clear evidence of links between unmet expectations and, in particular, student attrition, theory building in this field was in its very early stages. There was very little information on *exactly what expectations* students held as they entered university, or the extent to which they were 'unmet'. The quality management literature provided the best pointers as to the sources of expectations, but again, empirical data were in short supply. Nor had much attention been given to the effect on performance of those students who remained at university despite the problems caused by unmet expectations. Answering these questions became the objective of the main part of this thesis.

The aim was to produce data that could be generalised to the Business School students population as a whole. Thus, a functionalist approach (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) was considered to be most appropriate, using surveys and statistical reasoning to draw conclusions and generalisations from the predominantly quantitative data. Functionalism predominates in this field of study (Gioia and Pitre, 1992). However, this type of positivist approach is not used without some reservations which must be acknowledged in the research design.

Positivism, an approach that follows the argument that it is not possible to go beyond the objective world that is open to observation, and thus only those questions that can be answered by the application of scientific method can be addressed, has recently been the subject of some extensive criticism in social science research. Critics argue that it is not successful in its application to human behaviour, where the complexity of human nature and intangible quality of social phenomena contrast

sharply with the order and regularity of the natural world, upon which its assumptions are based (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Survey methods, no matter how well they are designed, are unable to fully tap the complexity of student views and the character of their understanding of the quality of their student experiences (Tinto, 1993). This is an important issue, for we saw in chapter three that expectations play a part in the process of social and academic integration of students, and it is the interaction of student and institution, and the sense that students make of their experiences that will determine how they act. The danger in using a positivist approach is the tendency of the researcher to devise variables that reflect their experience of, and their assumptions about, students (McKeown, 1993). The huge change that we have seen in educational structures and cultures over the last two decades may mean that researchers are too detached from students' perceptions of reality to be able to do this meaningfully. Ozga and Sukhanandan (1997) argue that this, together with a pre-occupation with manipulation of the variables in an attempt to uncover causality, is to blame for the proliferation of contradictory results that can be found in the literature on their particular topic of interest, student attrition.

Sampling methods and bias also present problems for the survey techniques most frequently used by proponents of the functionalist paradigm. Low response rates are commonplace with postal or other 'remote' surveys, and if one is to deliver surveys to students in class, then there is a danger of a non-random response pattern. Those students attending the class may be the most enthusiastic, those most needing help, may feel that they will gain favour with the tutor if they respond in a positive way, and so on. There is a strong possibility of bias.

The aim of trying to determine the effect of unmet expectations on student performance presents its own methodological and ethical problems. If the study is to adopt a field research approach in order to tap into students' naturally-occurring expectations and thus avoid the criticisms of studies that focus on experimentally-induced expectations (discussed in chapter three), then it is not possible to establish

a control group. Without a control group, it is not possible to identify changes in student performance due to expectancy effects -this would require us to know what their achievement *would have been* if their expectations *had* all been met. One way around this would be to determine the expectations, and then *deliberately* aim to disappoint those of a selected group, whilst with a second group deliberately aim to meet as many of the expectations as possible, thus allowing a comparison of results. This clearly would not be an ethical option for professional educators. So, seeking information on the effects of expectations on performance forces the study out of the functionalist paradigm at this point, as it requires that the students interpret their performance in terms of their experience of university.

It is not usual for researchers to cross paradigm boundaries, and it is certainly not the intention do so to any great extent within the context of this study. Nevertheless, I have come to believe that the use of multi-paradigm approaches is possibly the only way to gain a realistic picture of the issue of student experience and performance in the long term. Opportunities for this type of overlap are discussed later in this thesis.

4.2 Method of investigation.

4.2.1 Objectives

The objective of this part of the thesis was to investigate three hypotheses:

1. Students enter Sunderland Business School with a set of expectations that are largely unmet
2. The pattern of unmet expectations has a relationship with the findings from the first part of this study, i.e. there is a difference between 'traditional and 'non-traditional' students. (*Where 'traditional' is defined as A-level entrants*).
3. Unmet expectations have a detrimental effect on student performance

4.2.2 Preparatory work

The aim was identify students' *own* expectations and use these for a large-scale survey to determine how well they were met. Whilst it was considered important not to make *a priori* assumptions about what the expectations were, some structure needed to be placed on the investigation to avoid a very disparate range of expectations being used, which would make analysis too complicated. This was done in two ways:

Freshers' expectations:

The literature suggests that students' expectations predominantly load on personal expectations and expectations of the institution (which mainly manifests in relationships with tutors) (Becker, Davis, Neal and Grover, 1990; Kunkel, Pittman, Hildebrand and Walling, 1994) and so these two categories were used to elicit expectations from students. The technique used by Becker et al was employed in the first instance. During Freshers' week all students were asked to complete a questionnaire asking two questions:

'Describe, in as much detail as you care to, six expectations you have for yourself as a (new) student at this university'

'Describe, in as much detail as you care to, six expectations you have for your tutors on your course'

Students were given the questionnaires during formal skills training sessions and were given as much time as they needed to answer the questions. The class supervisor then collected questionnaires; in total, 349 usable questionnaires were returned. Responses were used to develop the longitudinal survey described in the next section.

Expectations of experienced students:

In their study, Becker et al had noted that many new students were not able to articulate their expectations so early in their university career. As an insurance against this happening in this study, it was decided to provide a 'back-up' questionnaire to the freshers', based on expectations of experienced students.

To develop this questionnaire a focus group was conducted with five final year Business Studies students. These students had recently completed their final assessments and were awaiting results; thus it was felt that they would feel able to provide free and open comment without any fear of prejudice. Focus group interviewing is a particularly useful technique for eliciting the views of a group of participants with similar experience. The interaction of group members is an important advantage; each individual is able to expand and refine their opinions in the interaction with the other group members, and the process tends to provide more detailed and accurate information than could be derived from each separately (Tull and Hawkins, 1993). The security of being in a crowd can encourage group members to speak out when they otherwise might not, and because questions are addressed to the group as a whole, the answers contain a degree of spontaneity not found with other techniques. Furthermore, individuals are not under any pressure to 'make up' answers to questions as they may be if they were addressed solely to them. The responses are more likely to be free from interviewer bias than individual interviews, and, in terms of efficiency, it takes less time to gather information.

Disadvantages of the technique are that they do not allow personal issues to emerge (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987), and that securing co-operation from a random sample is difficult. Those who volunteer for focus groups and actively participate are likely to be different in many respects from those who do not. Participants may go along with the group rather than expressing their own opinion and one vocal person with a strong opinion on the topic being discussed may alter the expressed views of the group substantially (Tull and Hawkins, 1993).

The advantages of the focus group technique were felt to outweigh the disadvantages for the purpose of this investigation, since it was most important to obtain a free-flow of ideas from the students with as little bias as possible from the interviewer. In addition, since the findings were to be used with a *different* set of students, any bias from the participants could be filtered out at that stage.

Group composition: The focus group participating in this survey comprised five final year Business Studies students. Three had been direct entrants from school with A-levels as entry qualifications. One of these also had an Irish Leaving Certificate. Two were mature students. One, in his late 20's, had an HND as entry qualification. The other was 32 years old, and entered the university with no formal academic qualification. His entry was allowed on the basis of his previous work experience in sales and marketing. There were three males and two females. With this composition it was felt that the group could present a representative range of student views.

Conduct of the enquiry: The session took place in a relaxed and informal setting off-campus. Students were told the aim of the focus group session, and were then allowed to talk freely. The moderator used a list of question domains (expectations of self, work, staff and the university) only as prompts. All students contributed well, although two (one mature, one traditional), dominated the conversation at times. Where this occurred, other students were asked for their opinions on the points made by the two dominant characters. There was no apparent disagreement between students on the major issues raised. Notes were taken of key points. The session was not taped.

Finding from focus group: A list of comments made by students in the focus group is included as appendix 3. Of the 58 key comments recorded, over half (55%) related to tutors directly, or treatment students had received from tutors. The majority were negative. Other themes to emerge from repeated comments related to:

- Other students. There was anger at the amount of cheating that was perceived amongst other students, particularly those from overseas. The group did not expect such a high proportion of overseas students, and felt that they (the

overseas students) were treated favourably because they bring in a high income to the university. They felt that overseas students did not mix properly.

- Others' perceptions of them: They felt that they were looked down upon because they were students, that people 'laugh' at a business course because it isn't a 'real' degree, and that because the University of Sunderland is ranked low in the list of UK universities 'people didn't care about them'. The group felt that pressure was put on them by the expectations of parents, friends, and in one case, his wife.

The findings of the focus group served two purposes. Firstly, they supported the decision to focus the main study in the two areas of self-expectations and expectations of tutors, for it was in these two areas that most key comments fell. Secondly, it allowed the construction of a 'back-up' expectation questionnaire to deliver to in-coming students.

Back-up questionnaire: A 33-item questionnaire was constructed based on the comments made by the final-year focus group (included as appendix 4). For each item, students were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert-style scale what they believed *would* happen during their time at the university (i.e. not what they thought *should* happen). They were also asked to indicate the most important influences on their expectations from a list including university prospectus, friends, family, school teachers, TV, visit to the university, admissions staff, students, and 'other'.

These questionnaires were distributed to the 349 freshers only after the main, open-ended expectation questionnaire had been completed and handed in. This was to avoid any 'prompting' effect that the back-up questionnaires might have on the students' own ideas about their expectations. Again, on completion, they were collected by the session supervisor. In the event, the only part of this questionnaire that was analysed was the information on expectation source, since the first (open-ended) questionnaire provided sufficient information to develop the main longitudinal survey.

4.2.3 The survey on student expectations

Contrary to the findings of Becker et al, the in-coming Business School students were able to list in some detail their expectations of themselves and of tutors. In many cases students provided quite lengthy elaboration on their expectations, providing an extra page of written notes. For this reason, it was decided that the results of the structured questionnaire based on the retrospective reflections of the final year focus group would not be required to help develop the main survey.

The completed questionnaires were reviewed and expectations noted until such point that no new themes emerged. Language was kept as close to the students' original as possible. The list so produced was then peer reviewed to remove any duplication and to ensure that statements properly reflected the multiple statements from which they had been derived. This process resulted in a final 17-item list of self-expectations and an 18-item list of tutor expectations, reflecting the most frequently repeated statements made by the students. These lists are shown in table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Students' expectations of self and tutors as they join Sunderland Business School

Students' expectations of themselves	Students' expectations of tutors
▪ Get a qualification	▪ To be good teachers
▪ Build good relationships with tutors	▪ To be professional
▪ Enjoy learning	▪ To be encouraging
▪ Become independent	▪ To motivate me to do my best
▪ Improve my personal transferable skills	▪ Give help and advice with academic problems when it is needed
▪ Feel proud of my achievements	▪ Give help and advice with personal problems when it is needed
▪ Gain the knowledge and skill that will make me an asset to an organisation	▪ Be honest
▪ Improve my self-confidence	▪ Show me the best way to learn
▪ Gain life experience	▪ Be available whenever help is needed
▪ Enjoy a good social life	▪ Be fair to everyone
▪ Meet people/make new friends	▪ Be approachable/friendly
▪ Become more responsible	▪ Help me enjoy my time here
▪ Get a placement	▪ Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations
▪ Improve my ability to make decisions	▪ Be understanding
▪ Work hard	▪ Help me develop as a person
▪ Build good working relationships with other students	▪ Treat me with respect
▪ Achieve the best grades I can	▪ Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career
	▪ Be knowledgeable about their subject

These items were developed into a questionnaire shown in appendix 5. There were four elements to this questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate how well each of the expectations represented by the above statements had been met, using a 3-point Likert-style scale, where 1=not well, 2= moderately well, and 3= very well. A 3-point scale was initially considered to provide the most realistic representation of the possible answers from respondents. Analysis would only require a knowledge of whether the expectations had been met, not met or partially met; any further information would be surplus to requirements and may be likely to elicit more subjective responses from the respondents.

Theory suggests that the effect that expectancies have is a function not only of how well an expectation is met, but also how important it is to the individual (Vroom, 1964). The expectations included in this survey had been designed from information given by the students themselves, implying that all should be important to them. However, as a check on the validity of the items, and to provide a possible comparison between different groups, the questionnaire also included a 5-point Likert-style scale for each items to determine how important the item was to the respondent, where 1=no importance and 5=extremely important. A 5-point scale was considered to provide respondents with sufficient scope to represent relative importance of essentially positive statements.

As a check on the responses to the main items, respondents were also asked to identify their six most important expectations, and to indicate overall how well expectations had been met in the two categories.

No personal information was required from respondents other than name. Whilst it was accepted that requiring students to give their name may deter many from answering, it was important to be able to identify respondents for a longitudinal study and follow-up investigation. The questionnaire therefore included an introductory statement explaining why a name was necessary, and providing

assurance that responses would be entirely confidential and used only for the purpose of this research.

4.2.4 Subjects and procedure

The effect of expectations has greatest effect during a student's first year at university (Holahan, Curran and Kelly, 1982; Erkut, 1977; Wratcher,1991), and this is also when most drop-outs occur (Tinto, 1993; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997). This study was therefore targeted at first-year students who joined the university in the academic year 1998/99 (i.e. those that had responded to the initial open-ended questionnaire about expectations during freshers' week). The questionnaire was administered at three points during the first year in order to monitor any trends and determine the effects of unmet expectations on results. These were end of first semester after results had come out (January), end of second semester immediately prior to final assessments (May) and during the summer vacation after the results had come out (August).

The aim was to get responses from as many of the first year students as possible. To this end, tutors of core modules agreed to hand out and collect the questionnaire during their teaching sessions, when all students were expected to be present. Tutors emphasised the confidentiality statement to the students when handing out the questionnaire. (This was possible only for the first two time points, whilst students were still attending university). At the end of the first semester, 155 completed questionnaires were returned, and at the end of the second semester 60 were returned. This represented 36% and 14% of the first-year student population .

These responses presented a problem for longitudinal analysis. The response rate at the end of the second semester was extremely disappointing. By delivering the questionnaire in core sessions it had been expected that a good response similar to that at time point one could have been achieved, and although there would be some different students in each group, there would still be sufficient numbers to run

within-group comparisons as well as between group comparisons. However, with such a small number returned, only 34 students responding at time point two had also responded at time point one. To improve response for follow-up analysis, all 155 students who had responded at time point one were mailed the questionnaire during the summer vacation after results had been published. Fifty-one responses were obtained from this mailing.

4.2.5 Analysis of responses

Descriptive statistics were prepared for the degree to which expectations were met at each time point.

Additional student data were obtained for all respondents from the university central record. These included entry qualifications, which were coded for 'traditional' (A level entrants) and 'non-traditional'; grade point averages at end of year one and end of year two; and programme board decision at end of first year (pass, pass with referral, repeat, withdraw being the main categories). Expectation data were tested for significant differences between these categories using the Mann-Whitney test. The t-test was used to test for significant differences in grade point averages.

Responses from the 51 named students who answered at time points one and three were analysed using the sign test for changes over time.

Chapter five: Expectation study results and analysis

5.1 Source of expectations

As part of the freshers' week questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the main source of their expectations from the following list:

Prospectus	Friends
Family Teachers	TV
Visit to the university	Admissions staff
Students	Other

Where more than one influence was identified, respondents were asked to rank them in order of importance. Where a respondent indicated 'other', they were asked to specify what that influence was.

'Prospectus', 'Friends' and 'Visit to the university' were most frequently listed as the **main** source of expectations about the university (21%, 20% and 20% respectively). 'Family', 'Students', and 'Teachers' were the next most frequently mentioned as the main source (15% 11% and 9% respectively). (Figure 5.1)

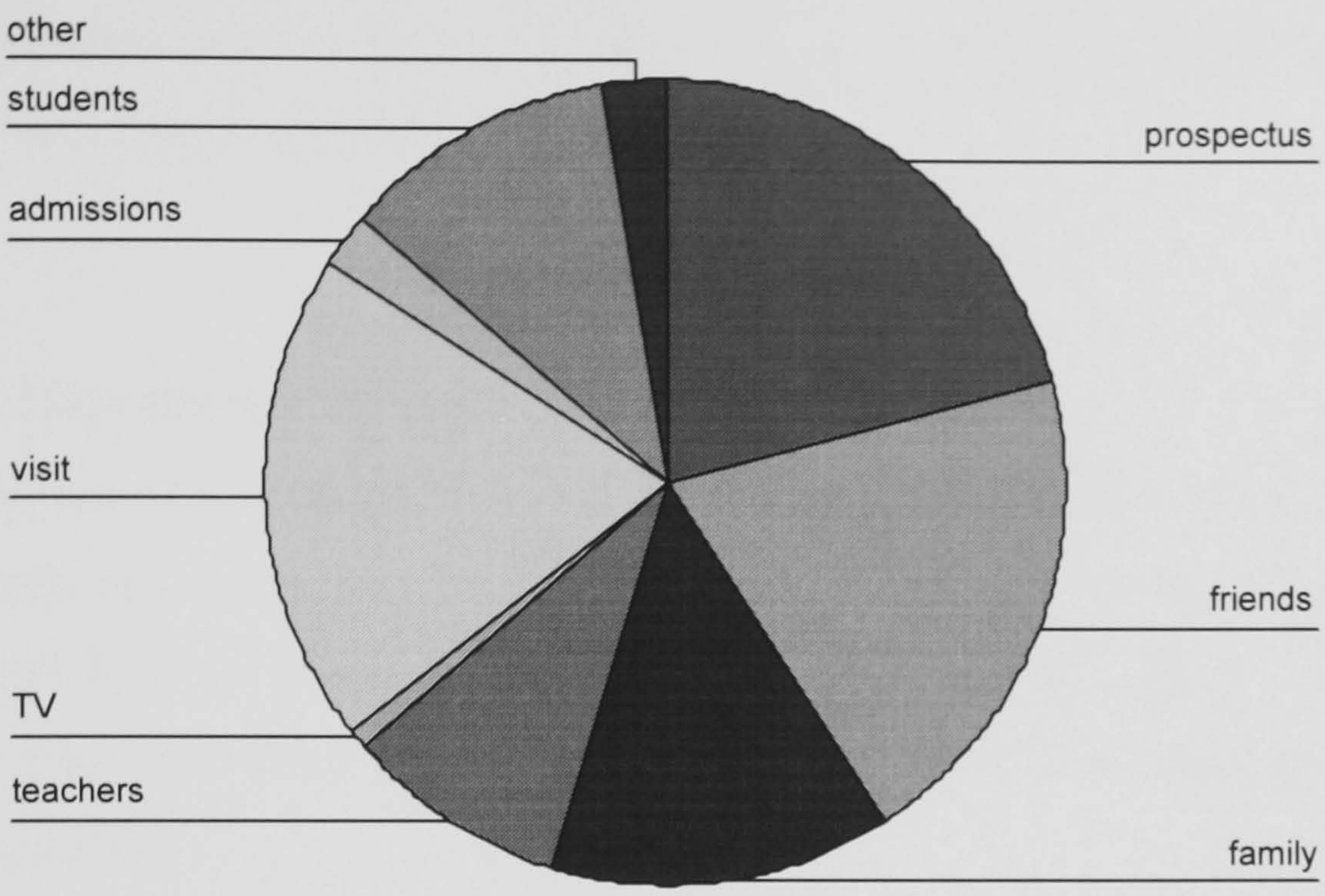


Fig 5.1: Main influence on student expectations of university

This pattern changes when the influences are considered regardless of ranking. The most frequently mentioned influence is 'friends', with 61% of the 349 respondents noting this as having some influence on their expectations. The university prospectus features for 56% of respondents, followed by 'visit (44%), 'family' (36%), 'students' (30%), and 'teachers' (30%).

Other influences noted by students included life experience, experience of other institutions, word-of-mouth, the army, the university International Office, and in one case, somewhat surprisingly, music magazines (specifically the NME).

These results show that it is the public face presented by the university, in the prospectus and at open days, that is having the greatest influence on our students' expectations. Although friends exert a significant influence, it is not possible to understand what that influence might be. It is possible that these are friends who

have already experienced university. but more likely it is simply school friends agreeing to go to the same university together. It is interesting to note that the sources that might represent the most realistic expectations. i.e. students and teachers. exert a relatively minor influence.

5.2 Importance of expectations

Respondents completing the main study questionnaire at each time point were asked to indicate the importance of each expectation on a scale of 1 to 5. As expected. all expectations were rated of medium to high importance on average. However. there was a notable difference between the importance placed on social and academic expectations.

Table 5.1: Students' rating of importance of their expectations of tutors over three time points in the first year at university

Expectation of tutors	Time point 1		Time point 2		Time point 3	
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)
1. Be good teachers	133	4.74 (0.52)	56	4.57 (0.76)	51	4.71 (0.50)
2. Be professional	133	4.53 (0.63)	56	4.61 (0.71)	51	4.65 (0.48)
3. Be encouraging	133	4.58 (0.58)	56	4.48 (0.85)	51	4.51 (0.58)
4. Motivate me to do my best	132	4.42 (0.76)	54	4.41 (0.84)	51	4.37 (0.63)
5. Give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	129	4.52 (0.70)	56	4.61 (0.80)	51	4.18 (0.57)
6. Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	132	3.08 (1.21)	56	2.84 (1.33)	50	3.20 (0.88)
7. Be honest	133	4.26 (0.79)	56	4.57 (0.74)	51	4.31 (0.65)
8. Show me the best way to learn	132	4.34 (0.80)	56	4.39 (0.75)	51	4.45 (0.64)
9. Be available whenever help is needed	131	4.21 (0.89)	56	4.25 (0.74)	51	4.49 (0.64)
10. Be fair to everyone	132	4.52 (0.82)	55	4.71 (0.57)	51	4.55 (0.61)

11. Be approachable/friendly	133	4.45 (0.73)	55	4.51 (0.63)	51	4.49 (0.64)
12. Help me enjoy my time here	133	3.82 (1.00)	56	3.95 (0.88)	51	3.92 (0.84)
13. Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	132	4.14 (0.85)	56	4.34 (0.75)	51	4.35 (0.69)
14. Be understanding	133	4.11 (0.86)	56	4.14 (0.75)	51	4.18 (0.68)
15. Help me develop as a person	133	3.47 (1.00)	56	3.37 (1.07)	51	3.43 (0.92)
16. Treat me with respect	132	4.47 (0.69)	56	4.59 (0.71)	51	4.49 (0.58)
17. Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career	133	4.51 (0.68)	56	4.55 (0.66)	51	4.61 (0.57)
18. Be knowledgeable about their subject	132	4.85 (0.45)	56	4.87 (0.43)	51	4.80 (0.45)

The majority of items lie at the upper end of the importance rating scale, and there is little notable difference in ratings between time points. There are, however, lower ratings for the factors related to personal, rather than academic, development, i.e. 5: 'Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it'; 12: 'Help me enjoy my time here' and 15: 'Help me develop as a person'. These expectations also show the widest variation in responses. This result is perhaps unsurprising, since it is likely to reflect the different priorities of the very varied types of students at the Business School. It might be expected that mature students and those students who are still living at home during their time at university are less likely to expect tutors to offer the type of personal support that they can readily get from friends and family. This pattern is apparent to an even greater extent in the personal expectation responses:

Table 5.2: Students' rating of the importance of their expectations for themselves during their first year at university

Expectation of self	Time point 1		Time point 2		Time point 3	
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)
1. Get a qualification	146	4.88 (0.34)	56	4.73 (0.84)	51	4.92 (0.34)
2. Build good relationships with tutors	145	3.43 (0.87)	56	4.20 (0.90)	51	3.57 (0.76)
3. Enjoy learning	143	3.94 (0.73)	55	3.98 (0.73)	51	4.06 (0.65)
4. Become independent	146	3.98 (0.88)	56	3.95 (1.09)	51	3.98 (0.71)
5. Improve my personal transferable skills	145	3.96 (0.82)	56	3.93 (0.85)	51	3.98 (0.73)
6. Feel proud of my achievements	141	4.38 (0.73)	54	4.43 (0.84)	50	4.38 (0.67)
7. Gain the knowledge and skills that will make me an asset to an organisation	144	4.67 (0.57)	56	4.59 (0.71)	50	4.62 (0.57)
8. Improve my self-confidence	145	4.17 (0.88)	56	3.91 (1.03)	51	4.10 (0.85)
9. Gain life experience	145	4.01 (0.87)	56	4.05 (1.05)	51	3.94 (0.81)
10. Enjoy a good social life	145	3.97 (0.95)	56	3.71 (1.19)	51	3.98 (0.84)
11. Meet new people/make new friends	145	3.96 (0.82	56	4.20 (0.90)	51	3.98 (0.73)
12. Become more responsible	146	3.93 (0.88)	56	3.75 (1.08)	51	3.88 (0.84)
13. Get a placement	144	3.95 (1.20)	54	3.72 (1.37)	49	4.06 (1.27)
14. Improve my ability to make decisions	145	4.02 (0.85)	56	3.91 (0.96)	51	3.86 (0.80)
15. Work hard	146	4.22 (0.83)	56	4.16 (0.91)	51	4.25 (0.56)
16. Build good relationships with other students	146	4.21 (0.77)	55	4.25 (0.87)	51	4.25 (0.63)
17. Achieve the best grades I can	144	4.73 (0.52)	56	4.70 (0.71)	51	4.76 (0.43)

Expectations related to academic achievement score very highly on importance - most notably 1: 'get a qualification', 7: 'Gain the knowledge and skills that will make me an asset to an organisation' and 17:'Achieve the best grades I can'. There is little variation in response to these items. Again it is the more socially orientated items that show more variation and score lower down on the importance scale. 4: 'Become independent', 10: 'enjoy a good social life', and 13: 'get a placement' in particular score below 4 on average, and exhibit wide variation. The placement expectation may be explained quite simply, as a percentage of the respondents would not be enrolled on a sandwich course and would therefore have no interest in a placement. However, the results for the independence and social life expectations are less readily explainable, though again student maturity and residency are likely to have an effect.

These simple descriptive statistics are useful in showing two things;

a) The choice of expectation items in the study is justified, as they are indeed important to the students
b) Academic expectations appear to be considered as more uniformly important than social expectations

5.3 How well expectations are met

Students indicated how well their expectations had been met at each time point on a scale of 1 to three, where 1 = not well and 3 =very well. Descriptive statistics provided an initial feel for the results:

Table 5.3: Degree to which students report that their expectations of tutors have been met during their first year at university

Expectation of tutors	Time point 1		Time point 2		Time point 3	
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)
1. Be good teachers	132	2.14 (0.54)	56	2.07 (0.42)	48	2.27 (0.49)
2. Be professional	133	2.31 (0.52)	56	2.32 (0.54)	48	2.44 (0.50)
3. Be encouraging	132	1.96 (0.61)	56	1.86 (0.62)	48	2.00 (0.65)
4. Motivate me to do my best	131	1.82 (0.56)	55	1.64 (0.70)	48	1.96 (0.58)
5. Give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	130	2.12 (0.61)	56	2.09 (0.64)	47	2.08 (0.40)
6. Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	121	1.74 (0.62)	56	1.68 (0.72)	44	2.26 (0.57)
7. Be honest	133	2.33 (0.57)	56	2.45 (0.54)	48	2.44 (0.54)
8. Show me the best way to learn	132	2.01 (0.59)	55	1.96 (0.69)	48	2.19 (0.67)
9. Be available whenever help is needed	132	1.83 (0.68)	56	1.80 (0.67)	48	1.81 (0.64)
10. Be fair to everyone	131	2.25 (0.60)	56	2.02 (0.67)	48	2.33 (0.66)
11. Be approachable/friendly	133	2.16 (0.6)	55	1.98 (0.62)	48	2.21 (0.62)
12. Help me enjoy my time here	132	1.87 (0.52)	56	1.84 (0.53)	48	2.04 (0.50)
13. Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	131	2.01 (0.58)	56	1.64 (0.62)	47	1.87 (0.61)
14. Be understanding	130	2.05 (0.58)	55	1.93 (0.57)	48	2.08 (0.40)
15. Help me develop as a person	129	1.90 (0.56)	54	1.72 (0.60)	47	2.04 (0.46)
16. Treat me with respect	132	2.17 (0.54)	56	2.00 (0.60)	48	2.35 (0.48)
17. Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career	133	2.17 (0.54)	56	2.07 (0.50)	48	2.27 (0.49)
18. Be knowledgeable about subject	130	2.43 (0.61)	56	2.46 (0.54)	48	2.50 (0.51)

There are seven items that produce an average of less than 2, which suggest that these expectations are not being met for a considerable number of students. Three of these: 6:'Give help and advice with personal problems when needed', 12:'help me enjoy my time here', and 15: 'Help me develop as a person' all received relatively low scores for importance in the survey. Of more concern are the unmet expectations that students scored highly for importance:3: 'Be encouraging', 4: 'Motivate me to do my best', 13:'Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations', and 9:'Be available whenever help is needed'.

At the other end of the scale, the items 2: 'Be professional', 7: 'Be honest', 10: 'Be fair to everyone', and 18:'Be knowledgeable about their subject' achieve relatively high average scores.

This would indicate that whilst students feel that their tutors live up to their expectations professionally and in terms of their treatment of students generally, they are not providing as much personal academic support as students had expected.

The results for personal expectations present a rather different picture:

Table 5.4: Degree to which students report that their expectations of themselves have been met during their first year at university

Expectation of self	Time point 1		Time point 2		Time point 3	
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)
1. Get a qualification	137	2.19 (0.46)	55	2.27 (0.45)	49	2.31 (0.51)
2. Build good relationships with tutors	142	1.94 (0.56)	56	1.95 (0.55)	49	1.82 (0.53)
3. Enjoy learning	141	1.99 (0.49)	56	1.93 (0.57)	48	2.08 (0.50)
4. Become independent	143	2.46 (0.63)	56	2.36 (0.64)	47	2.49 (0.51)
5. Improve my personal transferable skills	137	2.14 (0.49)	56	2.05 (0.52)	48	2.19 (0.49)
6. Feel proud of my achievements	136	2.17 (0.58)	55	2.15 (0.65)	48	2.54 (0.50)
7. Gain the knowledge and skills that will make me an asset to an organisation	140	2.12 (0.49)	56	2.02 (0.56)	48	2.25 (0.53)
8. Improve my self-confidence	141	2.16 (0.58)	56	2.05 (0.62)	48	2.33 (0.56)
9. Gain life experience	141	2.14 (0.58)	56	2.14 (0.72)	48	2.15 (0.65)
10. Enjoy a good social life	142	2.35 (0.67)	56	2.07 (0.74)	48	2.48 (0.65)
11. Meet new people/make new friends	141	2.63 (0.54)	56	2.41 (0.56)	48	2.85 (0.36)
12. Become more responsible	142	2.35 (0.56)	56	2.32 (0.66)	48	2.54 (0.50)
13. Get a placement	127	1.72 (0.63)	48	1.69 (0.62)	41	1.68 (0.65)
14. Improve my ability to make decisions	141	2.21 (0.57)	56	2.09 (0.55)	47	2.21 (0.59)
15. Work hard	142	2.25 (0.54)	56	2.16 (0.68)	48	2.27 (0.57)
16. Build good relationships with other students	142	2.39 (0.57)	56	2.32 (0.66)	48	2.58 (0.50)
17. Achieve the best grades I can	138	2.17 (0.53)	54	2.04 (0.58)	47	2.04 (0.59)

The majority of items have relatively high average scores, indicating that personal expectations are met to a large extent. 2: 'Build good relationships with tutors' and 3: 'Enjoy learning' have an average just fractionally below 2, but these items also scored low for importance. Only 13: 'Get a placement' has a significantly low average, but this is readily explained by the fact that many students would not be seeking a placement anyway (hence the low response to this question), and those that *were* intending to do a placement would not normally be expected to have secured one at this point.

From this initial analysis tutor expectations appear to be the main cause of concern. Frequency counts have been used to provide a more detailed picture of the extent of the problem by showing what proportion of students indicated that their expectations were not well met:

Table 5.5: Students' reports of degree to which expectations have been met at the end of their first semester (time point 1)

Expectation of tutors	Percentage of students reporting expectation met:		
	Not well	Moderately well	Very well
1. Be good teachers	8	70	22
2. Be professional	3	63	34
3. Be encouraging	20	63	17
4. Motivate me to do my best	26	66	8
5. Give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	13	62	25
6. Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	36	55	9
7. Be honest	5	56	38
8. Show me the best way to learn	17	66	17
9. Be available whenever help is needed	33	51	16
10. Be fair to everyone	8	58	34

11. Be approachable/friendly	11	62	27
12. Help me enjoy my time here	20	72	8
13. Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	27	63	9
14. Be understanding	15	66	19
15. Help me develop as a person	21	68	11
16. Treat me with respect	8	68	24
17. Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career	8	68	24
18. Be knowledgeable about their subject	6	45	49

Looking at the results from this perspective shows that items that had a low mean value at time point one are those that have 20% or more of the students reporting that their expectations have not been well met. However, the same analysis at time point 2 produces some surprising results:

Table 5.6: Students' reports of degree to which expectations have been met at the end of their second semester (time point 2)

Expectation of tutors	Percentage of students reporting expectation met:		
	Not well	Moderately well	Very well
1. Be good teachers	5	82	13
2. Be professional	4	61	35
3. Be encouraging	27	61	12
4. Motivate me to do my best	49	38	13
5. Give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	16	59	25
6. Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	46	40	14
7. Be honest	2	52	46
8. Show me the best way to learn	25	53	22
9. Be available whenever help is needed	34	52	14
10. Be fair to everyone	22	55	23
11. Be approachable/friendly	20	62	18
12. Help me enjoy my time here	23	70	7
13. Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	43	50	7
14. Be understanding	20	67	13
15. Help me develop as a person	35	58	7
16. Treat me with respect	18	64	18
17. Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career	9	75	16
18. Be knowledgeable about their subject	2	50	48

Here, the same items as before show 20% or more students reporting that their expectations have not been well met. However, four *new* items also show levels of dissatisfaction amongst 20% or more of the students: 8: 'Show me the best way to learn', 10: 'Be fair to everyone', 11: 'Be approachable/friendly', and 14: 'Be understanding'. This finding is reflected in a drop in the average scores for these items at time point 2.

Table 5.7: Students' reports of degree to which expectations have been met immediately prior to the start of their second year at university (time point 3)

Expectation of tutors	Percentage of students reporting expectation met:		
	Not well	Moderately well	Very well
1. Be good teachers	2	69	29
2. Be professional	0	56	44
3. Be encouraging	21	58	21
4. Motivate me to do my best	19	67	14
5. Give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	6	62	32
6. Give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	23	70	7
7. Be honest	2	58	46
8. Show me the best way to learn	15	52	33
9. Be available whenever help is needed	31	56	13
10. Be fair to everyone	10	46	44
11. Be approachable/friendly	11	58	31
12. Help me enjoy my time here	11	75	14

13. Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	25	62	13
14. Be understanding	4	83	13
15. Help me develop as a person	8	79	13
16. Treat me with respect	0	65	35
17. Help me develop the skills that I will need for my career	2	69	29
18. Be knowledgeable about their subject	0	50	50

At the end of the year when students had their results, the responses to the expectation questionnaire showed much more favourable results. Only four items have more than 20% of students reporting that their expectations are not well met. These are 6: 'Give help and advice with personal problems', 3: 'Be encouraging', 9: 'Be available when help is needed', and 13: 'Take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations'. Moreover, the first of these did not rate highly in terms of importance.

Responses to 4: 'Motivate me to do my best', 12: 'Help me enjoy my time here', and 15: 'Help me develop as a person' have now dropped out of the '20% or more' category, although the motivation item has only just improved enough to make this claim.

Thus, the data show generally higher levels of dissatisfaction with tutors at time point 2. It should be noted, however, that this time point differed in an important way from the other time points. Time points 1 and 3 are comparable, in that they occurred immediately after students had received results for semesters one and two respectively. However, time point 2 was immediately *before* students sat their final

assessments for year one. Thus it is likely that increased levels of anxiety may be responsible for the higher levels of dissatisfaction noted at that time.

5.4 Differences between groups

Results of the questionnaires were tested for significant differences between programme board decisions, and between entry qualifications using the Mann-Whitney *U* test (Siegel, 1956). The Mann-Whitney *U* test is commonly used when ordinal measurement has been achieved, to test whether two independent groups have been drawn from the same population. It is one of the most powerful non-parametric tests, and is used as an alternative to the parametric *t* test when measurement in the research is weaker than interval scaling, or one wishes to avoid the assumptions of the *t* test.

Programme board decision produced no significant differences, though it should be noted that there were very small numbers in some of the categories. However, analysis by entry qualification yielded a range of statistically significant differences. Most of these occurred at the end of the first semester (time point 1):

Table 5.8: Differences in importance rating of self expectations at the end of the first semester.

Importance rating of expectations of self				
Item	**Entry qualification**		**Mann Whitney test results**	
	A level Mean (SD)	'Other' Mean (SD)	Z	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
Become an asset to an organisation	4.63 (0.59) N=70	4.87 (0.34) N=55	-2.534	0.011
Build good relationships with students	4.06 (0.75) N=71	4.34 (0.72) N=56	-2.212	0.027
Feel proud of my achievements	4.22 (0.84) N=68	4.61 (0.53) N=54	-2.577	0.010
Work hard	4.13 (0.81) N=71	4.45 (0.71) N=56	-2.349	0.019

Whilst all of these items score at the 'important' end of the scale for both groups, the 'Other' entrants score all of them significantly higher than do the A-level entrants.

Table 5.9: Differences in rating of how well self expectations are met at the end of the first semester.

Degree to which self expectations are met				
Item	**Entry qualification**		**Mann Whitney test results**	
	A level Mean (SD)	'Other' Mean (SD)	Z	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
Improve my decision making ability	2.07 (0.49) N=69	2.31 (0.54) N=55	-2.510	0.012
Enjoy learning	1.88 (0.47) N=69	2.11 (0.50) N=55	-2.519	0.012
Make new friends	2.71 (0.49) N=70	2.50 (0.57) N=54	-2.227	0.026

This table shows that the A-level entrants social expectations are being better satisfied than those of the 'Other' (predominantly GNVQ) entrants, but intriguingly it is the 'Other' entrants that show more satisfaction with some of the academic experiences of their first semester. The 'enjoy learning' result is particularly interesting. Conventional wisdom might have the more traditional students enjoying the learning experience more, since university education has evolved to cater for A-level entrants, but here the A-level entrants score is at the low end of the scale, whilst the 'Other' students score above average.

Table 5.10: Differences in importance rating of expectations of tutors at the end of the first semester.

Importance rating of expectations of tutors				
Item	**Entry qualification**		**Mann Whitney test results**	
	A level Mean (SD)	'Other' Mean (SD)	Z	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
Be fair to everyone	4.35 (0.91) N=68	4.73 (0.53) N=49	-2.446	0.014
Be understanding	3.93 (0.83) N=68	4.30 (0.91) N=50	-2.596	0.009
Help me develop career skills	4.46 (0.63) N=68	4.68 (0.62) N=50	-2.270	0.023
Treat me with respect	4.35 (0.75) N=68	4.62 (0.60) N=50	-2.088	0.037

It is largely the social items here that produce the differences between groups. The greater emphasis placed on understanding, fairness and respect could be explained by a greater maturity in the non-traditional students, and their expectation that they will be treated as adults more than the A-level students, who are mostly straight out of school. An alternative explanation could be that the non-traditional students are *more anxious* about these issues, and are concerned about being taken seriously as students by university staff. Thus they place more emphasis on being treated with respect and fairness, and hope that tutors will understand their anxieties.

Herein lies an example of a deficiency of the survey as a research tool, for of course it is not possible without further evidence to decide which explanation, if any, is most likely. However, the latter explanation is supported by the results of the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire described in chapter two. This showed that the non-traditional students suffered significantly higher levels of anxiety during their

first semester. Linking this with the expectations results would suggest a greater insecurity about their position at the university.

Table 5.11: Differences in rating of how well expectations of tutors are met at the end of the first semester.

Degree to which expectations of tutors are met				
Item	**Entry qualification**		**Mann Whitney test results**	
	A level Mean (SD)	'Other' Mean (SD)	Z	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
Be fair to everyone	2.15 (0.58) N=68	2.38 (0.61) N=48	-2.079	0.038
Motivate me	1.70 (0.49) N=67	1.96 (0.61) N=49	-2.299	0.021
Show me how to learn	1.91 (0.51) N=68	2.16 (0.66) N=49	-2.303	0.021

These results again demonstrate the greater level of satisfaction with some of the more academic items demonstrated by the non-traditional students. Although the score for 'motivate me' is low for both groups, the A-level students expectations have been met to a significantly lesser degree. The non-traditional students' expectation that tutors will show them the best way to learn has been moderately well satisfied, whilst A-level students exhibit a significantly lower score on this item. Both items scored high for importance across the whole cohort.

As an additional measure, grade point averages (GPA) for the students responding to the questionnaire at time point 1 were compared for year 1 and year 2 using Student's t-test. The *t* test was the test of choice since grade point averages are represented by parametric interval data.

In year 1 there was a significant difference in grade point average between A-level entrants and other entrants:

Table 5.12: A comparison of grade point average at the end of year 1 for A-level and 'other' entrants

	A level Mean (SD)	Other Mean (SD)	p
Grade point average	8.54 (1.96) N=72	7.50 (2.44) N=54	0.009

At the end of year two there was no significant difference between the two groups. Mean GPA for A-level entrants was 7.86 (SD 2.52) compared with mean GPA for 'other' entrants of 7.75 (SD 2.24).

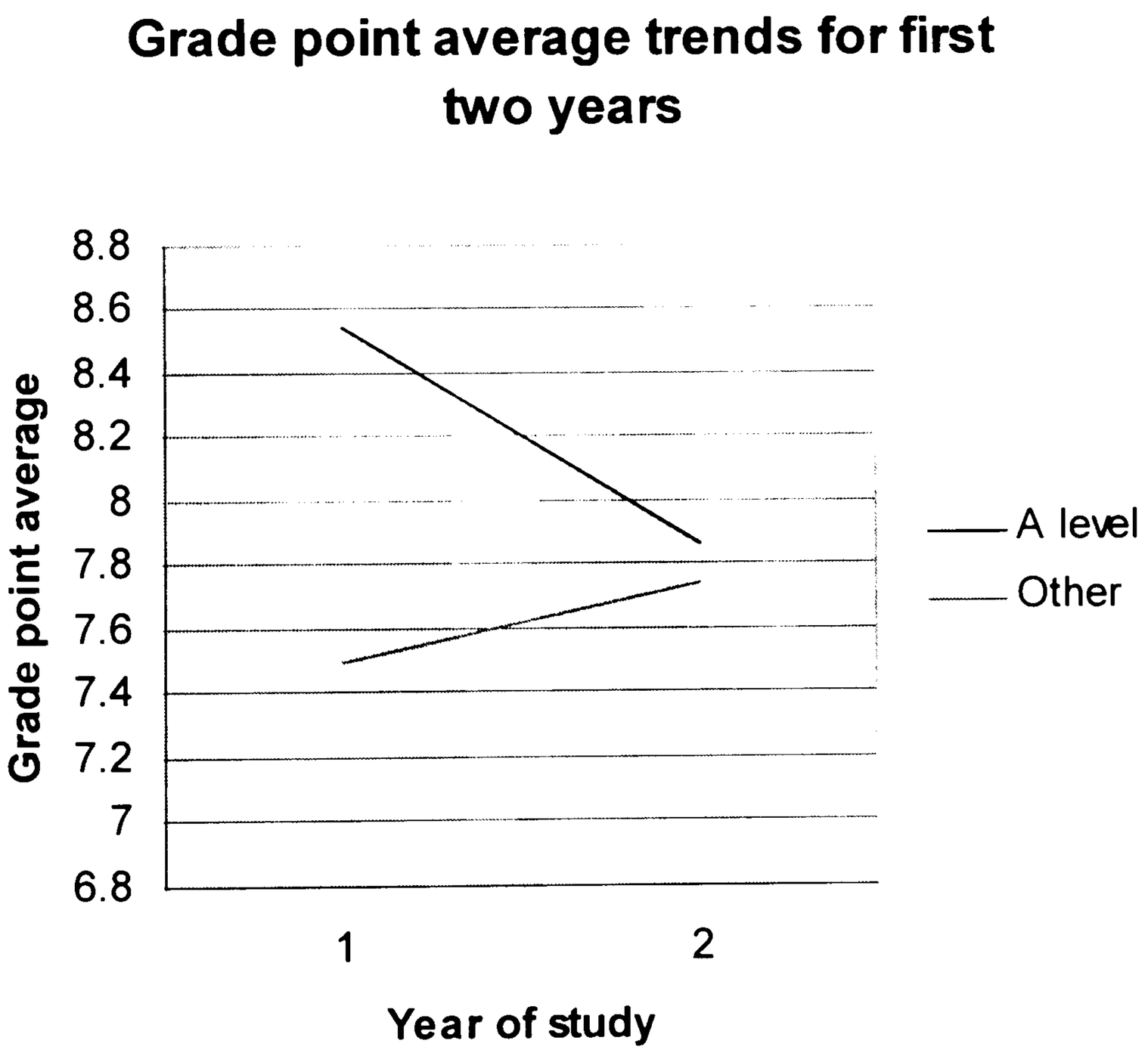


Figure 5.2: Comparison of grade point avarage trends for traditional and non-traditional entrants over the first two years of university

Thus, the closure of the gap between the two groups represents an apparent deterioration in performance of the A-level entrants. accompanied by a slightly improved performance from the 'Other' entrants:

5.5 Differences over time

Responses for 'expectations met' provided by the same named students that responded at time points 1 and 3, which represented comparable sampling points for each semester (immediately after publication of results). were tested for significant differences using the Sign Test (Siegel, 1956). This is applicable to tests between two related samples (in this case, within-subjects measures). where an equivalent parametric test can not be used.

Only one item, 'feel proud of my achievements' showed a significant difference. This expectation was met to a greater degree at time point 3 than at time point 1 ($p=0.035$, $N=44$). This would imply that most of the students' impressions about expectations form before the end of the first semester, and thereafter do not change to any significant extent.

5.6 Discussion

The data present a gradually unfolding story of the students' first year at the Business School. The main sources of pre-entry expectations are still the prospectus and the visit, so there has been little change since the research reported by Dehne (1993) and Roberts and Higgins (1992), despite the assertion by Dehne that students have become more distrusting of university publications in the intervening decade.

It was interesting to note that not one student mentioned any of the various university league tables as one of their sources of expectation. There is evidence to show that students seeking places at the more traditional universities use the league tables extensively in their decision-making process (Popham. 2001). In addition. it has been reported (Strauss and Frost. 1999) that there is an increasing use of

websites by students seeking university places. Again. there was no mention of this source from the Business School students. It would therefore appear that there is a lack of sophistication in the university selection/preparation process used by our students. Although today there is a wide and varied range of information available to any prospective student. those who end up at the Business School tend to have eschewed the more up-to-date and independent sources. and have relied heavily on the traditional prospectus and visit.

The prospectus and open days focus predominantly on the courses on offer. facilities, and the social life of the university, so clearly several of the expectations - particularly those stated as personal expectations - are likely have been influenced by these sources. For example, 'enjoy a good social life', 'meet people/ make new friends', and 'gain the knowledge and skills that will make me an asset to an organisation' are all lures used in marketing material to tempt students to university.

However, the students articulated a range of other expectations for which the source is less clear. These mainly relate to their expectations of tutors. Nowhere in the marketing literature is a claim or promise made that tutors will motivate students to do their best, be available whenever help is needed, take an interest in individuals' progress and notice when they are not meeting expectations, for example. These findings correspond to other studies that have found that, as well as expecting tutors to be academically competent, students have a number of expectations about a tutor's willingness to help students and about the caring manner in which they will interact with students (Shank. Walker and Hayes, 1996).

Clearly these types of expectation have source other than the university itself. Praksak's 1984 definition of different types of expectation (see chapter three) may provide a clue. If the expectations that students are expressing are not explicitly promised by any university source. then it is more likely that they are articulating what they think *should* happen (Praksaks normative expectation). rather than what they think *will* happen. The danger here. as pointed out by Boulding *et al* (1993). is

that their ultimate perception of the service delivered is likely to be decreased by this type of expectation, resulting in dissatisfaction.

Parsuraman *et al* (1985) showed that the major factors that will determine a customer's expectations are:

- Word of mouth
- Personal needs
- Past experience

It is not unreasonable to assume that these factors have also played a part in the formation of the expectations articulated by the student group in this study. This can help to explain some of the expectations that can not be linked to explicit promises or claims made by the university. The majority of the students will have had no prior experience of an institution of higher education, and therefore their expectations will be based on their experience of other types of educational establishment. These are most commonly school, sixth form college, and FE college. All of these provide a much more personal service to students, with smaller class sizes and discrete groups or cohorts. Expectations founded on this type of 'service' will not be realistic for the larger scale on which the university operates. For example, it is common for core tutors to teach a group of 250 students for a 12-week module, and then not teach the same group again for the rest of their time at the university. A personal service of the type seemingly expected by the students is unlikely to be provided under these circumstances.

Perhaps the answer here is for the university to provide some kind of orientation programme of the sort used with some success by other institutions (e.g. Spindell and Dembo, 1976) in an effort to change *'should'* expectations to *'will'* expectations. However, this would present problems for the university. Not least of these is the cost and effort involved, but there is also the problem of opportunity. It has already been discussed that many students come to us through the clearing process, and this leaves no time to prepare these students for their university experience. Better still, then, to encourage the pre-university educational establishments to do the

appropriate preparation. However, for this to be done effectively, there needs to be much more extensive research into what expectations students hold as they enter university, how they are formed, and where they come from.

It is apparent why such a shift is necessary when the results of the expectation survey itself are considered. The students rated their support expectations of tutors highly across the full range, with the exception of 'give help and advice with personal problems'. The non-traditional students in particular valued some of these items very highly. Yet, by the end of the first semester it is these items that show high levels of dissatisfaction amongst students. For example, 33% of students report that their expectation that help should be available whenever needed has not been met; 27% report that tutors do not take an interest in their progress as expected. This clash of student expectations/tutor service has been reported by other researchers (Tennant, 1991, Davies *et al*, 2001). Tennant concluded from his work that educators should have a clear idea of their role, and articulate it to learners - another example of making the shift from '*should*' expectations to '*will*' expectations.

The mismatch between expectations of tutors and actual service provided becomes more exaggerated in the results from time point 2. It should be noted, however, that the circumstances under which these data were collected differ from those of time points 1 and 3, which occurred immediately after results had been issued for semester 1 and 2 respectively. The survey conducted at time point 2, on the other hand, was done as students were preparing to take their end-of year final assessments. One might expect, therefore, that they would generally be in a more stressed or emotional state at this time, which may account for the levels of dissatisfaction reported. Nevertheless, these results should by no means be discounted because of these circumstances. The studies on student attrition (see, for example, Tinto 1993, Yorke 1999) show that students are most likely to leave at the end of the first year. The significant gaps between expectations and experience reported by students at this time are likely to play a part in the decision to leave. The level of 'consumer' satisfaction is primarily a function of the size of the gap

between expectations and performance (Day, 1984; Kotler, 1991; Mason and Ezell, 1993). Thus, it is likely that the large expectation-experience gaps reported in the survey at time point 2 will be manifested in high levels of dissatisfaction amongst our students at the end of the first year. While a satisfied student will re-enrol each semester, a dissatisfied student will probably drop out or transfer (Kearney and Kearney, 1994).

Students may have already made this decision before the first year results come out in July, when the results of the timepoint 3 survey show improved levels of satisfaction.

Of course, the main focus of this thesis is not attrition, but performance of those students who remain at the university. It is the analysis of difference between groups that provides the first evidence that unmet expectations may be having an impact upon the performance of the Business School students. On first joining the university, the non-traditional students place significantly greater emphasis on the 'caring' aspects of the (perceived) role of the tutor. They rate such items as 'be understanding' and 'be fair to everyone' more highly than A-level entrants do. Coupled with the results from the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire reported in chapter two, which showed higher levels of anxiety and depression amongst non-traditional entry students, this implies that initially this group is concerned about their position as students. By the end of semester 1, however, it is clear that their expectations about these support issues have been largely met. In addition, at this point the non-traditional students report the degree to which their expectations have been met on a series of academic issues have been met to a significantly greater degree than those of the A-level entrants. The non-traditional students enjoy learning more, they feel that tutors have met their expectations for showing them how to learn, and show less dissatisfaction with tutors ability to motivate them than the A-level entrants do. It is only the items 'make new friends' in which A-level students' report of expectations met exceeds those of the non-traditional entrants.

In their 1982 study. Holahan *et al* found that expectations formed before the end of the first semester were related to actual performance at the end of the first year. It follows, then that one might expect the non-traditional students in this study to perform better over the first year than the A-level entrants if their expectations are better satisfied. The grade point averages (GPA) at the end of year 1 seem to contradict this at first sight; A-level students achieve significantly higher grade point averages than non-traditional entrants. However, what these data can not tell us is what the GPA for A level entrants *might have been* if their expectations had been better satisfied. Indeed, average GPA that they achieve (8.5) is relatively low, equivalent to C/ C-, with few at the top end of the range achieving more than a B grade. Since, for many of these students, the first year of their course will involve going over material previously studied at A level, these results can not be considered promising.

What is particularly notable about the GPA analysis is the closure of the gap between the two groups by the end of the second year, representing a marginal improvement in the performance of the non-traditional entrants and a sharp decline in the performance of the A-level entrants. Parallels can be drawn again with the results of the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire, which showed that in year 2 it was the A-level entrants that exhibited higher levels of stress symptoms. The results point quite strongly to something happening to the A-level entrants during their first year at university that is adversely affecting their performance in, and experience of, university.

An explanation of these observations might be partially offered by returning to Tinto's ideas about academic and social integration, and how these affect a student's feeling of 'fit' within the university environment. Integration is affected by how well expectations are met; in this study, a number of the academic expectations of A-level entrants are not being met. Thus, it is possible to argue that non-traditional students are achieving better academic integration than A-level entrants during their

first year. This may seem surprising until one considers the teaching culture that is prevalent in the Business School.

Over recent years a key element of the school's strategy has been the effort to widen participation and improve access. As part of this, there has been a concerted effort made to change teaching and assessment practices. There are few exams or essays, but a high proportion of group assessment, and an emphasis on 'learning by doing'. Case analyses, poster sessions, presentations and role-play form a sizeable part of the teaching and assessment. For example, one module that runs over the first and second years requires groups of students to set up their own mini business and run it for the two years. Their assessment is based on the success of the business. Thus it is very much competence based. Students who have come through vocational route or mature students who have worked for a number of years will find this environment quite familiar, and of course this was the purpose of changing the culture in this way. However, it is likely that A-level students, with their more traditional educational background, will find the culture quite alien to them and thus find it more difficult to adapt.

In summary, the results of this second part of the study largely support the hypotheses stated in 4.2.2.:

- Students entering the Business School are able to articulate a range of expectations for themselves and tutors. Some of these are likely to arise from explicit information provided by the university, but others have a less readily identifiable source, and are likely to be influenced by the students' prior experience and personal needs. It is predominantly these expectations that are reported as not being met by significant numbers of students.

- There are significant differences between A-level entrants and non-traditional entrants in both the importance of some expectations and the degree to which some are met. Overall, expectations of non-traditional students are better met.

The findings have parallels with the results of the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire reported in chapter two.

- There is some indication that the unmet expectations of A-level entrants may be affecting their academic integration into the university. and consequently their performance. However, causality can not be established based on the expectation survey.

So, the study so far has shown that expectancy effects are indeed an issue. but to be able to use these findings constructively to the benefit of both the students and the university, we need to be able to build up a better picture to show where the expectations come from, why they are not being met, (and to what extent), and what effects there are likely to be. Only then will it be possible to propose proactive solutions to improve the experience of the full range of students at the Business School.

This was the aim of the next stage of this study.

Chapter six: Beyond expectations-the Psychological Contract

6.1 Historical development

Referring back to the organisational behaviour literature it is clear that, over the last two decades or so, research into expectancy effects has been focussed to a large extent on a particular construct termed 'the psychological contract'. Very generally, this term is used to refer to a set of beliefs regarding what employees are to give and receive with respect to their employer (Roehling, 1997). These beliefs arise because of the 'gaps' that inevitably occur in formal employment contracts. Formal contracts will cover terms and conditions such as pay, sickness benefits, holidays and so on, but can never cover all of the employee/employer interactions that occur. Because of this, employees suffer a degree of uncertainty about how they will be treated, and tend to fill this uncertainty with their own perceptions based on such things as previous experience or observation of the other workers. These perceptions take on the form of *expectations* about how they will be treated, and this forms the basis of the so-called psychological contract. It has been a focus of organisational behaviour research mainly because it has been shown that violation of the psychological contract has a detrimental effect on the performance of workers.

Most recently the research on this topic has been aimed at developing new human resource management practices in organisations to help them adapt to the changing economic environment and associated employment relationship. There are parallels here with the evolution of HE over the same period; we saw in chapter one that the changes taking place in education are closely linked to, and driven by, the economic environment. This is forcing HEIs into a different relationship with their 'human resource', which comprises both the staff and student body. Since the organisational behaviour research is some way ahead of any educational research in this field, the literature on the psychological contract and its application might provide a useful model that can be adapted for use in the HE context.

Although most of the work on the psychological contract has been published within the last fifteen years, the term was first used more than a quarter of a century earlier by Argyris (1960). Whilst conducting fieldwork at a plant Argyris observed that the foremen had what he termed a 'passive' or 'understanding' leadership style. He attributed this to the fact that foremen had come up through the ranks and had been influenced by the informal employee culture. Argyris hypothesised that there was an *implicit* understanding between the foremen and their subordinates: the subordinates would produce optimum performance so long as the foremen respected the informal culture and did not contravene its norms. Argyris termed this understanding the 'psychological work contract'.

Around the same time that Argyris was developing his ideas about the psychological contract, Levinson *et al* (1962) were conducting an investigation into the relationship between work experience and mental health of employees. During the course of interviews with employees, they observed that when people spoke about their work they referred to 'expectations' in a way that seemed to imply that they felt the company was obliged to fulfil them. From this Levinson *et al* developed their definition of the psychological contract, stating it to be a series of mutual expectations that affect the relationship between parties, even though the parties to that relationship may not be consciously aware of holding those expectations. In this definition, the expectations on both sides of the relationship (i.e. employee and employer) form part of the contract. However, unlike Argyris, who considered a *group* of employees sharing certain norms as forming the employee side of the relationship, Levinson *et al* focussed on the expectations of the *individual* employee. An important characteristic of these expectations was that they often pre-dated the individual's particular employment relationship.

In the two decades following these first conceptualisations of the psychological contract, most of the work in this area was either conducted by or influenced by Schein (1965). Schein was particularly interested in how the psychological contract could influence behaviour in organisations:

'The notion of the psychological contract implies that the individual has a variety of expectations of the organization and that the organization has a variety of expectations of him. These expectations not only cover how much work is to be performed for how much pay, but also involve the whole pattern of rights, privileges, and obligations between worker and organizations.....Expectations such as these are not written into any formal agreement between employer and organization, yet they operate as powerful determinants of behaviour' (Schein, 1965, p. 11)

It is interesting to note that in both their definitions, Levinson and Schein refer to 'obligations', implying that something rather stronger than simple expectations form part of the psychological contract. Indeed, it is upon this basis that a 'contract' can be said to exist. Like Levinson, Schein also acknowledges that expectations tend to pre-date a relationship. He argues that individuals' expectations arise from such sources as their inner needs, what they learn from others, traditions and norms that may be operating, and their past experiences. However, he also shows that the contract is dynamic, changing as the relationship develops through better understanding and negotiation, until a mutually acceptable contract is established.

Schein's work influenced a number of other studies in this area (see Roehling 1997 for a detailed review), but has since been superseded by that of Denise Rousseau, who has perhaps had the biggest influence on modern interpretations of the construct.

6.2 New perspectives

Renewed interest in unwritten contracts arose from expansion of employee legal protections in the US (Rousseau and Anton, 1988). After long being allowed to hire and fire at will, employers found that laws and courts decisions during the 1980s gave employees a basis to claim wrongful discharge due to violation of an *implied* contract. Rousseau (1989) argued that implied contracts arise from observable

patterns of interactions in a relationship, for example. employer and employee. When outsiders such as the general public, the courts. or the general labour market. infer that a predictable pattern of interaction and exchange exists. that pattern is likely to be enforceable as an implied contract. This sounds very like the definition of the psychological contract as defined by Levinson and Schein. However. Rousseau argues that it was the *observable* nature of the implied contract that made it different to the psychological contract, which she defined as the beliefs that the individual parties might have regarding what they and the other party might owe each other. She makes the distinction thus:

> 'Psychological and implied contracts are different in that they exist at different levels (i.e. individual versus relational) and because psychological contracts are highly subjective and parties to a relationship need not agree. whereas implied contracts exist as a degree of social consensus regarding what constitutes a contractual obligation' (Rousseau, 1989. p. 124)

Rousseau's conceptualisation of the psychological contract differed from others not only in its focus solely on the individual, but also in its emphasis on the notion of promise. She argued that whilst all contracts comprised expectations, not all expectations constituted a contract (Rousseau and McClean Parks. 1993). In this she separated the notion of the psychological contract from standard expectancy theory. For example. new recruits may have expectations about the way they will be treated. and if the expectations are not fulfilled then the individual will be upset and demotivated along the lines of expectancy theory. However, if a promise of the expected treatment was not made by the organisation, then this could not be regarded as breaking the psychological contract. This seems to contradict earlier researchers. who said that the expectations making up the psychological contract often predated the relationship. (after all. a promise can not be made until there is some contact between the parties), but if one considers how promises are made. there need not necessarily be a contradiction.

Rousseau and McClean Parks (1993) explain that the key element in communicating a promise is a behavioural event. Words are not always needed to create promises: organisational actions, observations of treatment received by other employees, and observation of the action of other organisation members can all be powerful factors in communication of promises. Of course, the interpretation of these actions by the individual will be highly subjective and influenced by such things as past experience, personal needs, and culture. Thus, previous experience can indeed influence the formation of the psychological contract within Rousseau's definition.

Rousseau places so much importance on the distinction between simple expectations and the distinct form of expectations that comprise a contract because of the different response that ensues when they are not met. When unmet, expectations result progressively in dissatisfaction, cognitive manipulations of perceived inequities, and behavioural adjustment (e.g. turnover, reduced performance, Adams 1965). Perceived violations of the psychological contract go beyond this to involve feelings of betrayal and deeper psychological distress (Rousseau 1989). The 'victim' experiences anger, resentment, a sense of injustice, and wrongful harm. Rousseau argues that the intensity of the reaction is directly attributable not only to unmet expectations of specific rewards or benefits, but also to more general beliefs about respect for individuals, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behaviour associated with relationships involving trust. Indeed, trust is a key element of the psychological contract, and is the reason why violation of the contract has such serious consequences. When trust is undermined, it becomes very difficult to re-establish.

The subject of contract violation draws Rousseau into making another distinction *within* her conceptualisation of the psychological contract. Based on work by MacNeil (1985), she describes a continuum of contracts, with the so-called 'transactional' contract at one end, and the 'relational' contract at the other. Transactional contracts tend to be short-term agreements, with limited involvement

of each party in the lives and activities of the other. They are normally easily quantifiable, usually in terms of money. On the other hand, relational contracts involve not only money, but agreements based on social and emotional elements such as loyalty and support. They tend to be long term. The importance here is that transactional or more specific contracts are less subject to violation than relational, more subjective contracts.

Rousseau has been, and continues to be, a key player in research into both psychological and implied contracts and their impact on organisational behaviour, and her work is invariably referenced extensively in articles on these subjects. However, her ideas are not without their critics. Some of the key assumptions upon which Rousseau bases her work have been questioned by Guest (1998). Guest argues that Rousseau's definition of the psychological contract focussing on the individual contradicts the very notion of a contract. For Guest, a contract must be a reciprocal two-way agreement. He also takes issue with Rousseau's concentration on the promissory nature of the contract, asserting that this leaves it very close to a conventional employment contract, and far removed from the spirit of earlier definitions. He also questions whether there is any value in making the distinction between promises or obligations and normal expectations when looking at the effects of violation:

> 'It is far from clear that violations of the psychological contract, defined as unmet obligations or promises, differ from unmet expectations and are therefore any different from job dissatisfaction. For example, it is possible that contract violation reflects strong dissatisfaction (broken promises) as opposed to moderate dissatisfaction (unmet expectations).' (p. 656)

Guest believes that the psychological contract is beset with conceptual problems that limit its value as a useful and valid psychological construct, whilst still accepting that it provides a potentially useful framework around which to organise thinking and research.

Rousseau (1998) counters these criticisms by stating that Guest is wrong in his assertion that she has defined the psychological contract without considering the role of mutuality, explaining that the key issue regarding mutuality is that it is the *perception* of mutuality and not necessarily mutuality in fact that gives rise to the creation of a psychological contract. She argues for the construct's validity by pointing out that researchers *consistently* find that psychological contract violation is distinct from unmet expectations, evoking much more intensely negative responses.

These two very different viewpoints have produced some argument and concern amongst other researchers, and resulted in a variety of approaches to investigations of this topic. For example, when Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) set out to conduct a large-scale survey within a local authority, they were keen to examine the state of the psychological contract from both the employee and employer perspectives, maintaining that this was consistent with the core of the psychological contract as reciprocal obligations. However, they acknowledge that the 'organisation' can not hold a psychological contract of its own, and to capture mutual obligations it is necessary to personify the organisation; employees view the actions by agents of the organisation as actions of the organisation itself. This in itself results in problems of definition. The basic premise of the psychological contract is reciprocation between employee and employer, so employees' reciprocation will be directed towards the source of their fulfilled or unfulfilled obligations, that is, their perceived employer. However, in a large organisation such as a local authority, there are several candidates for the perceived employer, and all employees may not hold the same perception.

Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler also voice some support for Guest's caution about expectations and obligations not being conceptually distinct, despite accepting Rousseau's counter-argument to some extent. They urge further empirical work, at very least to account for the effects of expectations prior to assessing whether obligations have any further predictive power.

The literature is dogged by disagreements like these as to the nature and definition of the psychological contract; nevertheless, it has become an increasing focus of attention for researchers looking to investigate the effect of changing employment relationships on organisations and their workforce. Thus the discussion has centred largely on the effect of perceived changes in the psychological contract, from the 'old' contract of loyalty in exchange for security to the 'new' contract of flexibility in exchange for employability (Herriot 1998).

The banking sector has been the focus of a number of studies because of the recent dramatic transition in the way it operates. The sector can be used to illustrate the whole range of new work practices seen in organisations over the last decade - downsizing, redundancy, performance related pay schemes, drive for greater productivity, quality performance measures, benchmarking, and so on. Increased competition, advances in technology, and expanded flexibility have fostered new strategies and structures in the sector. Staff have needed to become more sales-orientated, outgoing, adaptable, educated and competitive (Sparrow, 1996). During the introduction of such changes, issues relating to pay and conditions are readily communicated to staff, but plans relating to number of employees, labour turnover, and redeployment are rarely communicated. However, staff implicitly know what is going on, and act upon it. Researchers have found that a useful way to capture and summarise these changes is by analysing the shift in the psychological contract.

Sparrow's 1996 study in this sector resulted in several important observations about the nature of the changing contract. The psychological contract was highly fragmented; banking staff exhibited a range of different contracts covering attitudinal positions ranging from flexibility, ambition, security and disengagement. Some contracts were dominated by lifestyle or personal motivation factors. Sparrow pointed out that this created problems for HR managers; the tools that they had at their disposal, such as performance appraisal, reward systems, and career plans.

were designed to operate across the board. With such diversity of contracts, the tools were likely to be less effective. The solution, he postulated, was to create a series of layered and individualised career contracts. A second important observation was that, as the psychological contract 'deteriorated', there was a decrease in trust of management amongst employees, resulting in a corresponding lack of commitment. However, perhaps the most thought provoking of Sparrow's observations was that the nature of motivation itself might have changed because of new work values, requiring that researchers go back to basic assumptions. He argues:

> 'Without clear knowledge of the relative role and contribution of causative influences on the contract, its new dynamics will be hard to predict and manage' (p 89)

Somewhat contradicting this work was a study by Herriot, Manning and Kidd (1997). Starting from a classical (mutual) definition of the psychological contract, they used critical incident technique to investigate the content of the psychological contract from both the employee and organisational perspectives. Their findings showed a considerable level of agreement about what the psychological contract consists of, and indicated an extremely traditional view of work values. Herriot *et al* note that these findings do not match the literature on the psychological contract, and suggest that the literature gives a view which is limited by the unrepresentative nature of the samples used.

David Grant (1999) introduces yet another element to the psychological contract concept. In a study conducted with employees at a Japanese-managed start-up plant in the UK he found that management rhetoric influenced employee expectations, and that employees were willing to suspend any expectations based on previous employment experiences. (It should be noted, however, that Grant draws little attention to the fact that employees also quote their knowledge of other Japanese-owned businesses in the area as having an influence on their expectations). However, when reality did not match up with management rhetoric and expectations

were not met there was a negative impact on motivation and performance. The results of his study led Grant to postulate that management rhetoric has a bearing on the extent to which employees allow their perceptions of past and present experiences to affect their expectations. He introduces the idea of the 'congruent contract' as the overall aim of management - i.e. one where the rhetoric coincides exactly with employees' perceptions of reality. Previous experiences would tally with the content of the rhetoric, or, where these expectations ran counter, they would be disregarded and left behind.

Despite the congruent contract being the 'ideal', Grant maintains that it is unlikely to be achieved, and so goes on to describe three alternative types of psychological contract that are more probable (ibid, p. 331):

- The *mismatched* contract: where the rhetoric fails because it has no appeal to the employee and does not match the perceived reality. This may be because past experiences tell employees that management cannot possibly deliver what the rhetoric is offering. It may be because employees cannot see the policies and practices associated with the rhetoric of the HRM being practised or working in the way in which they have been led to believe they might work. It may also be that the rhetoric simply fails to overcome the existing organisational culture.

- The *partial* contract: where parts of the rhetoric appeal to employees and parts do not. Similarly, because some aspects of the rhetoric are perceived as reality, some expectations have been met, while, because other aspects of the rhetoric are not perceived as reality, other expectations are not met.

- The *trial* contract: where rhetoric is given a chance to prove itself and become reality. Though rhetoric appeals to employees when it is first espoused, employees may hold views similar to those described under the mismatched contract above. However, they may be willing to accept that what is being promised under the rhetoric will take some time to take effect. They therefore

'buy in' to the rhetoric on a 'wait and see' basis. If all goes well, the rhetoric and reality should move towards congruence. However, it may be that in time employees perceive that the rhetoric, or parts of it, is not reality and is unlikely to become so. The trial contract is therefore terminated and either a mismatched or partial contract emerges.

The three latter types of contract represent varying degrees of *contract violation*, a phenomenon that has been the main focus of organisational behaviour research.

6.3 Violation of the psychological contract.

Although there are varied definitions and uses of the concept of the psychological contract, all generally agree that it binds the employer and employee in a sort of guarantee that if each does their part the relationship will be mutually beneficial. It follows that if one party violates that contract, the bond is weakened. The violated partner is likely to lose faith in the benefits of the relationship to them, and will be more likely to leave. A key feature of this is loss of trust. When rules of friendship are broken, trust and respect decline (Davis and Todd, 1985). In the same way, if an employer breaks a basic rule in work relationships, such as good faith and fair dealing, trust declines (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994).

Largely because of the loss of trust, the reaction to violation of the psychological contract is more intense than the reaction to unmet expectations. When expectations go unmet the result is disappointment, dissatisfaction, and a decline in performance. When the psychological contract is violated, the response tends to be anger, feelings of betrayal, and moral outrage (Rousseau 1989). However, the impact of violations may be different for employees with different career motives (Rousseau 1990). Individuals who are strongly ambitious often see their employer as a 'stepping stone' to better employment and will tend to adopt a more transactional relationship with their employer. This type of relationship has a short-term focus and immediate rewards such as pay and training are most valued by the employee. On the other

hand, employees who see their career development as being through a long-term relationship with their current employer value not just the immediate rewards but the relationship itself, i.e. they have a relational contract. Relational contracts are more susceptible to violation than transactional contracts, since they are more subjective and involved, and are largely based on trust. Thus careerist individuals are less likely to be seriously affected by violations than long-term employees.

Evidence for these ideas has been provided by a number of studies. Robinson and Rousseau (1994) conducted a longitudinal study with 128 MBA graduates, surveying them immediately following recruitment, and then two years later. They reported wide-scale contract violation. Violations were negatively associated with satisfaction, trust, and employees' intentions to stay with their employer, and positively associated with actual staff turnover. The researchers felt that the strong relationship found between violations and trust was particularly significant, as trust is crucial to organsational effectiveness (Golembiewski and McConkie 1975, quoted in Robinson and Rousseau 1994). Robinson and Rousseau draw an interesting conclusion about why there was so much evidence of violation in their subject group. The group of employees was not representative of the general work population, in that it comprised management school graduates who were in great demand and heavily recruited. They propose that employers may have been inclined to make promises that they later could not keep in order to lure these graduates into the firm. They base this argument on evidence that the motivation of recruiters to provide accurate information is quite low generally (Porter, Lawler and Hackman, 1975), and so this group was especially unlikely to receive realistic job interviews.

However, critics of Robinson and Rousseau's approach have other theories as to why violation is widespread. For example, Guest (1998) cites what he terms 'the agency problem' as a cause of violation. By this he means that it is difficult to know what is actually meant by 'the organisation' when considering the psychological contract as being an agreement between it and the employee. The employee is likely to form

perceptions of obligations from an agent of the organisation, who may or may not have the power to fulfil those obligations. In a similar vein, Marks (2001) believes that in the workplace individuals have a range of work contacts, it is probable that employees will be involved in more than one contractual relationship, with each relationship of differing importance. Taking this to the extreme, she argues that there can be as many contracts as there are relationships in the workplace. Thus the potential for violation is almost infinite.

Turnley (1999) is less convinced of the high incidence of contract violation; indeed, he cites a wide variation in the incidence of violation reporting, ranging from 55% (Robinson and Rousseau 1994) to only 25% (Turnley and Feldman, 1998). He believes that the wide discrepancy may be explained by the way that psychological contract violation is conceptualised and measured. Prior research shows that most employees report receiving less than they were promised on at least one element of the psychological contract, and thus in the strictest sense have experienced a violation. However, when asked about the overall extent to which their organisation has kept its promises and obligations, most employees are more positive.

Turnley's work on reality/obligation discrepancies has led him to postulate that the variation in perception of contract violation is accounted for by a whole range of factors including sources of expectations, the specific elements violated, characteristics of the discrepancy, individual differences, organisational practices, and labour market circumstances. Under these categories he lists twenty-four individual propositions that he believes explain variations in violation reporting. These include:

- Discrepancies arising on commitments made by supervisors or members of top management are more likely to be interpreted as violations than discrepancies arising on commitments made by recruiters, HRM specialists, or coworkers. Employees perceive that it is the job of recruiters and HRM people to 'sell' the organisation to them.

- Discrepancies are more likely to be interpreted as a violation when they arise on obligations that were conveyed explicitly than when they arise on obligations that were conveyed implicitly
- Discrepancies on compensation elements (pay. fringe benefits) are more likely to be perceived as violations than discrepancies on other elements.
- Employees are more likely to interpret discrepancies as a violation when they attribute such discrepancies to the organisation's unwillingness to keep its promises
- Employees are less likely to interpret discrepancies as violations when they attribute such discrepancies to honest misunderstanding or to external factors outside the organisation's control
- The relationship between violations and the employee responses will be moderated by affectivity; individuals with high negative affectivity will respond more negatively to perceived violations
- Conscientiousness will moderate the relationship between violations and response; individuals who are highly conscientious will respond less negatively to perceived violations.
- Procedural justice will moderate the relationship between violations and response; the relationships will be weaker when employees perceive procedural justice surrounding the discrepancy
- Interactional justice will moderate the relationship between violations and response; the relationships will be weaker when employees perceive interactional justice surrounding the discrepancy.
- Offers of remediation will moderate the relationship between violations and employee responses; the relationships will be weaker when organisations have offered to remediate the violation in some way

Thus, with so many opportunities for variations in discrepancy reporting, it is little wonder, then, that there have been so many problems in trying to measure this phenomenon.

Yet another variable in all of this is contract change. In another longitudinal study with business school graduates, Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) discovered that the mutual employer-employee obligations that are perceived by new recruits change strikingly during the first few years in an organisation. Over time new recruits perceive their employer's obligations to increase, whilst their own decrease. Constant contract change means increased opportunities for employees and employers to misunderstand the agreement and perceive a contract violation even when an actual violation did not occur. From this they suggest that understanding employee perceptions of mutual obligations may be at least as important as creating a contractual relationship with one particular set of terms.

It was this *perceived* contract violation that was the subject of another study by Robinson (1996). The basis of Robinson's study was that psychological contract violation is a subjective experience, and consequently can and does occur in the absence of an *actual* violation, which she defines as the situation where one party deliberately reneges on another party's contract, and that fact can be determined by a neutral third party. The subjectivity can arise from several quarters, and again, trust is considered to be a key influence. Robinson explains (p. 3) that as a general positive attitude towards another social entity, trust acts as a guideline, influencing one's interpretation of social behaviours within a relationship . Trust is thus likely to play a significant part in the perception of psychological contract violation, as it may influence the employee's recognition of a violation, his interpretation of the violation if it is recognised, and his reaction to it. Research has shown that people act in ways that preserve their established knowledge, ideas and perceptions (Greenwald, 1980). Thus, if an employee has trust in an employer, they will be likely to act in such a way as to interpret a contract violation in a benign way. This can be termed 'selective attention'.

As well as supporting findings of previous studies by finding a negative relationship between psychological contract violation and employee contributions such as performance and intentions to remain with the organisation, this study added a new

dimension to the literature in that it demonstrated a link between trust and psychological contract violation. Initial trust in the employer was found to be negatively related to psychological contract violation one year later. Robinson offers two possible explanations for this finding. It may simply be that an untrustworthy employer is less likely to be trusted by employees and more likely to breach contracts. Alternatively, it could be due to the bias of selective attention as described above. Employees with high initial trust in their employer may have forgotten or overlooked perceived violations of contract, whilst those with low initial trust may have actively sought out or exaggerated examples of violation.

Related to this was the finding that prior trust moderated the relationship between contract violation and subsequent trust. Employees with high initial trust in their employer experienced less of a decline in trust after a perceived violation that did those with low initial trust.

With this plethora of factors affecting perceptions of, and reactions to, psychological contract violation, it seems that many of the criticisms levelled at the construct may be valid, particularly that it may not be useful as a diagnostic tool. However, Shore and Tetrick (1994) offer a process model by which psychological contract violations might be better understood. (Figure 6.1).

The model depicts the process underlying violation of the psychological contract, and it serves to summarise and include many of the issues already discussed. Shore and Tetrick propose, like others, that the degree to which employees focus on discrepancies will depend on three things: the type of violation, the size of the discrepancy, and the degree of assessed organisational responsibility for the unmet obligations.

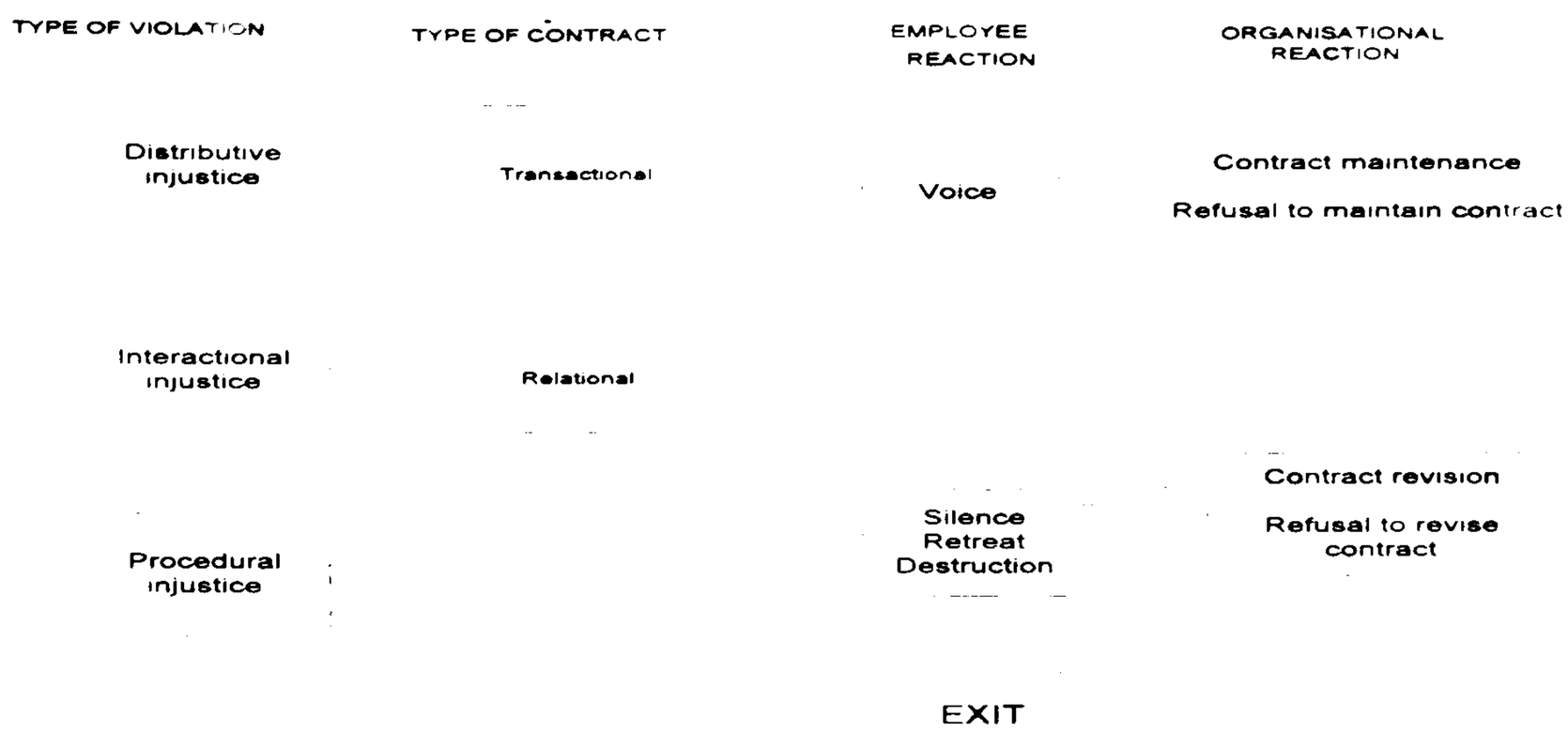


Figure 6.1: Schematic representation of the response to violation of the psychological contract (Shore & Tetrick 1994)

The model describes three types of violation. Distributive, for example training or pay; procedural, which refers to the fairness of procedures through which outcomes are allocated; and interactional, which refers to the quality of the interpersonal treatment an employee receives during the implementation of a procedure. The model shows how each of these relate to the different types of contract already described. Like Robinson *et al,* 1994, Shore and Tetrick believe that reactions to transactional contract violations tend to be less intense than those to violations of relational contracts. They also describe in the model how an individual might respond to different types of perceived violation; thus small discrepancies are likely to generate what they term an 'action orientation' which would lead to the employee trying to restore the contract. Large violations would, however, be expected to induce a 'state orientation' which would result in the individual focusing on the emotional effects of the violation. Shore and Tetrick suggest that for individuals with transactional contracts, the most salient violations will be those resulting from distributive injustice, and interactional injustices may be discounted unless very large. Procedural injustice in conjunction with distributive injustice would

exacerbate the effect of the distributive injustice and increase the likelihood of the individual adopting a state orientation. For individuals with relational contracts, the most salient violations will be procedural and interactional injustices, and distributive injustices may be discounted unless the discrepancy is very large.

The model describes five potential employee responses to violation, which have been based on work by Robinson (1993):

Voice: the individual attempts to reinstate the contract, and is consistent with an action orientation

Silence, retreat, destruction and *exit* : the individual attempt to survive contract violation by lowering perceived obligations of the employer, or withdrawing from the employment relationship. This would be consistent with a state orientation.

6.4 Summary

There are two broad definitions of the psychological contract that have been widely adopted:

The 'classical' definition, which is derived from the work of Argyris (1960) and Schein (1978), refers to the perceptions of mutual obligations of two parties in an employment relationship- the employee and the organisation.

The second definition is based on the extensive work of Rousseau. This has the psychological contract as existing only in the mind of the employee, and is about the 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organisation, regarding terms of an exchange between individuals and their organisation' (Rousseau 1995).

Research on the psychological contract has been beset by problems of definition and questions about the convictions underpinning the concept. The literature shows a gradual move away from the original spirit in which it was defined to explain the experience of workers, to now being used almost as a term for a particular form of HRM practice. Theory building and research into the content and process of development of the psychological contract are in the embryonic stage, and thus most research has focussed on the effects of the psychological contract, or more generally,

responses to contract violations. Critics argue that it has been misused, that it does not have the analytical rigour of other psychological constructs, and as a consequence that its use as an explanatory framework is limited.

Despite the criticisms, the psychological contract has been widely accepted as providing a useful construct around which to base research on a range of topics related to human resource management, and is gaining increasingly wider appeal as employment relationships continue to change rapidly.

6.5 Students and the psychological contract

Can the concept of the psychological contract help to explain findings from the results of the investigations into the experiences of students at Sunderland Business School? Although the concept has been predominantly applied to the employment relationships, there are precedents for its application to other types of relationship. Roehling (1997) describes how the concept has been generalised to a variety of relationships including renter and landlord (Radford and Larwood, 1982), consultant and client (Boss, 1985), husband and wife (Dunahee and Wrangler, 1974), and student and teacher (Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre, 1984).

It could be argued that a student securing a place at a university is similar in many respects to an employee securing a new appointment with an organisation. Both are joining the organisation for an extended period of time (hopefully). Both will accept that they will be expected to contribute to the work of the organisation, and for that, they will expect some reward. That reward will have both transactional elements (pay, fringe benefits, or grades and qualifications), and relational elements (job security, personal development, or nurturing, encouragement, motivation). Both will value these different elements to differing extents depending on their personal goals and circumstances. For both the employee and the student, their progress within their chosen organisation will depend not only on the quality of their work, but also on the relationships that they build with fellow workers and supervisors.

Perhaps the biggest differences between these two situations are

a) the student is working primarily for his or her own gain, whilst the employee also works for the gain of the organisation
b) Students now pay for their university course, thus introducing a client provider element to that relationship.

However, the difference may not be so big as it first seems. Universities are increasingly judged on the performance of their students in today's environment, so whilst in the past it was in every academic's *professional* interest to make sure that students worked to the best of their ability, it is now also in the university's *financial* interest. So, like an employee, the student's effort now contributes to the business success of the university.

At the other end of the scale, careerist employees, like those MBA graduates described by Robinson and Rousseau in their 1994 study, are seeking appointment to firms as a personal development move - a stepping stone to better employment. They are not short of job offers so they can look around for the best, and organisations often have to 'sell' their benefits to them. Here, they are not unlike students seeking a university place.

When joining their chosen organisation, neither of these individuals will know, comprehensively, what their experience will be. They will meet recruiters and other organisational representatives who will help shape their expectations, and they are likely to use this information to fill in the gaps in what they know will happen. The student, in particular, is likely to have a large degree of uncertainty about what will happen, for he or she will have no formal work contract for reference. Perhaps the closest that exists to a formal contract in this context is the 'Student Charter', (appendix six) which sets out standards of service that the student can expect from the university. It is reciprocal in nature in that it also summarises what the university expects from the student, but the charter lacks any real specificity and uses very broad terms to define requirements (necessarily so, perhaps, because of its

need to apply to such a wide diversity of students). Thus, the charter still leaves much opportunity for 'gap-filling'.

The findings reported in chapter five show evidence of this. The students articulate a range of expectations on joining the university, but only a small minority of these can be traced to any explicit information provided by the university. There is also some evidence for a link between unmet expectations and performance. Does this, however, provide evidence for a psychological contract?

Despite the arguments over the definition of the psychological contract, there is reasonable agreement that its two distinguishing features are that it is based on obligations rather than simple expectations, and that the reactions to violations of the contract are stronger than reactions to unmet expectations. So far in this study there is no evidence for the first of these; the students have only been asked about expectations, but there *is* evidence for the second. In the interviews reported in chapter two, students voiced very strong feelings about relations with both fellow students and, most especially, academic staff:

> 'I feel angry when I have to work in a group. It's very stressful'
>
> 'It's demotivating and frustrating'
>
> 'They don't care, and that makes me angry and upset. I *want* someone to care'
>
> 'It makes me bloody angry. I want to smash them in the face sometimes'.

Here, perhaps are some examples of the 'anger and moral outrage' that Rousseau describes.

If the psychological contract can be accepted as being applicable to the student/university interaction, it could provide a useful framework to further investigate the student experience. We pursue this theme in chapter seven.

Chapter seven: A proposal for the existence and structure of the student psychological contract

7.1 Introduction

The aim of the last part of this study was to establish evidence for the existence of a student psychological contract, and to identify what the various influences on such a contract might be. The overall objective was to establish a preliminary model that might provide a useful basis for future investigations into the student experience.

7.2 Method of investigation

The investigation looked at the development of a potential contract only from the viewpoint of the student. Whilst it is accepted that many commentators would argue that the organisation's side of the contract must always be considered, it is still a controversial issue, and it was thought that this would not be pertinent at this stage for two main reasons:

- If the students perceive a contract that is being violated, then this is likely to have an impact on their performance and experience, regardless of what the university's perception of any contract may be. Since it is student performance and experience that is the main subject of investigation in this study, there is justification for taking only the student view in this inquiry.
- The literature review has shown that there is what Guest termed an 'agency problem' when investigating the organisational side of the contract - that is, it is difficult to define who actually represents the organisational view. The students come into contact with very many organisational agents when their expectations are being formed, all of whom are likely to be presenting a different picture. Without any prior knowledge of which are the most influential agents, there is little value in following this line of investigation.

However, if this investigation can establish evidence for a perceived student psychological contract *and* identify influential agents from the university, then this could provide the basis for future investigation and action.

7.2.1 Evidence for the psychological contract.

This study has already established that students have a range of transactional and relational expectations for themselves and their tutors when they join the university. There is also wide reporting of some of these expectations not being met and it is the relational expectations that fall more frequently into this group. Now the aim was to identify if any of these frequently unmet expectations were more than that - would the students consider these items to be *obligations*, and if so, would they consider them to be unmet to the same extent?

It was not necessary to investigate *all* of the expectations used in the previous survey simply to produce evidence of a psychological contract. Rather, it was more important to get a good response rate with reliable results. This could be better achieved by keeping the survey as short and simple as possible. To that end, ten expectations of tutors that had a high percentage of students reporting that they were not met, and that were not explained by differences in educational background, were selected for a new survey. Together with the instructions to the respondents and some background details, these could fit comfortably onto one page.

In the earlier expectation survey (chapter five), the expectations listed had been derived from student feedback, and as such were anticipated to be accepted as important by the majority of students. An 'importance' rating on the survey served only to confirm this. In this part of the study, there was no knowledge beforehand of how much importance students would place on these items as *obligations*. Thus, it was relevant to use a measure that would directly relate perceived importance with degree to which the obligation had been met for each individual respondent if the findings were to give an indication of potential problem areas, and were to be true to the spirit of the psychological contract by focussing on individual perceptions. A measure used by Robinson (1996) was considered to be appropriate.

The survey was designed to measure potential psychological contract violation in the following way: Participants were first asked to indicate the extent to which they felt the university was **obliged** to provide this set of items, and then asked to indicate how well the obligation had been met. The instructions read:

> 'When students join a university they usually have ideas about what they can expect from their tutors during their course. University staff also make implicit and explicit promises during recruitment, which obligate them to provide certain things to students. Universities vary in the degree to which they subsequently fulfil those promises.
> Read over the following items listed below. Think about the extent to which the university made implicit or explicit promises to provide the type of tutor support mentioned. Then think about how well the university has fulfilled those promises. Using the scale provided, could you please indicate the extent to which you think tutors are **obligated** to fulfil the service mentioned, and in the second column indicate the extent to which you think the obligation has been met.'

Participants were provided with two five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 'not at all obligated' to 'very obligated' for the first and 'not at all fulfilled' to 'very well fulfilled' for the second. A measure of contract violation was developed from the responses as follows. The degree to which each item was fulfilled was subtracted from the degree to which it was obligated. For example, if it was perceived to be highly obligated (a score of 5), and was perceived not to be fulfilled (a score of 1) it resulted in a high violation discrepancy (5-1=4). Conversely, if an item was perceived to be not obligated (a score of 1), yet well fulfilled it resulted in a high fulfilment discrepancy (1-5=-4). An item not perceived to be obligated (a score of 1) and not fulfilled (a score of 1) resulted in no discrepancy (1-1=0).

Participants were also asked to provide basic personal details that the literature suggests could have an influence on any psychological contract (Herriot, Manning and Kidd, 1997; Rousseau and Anton, 1988). These were: age group (18-22 and

over 22, to distinguish mature students); gender; year of study; how they were employed immediately before coming to university (school, college, work or other); and what they felt was the **main** influence on their opinions about what university would be like, using the same categories as in the previous survey. The pre-university history information was included in preference to the education background requested previously, since items selected for this survey had shown no significant differences between A-level and non-traditional entrants in the last survey. This survey therefore attempted to determine if other types of background had an effect. A copy of the questionnaire is shown in appendix 6.

The survey was distributed in core lectures for all business courses, with the aim of retrieving responses from as many of the business school students as possible. Responses were returned from 161 year one, 55 year two, and 153 final year students.

7.2.2 Influences on the psychological contract.

Any academic interpretation of the survey findings in terms of the psychological contract could not be considered reliable without input from the students themselves. The changes in the HE environment discussed in chapter one would be likely to mean that viewpoints of today's students would differ significantly from those of any academic who experienced the more traditional HE environment, so it was important at this stage in the study to understand what the students themselves thought.

The interview was considered to be an appropriate technique for this purpose. As Tuckman (1972) describes it, 'By providing access to what is 'inside a person's head', [it] makes it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs). Furthermore, Kerlinger (1970) suggests that may be used usefully in conjunction with other methods in a research undertaking, in that it might be used to follow up unexpected results, or to validate other methods, or to go

deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding as they do.

Despite offering to provide just the type of qualitative information that might be used to support the idea of a student psychological contract, the interview technique is not without its drawbacks, not least the fact that it is prone to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer. Cohen and Manion (1994) quote Cicourel's (1964) five unavoidable features of the interview situation that would be normally regarded as problems:

1. There are many factors which inevitably differ from one interview to another, such as mutual trust, social distance, and the interviewer's control
2. The respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the questioning is too deep.
3. Both interviewer and respondent are bound to hold back part of what is in their power to state.
4. Many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to the other, even when the intention is genuine communication.
5. It is impossible, just as it is in everyday life, to bring every aspect of the encounter within rational control

Cohen and Manion conclude that no matter how hard an interviewer may try to be systematic and objective, the constraints of everyday life will be part of whatever interpersonal transactions he initiates. These problems may be minimised by careful interview design, for example by having a range of interviewers with different biases and to have as explicit a theory as possible to take the various factors into account (Kitwood, 1977).

Choice of interview provides a first step in the design. There are four kinds that can be used specifically as research tools: the structured interview, the unstructured interview, the non-directive interview, and the focused interview (Cohen and Manion, 1994). In the structured interview the wording and sequence of questions

are organised in advance and detailed in the interview schedule. The interviewer has little opportunity for flexibility, other than to ask for elaboration or clarification of points. In the unstructured interview the research purposes govern the questions asked, the interviewer has the freedom to decide their content, sequence, and wording. However, the term 'unstructured' must not be taken to be synonymous with 'casual'; the interview still has to be carefully planned to elicit the required information.

At the other end of the spectrum is the non-directive interview, a research technique that was derived from the therapeutic or psychiatric interview. Here the subject is encouraged to talk freely about the subject under investigation. There are no set questions and the course of the interview is mainly directed by the interviewee, with the interviewer only interjecting to clarify points and probe generally. (Moser and Kalton 1977).

The focussed interview adds a little more interviewer control to the unstructured interview. Often used in market research, it focuses on a respondent's subjective responses to a known situation in which he or she has been involved, and which has been analysed by the interviewer beforehand. In this way the interviewer can use the information to either substantiate or reject former hypotheses.

The structured interview was chosen as the preferred technique for this part of the study for three main reasons:

- Specific information was sought on students' opinions and attitudes related to the various features of the psychological contract - a subject that students would not be able to discuss without direction.
- Since the interviewers were to be the respondent's academic tutors it was feared that the students would perceive a power imbalance in the interview situation, and thus be reluctant to talk freely. Adding clear structure to the interview would serve to minimise this effect.

- More than one interviewer was to take part (to minimise interviewer bias: see Kitwood, above), so structure would ensure that the same information was elicited from all respondents.

The interview schedule was constructed using open -ended questions, which Cohen and Manion believe have a number of advantages:

- They are flexible
- They allow the interviewer to probe so that he or she may go into more depth if so desired
- They allow the interviewer to clear up any misunderstandings
- They can test the limits of the respondent's knowledge
- They encourage co-operation and establish rapport
- They allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent truly believes
- They can result in unexpected or unanticipated answers that may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses.

This last point was particularly important to this study, since it had been anticipated that students may produce unexpected responses by virtue of their 'non-traditional' background. It was important to capture these if the exercise was to be of proper value.

The trade-off between validity and reliability was considered to be a possible problem with these interviews. The best way to achieve greater validity is to reduce the amount of bias as much as possible. The source of most bias is potentially the interviewer himself, but the characteristics of the respondent and the content of the questions also play a part. For example, the interviewer may seek answers that support whatever principle they are trying to prove, or because of their own ingrained knowledge and attitudes may tend to interpret responses in a way not intended by the respondent, or may fail to convey the question to the respondent in the way intended. A best way to minimise this bias is to formulate questions so that their meaning is crystal clear, and train interviewers so that they are absolutely sure of how to conduct the interview. However, this then generates a conflict between

validity and reliability. By exercising greater control of the interview one potentially reduces the conversational spontaneity that can make the respondent feel sufficiently at ease to disclose their true thoughts and feelings. As Kitwood (1977) explains:

> 'The more the interviewer becomes rational, calculating, and detached, the less likely the interview is to be perceived as a friendly transaction, and the more calculated the response is likely to be'

With these concerns in mind, a pilot interview schedule was prepared based on theoretical aspects of the development and violation of the psychological contract, translated into the student/university perspective. For clarity and brevity, the theoretical approach described by Shore and Tetrick (1994) was used as the sole basis for the interview schedule. Whilst undoubtedly not comprehensive, the aim of the interviews was to provide only a preliminary structure for a possible contract, and the Shore and Tetrick approach was felt to cover all of the main general areas required. (Appendix 7 provides details of the theoretical basis for each group of questions and the full interview schedule). Five final-year volunteers were interviewed from the group that had taken part in the expectations survey during their first year and responded at time points one and three. Interviewing this group of students as they were about to graduate would provide a case study of their expectation development and subsequent effects across the full period of their course. Results of the pilot interviews were peer-reviewed and the schedule amended accordingly to provide more detailed information and promote a more relaxed interview style. During the pilots students were referred back to their first year questionnaire responses and questioned about them, but it quickly became clear that they did not remember them, and so to avoid any possibility of leading the interviewees it was decided to omit this part of the interview for the main sample.

The final version of the interview was conducted in the final semester of the academic year 2001/2002. At this point, thirty students from the original sixty

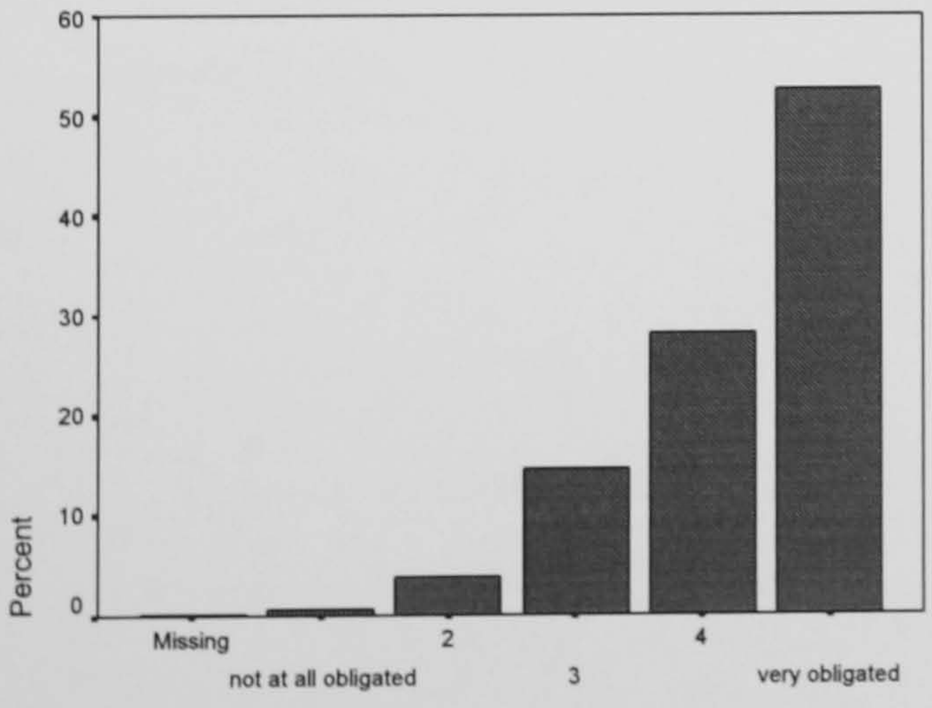
students who had responded to the expectations questionnaire at time points one and three remained in the final year, following their return from placement. Twenty of these students agreed to be interviewed. Two interviewers, another academic (male) colleague who had been briefed in detail about the interview schedule and myself, conducted ten interviews each. Both interviewers were well known to the students, and interviewees were allocated to interviewer based on known rapport with each of the students. Interviews took place in a private room at the Business School.

Interviewees were told that the purpose of the interview was to follow up their experiences that they had reported during their first year. It was explained that the information provided was entirely confidential and would be used for research purposes only. Permission was requested to tape the interview. All interviewees agreed to this. Interviews were then fully transcribed from the tapes. No prior coding was decided, since responses could not be anticipated.

7.3 Survey findings

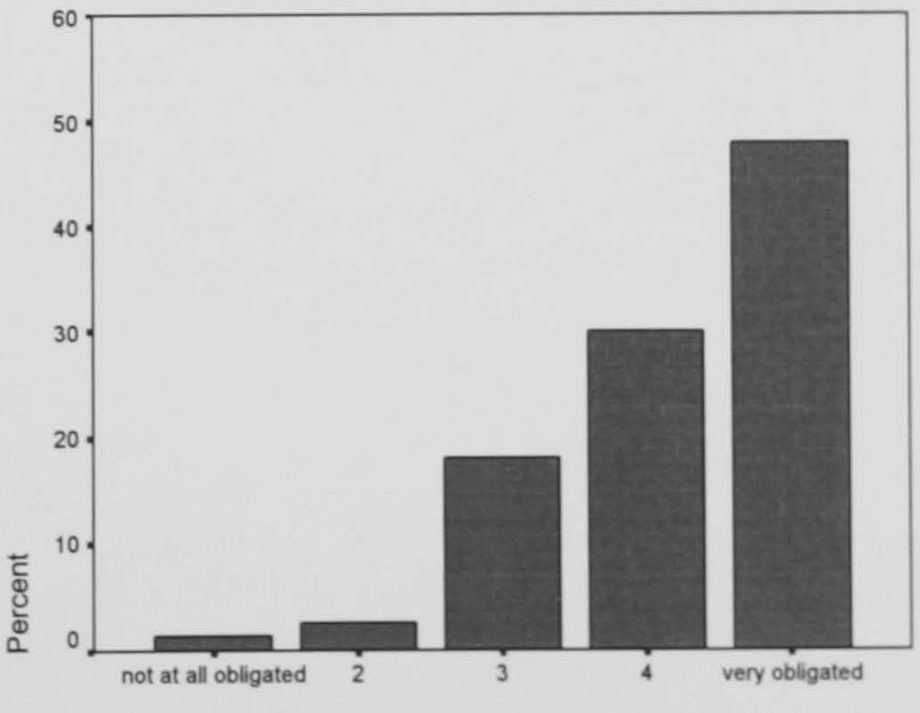
Results of the obligations survey were analysed using SPSS. Frequency charts (Figures 7.1a- 7.1j) show the degree to which students rated each of the ten items on the questionnaire as obligations:

Fig 7.1a: 'give academic advice'



advice obligation

Fig 7.1b: 'be approachable'



approachability obligation

Fig 7.1 c: 'be available when needed'

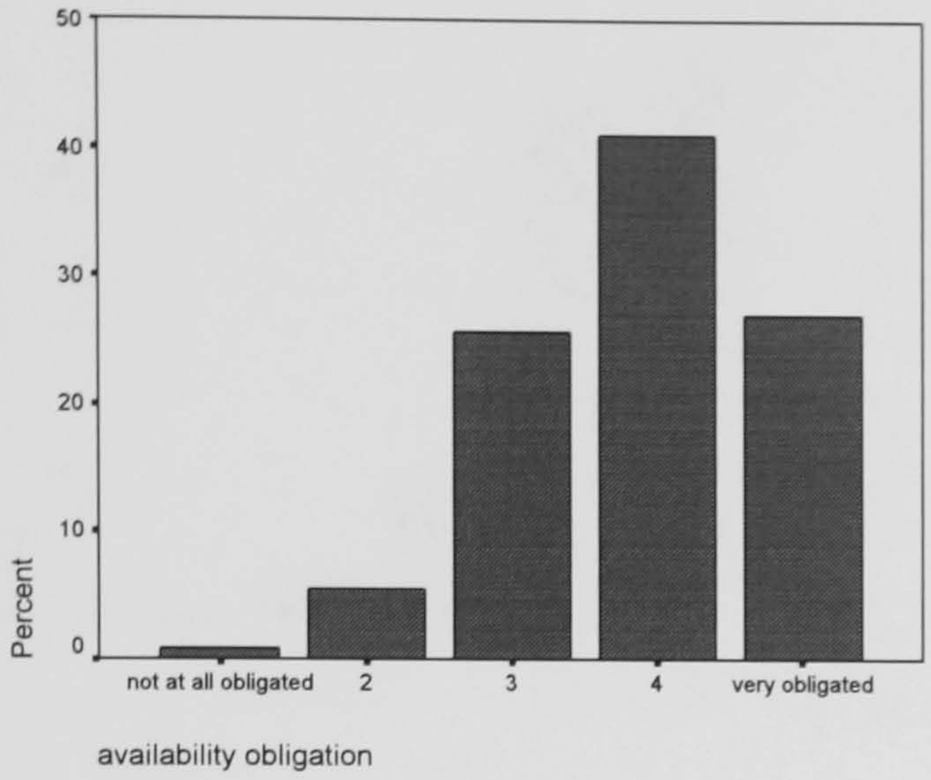


Fig 7.1d: 'help me develop as a person'

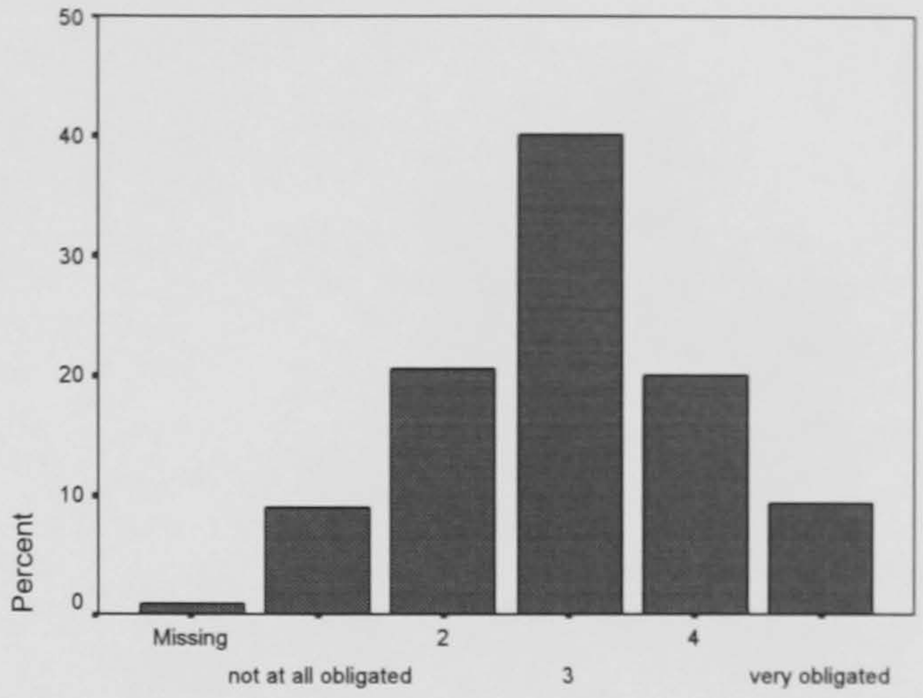


Fig 7.1e: 'be encouraging'

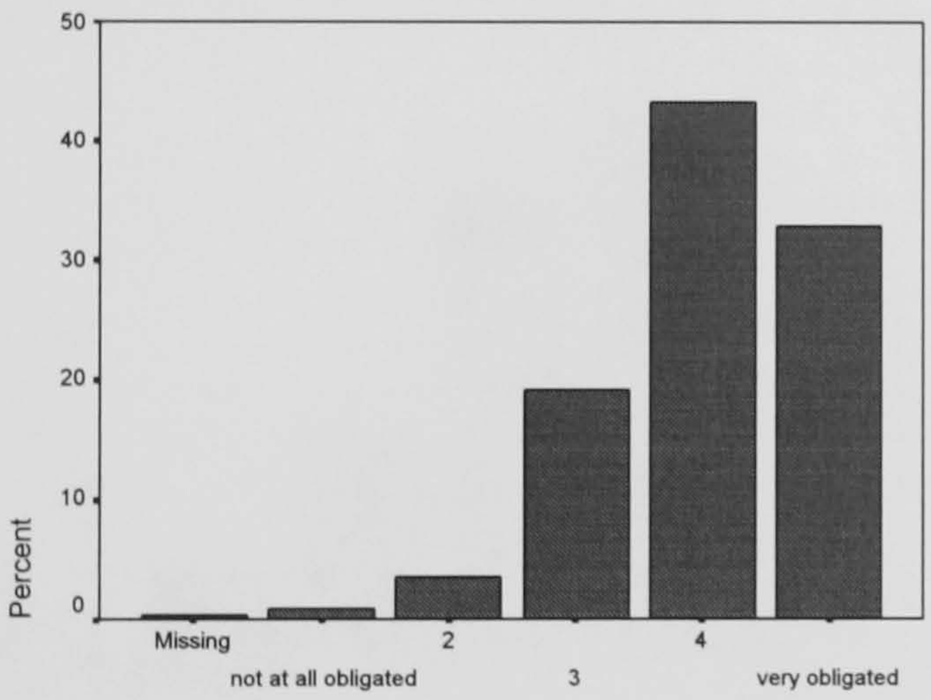


Fig 7.1f: 'help me enjoy my time here'

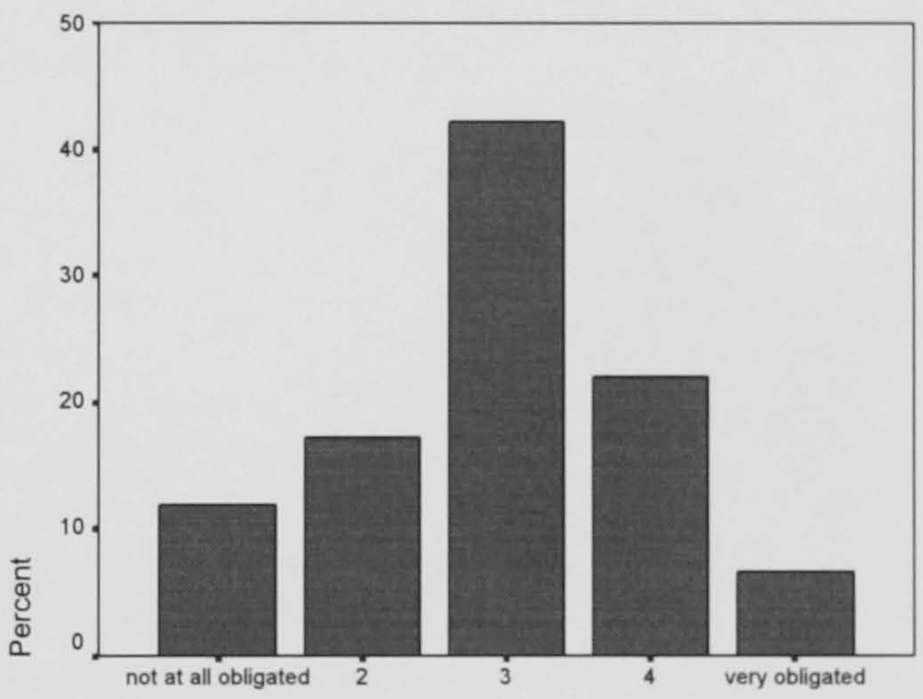


Fig 7.1g: 'take an interest in my progress'

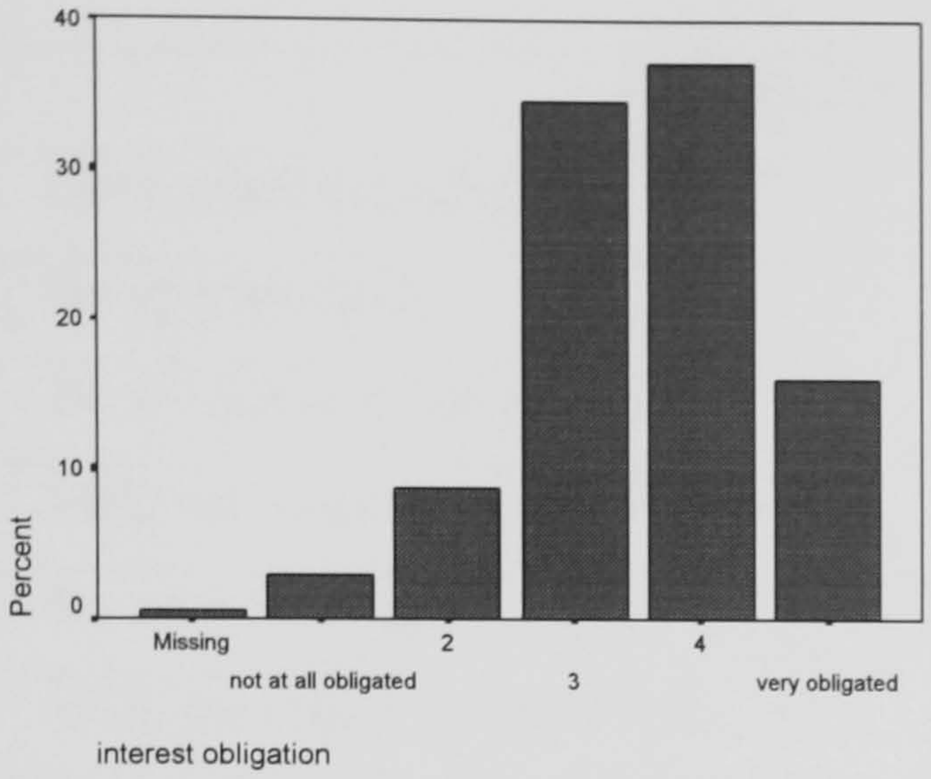


Fig 7.1 h: 'show me how to learn'

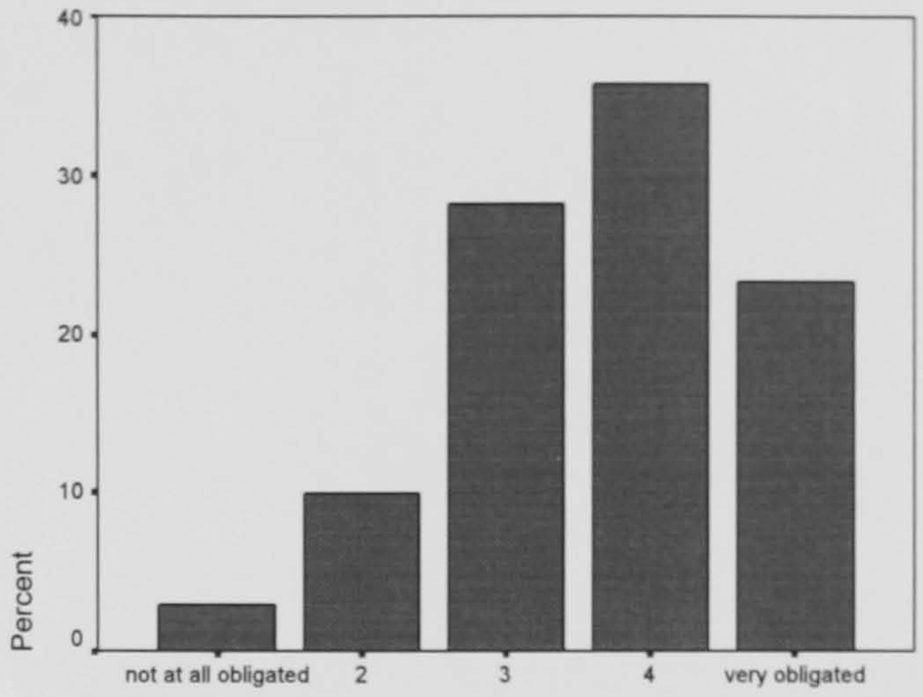


Fig 7.1i : 'motivate me'

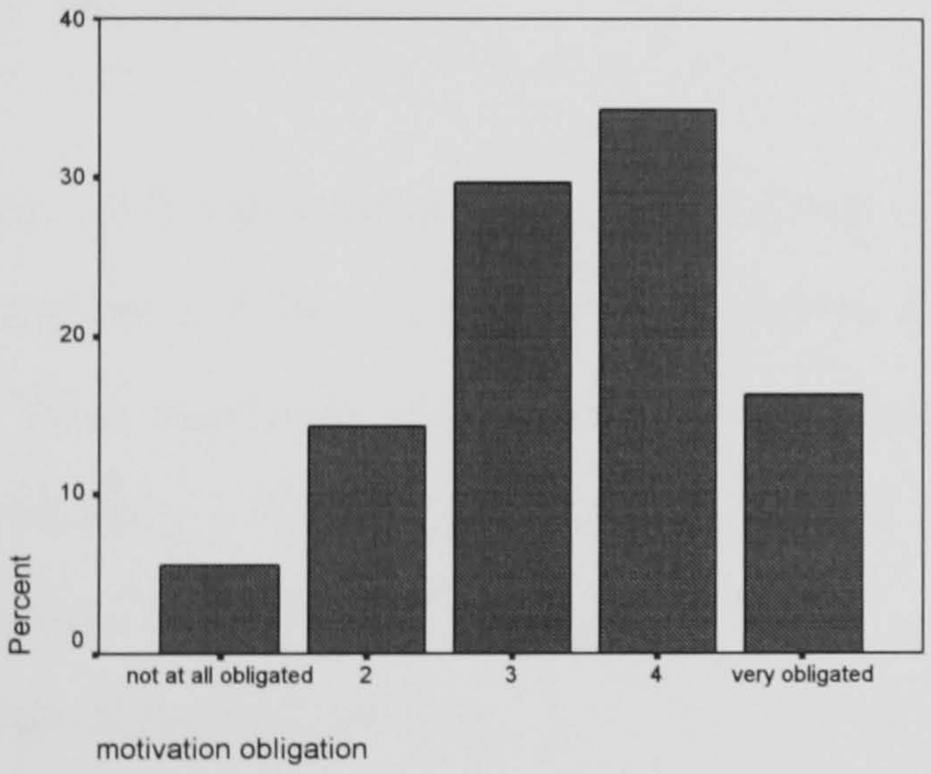
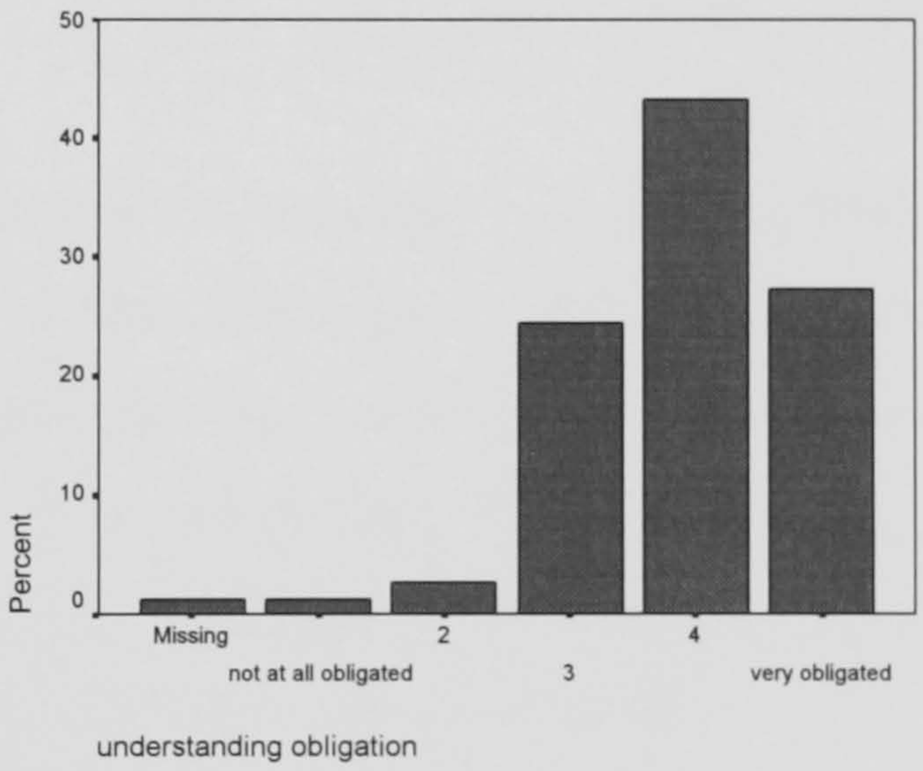


Figure 7.1j: 'be understanding'



The graphs show that only 'help me enjoy my time here' and 'help me develop as a person', have any reasonable numbers of student ratings the item as less than three on the obligation scale. The following table, showing percentages of students reporting each of the ratings for each of the items, demonstrates this point further:

Table 7.1: Percentage of students vs obligation rating

	Percentage of students in rating				
Obligation rating:	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Give academic advice	0.6	3.8	14.6	28.3	52.8
2. Be approachable	1.5	2.6	18.0	29.9	48.0
3. Be available when needed	0.9	5.5	25.6	41.0	27.0
4. Help me develop as a person	9.1	20.8	40.5	20.2	9.4
5. Be encouraging	0.9	3.5	19.2	43.4	32.9
6. Help me enjoy my time here	11.9	17.2	42.2	22.1	6.7
7. Take an interest in my progress	2.9	8.8	34.8	37.4	16.1
8. Show me how to learn	2.9	9.9	28.2	35.8	23.3
9. Motivate me	5.5	14.2	29.7	34.3	16.3
10. Be understanding	1.2	2.6	24.7	43.8	27.6

The table shows that 4:'Help me develop as a person' and 6:'Help me enjoy my time here' have 70% or more students rating them as three or less on the obligations scale. 1:'Give academic advice' and 2:'Be approachable' are rated highly by most students, with only 19% and 22% rating them as three or less respectively. In addition, around 50% of students rated these two items with the highest score of five, indicating high perceived obligation. Following closely behind were 5:'Be encouraging' with 76% of students rating this as four or five, and 10:'Be understanding', which 71% of students rated as four or five.

Whilst these data give an overall feel for the perception of obligations, it is the individual response to these obligations that is particularly important in terms of the psychological contract. Thus, the relationship between perception of obligation with how well the obligation has been met, provided by the contract violation measure, can give a better indication of possible effects on student performance. The following table shows percentages of students reporting scores of contract violation for each of the survey items:

Table 7.2: Percentages of students vs obligation discrepancy score

Violation discrepancy score:	Percentage of students reporting score								
	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
1. Give academic advice	0	0.3	0.9	5.6	32.9	30.9	20.6	7.6	1.2
2. Be approachable	0	0.3	1.2	8.5	28.4	28.1	24.3	8.5	0.9
3. Be available when needed	0	0	2.0	8.8	26.3	26.3	21.6	10.2	4.7
4. Help me develop as a person	0.6	0.3	3.2	12.6	45.2	24.9	7.3	3.8	2.1
5. Be encouraging	0.3	0.6	0.6	6.1	34.2	27.2	20.8	7.6	2.6
6. Help me enjoy my time here	0.6	0.9	3.8	14.3	49.1	19.6	7.3	2.3	2.0
7. Take an interest in my progress	0.3	0.3	1.2	8.2	36.1	22.0	20.2	7.9	3.8
8. Show me how to learn	0.3	0.3	4.7	14.1	32.3	27.0	13.2	5.9	2.3
9. Motivate me	0.9	0	3.2	12.6	37.4	22.5	17.8	3.5	2.0
10. Be understanding	0.3	0	1.8	6.8	35.6	32.4	15.6	5.3	2.4

The data show that 1:'Give academic advice', 2:'Be approachable', and 3:'Be available when needed' produce the most violations, with 40% or fewer students reporting either no discrepancy or a positive discrepancy between perceived obligation and obligation fulfilment. 'Be available when needed shows the greatest discrepancy scores, with 15% of students reporting a score of three or four. 5:'Be encouraging', 7:'Take an interest in my progress'. and 10:'Be understanding' show the next highest level of discrepancies, with 'Take an interest in my progress' showing particularly high numbers of high discrepancy scores. 4:'Help me develop as a person' and 6:'Help me enjoy my time here' show the lowest levels of discrepancy.

Differences between groups was determined using the t-test for differences between age and between gender. and one-way analysis of variance for differences between pre-university background groupings. Although these tests are intended for use with interval data. they are also routinely used with ordinal data due to their robustness.

They were considered appropriate for this investigation because of the large sample size and the five-point and nine-point scales used. (Note that no inter-group analysis of influence on obligations was possible, because although students had been requested to indicate only the *main* influence, many had ticked two or more influences, without indicating rank).

No significant differences due to age or gender were found in perception of obligations, fulfilment of obligations, or discrepancy scores, with one exception. Males reported greater fulfilment of the obligation 'give academic advice' ($p<0.05$), although this did not translate into a significant difference in discrepancy score.

Significant differences were found between years of study and history of students. There was a significant difference ($F(3,340)=3.064$; $p<0.05$) in total discrepancy score between year 1 students and final year students, with the final years suffering higher levels of discrepancy between perceived obligations and fulfilment. Students with a work background recorded stronger discrepancy scores than school ($p<0.01$) or college ($p<0.05$) background students for 'Help me enjoy my time here'; than college background students for 'Give academic advice' ($p<0.05$). No other significant differences were observed in discrepancy scores.
Work background students recorded stronger perceived obligations than college background students for 'give academic advice' ($p<0.05$).

The data were further investigated using a factorial ANOVA using the factors 'history' (three levels: 'work', 'school' and 'college'; 'other' omitted because of very small numbers), and 'year of study' (four levels: each of the four years of the degree course). When perceived obligations were analysed, there was a significant main effect for year of study for 'give academic advice' ($F(3,320)=2.972$; $p<0.05$), 'be approachable' ($F(3,321)=4.585$; $p<0.005$), 'be available' ($F(3,321)=3.739$; $p<0.05$) and for 'show me how to learn' ($F(3,321)=3.894$; $p<0.01$). Perceived obligations increased with time for students from all backgrounds.

Similarly there was a significant main effect for year of study for three of these items when discrepancy scores were analysed: 'give academic advice': ($F(3.317)=5.800$; $p<0.005$): 'be approachable': ($F(3,319)=4.848$, $p<0.005$): 'be available: ($F(3,319)=5.477$; $p<0.005$). There was also a significant main effect for year of study for 'be encouraging' ($F(3,319)=4.569$; $p<0.005$) and for 'motivate me' ($F(3,320)=2.993$); $p<0.05$). In all cases level of discrepancy rose with time except in the case of 'motivate me', which showed an irregular pattern. Levels rose at year two, dropped for year three, and rose again at year four.

Again with discrepancy scores, there was a significant main effect for history for 'give academic advice' ($F(2,317)=4.284$; $p<0.05$) and 'help me enjoy my time here' ($F(2,319)=3.821$; $p<0.05$). In both instances, students with a work and school background showed similar profiles, whilst college background students showed lower levels of discrepancy.

The change in obligations with time is interesting for several reasons. First, it adds to the findings from the expectation survey, which concluded that expectations formed before the end of the first semester did not then substantially change. Here it seems that as students move from *year to year* their expectations *do* change. An explanation for this could be provided by the importance that the students place on achievement as they go through their course. As they reach level three, their grades count towards their classification, (unlike grades at levels one and two) and so students naturally focus much more on achievement at this level. However, that would not easily explain the steady increase seen in some of the obligations over the course (there is no marked 'jump' at level three), nor would it fully explain the intriguing finding that there is a difference between year three and year four students. Both years three and four are final years - the latter the final year for students who complete a placement. One might assume that if importance of qualification was the main factor affecting their perception of obligations, then there should be little or no difference between these two years, and yet year four shows higher perceived obligations.

Another explanation could be provided by an element of the psychological contract model proposed by Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994), who discovered that the mutual employer-employee obligations that are perceived by new recruits change over the first few years in an organisation, and that over time new recruits perceive their employer's obligations to increase. They suggested that this occurred in the workplace because employees felt that by simply staying in employment with the organisation, the organisation essentially 'owed' them something for that loyalty. The reason is not likely to be quite the same here, but it could be that as students build up a relationship with the university and feel that they have more investment in it, they expect more. The students' goals will of course change over this time too, as they mature and develop clearer ideas of what they want to do with their lives. This may explain the difference between years three and four - anecdotally, students who complete a placement tend to be more mature in their outlook and are more certain about their future.

These findings are a cause of some concern for an organisation seeking to develop more independence in its learners as their course progresses. It seems that there is a mismatch between the two parties here, which reflects in the increasing levels of discrepancy shown in the survey.

7.4 Interview findings

Twenty-five final year students were interviewed in total, although the shorter pilot version of the interview schedule was used with five of these and so some responses are missing for this group. Where possible, responses for all twenty-five interviewees have been considered.

Eighteen of the interviewees had A-level entry to university, six had GNVQ, and one had both. Twenty-one were female. Two students belonged to ethnic minorities, and one was a special needs student. None were mature students.

The interview schedule first addressed the pre-university background of the students. since the literature suggests that individuals enter a new relationship with some predetermined expectations about the relationship that are partly determined by background. An individual's background can influence the way they 'filter' and make sense of information that they receive. (Lord and Foti, 1986). Fourteen of the interviewees had no family background in Higher Education. i.e. they were the first in their extended families to go on to HE. Five had siblings who attended university, four had other relatives (cousins, uncles and aunts) who had attended university, and only two had parents who had been educated to degree level. All but one of the GNVQ entrants had some family background of HE. whilst twelve of the A-level entrants had no family background. It was clear, then, that the majority of the sample had no direct family background of HE. and were therefore likely to form their impressions of what university would be like from other sources.

When asked about the main influences on their expectations of university life, those students who had no family background of HE expressed greatest uncertainty:

'I'm not sure. I can't even remember deciding to come here'

'I think it was just coming to see it'

'I didn't really have any. to be honest'

'Erm, I don't really know'

Of those that could identify influences, four identified teachers. and two friends. However, the reliability of these sources seem to be somewhat questionable in some cases. as the following quote shows:

'Well, there was one person in particular. and that was my Business Studies teacher. Right from the very beginning, right from the very start of GCSEs. he. like. primed us for university if you like. He said ' If you want to go to university you have to be good at presentation techniques. so we did loads of

> presentations. Because he went to Sunderland, and he gave us a good insight into what it would be like'

All students with some history of HE in their family could identify influences on their expectations, but only in the case of students with siblings was that family member invariably the main influence. Neither student who had a parent educated to degree level cited the parent as an influence, citing instead a cousin and their college. Students who had cousins, uncles or aunts with a university education most frequently cited friends as the main influence, with a cousin being cited by only one student. However, every interviewee who had a student brother or sister cited the sibling as the main influence.

These findings are particularly interesting when they are considered alongside the things that the students say when they were asked what impressions they had of university before they joined. The majority of those with no family background said that they were not sure or that they did not have any:

> 'I didn't really have any because I didn't have any intentions of coming. It was a last-minute decision when I was in my last year at college. All of my friends were filling in their UCAS forms and stuff, and I just felt a bit left out really. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but seeing as how everyone else was going, I just kind of, like, went with the flow'

Two of these students had impressions about the work - one saying that she thought it would be harder than A-levels, and the other saying that she had expected to have to do a lot of the work herself. Two students formed their impressions from television:

> 'I just thought loads of lectures. Lecture theatres. And I thought. 'Oh my god, am I really getting into the right thing?' Because there's no way I'd be able to learn things from lectures, because I can't listen for too long. I

thought it was just like television. You know, that's what you tend to see when they advertise university. You always see lecture theatres and things like that, you know'.

'I think the impression of the 'stressed finals' is what I had in my mind, because you see it on television and things, where you're cramming for finals. That's basically what I had in my mind, and old buildings as well. Under-resourced'

Those students who had family members other than siblings with experience of HE could express clearer impressions of university life. Only two said that they had not been sure. However, the impressions that they articulated centred mainly on the social side of university life. Impressions such as 'a good laugh', 'meeting lots of friends' 'hard work, but good fun', 'exciting, wild, freedom, a laugh' predominated. Two students expressed impressions about the work - one saying that they had thought it would be harder, the other easier.

All students who had siblings with experience of university were able to talk about their pre-university impressions, and they represented the most balanced view, with impressions of both the social and academic aspects of student life. Generally they expected it to be hard work, but good fun at the same time. One had the impression that it would be like learning a skill or a trade, another thought it would be like school. One student had two very different impressions from her two sisters who had attended different universities before her:

> 'Before I got here I knew it was going to be sort of hard, but I got two different perspectives because one sister went way and one stayed at home. Claire said 'stay at home' and Jill said' go away'. I knew she went out a lot, and she lived in halls, so she had the full halls life. But I decided to stay at home, and I seem to be doing a lot of work. Like, sitting in every night. I knew it was going to be hard, but……'

In addition to eliciting impressions of university life in general, the interview also asked students for their impressions of Sunderland University specifically. Here, location and the campus itself were the overwhelming themes. Several students had only vague impressions of what Sunderland University would be like, stating that they 'didn't know', 'weren't sure', 'good' or 'like school'. However, eight of the interviewees specifically mentioned impressions formed by the campus and facilities. These were invariably positive:

> 'Well, I'd heard that the Business School was really new and up-to-date, so I thought that was a good thing. I was impressed when I came to look at it. It was like one of them space station things, with high technology and everything'

> 'I didn't expect plush buildings, new facilities. I was surprised really'

> 'I didn't expect it to be modern like this....when I came on the open day I thought 'oh, definitely!'. '

> 'I thought it would be quite modern, purely from one of my visits. That was the reason I decided to come here. It stood out because it was modern. I just thought, it's new, somebody's spent all of this money on the university, so it must be a good university. From my perception of the buildings and that type of thing, I thought if they can spend all this money, the university must have enough money to spend on all types of things. That swayed me.'

The last comment is interesting in that the same student said that others had tried to dissuade him from coming to Sunderland because of its poor reputation. In response to being asked how his family and friends reacted when he told them he was coming to Sunderland he said:

'Not positive - not very positive at all! They all thought I was mad, to be honest, because Sunderland has a poor reputation as a city, and because the university used to be a polytechnic. A lot of them said ' oh, you're going to Sunderland. Anybody can get into Sunderland'. That's the attitude I was told by a few people'.

Despite this, and even though he had offers from other universities, this student said he chose Sunderland simply because he was impressed by the facilities.

The comments that were expressed about the location of the university were most likely a peculiarity of the Northeast. Despite only being a few miles apart, there is fierce rivalry bordering on the tribal between the two cities of Sunderland and Newcastle. This has its roots in support for the two premiership football teams, but has become so ingrained that it affects even those who are not football supporters, particularly the young. There are regular conflicts between the Newcastle 'Geordies' and the Sunderland 'Mackems'. The problem is so acute that away supporters have been banned from attending local derby football matches. This cultural peculiarity had affected five of the students interviewed:

'I'm a Newcastle supporter, so I get a lot of stick for coming to Sunderland'

'There were plenty of courses at Northumbria, but I didn't want to go there…I mean, I've been brought up a staunch Sunderland fan'

'There were a lot of people saying about the Mackem - Geordie battles'

'I sort of thought there'd be a cultural difference between Newcastle and Sunderland'. Newcastle, because I'm from there, I thought, you know, try something a bit different. I don't want to be on the doorstep'

'Well, being from Newcastle, I had quite a bit of bias against coming to Sunderland in the first place'

From these responses it seemed that new students had not formed any impressions of Sunderland *as a university,* indeed, it appeared that they had not given that aspect any thought at all. To determine whether this impression was true, they were then asked about their perceptions of other universities in the area. Nineteen of the interviewees were local, and would potentially have had the choice of any of the five universities in the area if they wanted to stay in the region - the three 'new' universities of Teesside, Northumbria and Sunderland, and the pre-1992 universities of Newcastle and Durham. This line of questioning showed that the students *had* formed impressions of the academic nature of Sunderland Business School, though it was interesting that these impressions were not expressed until pressed in this way.

Fourteen students said they thought Durham was a better university than Sunderland in some way, five thought there was no difference or did not know, and one thought Sunderland was the better university. The reasons why they had formed these opinions tended to be vague, and were based predominantly on the grades required for entry, and on impressions about the type of student that went to Durham. Typical comments were:

'I thought they were a bit higher class than Sunderland'

I thought at Sunderland it would not be such a harder degree than it would be at Durham, or such strict teaching'

'I never wanted to go to Durham, because apparently it's quite elitist. I don't know if it's true, but that's the impression I got- that all the really upper class people went there. I didn't think I would fit in there anyway'

'I think it's mainly maths and stuff over at Durham'

'When you go to places like Durham the students are very traditional students. They're academic students, but in the Business School it's not like that'

'I think there's a big difference between Durham students and Sunderland students. They just seem a lot more - dare I say it? - upper class.'

'I think I would need a lot more money to go to Durham. From what I've heard it's a posh area. I actually had a friend who went to Durham University, and she said the kids all got cars for their birthdays and stuff!'

'You know, everyone who's the brainiest and the richest go to the better universities'

'I've known people who've gone to Durham University, and I think a lot of people see Sunderland as - ugh! working class'

In an era when HE is meant to be accessible to all, it is interesting that young people feel that they could not apply to a particular university because of perceived class barriers or financial restraints.

Although the question asked about Newcastle University as well as Durham, this was initially ignored by most of the students, and they responded only about Durham. When pressed about Newcastle, six said they thought Newcastle would be better, and eight thought Sunderland was better. However, it became clear when listening to some of the responses that there was some confusion between Newcastle University and the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. Again when pressed, some students said that they did not know that there was a difference, or that they did not know that there were two universities in Newcastle. For example:

'I think they are quite closely linked. I'm not fully sure why there's two. Why are they different, because I always just consider them as Newcastle, even though there's Northumbria at Newcastle and Newcastle. I consider it as one really'

' I know someone who went to Newcastle saying 'oh, it's absolutely fantastic, it was great', but now it's been taken over by Northumbria University, so it's just names and reputations'

Only two of the students volunteered the information that both Durham and Newcastle were traditional or 'redbrick' universities. These comments indicated a level of naivety in the students' knowledge of the HE system, (even though, by this time, they had been part of the system for four years) and suggested that perhaps their selection of university had been to some extent unsophisticated and that their experience of HE had remained somewhat parochial. This view is supported by some of the responses to the question 'How do you feel you fare in the job market with a degree from Sunderland?' Four thought they would do 'ok' and seven felt that the placement had given them a distinct advantage in the job market. Six expressed concerns because of what they perceived as the poor reputation of the University of Sunderland and because of the large numbers of graduates seeking jobs. The perception was that local employers would be happy to take Sunderland graduates, but that employers elsewhere may not:

'I think in this area they haven't got the pick of the crop, so they are quite happy to take students from Sunderland, but I think nationally maybe a lot of the bigger companies maybe look to other universities that are higher up the lists'

'I think locally, not too bad, but if you went further afield it doesn't help you, with the reputation of other universities'

When this last student was asked where she felt the reputation stemmed from she offered this comment:

> 'I don't know where they get the information. I think it's because to get in here you don't need such good grades as you do at other universities, so then from that people might think that the whole university and the majority of people here are not as good as people who go to universities where you need high grades to get in. That's probably where it stems from'

So here there is evidence of some degree of discernment about the reputation of the university in relation to others, but still a lack of any active information seeking about the university.

These views contrast sharply with those of the other students questioned. Nine of the interviewees had the feeling that they would do very well in the job market because of the *high* reputation of the university. In 2001 the university was awarded 'best new university' by the Guardian, a fact that has been widely broadcast by the university's marketing department. This more than anything seems to have made an impression on these students. For example:

> 'Reading newspaper articles, it says that Sunderland is considered a really good, top business school'

> 'You're seeing it everywhere- University of Sunderland is perceived as one of the best universities. Obviously, it can't be as good as Oxford and Cambridge, but if it can come top ten, especially for business and computing degrees. Am I right? I've seen it somewhere.'

> 'I think as far as the Business School is concerned it gives the impression that it's new and up-and-coming, and that the university is going in the right

direction. You know. that they are getting things right and that it's a good new university'.

When this student was asked what she understood by 'new university' she replied:

'I don't understand. I only thought it was new in the sense that the business school was only six years old or something like that when I came here. It isn't very old - that's what I assumed it meant. I didn't think they meant Chester Road as well. I thought that was really old, but I don't know.'
(*NB Chester Road is the hub of the original polytechnic campus, comprising Victorian and 1960s buildings)*

These examples illustrate the power of university marketing rhetoric. Survey results have been used selectively for an audience that does not have a clear understanding of their meaning. It is worth remembering that these students were young children when the binary divide was removed, so it is not surprising that the term 'new university' has little meaning for many of them, particularly if they have no prior history of HE experience within their family.

The unsophisticated nature of the students' selection of university was further reinforced by their responses to the next line of questioning. Based on the theory that people have goal-orientated motivations for seeking information about the psychological contract, the students were asked for their reasons for coming to university, and how they decided that Sunderland Business School would meet their needs. Again, responses tended to be vague. Thirteen said that they simply had not felt ready to find a job when they left school or that they did not know what to do, so university was the next best option:

'I didn't have none. It was just purely I didn't want to be left out. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. Everybody else around me was going to university. I knew that if I did go I wanted it to be Sunderland

because it was nearer home, financial circumstances. But it was just because of the fact that I didn't want to have a 9 to 5 job. because at that age - seventeen or eighteen - I felt I was still too young to be able to go into a job and do Monday to Friday 9 to 5 for the rest of my life. It's not what I wanted'

It was the fact that I had the opportunity really. I didn't feel as if I wanted to go straight into employment. I've never been the most academic of students. I've always worked hard enough and that, but I didn't want to get into a proper, you know, chemistry or that sort of thing. I just wanted to get more of a vocational degree, something I could use'

'Well obviously I've always known I was going to come to university. I don't know why, but I think it was because…I don't know! I've never really had one set career path'

Eleven stated that they came to university so they could get a better job, though only two expressed any clear career plans - one intended to become a teacher, the other had applied to go into the police force after graduation.

When asked how they decided if Sunderland would meet their needs, ten stated that it was because it was local, or 'financial reasons'. Six said that the course was the deciding factor, and five were influenced by the opportunity to do a placement. Four said that the facilities or campus were the reason they chose Sunderland. So again, there is evidence of a lack of sophistication in university choice, with a minority of students making the choice for academic reasons. When asked where they had gone to for information about the university, most stated that the visit or open day provided the most information, with the Internet and prospectus also frequently mentioned.

Shore and Tetrick (1994) suggest that prior to entry to an organisation, an individual will develop their psychological contract based on the organisational agents that they come into contact with, usually a recruiter or an HRD representative. Translating this into a student scenario, the interviewees were asked about the staff that they came into contact with as they were applying for university. None could clearly remember specific individuals that they had come into contact with, but generally expressed impressions that the university seemed 'friendly', 'relaxed' or 'professional'. Two mentioned that the speed of response to their applications made them feel wanted and persuaded them that they were making the right choice, and one was impressed that she was spoken to 'like an adult' when she phoned the student helpline. It would seem that the campus and facilities made a significantly greater impression than university representatives on students making their choice.

The students were much more able to express impressions that had been influenced by other members of the organisation since starting their course. None felt that older students had influenced them, as they rarely came into contact with them. However, academic tutors and people in the administration departments were an influence. Feedback about the academic staff was generally favourable, but individual lecturers were a cause of concern:

> 'I think most of them have a lot of respect and are quite happy to help, but there are a few who see you as a nuisance'

> 'I think you can tell that some of them really enjoy what they do, really enjoy teaching the modules and stuff, but I think others come across like we're wasting their time'

> 'Honest, a true opinion, yeah? If you really want to know, well there have been some really, really nice teachers who would go that extra mile to help out students, and I have seen that. But there are others who couldn't care less'.

Despite these concerns about individual lecturers, on the whole students expressed positive opinions about the academic staff, and, perhaps surprisingly, expressed a great deal of empathy with them when discussing some of the day-to-day problems experienced in the university. The impression was that these students considered that the students and academics were on the same side against 'the university' (usually represented by some administration department). Some examples of this type of comment are :

> 'I know a lot of students who say that the communication here is absolutely horrendous, but I think a lot of staff may have the same view as well. Maybe not from the same side as the student, but from their own viewpoint. On one side, it makes you think that at least we're not the only ones who think like that, but on the other side you think, well, is there anything they can do about it. Surely they should be able to have their views heard.....If you're happy with the place you're naturally going to want to teach and help students. So I think it's just as important for staff to be happy as students' .

> 'I think there's a lot of red tape and stuff that does cause a problem both for the teachers and the students'

> 'In any organisation people do feel sometimes that they are put under too much pressure, or that people don't respect what they do or acknowledge what they do, but I do feel that staff here are positive about what they are doing. But I just feel that perhaps the strains that are put on them get them down sometimes'

> 'I've heard the odd grumbling...just venting off. It's equal frustration I think.... Well, at least it's not just us students who are hard done to. That's another good point, that feelings are mutual'

This then raises the question, if the expectations and obligations investigated so far (which relate only to the tutors) represent a psychological contract, does this *only* apply to the student/tutor relationship? Could it be that the tutors are not seen as representatives of 'the university', and is there a separate and different type of contract with the university as a whole? This theory would follow the 'agency' arguments put forward by Marks (2001) and Guest (1998). Some clarification can be obtained by considering the students' responses when they were asked about whom they get angry with when things go wrong, and about any complaints that they had made.

Some students mentioned more than one party with whom they may get angry, but ten said they would get angry with themselves. Five of these made it explicit, without any prompting, that they did *not* blame lecturers if things went wrong:

> 'There's a lot of bureaucracy, and a lot of things tutors can't do. I think they have as many problems as other people'.

> 'It's just 'pass the buck'. That seems to be the standard thing, not from the academic staff, but from the staff that are in the university in an organisational role'

> 'I think it must be my fault. It can't be the teachers, because not everyone else has done it wrong'

> 'If something goes wrong academic-wise, work-wise, whether it be grades or just not understanding the subject, it's not angry with the lecturers, because obviously they teach it to you, but you can't make me understand it. If you teach me something and I don't understand it, obviously that's a problem within myself'

> Nine times out of ten it's myself, because everything is in your own control. If, for example, I fail an assignment, it's not the lecturer that's failed it. They've given me and everyone else in the class the right tools, it's just that I haven't used them properly'

This finding does not fit with the Shore and Tetrick's (1994) theory that even a poor performing or disruptive employee may not view themselves as having a responsibility in organisational violations or contracts (p 102). In the three cases where students did say that they would blame a lecturer, the scenario offered was more to do with organisational problems, for example the lecturer not turning up for a class, or not allowing students to select their own work groups.

On the other hand, twelve students said they would blame 'the university', 'the system' or 'administration' when things went wrong. Here, the strongest feelings were aroused when students talked about the attitude that others displayed towards them:

> 'They seem to see students as some kind of hindrance on their work really. They really do see that we are here to make trouble for them, you know. They're not here to help us. You really have to be extra nicey-nicey, smiley-smiley to get anything. Even then, you're lucky if you get a smile at all.'

When this student was asked about the corresponding attitude of the academic staff towards students, she replied:

> 'The academic staff I think like us, and see us as colleagues as much as students sometimes. I think they see us as alright - not the hindrance that some of the other staff see us as, I'm afraid.'

Another student responded in a similar vein in relation to the administrative function:

'Obstructive, rude, arrogant. They're just basically they're not helping you. they can be very stand-offish, and that can aggravate the position. and that's when I get cross with a person'

However this same student qualified her statements with:

'I've realised that often, it's not the person that's the problem. it's what they've got to work with'

So even here, where feelings are quite strong, the student assumes problems with the system rather than with individuals

These expressions of blame which largely focus on interactional issues are not reflected in students' reporting of complaints they had made. Nine of the interviewees said that they had made at least one formal complaint during their time at the university, and all but one of these was related to specific modules they were taking. The complaints all focussed on students feeling that they had been obstructed or prevented from achieving a fair grade for the module. for example by being put into a group with foreign students who could speak little English. not having clear assessment criteria, or inappropriate timetabling of the module. The one complaint that was not of this type concerned a student not receiving the appropriate fees support. These are all issues of a distributive nature, suggesting the existence of a transactional contract giving rise to what Shore and Tetrick refer to as 'voice' when violations occur.

To further test the nature of any contract that may exist, the interviewees were presented with three different scenarios, representing examples of distributive. interactional and procedural injustices. The example used for the distributive injustice was:

'Another student gets a much better mark than you for a very similar piece of work'

The example of the interactional injustice was:

'A member of staff treats you disrespectfully'

And the example of the procedural injustice was:

' You submit valid mitigation for a late assignment, but it isn't accepted and you end up being referred in that module'

In the case of the distributive injustice, in 33% of cases the response would be to accept it without saying anything, in 52% of cases the student would ask for an explanation from the tutor, and in 14% of cases the student would make a complaint or follow up the query at a higher level than the tutor. However, these results are not wholly representative of the response, because in several instances where students said they would ask for an explanation, they indicated that they would be satisfied if they could be convinced that the mark that they had been awarded in these circumstances was fair; if not, they would then take the issue further.

In the case of the interactional injustice, 30% said they would accept it, 45% said they would confront the tutor personally, and 25% said they would make a complaint. However, students generally expressed surprise at the scenario being put to them, saying that they would not expect this to happen anyway. Only one student cited an example of this type of experience actually happening to her, where she described a tutor 'trying to become too close'. She explained that she had felt able to handle the situation herself, although she mused about whether she should have made an official complaint.

It was the example of the procedural injustice that prompted the most extreme responses, with 76% of students saying that they would immediately make an official complaint or query the situation at a senior level. Only 14% said that they would speak to the tutor concerned in the first instance, and 10% said they would accept the situation without doing anything. The main concern expressed in this

scenario was about academic results being compromised through a perceived failure in the system, rather than because of the student's own poor performance.

Although during this line of questioning students were only asked what they would *do* under the circumstances put to them, many of them also expressed how they would *feel.* There were seven expressions of anger or extreme anger for both the distributive injustice example and the procedural injustice example (though not necessarily from the same students). There were no expressions of anger associated with the interactional injustice example, although some students said that they would be 'disappointed' or 'surprised' if it happened. Those students who expressed extreme emotions were asked to reflect on the seriousness of each of the examples in relation to one another. The following comments are informative:

> 'I think the final one (*i.e the procedural injustice)* would be more gutting. I feel that that would be the one that would make me feel most hard done to, and have more of an issue with. Whereas, arguably, a piece of work, you know, be it six or seven percent, if you've spoken to them and they've given you a reasonable explanation, you know, sod's law, you get on with it, don't you? Whereas the final one (*i.e. the procedural injustice)* I would be just like a woman possessed!'

> 'If I got a lower mark, and it had been explained, fine, no problem, but I don't suppose that would make you want to walk out. It would make you more determined to sort of do better next time, to prove that I'm worth the higher mark. If he treated me disrespectfully, you know you shouldn't have to put up with that. If you're a student at university, and the university treats you like that then you shouldn't be there. But if I was failed and I had a genuine reason, I'd be foaming. That's the worst one'

These findings seem to support the existence of a transactional contract centering on grades. If the tutor can adequately justify the award of a poor grade it will be

accepted. but if a poor grade is seen to be awarded because the procedure is unfair. then the student will respond by challenging the system. Here, parallels can be seen with Shore and Tetrick's model of contract violation. The response expressed at some of the violations adheres to Rousseau theory that contract violations will lead to strong feelings such as anger.

Since grades are emerging as probably the most important focus of any student/university psychological contract that may exist, it is pertinent at this point to consider the grades that these students achieved and whether they met their expectations. The data gathered earlier during the longitudinal expectation survey provides an additional perspective on this issue, because for a number of the interviewees it provides information on the grades that they were *expecting* to get as they joined the university. Table 16 compares expected grades with achieved grades for years one and two, together with the students' comments on whether they felt that they had done better, worse, or about the same as expected.

Table 7.3: Comparison of expected grades with achieved grades, and students' perception of achievement

Student	Expected grade	Average grade for year one	Average grade for year two	How students feel they have done compared with expectations
NB	65-75%	50%	51%	As expected
SB	70-80%	60%	63%	Better
JB	70-80%	51%	55%	As expected
GC	Not available	40%	47%	Worse
KD	Not available	48%	44%	Better
RF	Not available	50%	56%	Better
PF	65-75%	58%	48%	Worse
SF	65-80%	53%	63%	Worse yr 1, better yr 2
AG	70-80%	66%	59%	As expected
AH	65-75%	47%	43%	As expected
AHo	65-80%	59%	69%	Better
EH	55-65%	47%	59%	Better

LM	Not available	52%	49%	Worse
AN	60-80%	55%	59%	Better
KR	>65%	40%	49%	Worse
IT	50%	60%	50%	Better
DV	60-90%	40%	49%	Better
HW	60-80%	60%	63%	As expected
LK	65-70%	47%	52%	Better
HM	60-70%	57%	63%	Better
DG	80%	47%	52%	As expected
SK	Not available	50%	50%	Don't know
VS	70-80%	53%	59%	As expected
MV	70-80%	43%	49%	Worse yr 1, better yr 2

These results are striking in the respect that the majority of students had considerably lower marks than they had expected, and yet had the perception that they had performed either as they expected or had done better. Only students PF,KR, HW and IT had a more realistic perception of their performance. PF and KR had clearly reflected on their worse-than expected performance, and were able to articulate their thoughts about this. PF had exceptional circumstances, since her problems began to arise when her brother died during her first year at university. Although she felt that she had been trying to do well since then, she felt that her course had little relevance.

The views of KR can perhaps provide more insight into the experiences of the general body of students since there were no exceptional circumstances that might have altered her perceptions. This was evidently a bright student, who had ten GCSEs at grades A and B (which, rather surprisingly, she classed as 'average'), and four A levels. She had found the change from school to university quite difficult, and also felt that she had changed as a person during her four years at Sunderland, which meant that her motivations and ambitions had changed, making her less interested in her course:

'I went to quite a small school. There was only ever about ninety in my year, and then when I got to sixth form perhaps about twenty people, twelve who were doing A levels, the rest GNVQs. I'd always performed quite well at school, and with being in a small group I was always in the top sets and things like that. But since I've come to university there are just massive amounts of people. After the second year of my A levels I'd started losing interest a bit, and when I got to university it renewed my interest more, and then I started losing interest again'

And from the same student:

> 'My attitudes have changed a lot since I started, especially after doing a placement. First year was great, because it was all new, and you were meeting loads of new people, and it was so exciting to be at university. And then you get into second year, and it was kind of …hum!…you lose interest a little bit'

> 'From the age of eighteen to the age of twenty-two you kind of grow up and your opinions change, and your career, what you're going to do after you finish university, changes drastically'

This student summed up her lack of performance by saying it was simply down to lack of motivation and interest. However, she also said that she had not expected the work at university to be as hard as it was.

MV is an interesting case. She had high expectations on entry, and performed quite poorly in year one. In keeping with this she felt that she had done worse than expected. However, despite her performance remaining at almost the same level in year two, her perception was that she had done better than expected. Soon after starting at university she realised that the course that she had chosen was not suitable, but she was persuaded to persevere with it. She changed course in the

second year to one that she was happier with, and her perception was that she had done much better because of this. She explains it thus:

> 'In my first year I didn't do as well as expected, but I knew the reasons why. Second year, I changed and was happier and more comfortable. I did a lot better, and was quite happy with what I did'

This student's experience suggests that her perception of performance is not just associated with the grades achieved, but also with the level of enjoyment or comfort within the situation. (There are parallels here with Tinto's notions of academic and social integration). This may go some way towards explaining the majority of the students' perceptions that they had done better than expected, even though grades did not support this. Students AH, DV, and LK provide examples where initially high grades were expected but very low (bare pass) grades were achieved, and despite this the students felt that they had done better, or at least as well as, expected. All three of these students express positive comments overall about their university experience. They found their courses less hard then expected and felt that the tutors were more like friends or colleagues than they had expected. It seems then, that their expectations and their perceptions of reality have been changed by their experiences. It is worrying, though, that their expectations for themselves in terms of academic performance appear to have been lowered.

It is interesting, though perhaps incidental, to note that the four students that seem to have the most realistic perception of their performance (in academic terms at least) all lived at home, whilst those discussed above had all moved away from university and lived in halls or student houses.

The interview closed with an explicit question about the students' perceived relationship with the university. This one question above all others provided the most interesting and informative insight into the student's perceptions of their relationship and possible 'contract' with the university. In particular, it cast further

light on the notions that emerged earlier in the interviews that the perceived contract (or at least relationship), with academic tutors was different to that with the university as an organisation, and that resident students and students living at home have different 'contracts'.

On first sight, the responses indicate a predominantly customer/provider relationship. Twelve students said they believed themselves to be customers, two said they felt like an employee, three said they felt like both, three students felt like pupils, and one said that she considered herself 'part of the university'. However, it was when the students elaborated on these opinions that the interesting findings emerged. The customer orientation was almost exclusively related to the payment of fees:

> 'I see my self more as a customer because I'm paying an awful lot of money'

> 'I would say I'm a customer, in the way that, if you think about a customer in business, like we pay to come here, we have to pay for printing, we have to pay tuition fees, and things like that'

And, conversely, from a student who has her fees paid by the education authority because of the financial circumstances of her parents:

> 'I would say I probably have a different opinion to some people, because I know that some people do pay their money for their education, but as I don't I would say that I'm not a customer because I'm not paying for anything. I know some of my friends who have paid for their education, and they do get annoyed when things aren't handed out on time. They come up with the comment 'well, I've paid to come here'. Well, I don't feel that I have the choice to be that picky, because I haven't.'

When the interviewees elaborated on these views, it emerged that this customer relationship was with 'the university' as a system or business, and that their perception of their relationship with academic tutors was quite different. For example, one student who was incensed by the treatment she received from non-academic staff, because she 'was paying their wages', felt quite differently about the academics:

> 'I think you do get the academic staff that nurture you, want you to do well - the little rosebud effect, 'yes, come on, you can do it!', and it is great to have that. That encouraged me. You're the customer when it comes to say the fees, or something that they need off you. Whereas, I would say more, definitely the academics, the majority of academics that I've had over the last three or four years, you feel like an employee that's hopefully going to move on to better things. I think that's good, it's nice'

One student expresses the different relationships even more explicitly:

> 'In general the people you have contact with want you to do good for *you*, and to know that they've taught you well. But from the business point of view you are definitely a customer, which is what you are'.

Student residency also seems to impact upon their perception of the relationship with the university. One student expresses the difference quite concisely:

> 'I think I would answer the question differently if I was living in halls, because then I would probably feel like I was part of the university, whereas, as it is, I just feel like I'm going to school again, getting on a bus and going in, and go back home, so I feel more like a customer'

This view was supported by a number of other comments that indicated that students who lived at home felt that they missed out, not only on the social aspect of university life, but some forms of academic support too. For example:

> 'I travel in from home and go back. so I don't get to many parties in that respect. I think I've missed out'

> 'If you're in halls you've got that interaction on a day-to-day basis. and the contact with the university all the time. I think if you don't live in the university you can't really engage in all the student life there is to see - the drinking, the fooling around, but also the academic things.'

> 'I think I'd have a completely different view of things if I'd moved over here. I don't think I've properly experienced any of the social or anything like that that everyone who lives here has.'

So, it is evident that any model of the psychological contract between the university and the students will need to take account of these factors so clearly expressed by the students themselves.

7.5 Summary

The aim of this part of the thesis was to:

a. Establish evidence for the existence of a psychological contract
b. Identify what the various influences on such a contract might be

Evidence for the contract was sought. based on Rousseau's hypothesis that the contract comprises perceived obligations rather than simple expectations. that these arise from implicit understandings of the relationship with the organisation. rather than any explicit information. and that contract violations produce stronger feelings than those resulting from unmet expectations. for example anger and moral outrage.

Using as examples ten expectations of tutors that were widely reported a being unmet in the previous survey, it has been shown that students do indeed perceive obligations on the part of the university. Although the perception of obligation was widely held for several of these items (for example 'be approachable', 'be encouraging'), these were not things that were explicitly promised in any formal contract or university literature. Taking this as positive evidence for the existence of a psychological contract, the nature of the contract and influences on its development were investigated through interviews.

Most of the students interviewed had no family background of higher education, and had gone through a relatively superficial selection exercise when choosing to come to university. They had used the university prospectus as an information source, but there had been no use of university league tables or other published information about the relative merits of different universities. Friends had been influential in their choice, but the most mentioned influence was the visit to the university, and the impression that the campus had made on them. These results mirror those reported in chapter five, under 5.1 'Source of expectations'. Not surprisingly then, students had ill-defined expectations of the university before they arrived. Only those with siblings who had previously been to university were able to express a reasonably balanced view of university life. With such a pronounced lack of explicit information about university, it is clear that individuals were prone to development of a contract that did not reflect reality. Shore and Tetrick (1994) note that where incomplete information exists, individuals will base their contract on existing schemas. All students interviewed were directly from school or college, and it is therefore likely that their expectations or perceived obligations were shaped by their experiences at these former educational establishments.

It was not explicitly clear from the interview *why* the students had expended so little effort in finding out about university or in making an informed selection. However, when one examines the reasons given for coming to university it is possible to

hypothesise why this might have been so. The majority of the students were local, and had not considered moving away to university. Thus, there was limited need for them to seek information, as one choice (location) was made automatically. Nevertheless, there are five universities in the area that could have been chosen. Of those, only the University of Northumbria at Newcastle had been considered as an alternative choice by any of the students.

Emerging from this discussion was a notion of a possible *implied contract* about the local universities. Northumbria was mentioned as an alternative to Sunderland because it was generally considered to be the same type of university. This impression arose largely from a perception of the grades required for admission, and the vocational nature of courses on offer. Durham, on the other hand, evoked perceptions of being 'upper class' and 'expensive', though these perceptions again seemed to be linked to grades required for entry. Some students made links between being 'intelligent' and 'rich'. When pressed, most students expressed similar perceptions of the University of Newcastle, although some did not realise that there were two universities in Newcastle. Teesside University, which is somewhat further away than Newcastle, was not mentioned by any of the students. When perceived differences between the universities were investigated, there was a general perception that the work would be harder and the regime stricter at Durham and Newcastle than it would be at Sunderland and Northumbria.

So, it would seem that for many of these students, university choice was automatically limited to two - Northumbria and Sunderland - because of their desire to stay local and their perception of the nature of the universities (and possibly their own self-perception). One remaining influence may have come into play at this point, i.e. the students' career goals. One might expect that if an individual had clear goals for their educational experience they might seek information about each university to decide which might best suit those needs. However, only two of the students had a clear career in mind and only one of these was connected to the course that she had chosen (the other had plans to join the police, and type of degree

was not crucial to that goal). Most students came to university to delay going into employment or because they felt it would help them get a better job in the future. Choice of degree was not a major factor.

Thus, the reason why the university visit was so influential seems to be that it offered a simple way of choosing between the two options of Northumbria and Sunderland, or perhaps simply to reinforce a choice that had already been made. The new campus at Sunderland Business School offered an advantage over Northumbria because of its high technology image and modern surroundings.

Inferences about the nature of the contract can be drawn primarily from the students' discussion of complaints made and of perceived contract violations. Whilst most students express concern about relational issues - for example. the attitude that administration staff display towards them, these are not normally seen as being serious enough to make a formal complaint. Reported complaints arise predominantly from issues relating to the award of grades - what might be termed transactional issues in student/university terms. Student responses to hypothetical injustices of a distributive, interactional and procedural nature largely follow Shore and Tetricks (1994) model of response to contract violation and are indicative of a predominantly transactional contract. For example, where a student receives a lower grade than expected they will first tend to question the result. If the explanation given satisfies the student that the award was fair, then normally no further action will be taken. However, if it is perceived to be unfair then a complaint may be taken further. This corresponds to Shore and Tetrick's notion of 'voice' as a reaction to violation. Procedural injustice produces the most extreme response in the majority of students when associated with distributive injustice (in this example, award of a low grade or failure in a module because of unfair procedures). Anger was a common reaction to the scenario put to the students. Interactional injustices were a source of much complaint during the interviews, but were not likely to provoke a formal complaint to the university unless very severe, for example in the case of

racial discrimination or possible sexual harassment, which were suggested by several students.

This evidence points to the existence of a psychological contract that lies at the transactional end of the contract continuum as described by Rousseau and based on work by MacNeil (1985). Indeed, a transactional contract would seem to be most likely for students at university, since they are more likely to arise from short-term relationships. Parallels can be drawn with Rousseau's (1990) description of the contract that exists for ambitious individuals who see their employer as a 'stepping stone' to better employment. These individuals are more likely to adopt a transactional contract. Students' relationship with their university is of a similar nature, since the relationship is relatively short-term and similarly exists to enable the students to find better employment.

If a predominantly transactional contract focussed on grades is accepted, then one particularly interesting finding is that, although students generally achieve lower grades than expected, many perceive that they have done as well as expected or better. The effect is particularly noticeable for students who are resident in the university. This might be explained by revision of the contract along the lines of Shore and Tetrick's violation model when expectations are initially not met; students' expectations for themselves may be adjusted down. Such revision of the contract has shown to occur as individuals strive to maintain relationships. It similarly corresponds to Tinto's ideas about the comparisons that students make with their pre-entry expectations. Although Tinto concentrated on the students who did not readjust their expectations, and thereby suffered major disappointments, often leading to them leaving the university, he noted that some students would modify their expectations to suit the situation. (See page 69 of this thesis).

Since the findings show that residency seems to play a part in this effect, the contract may move further towards the relational end of the continuum for these students. This theory is supported by the case of student MV, who despite achieving

similar grades in years one and two, (considerably lower than her expectations for herself on entry to the university), felt she had done better than expected in year two, when she felt generally happier because of a change of course.

The student interviews also gave an indication of who they perceived to be the other party to the contract. Although the obligations survey had focussed on tutors, and there had been widely reported levels of discrepancy, the interviews showed that students rarely levelled any blame at tutors, seeing them largely as fellow 'victims' of the deficiencies in the university system. It was the nebulous 'university' that bore the brunt of most of the complaint, though 'the university' tended to be embodied by administrative staff. One student expressed it quite nicely:

> 'In terms of who you blame, it's 'the university', but no-one knows what you mean by that'

The relationship with the university is influenced by a consumerist attitude amongst the students. Because they have to pay fees, most consider themselves to be customers of the university. However, again this does not transfer to tutors, who they perceive to be equals, colleagues or in some cases, friends. This may have implications for the nature of some of the obligations investigated in the survey. I had originally considered items such as 'give help with academic problems' and 'be available' to be mainly relational, viewed from the perspective of the student/tutor relationship. However, if they are considered to be part of the student/university relationship, they may be better considered as transactional, in that the student pays for academic advice and so expects it to be provided. The distinction will be important when trying to predict responses to any violations of such perceived obligations.

So, the results of the obligation survey and interviews demonstrate many parallels between the student/university relationship and the literature on the psychological contract, and supports the notion that a student psychological contract exists. Using

the components of the psychological contract as a structure for this research has produced a valuable insight into the experience of students at Sunderland Business School. The implications are discussed in chapter eight.

Chapter eight: Discussion and conclusions

8.1 Discussion

During the final few weeks when this thesis was being completed, there appeared two timely newspaper articles that seemed to encapsulate the two main themes to emerge from this research. The first appeared as the 2002 A-levels results came out, and proclaimed 'A-levels are only slightly better than tossing a coin as a way of predicting who will do well at university' (The Daily Telegraph, 14th August). The article reported on comments made by Prof. Dylan Williams of Kings College, London, relating to the fact that less than ten percent of the differences in students' degree classifications were accounted for by differences in their A-level grades. I would argue that this thesis has produced evidence of some of the other variables that play a part in this.

From an initial idea that students were stressed, the first study using the Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire (MHQ) showed differences between A-level entrants and non-traditional entrants. A-level entrants became more pressurised during their second year at university. The subsequent interviews produced evidence of demoralisation, demotivation, and anger, with unmet expectations and poor person-environment fit emerging as common themes. When these themes were followed up in the second study (of expectations), again a difference between A-level and non-traditional entrants emerged, with a pattern that mirrored the MHQ findings. A-level entrants' performance fell to the same level as that of non-traditional entrants by the end of the second year, having been significantly higher at the end of the first year. Coupled with this was evidence that expectations related to the enjoyment of learning were significantly less well met for this group. So, this points to something happening selectively to the A-level entrants during their first two years that results in a fall in performance.

There are a number of possibilities to explain this effect. A simple explanation could be that students are enjoying their social life in the first two years and

therefore work suffers. Indeed, the expectation questionnaire did show that A-level entrants enjoyed their social life more than expected. However, many of the Business School students live at home, and so are not intensively involved in the traditional university social life. Furthermore, one would expect to see a social life effect for all students, regardless of entry qualification.

The findings showed that non-traditional entrants' performance actually improved slightly over time, so whilst an exciting social life might well be preventing them from improving *more*, it does not seem to be having a detrimental effect. However, it should not be ignored that non-traditional entrants start with a much lower performance level, and any fall in that level would result in failure and possible drop-out. Perhaps, then, these students are aware that they have to maintain that minimum standard to remain on their course. Students know that the grades from their first two years do not count towards their classification, so this could be a comparatively low risk strategy. This would then account for why the A-level entrants' performance drops to the level of the other group. Theory shows that individuals will compare themselves with others, (Festinger, 1954), so if the higher-achievers see others enjoying themselves with little or no adverse effect, they could well minimise their effort in order to do the same. However, this explanation does not account for all of the findings from this part of the research. Why, particularly, do A-level students show increased levels of pressure in year two and lower levels of enjoyment of learning than the others?

I would argue that the evidence points to poor academic integration of the A-level entrants because of the nature of the teaching and learning environment within the Business School. Much of the teaching and assessment has been developed to suit the non-traditional entrants and has evolved over the last few years to be skills based and continually assessed. It also becomes increasingly student-centred as a course progresses. This is likely to be a great change for A-level students used to intensive teaching schedules and assessment via exams, but much less so for students who have studied for more vocationally-orientated qualifications, and

could explain the finding that enjoyment levels for the A-level entrants were lower. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that A-level entrants are largely ill prepared for this environment, experience poor person-environment fit, and may struggle to adapt. Some may find the skills elements difficult, others may find them trivial if they are very academically-orientated and do not appreciate the vocational benefits of skills development. With low contact hours in comparison with their A-level studies, they may fail to realise that non-class time is not really 'free time', and therefore not spend as much time as they are expected to do in academic work.

There is evidence to support this theory both in the literature and in the findings reported earlier in this thesis. In the first study, A-level entrants were found to be less stressed than the non-traditional entrants during the first year. If this is related to theories of arousal (e.g. Yerkes-Dodson Law, 1908), it seems that the A-level entrants may not be sufficiently aroused to perform to their best ability. The follow-up interviews supported this idea, when students reported that it took them most of the first semester to realise that they did not have as much 'free' time as their timetables seemed to indicate. Chapter two also reported comments made by the students about the work not being hard enough to motivate them. This was reinforced by the findings from the expectation survey reported in chapter five, when A-level entrants showed significantly lower scores for the degree to which the 'motivate me' expectation had been met by the end of the first semester. So, in contradiction to the conclusions made in chapter two about the non-traditional entrants being more at risk, these finding suggest that the A-level entrants are more at risk, possibly because they are experiencing insufficient pressure, with the result that grades fall, and then expectations of achievement are readjusted. These finding have similarities with the findings of Becker *et al* (1990), who reported that achievement of a certain grade had slipped from the top five expectations of students they studied over a semester.

A further factor may be the attitudes of the students themselves to those with different types of qualification. One student who was interviewed commented that she felt that others looked down on her because she had 'just' done GNVQ. If this attitude is widespread. do A-level students consider themselves to be superior. and then feel demoralised if they see 'lesser' students doing better at some of the modules because of their more advanced skill levels?

The students that fail to adapt quickly to the new environment face a downward spiral of reducing performance and lower morale and motivation. It is a sobering thought that students who come to the university full of excitement and enthusiasm for their new life may have that knocked out of them by the system itself within the first two years. If this happens, there is little chance of them being able to raise their level sufficiently for their final year to achieve their full potential unless something else intervenes. An example of just such an intervention is the placement year. Students who complete a placement invariably do better as a group in their final year than those who do not. Module and course statistics throughout the Business School provide evidence of this.

Further evidence must be sought to tease out some of these issues and determine causality.

The second newspaper article appeared in the education section of The Sunday Times on August 25th. 'Duped by the dons' told the story of a mature student. an experienced nurse, who had joined a law course at Greenwich University with the aim of becoming a nurse advocate after graduation. After failing all three of his first year exams, he was required to withdraw from the university. The student placed the blame for this firmly on the shoulders of the university. In an angry attack. he claims that:

- He has been 'duped', because he was not warned of high failure rates on the course.
- His previous nursing qualification was based on learning how to do things on the ward, not on passing exams, but the law course was heavily weighted towards passing exams.
- He did not get any extra help with exam technique
- He got no individual tuition
- There were 20 students in each seminar group
- Some tutors were rude and unprofessional (particularly to him).

This is a clear example of a student not getting what he expected or what he felt he *should* get, and, unfortunately for the university, going very public about it. Yet, how many of his complaints were justified, and how reasonable were his expectations? If someone was making a life-changing decision to give up a 25-year career to take a university course, one might expect him to do it in a calculated way and gather as much information as possible before making that decision. One would expect that it would be relatively easy for any prospective student to find out about assessment techniques, levels of support, class sizes and so on. Failure rates may be a little less accessible, but not entirely so. It seems that either this student made no such effort to find out these things, or he was genuinely 'duped', which would imply that the course was 'sold' to him as something other than what it actually was. The article itself sheds some light on one possible source of the problem. Prior to starting his course, the student had consulted a former Oxford don about his chances of success, and was told that as long as he got the support he needed, he would get through the course, that at Oxford hardly anyone fails, and that students there get individual tuition.

I believe that this case study represents a clear example of a student/university psychological contract gone wrong and further illustrates the findings of this thesis. This student had entered the relationship with the university with incomplete

information, and had sought other information from inappropriate sources. Possibly he had not appreciated the importance of finding out about assessment methods and tutorial support, assuming that this experience of higher education would be similar to his previous experience. He demonstrated naivety in his choice of advisor, seemingly not appreciating the differences between an institution like Oxford and the institution he was joining. Experienced in competency-based assessments, he was not able to adapt suitably quickly to a different style.

His responses to perceived violation of his contract with the university were typical of those described in the literature: He demonstrated anger, feelings of betrayal, and moral outrage (Rousseau, 1989), he blamed the university, rather than viewing himself as having any responsibility for his poor performance (Shore and Tetrick, 1994), and he described examples of distributive, interactional and procedural injustices (ibid), for example, respectively, failing to pass exams, lack of professionalism on the part of tutors, and claiming that all exams 'were internally marked' (which seemed to imply that he felt that they should not have been). His reaction was to withdraw from the relationship altogether, intending to return to nursing, and doing so in a destructive manner by going public in the press with his complaints.

This case represents an extreme example of how important the student/university psychological contract can be. Whilst none of the students interviewed for the final part of this thesis had such negative experiences, all provided examples of some of the features of this case: incomplete information, naivety in selection processes, poor understanding of the variations in the HE system, strong responses to transactional discrepancies, and so on. They differed from the Sunday Times example in their personal goals and experience. They were all young students, most did not have clear career goals, had only vague ideas about why they wanted to go to university, and saw university as a simple progression from where they were. In effect, they had less to lose, their expectations were only vaguely formed

and thus more malleable, and following from that. less susceptible to violation. Nevertheless, examples of violations followed the same themes.

If these issues are as widespread as the data suggest, then contract violations may be producing under-performance in students across the system. Following from this, any efforts to produce a more congruent psychological contract could help improve performance. However, this will require an understanding of the complex inter-relationships that form the elements of the psychological contract. Shore and Tetrick have developed a model, shown as figure 8.1, to provide a framework for such an understanding. The model is intended to show how the psychological contract develops at the time of pre- and initial employment via an interaction between an individual and their organisational environment. Whilst this model was developed with employment relationships in mind, when described in terms of the student /university relationship it can provide a useful tool to provide structure to the findings described in this thesis. Each of the elements of the model can be related to findings from this research:

Organisational goals

The organisational side of the contract starts with the goals of the organisation. from which contract strategies are formed and relayed to organisational 'agents' who are the communicators of the contract to the individual. Chapter one described how government and economic policy shaped university goals, with expansion, meeting the needs of industry and the economy, producing a learning society and improved efficiency being the driving forces. The University of Sunderland has adopted strategies to embrace all of these goals in a broad sweep.

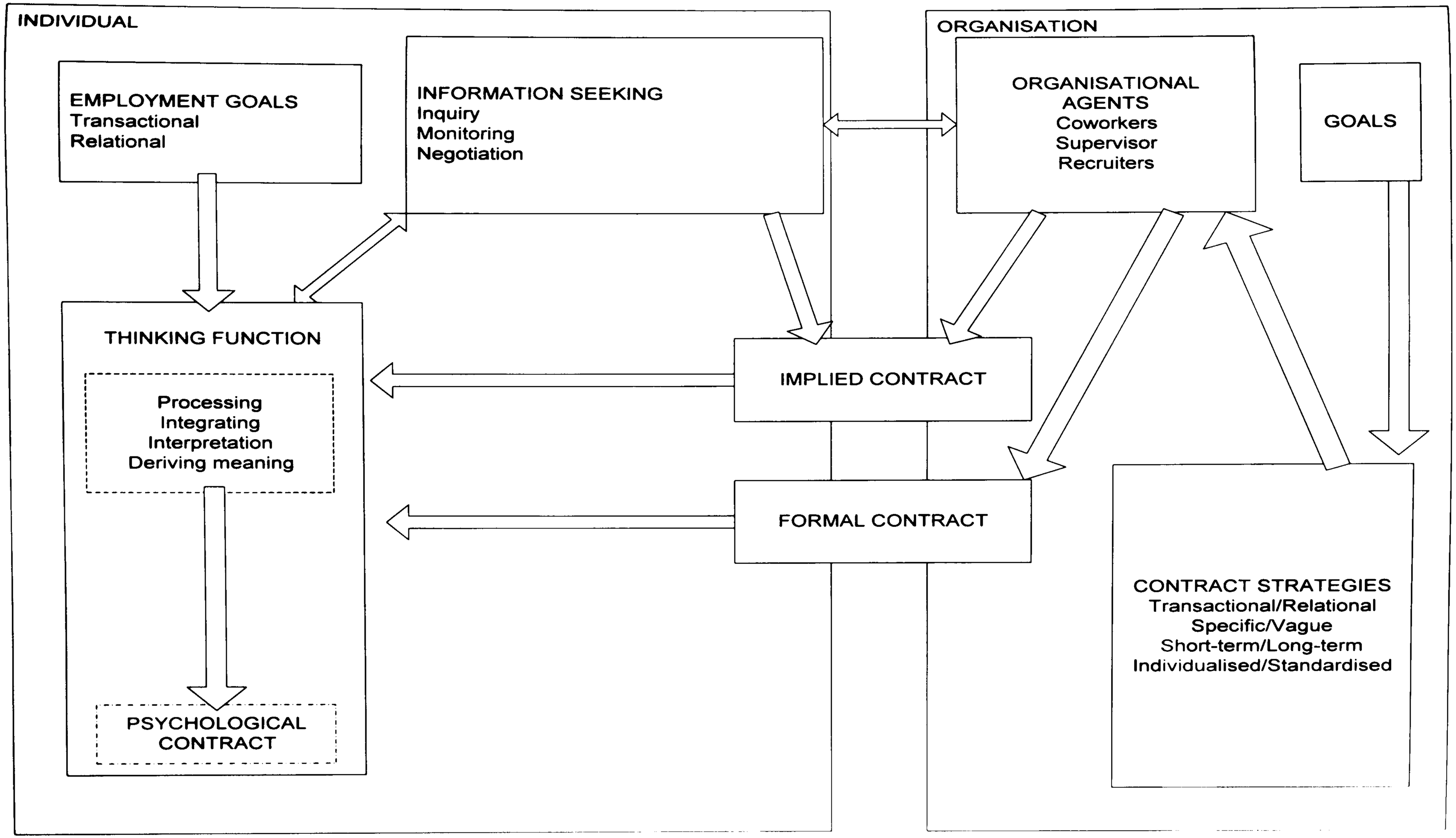


Figure 8.1: Schematic representation of the development of the psychological contract (Shore & Tetrick, 1994)

Contract strategies

The goal of expansion has been achieved through actively recruiting students from under-represented areas, adopting low and non-traditional intake requirements, development into different areas such as corporate programmes, overseas markets, and distance-learning qualifications. However, resource constraints have allowed little opportunity to provide a diverse range of services to meet the specific needs of these very distinct groupings. Thus, whilst the Business School has made great efforts to adopt teaching and learning methods suitable for non-traditional intake students, the data from this research suggest that the more traditional types of student have been left behind in this, and thus have difficulty in adapting.

The strategies adopted to achieve the expansion goals have conflicted in many aspects with those adopted for other goals. So, for example, the goal of efficiency has been pursued by reducing class contact times and increasing student-centred learning, increasing staff/student ratios, not replacing staff who leave, and only recently, redundancies. Visiting lecturers, who of course cost considerably less than permanent staff, have increasingly covered gaps in the timetable. However, as a result, the administrative load in the school is shared by a reducing number of full-time academics, who therefore have correspondingly less time to spend with students. One effect of this can be seen in the results of the survey, where perceived poor availability and approachability of lecturers was a concern.

Meanwhile, the goal to serve the needs of industry and the economy has not only driven the development of corporate and overseas programmes, taking academics off campus for several days at a time, but also produced a push for increased research and consultancy output. This in turn has shaped the recruitment policy, with academics being recruited predominantly on the basis of their research record. The effect of this has been to shift more teaching onto existing academics; established researchers tend to expect to be given the opportunity to continue their research and are unlikely to come to the university if an excessive teaching load is

likely to curtail that. Again, this tends to exacerbate the problems of availability and accessibility.

Whether these often-conflicting strategies are likely to lead to the achievement of the final goal, that of producing a learning society, is dubious, and perhaps something that the notion of psychological contract can help to predict.

Organisational agents

Already discussed in this thesis is the widespread controversy in the literature about the role of organisational agents in the formation of the psychological contract. Shore and Tetricks view is that there is a variety of forces that encourage different organisational agents to send different messages to individuals. So, for example, organisations may try to 'sell' the organisation to recruits, and thus individuals receive different messages at the time of recruitment than they do once they are employed with the organisation. The findings of this research show similar evidence. The main agents influencing the students seem to be the recruiters, academics, and administrative staff and there are different messages from all three of these. The messages emanating from recruiters (including the marketing function and enrolment staff), were interpreted in very much a standardised way by the students taking part in the study. I would interpret this as forming an implied contract, rather than an individual psychological contract, since they are messages that are also observable from individuals outside the organisation. So, for example, the low entry requirements produced an expectation that the university was 'easier', 'less strict', and 'not as academic' as others with higher entry requirements. On the other hand, the marketing message was interpreted as showing the university to be up-and-coming, modern, and 'the best new university'. There is evidence to show that the marketing message is viewed with some scepticism, and that students are aware that it is a 'selling' exercise. For example:

'They definitely know how to sell something. and put a package around something that sounds better than it is'

'I think they sold the place very well'

Academics and administrative staff have different effects on individual students. but overall the findings show that they are considered differently as groups. with academics considered to be more 'on the side' of the students. and the administrative staff representing 'the university'. So, even in cases where there is a problem with a lecturer, for example he does not turn up to a lecture or is irritable with a student, the student response tends to be sympathetic. whilst the same is not true for administrative staff.

The individual's goals (employment goals)

For Shore and Tetrick, the development of the psychological contract is a deliberate goal-seeking process on the part of the individual, whereby the individual will seek to establish a relationship that will help them achieve their objectives. They give the example that someone who is seeking temporary employment and flexible working hours will be more interested in transactional elements of the contract, whilst someone seeking long-term employment may focus on the relational elements. If we translate this to educational goals rather than employment goals. the findings presented in this thesis show that the students, in general, could express only vague goals. These include delaying going into full-time employment, getting a better job after graduation, and improving their education (in the most general terms). Having a good social life featured as a goal to varying degrees. However. staying local was an overriding goal for many of the students interviewed. The findings show that this lack of clarity of goals may have had an impact on the 'information seeking' element of contract formation.

Information seeking

Shore and Tetrick describe three methods of information seeking in their model - 'inquiry', monitoring' and 'negotiation'. The vague goals held by the students interviewed manifested in limited inquiry prior to university entry, with students influenced mainly by the prospectus and a visit to the university. The need to stay local limited choice, and thus campus facilities and cultural aspects of the Newcastle/Sunderland relationship exerted influence. There was little evidence that students sought out information about the intellectual aspects of university life, despite these being most important for forming realistic expectations and appropriate choice (Tinto, 1993). The literature suggests that students will make a choice of institution based on where they feel they will be successful , so with such limited investigation carried out by the students in this survey, it would seem that this has been done based on limited information related to the perceived 'implied' contract relating to the Business School, which was broadly seen as easier to get into, and 'less strict' than some of the more traditional institutions. Subsequently, there was evidence of monitoring taking place once students joined the university, having the effect of contract adjustment. For example, achieving lower grades than expected appeared to have the effect of lowering expectations of academic performance. Thus, the incomplete 'inquiry' stage has had a detrimental effect on the students' academic achievement.

Opportunities for negotiation of the contract are limited for students. In the workplace this relates to such things as negotiation of pay and benefits, and translating this to the student scenario, clearly negotiation of grades, for example, is not an option.

Thinking function

It is in this area of the model that the psychological contract truly takes shape. Individuals will use the information that they have gathered to develop an agreement with the organisation that best meets their goals. However, Shore and

Tetrick explain that individuals store and recall incomplete information, and fill in incomplete information based on existing schemas. Thus, the contract is developed through a process unique to that individual, even though the information available to all individuals is the same. The research conducted for this thesis can only provide a very preliminary insight into the influences in this area of the model. Influences emerging from the findings are:

- Lack of history of HE in the family, naivety in interpretation of rhetoric
- Consumerism: Students brought up in a 24-hour society ; requirement to pay fees
- Live in/live out issues affecting the contract's position on the transactional/relational continuum
- Issues of self-perception and self esteem: influences on choice of university, with Universities such as Durham being beyond their reach because of class, intelligence or finance

By applying these ideas to the Shore and Tetrick model of the psychological contract, a preliminary model for the student/university contract can be proposed. This is shown as figure 8.2 (pg. 201).

The model demonstrates how the university and individual student characteristics interact in various ways to generate a student perception of what their university experience will, or should, be like. The closer that perception is to the real experience, the more likely is the individual to feel that they fit into the environment well, and consequently are motivated to do well. However, by fitting the findings of this research to the model it can be seen that there are so many conflicting variables within the model that the possibility of some degree of mismatch between student perception and the reality of their experience. is almost infinite.

Shore and Tetrick's accompanying model of psychological contract violation describes the possible consequences when there is not a close match. Responses can range from a simple readjustment of the contract to retreat, destruction and exit. The findings of this research suggest that even the former, more mild response can have quite serious consequences. For example, the students surveyed have appeared to readjust their expectations of what grades they are likely to achieve when their performance does not meet their initial expectations.

The Greenwich example from the Sunday Times article provides an example of the most extreme response to violation. Here, a student in a similar type of organisation to the University of Sunderland has met with violations of contract of a similar nature to those expressed by the students interviewed for this thesis. Yet, despite these similarities the student response has been quite different. The difference would appear to lie in the strength of that student's goals and in the way he has processed and interpreted information from the university.

It is suggested, then, that the psychological contract model can provide a useful framework for explaining the experience of students within a university environment and for identifying factors that may affect their performance and, ultimately, their persistence.

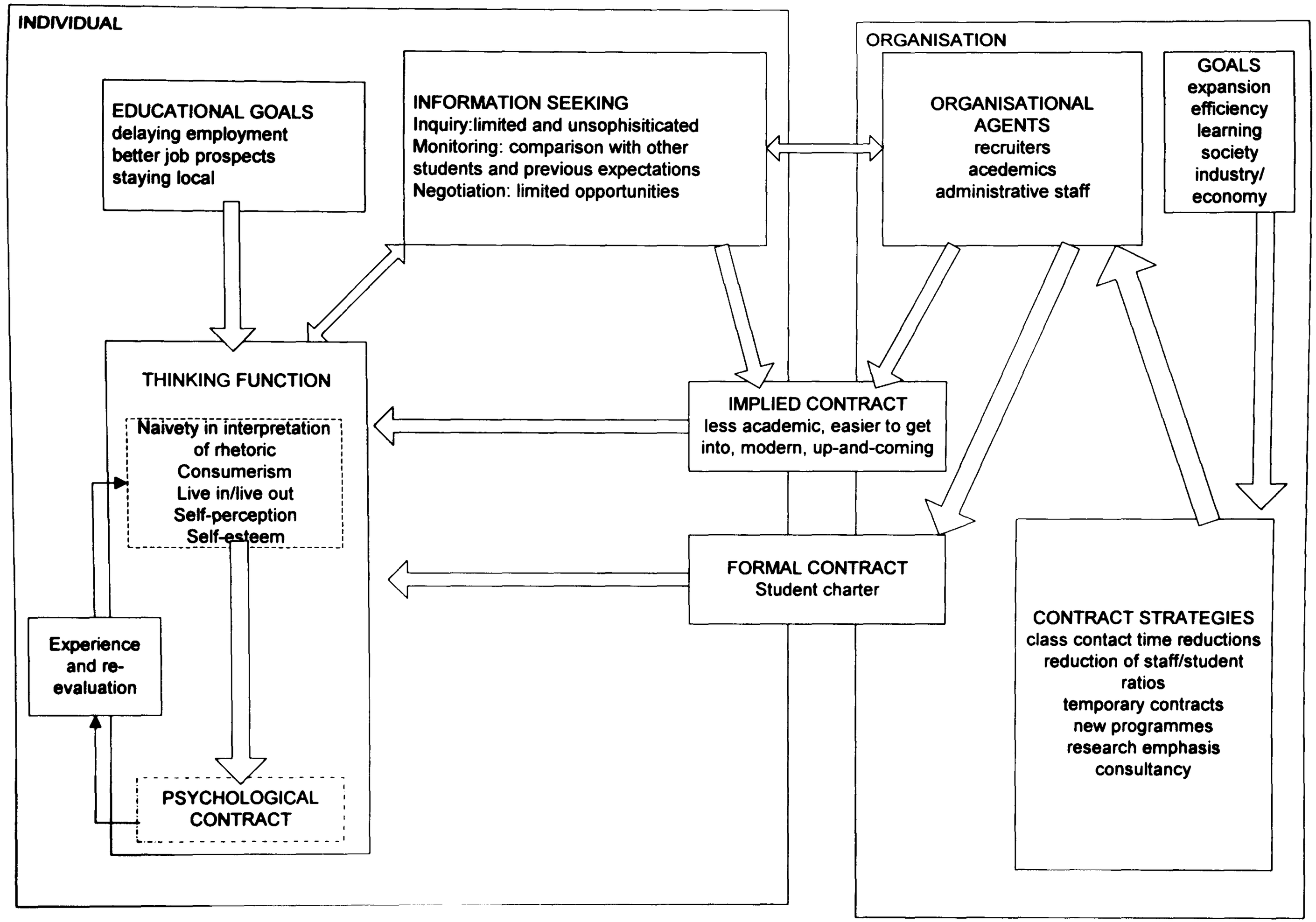


Figure 8.2: Influences on the formation of the student psychological contract following Shore and Tetrick's 1994 schematic representation

8.2: Conclusions and implications for future research

The University of Sunderland has been a forerunner in adopting the Government's agenda of widening participation and improving access, along with adopting other initiatives to better meet the needs of industry and the economy and improving efficiency. However, during the time that these initiatives have been adopted, student retention and performance have been poor. This research has examined why this might be so, and proposes a model that is useful in identifying the inter-related variables that contribute towards this phenomenon.

The research has shown parallels between the psychological contract construct as it applies in the employment situation and the student/university relationship. When the framework is applied to the findings related to Sunderland Business School it suggests that:

- The psychological contract formed by students is predominantly transactional and focussed on academic performance. This has implication for responses to different types of violation and for the University's reaction to them. For example, it may be that if attention is given to getting the transactional contract 'right', in terms of ensuring that students' performance can match their expectations, then issues such as lecturer availability may assume less importance.
- Efforts to widen participation and access and to meet the needs of non-traditional students may have a detrimental effect on the learning and performance of the more traditional entrants resulting from perceived violations of the transactional contract.
- Efforts to improve efficiency are having an impact on the level of service that the students perceive. For example, poor staff/student ratios mean that staff are not available as much as students would like, and may not offer as much help as required because of the pressures they are under. The interviews showed evidence of some staff being rude or irritable with students when they have had a succession of students coming to see them. This leads to violation of the

psychological contract, though these will be predominantly relational violations, and therefore unlikely to lead to extreme responses from the students unless very severe.

- Many students have only vague goals when they enter the Business School, and adopt unsophisticated methods of university selection. They therefore enter the Business School with only sparse knowledge of the university, which implies that any perceptions that they form prior to entry will be based on previous experience or external sources. This will leave them highly susceptible to contract violation.
- Violation of the psychological contract, unless very severe, (in which case the student may leave), leads to a readjustment of the contract, and this can lead to expectations of performance being adjusted down.
- Students are susceptible to university marketing rhetoric due largely to a lack of experience or poor understanding of the higher education system - for example, not understanding what is meant by the term 'new university'.
- An implied contract exists, which distinguishes the University of Sunderland from the universities of Durham and Newcastle by virtue of entry requirements and the type of students in each institution. Issues of class, financial capability, and perceived intelligence deter students from applying to the more traditional universities.
- The need to pay fees has produced a culture of consumerism, generating strong feelings of expectation about the standard of service required from the university. This conflicts with the resource capabilities of the university.

The model generated from this research is by no means complete, and can only offer a preliminary framework for better understanding of the student experience. However, it does provide an indicator for the main areas for future research. There are several questions arising from the model that can be addressed in the immediate future to better inform the system at Sunderland Business School:

The differences between A-level entrants and non-traditional entrants need to be addressed further. Most particularly, it should be established why A-level entrants enjoy learning less, and whether this truly links to their decreased performance over the first two years. Comparisons can be made between modules that adopt traditional methods and those that are more competency-based. In addition, the evidence from this study suggests that a broader perspective needs to be taken to investigate the problem of decreased performance by the end of year two. (It should be noted that survey returns from level two students were very much lower than from other levels, and that this is indicative of poor attendance at core sessions). This recognition of a tendency for the performance of students to fall after a period of time with their institution is not without precedence. In the 1960s and 70s William G. Perry developed a classic model for intellectual development among college students, which proposed that students (and others too) 'journey' through nine 'positions' with respect to intellectual development (Perry, 1968, 1970). The nine 'positions' can be grouped into three major stages:

Dualism (either/or thinking): Students at this stage believe that there are only right or wrong answers to questions and resist thinking independently

Multiplicity (subjective knowledge)**:** At this stage students believe that knowledge is just an opinion, that some problems are unsolvable, and therefore it doesn't matter which (if any solution) they choose.

Relativism (constructed knowledge): Students at this stage recognise that opinions are based on values, experiences and knowledge. They can argue their perspective and consider the relative merit of alternative arguments by evaluating the quality of the evidence.

Research has shown that when some students reach the stage of 'multiplicity' they may rebel at criticism of their work, become alienated, and may in extreme cases either opt to change course for one which they perceive to involve less uncertainty, or may decide to drop out of college altogether. This effect provides one possible explanation for the observed drop in performance of the Business School students.

Application of the Perry model to investigate possible 'at risk' stages in the students' development may offer the potential to intervene with suitable strategies to prevent alienation.

The research reported within this thesis suggests that students resident within the university may move towards a more relational contract when transactional violations are experienced. However, it has not shown what happens to live-at-home students. The danger may be that students with a weakly relational contract may respond more seriously to transactional violations and drop out. Indeed, comments made in the interviews suggested this, and work reported by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) supports this view. A comparison should be made between levels of persistence between resident and non-resident students to identify if non-resident students are more at risk.

This research has established the expectations that students have as they enter the university, and which are most susceptible to violation. This provides the opportunity to intervene at the start of the students' university career to ensure that their expectations are more realistic and thus establish a more explicit psychological contract, similar to the quality literature promoting changing 'should' expectations to 'will' expectations (Prasak,1984; see chapter three). The quality literature can provide useful models for identifying where interventions should be targeted, for example by use of the 'Quality Gap' model proposed by Zeithaml *et al.* (see, again, chapter three). Any such interventions need to be monitored to establish if they have an effect on the subsequent performance of students. However, there is already evidence that interventions, for example in the form of clearly targeted induction programmes, can have a positive effect on students' performance (Smead and Chase, 1981; Spindell and Dembo, 1976). A caveat to this is that expectations and perceived obligations of the other sizeable group in the school need to be established too; this research focussed on undergraduate full-time students. It is likely that part-timers, overseas students, corporate students, distance learning, and special needs students all have distinct differences.

The student charter (see chapter six) is a potentially useful vehicle to ensure that the obligations of both parties (student and university) are made more explicit and communicated appropriately. However, this research suggests that the content of charter may need to be revisited to define requirements in more specific terms that are relevant to all groups of students and staff.

A longer-term aim may be to determine what impact the university experience has had on the students future as learners, and on their *employment* psychological contracts. This is suggested because the students interviewed at the end of this thesis were leaving university with, on the whole, very high expectations for their future career prospects. This was influenced by university rhetoric rather than any concerted efforts of inquiry on the part of the students. If these students are subsequently disappointed by their expectations not being met, will this alter how they perceive their university experience in retrospect? This is an important question because disenchantment with the educational system could have an impact on these students' development as life-long learners and the advice they give to their future families (thus impacting on the university system's aim to produce a learning society).

On a larger scale, the nature of the interactions between the different elements in the framework need to be determined. For example, it has been shown (Popham, 2001) that students at Newcastle University adopt very sophisticated methods of enquiry when making their university selection. Does this mean that their psychological contract, being better informed, is more explicit, and thus less susceptible to violation? Similarly, how do a university's strategies for meeting the government's agenda for HE impact upon the students subsequently enrolled? Comparative studies are needed to answer these questions. An understanding of these relationships will inform intervention strategies to help prepare students for university life.

The nature of the implied contract should be of particular concern to policy-makers. If students feel that class is a limiting factor in their choice of university, then government targets for widening participation will only be achieved by the universities that are already forerunners in this field taking *more* students from under-represented groups. Thus, a dual system will be perpetuated. If *all* of higher education is to be really open to all, then the source of such perceptions needs to be addressed.

Finally, the key element of the psychological contract framework is the 'thinking function', i.e. the way the individual processes, integrates, interprets and derives meaning from the information in the external environment. It is here that a purely functionalist approach is deficient. Much as Sparrow (1996) has suggested that new work values may have changed the nature of motivation itself, requiring researchers to go back to basic assumptions, the nature of education has changed so much that to fully understand how the student psychological contract works we need to investigate how the thinking function operates using other approaches.

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Appendix one

The Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire

UNIVERSITY STUDENT EXPERIENCE RESEARCH PROJECT

This questionnaire is part of an important research programme which is looking at the pressures students face whilst at university. You are under no obligation to answer this questionnaire, but your opinions would be very much appreciated.

The questionnaire is in two parts. The first part asks you about your current feelings and behaviour as a student. The second part asks you for general information which we need to work out population statistics. It is based on a well-established questionnaire that has been used for many years.

We do not need your name. This questionnaire will remain completely anonymous. The information you provide will be used only for this research.

Please complete both sections of the questionnaire - this should take you about ten minutes.

PART 1

Instructions

The following questions are concerned with the way you feel or act. They are all simple. Please tick the answer that applies to you. Don't spend long on any one question.

Do you often feel upset for no obvious reason?				Yes	2	No 0✓
Do you have an unreasonable fear of being in enclosed spaces such as shops, lifts, etc.?	Often	2	Sometimes	1	Never	0✓
Do people ever say you are too conscientious?			No	0✓	Yes	2
Are you troubled by dizziness or shortness of breath?	Never	0✓	Often	2	Sometimes	1
Can you think as quickly as you used to?			Yes	0✓	No	2
Are your opinions easily influenced?			Yes	2	No	0✓
Have you felt as though you might faint?	Frequently	2	Occasionally	1✓	Never	0
Do you find yourself worrying about getting some incurable illness?	Never	0	Sometimes	1✓	Often	2
Do you think that 'cleanliness is next to godliness'?			No	0	Yes	2✓
0. Do you often feel sick or have indigestion?			Yes	2	No	0✓
1 Do you feel that life is too much effort?	At times	1✓	Often	2	Never	0
2. Have you, at any time in your life, enjoyed acting?			Yes	2	No	0✓
3. Do you feel uneasy and restless?	Frequently	2	Sometimes	1✓	Never	0
4 Do you feel more relaxed indoors?	Definately	2	Sometimes	1	Not particularly	0✓
5 Do you find that silly or unreasonable thoughts keep recurring in your mind?	Frequently	2	Sometimes	1✓	Never	0
6. Do you sometimes get tingling or pricking sensations in your body, arms or legs?	Rarely	1✓	Frequently	2	Never	0
Do you regret much of your past behaviour?			Yes	2	No	0✓
Are you an excessively emotional person?			Yes	2	No	0✓
Do you sometimes feel really panicky?			No	0✓	Yes	2
Do you feel uneasy travelling on buses or the Underground even if they are not crowded?	Very	2	A little	1	Not at all	0✓
Are you happiest when you are working?			Yes	2✓	No	0

2.	Has your appetite got less recently?			No	0 ✓	Yes	2
3.	Do you wake unusually early in the morning?			Yes	2	No	0 ✓
4.	Do you enjoy being the centre of attention?			No	0	Yes	2 ✓
5.	Would you say you were a worrying person?	Very	2	Fairly	1	Not at all	0 ✓
6.	Do you dislike going out alone?			Yes	2 ✓	No	0
7.	Are you a perfectionist?			No	0	Yes	2 ✓
8.	Do you feel unduly tired or exhausted?	Often	2	Sometimes	1 ✓	Never	0
9.	Do you experience long periods of sadness?	Never	0 ✓	Often	2	Sometimes	1
10.	Do you find that you take advantage of circumstances for your own ends?	Never	0	Sometimes	1 ✓	Often	2
11.	Do you often feel 'strung up' inside?			Yes	2	No	0 ✓
12.	Do you worry unduly when relatives are late coming home?			No	0	Yes	2 ✓
13.	Do you have to check things you do to an unnecessary extent?			Yes	2	No	0 ✓
14.	Can you get off to sleep alright at the moment?			No	2	Yes	0 ✓
15.	Do you have to make a special effort to face up to a crisis or difficulty?	Very much so	2	Sometimes	1	Not more than anyone else	0 ✓
16.	Do you often spend a lot of money on clothes?			Yes	2 ✓	No	0
17.	Have you ever had the feeling that you are 'going to pieces'?			Yes	2 ✓	No	0
18.	Are you scared of heights?	Very	2	Fairly	1 ✓	Not at all	0
19.	Does it irritate you if your normal routine is disturbed?	Greatly	2	A little	1 ✓	Not at all	0
20.	Do you often suffer from excessive sweating or fluttering of the heart?			No	0 ✓	Yes	2
21.	Do you find yourself needing to cry?	Frequently	2	Sometimes	1	Never	0 ✓
22.	Do you enjoy dramatic situations?			Yes	2 ✓	No	0
23.	Do you have bad dreams which upset you when you wake up?	Never	0 ✓	Sometimes	1	Frequently	2
24.	Do you feel panicky in crowds?	Always	2	Sometimes	1 ✓	Never	0

Do you find yourself worrying unreasonably about things that do not really matter?

Never 0 | Frequently 2 | Sometimes 1 ✓

Has your sexual interest altered?

Less 2 | The same or greater 0 ✓

Have you lost your ability to feel sympathy for other people?

No 0 ✓ | Yes 2

Do you sometimes find yourself posing or pretending.

Yes 2 ✓ | No 0

Please do not write in this box.

F	P	O	S	D	H

PART 2: Personal Information

Please print using block capitals. Tick boxes that apply to you.

Age: 20

	M	F
Sex	☑	☐

Course: HIDO BUSINESS / FINANCE

Level: 1

Marital status:

Single	☑
Married	☐
Divorced	☐
Widowed	☐

How many dependent children do you have?

None	☑
One	☐
Two	☐
Three	☐
More	☐

What were your qualifications on entry to the University?

'A' levels	☐
GNVQ	☐
BTEC	☑
APL/APEL	☐
Other	☐

Where are you living during your time at the University?

With parents	☐
Your own home	☐
University hall	☑
Student house	☐

If you are living away from home whilst at the university, how often do you visit the family home during the semester?

Often	☐
Occasionally	☑
Never	☐

Have either or both of your parents completed a course of Higher education?

Yes ☐ No ☑

Do you have any brothers or sisters who have completed or are presently undertaking a course of higher education?

Yes ☐ No ☑

		Father	Mother
What is/was the occupation of your parents?	Unskilled	☐	☐
	Skilled	☑	☐
	Professional	☐	☑
	Homemaker	☐	☐

Have you ever worked full-time? Yes ☐ No ☑

Do you currently have a job in addition to doing your university course? Yes ☐ No ☑

How do you fund your university education?
(Please tick all sources of funding used, and then rank in order of importance on the dotted lines
1 = most important)

Family support	☑ 1
Grant/scholarship	☑ 2
Loan	☑ 3
Savings	☐ ....
Job	☐ ....
Other	☐ ....

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

Appendix two

Interview schema for phase one interviews

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

I am carrying out this interview as part of a study in which I am looking at students' experience of Higher Education - in particular the pressures that students face and the effect that this has on their learning and success. Over the next few weeks I will be interviewing up to 50 people from all levels in the Business School. I expect that this session will last for about an hour.

The quality of the research depends very much on how honest and open you are in your answers. You can be confident that the information you provide will remain entirely anonymous and confidential - I will use it only for the purpose of this research. Whilst I hope that you will feel comfortable about answering all of the questions, you are not obliged to do so. Please say if there is anything you don't want to answer.

Because we are likely to get through at lot of material in this session, I would like to tape our conversation. Would you agree to let me do this?

Have you any questions before we start?

Part 1 : Personal details

1. Name?
2. Age?
3. Sex?
4. Home town?
5. Are you in a long-term relationship?
6. Children?
7. What academic qualifications did you have when you came to university?
8. Where did you get those qualifications?
9. How long ago was that?

Part 2 : Investigation of stressors

The next section of questions ask you about your feelings and experiences when you first came to university. I would like you to think about how you felt during, say, your first semester, and answer them from that perspective.

10. Tell me about why you came to University

11. Who, besides yourself, had an influence on your decision?

12. How did you feel about that?

13. Was Sunderland your first choice of university?

14. Why, (eventually), did you choose Sunderland?

15. Why did you choose your particular course?

16. Thinking back to just before you joined the university, how did you feel about the prospect of coming here?

17. What did you think the other students would be like?

18. Have you now found that they are now different to what you expected? *(In what way?)*

19. And what did you think the staff would be like?

20. Are they different to what you expected? *(In what way?)*

21. Let`s think about the work you have to do at university - did you have any perceptions of what it would be like before you got here?

22. How does it differ from your expectations?

23. How does the way you are taught at this university differ from the way you were taught before? (When you got your previous qualifications)

24. How did these differences make you feel when first you got here?

25. Have your feelings now changed?

26. Why is that?

27. Did any of the unexpected differences ever make you feel like leaving the University? *(Has anything ever happened to make you feel like leaving the university?)*

28. What made you change your mind? (*if yes)*

29. What do you think were the main ways that your life changed when you became a student?

30. What things were better than before?

31. What things were worse than before?

32. How did you feel about the change?

33. What did you miss about your 'old' way of life?

34. On the whole, would you say that you prefer your old way of life, or your life as a student?

I would like to change direction now and talk about your current feelings and experience of university life.

35. One of the things that is a big feature of this University's system is the modular scheme. Students have a lot of choice with regard to what subjects to take. Some students like this amount of choice, and others don't like to have that much responsibility - they would prefer the choices to be made for them. What is your opinion?

36. What do you feel are the main advantages of having lots of choice?

37. What are the main disadvantages?

38. What changes, if any, would you like to see made to the modular scheme?

39. The system not only gives you choice in the subjects that you take, but also in the way you learn, to a large extent. A lot of the learning here is 'student-centered', which means two things - you have the choice of when and how you learn, but it also means that you have responsibility for your own learning - nobody chases you to make sure that the work is done. How do you feel about this?

40. What do you feel are the main advantages of this system?

41. What have you found to be the main problems?

42. Overall, do you think that you benefit or suffer from this system of teaching & learning?

43. If you went to a university where a more traditional style of teaching was adopted, do you think that you will get a better class of degree, worse or the same? Why?

44. The class-contact teaching here takes several forms - lectures, seminars, tutorials, surgeries, projects are the main ones. Which of these do you prefer?

45. Why?

46. Do you think that your preferred method is the one that makes you learn best?

47. Lets think about assessment now. Do you think that on the whole, you usually manage to achieve the best grades that you are capable of?

48. When you don't, what do you think are the things that most often prevent you from doing so?

49. How do you feel about that?

50. Thinking about when you have get grades that you're really pleased with, what do you think are the things that help you to achieve this success?
51. Do you find that you get adequate feedback on your assignments?

52. Many assessments require group working. How do you feel when you have to work in a group?
(move now to fit)

53. In general, how well do you get on with your fellow students?

54. Do you ever 'fall out' with other students?

55. When is this most likely to happen? (*if yes)*

56. How does this make you feel?

57. Do you get support from your fellow students?

58. How important is this to you?

59. As you know, the student population at Sunderland is very mixed. As well as the 'traditional' sort of student, we have a lot of mature students and overseas students. What benefits do you think this brings to you, as a student?

60. Does it have any disadvantages for you? What are they?

61. How does that make you feel?

62. Would you say that you mix widely with other students, or that you stick to one particular group of colleagues?

63. Why is that?

64. Thinking about the teaching staff now, do you think that your need for academic support is adequately satisfied by the teaching staff?

65. Where are the main gaps, if any?

66. What effect do you think that this has on your studies?

67. How does this make you feel?

68. What is your general impression of the academic staff's attitude towards you as a student?

69. How does this make you feel?

70. Moving on, most of your teaching takes place on this new campus at St. Peter's, which is only a couple of years old. Most people seem to either love or hate the building. What do you think about it?

71. What things do you like most about the facility?

72. What do you most dislike?

73. How well do you think it meets your needs as a student?

74. What are it's main deficiencies?

75. How does that affect you personally?

76. Moving outside of the university itself now, how do you find the city of Sunderland as a place for students?

77. Do you mainly socialise with non-students, or your student colleagues?

78. How has your immediate family reacted to you becoming a student?

79. What effect does that have on you?

80. What about your circle of friends that you had before you joined the university - how have they reacted to you becoming a student?

81. How do you feel about that?

82. You have probably had to change your lifestyle quite a bit because of the work that you have to do here. How do you feel about the *amount* of work you have to do for the course?

83. What about the *level* of the work - on the whole, do you find it hard, manageable, or easy?

84. Would you say that you're the sort of person who is happy just to get through the course, even if it means getting bare 'passes', or are you more concerned with getting good grades?

85. Why is that?

86. Have you thought that way ever since you joined the university, or would you say that you'd changed since you got here?

87. How do you feel about the results that you've achieved so far?

88. Thinking just about your experience as a student, do you ever feel that you are under extreme pressure or that you can't cope ?

89. If so (or not),what tends to make you feel like this?

90. Are there any other causes?

91. When you're feeling like this, does it ever affect the work that you're doing?

92. How?

93. Do you ever miss lectures or other teaching sessions because you're feeling under pressure?

94. What do you tend to do instead?

95. Have you ever considered leaving the course because of the pressure?

96. What made you change your mind?

97. When you're feeling under pressure or having difficulty in coping, who do you talk to about it, if anyone?

98. What sorts of things do you most often do to help you cope with the pressure?

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Appendix three

Focus group comments

FOCUS GROUP TO INVESTIGATE EXPECTATIONS
5TH May 1998

AIMS:

- To identify the expectations that students brought with them to university
- To identify how those expectations were formed
- To discover if those expectations were met, and if not, where they differed
- To discover what effect this had on the students

QUESTION DOMAINS:

1. Self

- Performance
- relationships
- social life
- how they are perceived by others
- job expectations upon graduating

2. Work

- amount
- difficulty
- styles of learning
- feedback
- value

3. Staff

- ability
- approachability
- helpfulness

4. University

- organisation
- facilities

Group members

The focus group comprised five final year Business Studies students. Three were direct entrants on finishing school - all of these had A-levels as entry qualifications and one also had an Irish Leaving Certificate.

Two were mature students. One, in his late 20's had HND as entry qualification. The other was 32 and entered the university with no formal academic qualification. His entry was allowed on the basis of his previous work experience in sales and marketing.

Conduct of the enquiry

Students were told the aims of the focus group session, and then allowed to talk freely. The list of question domains was used only as prompts. All students contributed well , though two (one mature, one standard) dominated the conversation at times. Where this occurred, other students were asked for their opinions on the points made by the two dominant characters. There was no apparent disagreement between students on the major issues raised. Notes were taken of key points. The session was not taped.

FINDINGS

General expectations:

All students had decided to get a degree to get a better job or 'proper' job.
Salary expectations : £13000 - £16000

Found it easier than expected. Expected it to be more 'cultured', with more theory, more heavy work, and more requirement to develop their own ideas. They wer eonly really required to develop original thought in the final year, and then they found itscary because they weren't used to it. The law exams are 'laughable'.

The fact that work was easier than expected generated a feeling of relief in the student with no qualifications.

Other students said that degrees aren't what they used to be, and felt that managing to live away from home gave them a greater sense of achievement than the academic achievement.

There are more important things to university life than the work.

The social life is as good as you want to make it.

Students disillusioned because they feel that it was not possible to get an A grade for a module.

Expected to get help with how to research but didn't get any.

Students feel that they are looked down upon by 'outsiders', but put this down to jealousy.

This doesn't knock their self-esteem, because 'mates help you out'.

Academic staff expected to be more helpful and approachable than they were.

At school they were told that the relationship with staff would be quite informal, but it wasn't like this with some staff, and this caused disappointment.

Individual thought is penalised by staff, and this is the most annoying aspect of university.

Expected all staff to be very clever, but some are as 'dull as dishwater'

Expected them to be able to teach!

The biggest problem with staff shortcomings is in the final year

People laugh at a Business Course

The University of Sunderland is lowly-ranking so `people don`t care about us`

It is degrading when other people have been allowed onto the course with so few points.

Ther eis a real problem with foreign students putting a wall up, and also cheating so much.

Didn't expect so many Greek students.

Greeks get away with cheating because they bring big income to the school

Makes you feel cheated

Didn't expect so much blatant cheating

Some subjects are not realistic - don't prepare you for the real world

Feedback is very variable, sometimes non-existent. Expected more

It preys on your mind how approachable or otherwise the tutor is when you need feedback.

In the final year would expect more intense feedback

Even at level three feel intimidated by tutors

The money situation is hard, but expected this anyway.

Parent expectations are important - students need a break from them.

Parent expectations have put pressure on

Other expectations come from wife and friends

Time management skills are all that`s needed to do the degree : `If I could organise two hours a day I`d piss this course`

Surprise expressed that no-one in the final year had yet secured a job.

University teaches you a lot about yourself - gives you much more confidence

One student doesn't lik easking for help even now, but the course has taught him to do it.

People met at the university have helped much more than the lecturers. Didn't expect that - expected it to be much more insular.

Personal conflict with lecturers affect the mark you get. You can't answer back to lecturers or they'll penalise.

It's annoying when second-marking is done by someone who doesn't know you.

If you don't have a good relationship with a lecturer then you don't expect to be able to get a good mark, so you don't put as much effort in.

Two students expected lecturers to know everything about their topic.

Others think that teaching ability is more important - knowing how to relate to students (people ability)

Some lecturers set themselves apart

Surprised how some lecturers know less than the students

Surprised that some other students 'can't string a sentence together'

The biased opinion of lecturers is a real surprise

Inconsistency between semesters for the same module is very surprising

Students are being used as guinea pigs to develop courses - lecturers don't accept that they are wrong, and so students suffer.

There is no real procedure for grievances - if you complain your name is passed around the university and you end up being victimised

There is no compassion shown for mitigating circumstances and lectuers lie about what might happen to people who are thrown out of a group. Malice in this way can extend all the way from year 1.

Stress arises from 'unfair' treatment

Other students get pissed off when we leave things until the last minute and still get good marks

One major problem is that every lecturer thinks that their subject is the only one you're doing. They need to co-ordinate and talk to each other more about hand-in dates.

Lecturers are meant to be teaching management and they can`t manage themselves

`If I performed that way in my work I`d be fired`

`If the lecturers themselves can't be arsed, why should the students?`

There is one rule for lecturers and another for students.

Appendix four

Back-up expectations questionnaire

Part 2

This second part of the survey asks about some more wide-ranging expectations.

When you look at the statements, please answer them according to what you think **will** happen, not what you think **should** happen. This is very important, as it makes a big difference to the interpretation of the results.

For questions with a scale next to them, rank them as **1=*very likely* and 7=*not likely at all.***

What average % mark do you expect to achieve during your course? (Give a range if you want to)	
Students who spend most time on assignments will get better grades	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You have the study skills to make you successful	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will probably have to repeat some modules during your course	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
If you do the right amount of work you will get an 'A' grade	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
If you do badly in an assignment you will be given help to do better next time	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The work at university will be harder than the work you've done previously	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will have to attend most of your timetabled sessions to make sure that you keep up with the work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Most students are serious about learning	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will mostly be able to do your work in your own way	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will be expected to have your own thoughts and opinions about topics taught on your course	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will get better grades if the tutor likes you	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will care about your progress	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will be able to get help from tutors when you need it	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will be knowledgeable about their subjects	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will be knowledgeable about the administrative issues that affect you	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will treat you with respect	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will get a placement if you choose to do one	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will be able to cope with the amount of work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Most students will cheat on assignments	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Students who cheat will often 'get away' with it	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Students who do the most work will get better grades	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
People will treat you with respect because you are a university student	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will be good teachers	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Subjects taught on your course will prepare you for the 'real world'	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will be given help with learning how to study	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
You will get suitable feedback on the work you do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Other students will be of a similar academic standard as you	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Students who express opinions similar to those of the tutor will get better marks	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The course will be enjoyable	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will make the topics interesting	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tutors will be intimidating	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Students will help each other with the work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Name : .....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

Appendix five

Main expectations questionnaire

Student Expectations Survey

This survey has been designed to find out what your expectations are as you start your university career. Hopefully, analysis of the answers you give will help future students of this university.
You'll see that you are asked to give your name. This is only so that we can follow through the survey later on to see if expectations change. *No conclusions will be drawn about you as an individual from the answers you give - we are only interested in analyzing how the whole student year- group feels. Your personal answers will remain entirely confidential.*

Name:---------- **Course:----------**

As a new student you probably had all sorts of expectations when you joined the university. The statements below all express expectations which you may or may not have had about YOURSELF.

1. Using the 5-point scales below please rate how IMPORTANT these expectations were to you AT THE TIME YOU JOINED THE UNIVERSITY. (Ring the appropriate number).

1 = of little or no importance to you
5 = extremely important to you

2. Using the 3-point scales below please rate how well you think each expectation has been met from your experience of university life so far.

1 = not at all well
2 = moderately well
3 = very well

3. Please then tick the SIX expectations which you think are most important.

As a student I would expect to:	**How important 1=no importance 5=extremely important**	**Expectations met 1=not well 2=mod.well 3=very well**	**Tick SIX most important**
1. get a qualification	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
2. build good relationships with tutors	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
3. enjoy learning	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
4. become independent	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
5. improve my personal transferable skills	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
6. feel proud of my achievements	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
7. gain the knowledge and skills that will make me an asset to an organisation	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
8. improve my self-confidence	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
9. gain life experience	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
10. enjoy a good social life	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
11. meet new people/make new friends	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
12. become more responsible	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
13. get a placement	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
14. improve my ability to make decisions	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
15. work hard	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
16. build good working relationships with other students	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
17. achieve the best grades I can	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	

In general, how well do you think your expectations of yourself have been met so far?

Very well 1 2 3 4 5 Not at all

P.T.O.

Now please repeat the exercise with the following statements, which all represent expectations that you may have held about your **TUTORS** WHEN YOU JOINED THE UNIVERSITY

I expected my university tutors to:	**How important?** **1=no importance** **5=extremely important**	**Expectations met** **1=not well** **2=mod. Well** **3=very well**	**Tick SIX most important**
1. be good teachers	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
2. be professional	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
3. be encouraging	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
4. motivate me to do my best	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
5. give help and advice with academic problems when I need it	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
6. give help and advice with personal problems when I need it	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
7. be honest	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
8. show me the best way to learn	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
9. be available whenever help is needed	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
10. be fair to everyone	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
11. be approachable/friendly	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
12. help me enjoy my time here	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
13. take an interest in my progress and notice if I am not meeting expectations	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
14. be understanding	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
15. help me develop as a person	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
16. treat me with respect	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
17. help me develop skills that I will need for my career	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
18. be knowledgeable about their subject	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	

In general, how well do you think your expectations of your tutors have been met so far?

Very well 1 2 3 4 5 Not at all

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

Appendix six

The University of Sunderland Student Charter

Introduction

We want staff and students to work together to improve the quality of our service. We focus on everyone's responsibility to each other. This charter explains this responsibility and was written by a group of staff and students after consultation with s taff and students across the university.

The charter sets out the level of service you can expect when you apply to come to the university and while you are studying here. The charter also says what we expect of you.

We are committed to equal opportunities, equal access to facilities, to fair practice, respect and courtesy. We focus on partnership because we believe that the best way to improve the university is to improve communication between students and staff. If you do have a problem, tell the person who provides the service. If they do not sort out your problem you can use the complaints procedure.

Contents

Before you arrive

You can expect us to do the following.

• Reply to any inquiry about how to join the university and the programme you want to study within five working days. We will deal with your application as fairly and quickly as we can.

• Give you accurate information on:

- how to apply;
- programmes and qualifications;
- whether a programme is available full-time or part-time;
- how often you must attend for part-time study;
- entry requirements;
- tuition fees, the relevant deadlines for payment, and easy payment options;
- names and telephone numbers of staff who can give you more advice and information;
- when you can visit the university and whether representatives from the university will be visiting your area;
- the services we provide and how to use them;
- the facilities and procedures for students who have a disability or a specific learning difficulty; and
- travelling to and living in Sunderland (especially to help international students).
- reply to a direct application (one that is not on a UCAS or ADAR form) within seven working days of receiving it . We will try to tell you if you have got a place within 28 working days (it may take overseas students longer to receiv e our reply if there are postal delays).

• After you have accepted a place, we will give you full instructions. This includes induction arrangements, dates, times and places to enrol and register.
• Help you if you have a disability or specific learning difficulty (for example dyslexia). You can talk to a special needs adviser about your needs. You can also get help from the special needs tutor in each subject area.
• Send you an accommodation application form, an accommodation leaflet, and an accommodation acknowledgment card when you have satisfied all our academic requirements.

• Post your accommodation acknowledgement card to you on the day we receive your accommodation application.
• Offer university accommodation to new students first.
• Give out accommodation in the order we receive accommodation cards.
• Guarantee university accommodation to overseas students accepted before 1 September.
• Consider any special needs you may have.
• Try to offer you the type of accommodation you prefer. If there are no places left in that type of accommodation we will offer you the next available option.
• Tell you how to get private accommodation if you need it.
• Make special arrangements for you if you are an international student. We will pick you up from Newcastle or Teesside airport and take you to your accommodation. But you must fill in the form in the joining pack so that we know what time you will arrive.

We will expect you to do the following.
• Give us complete and accurate information in your application.
• Take part in any necessary exams, tests or interviews and give us any extra information we ask for.
• Tell us about any personal circumstances (for example health, learning difficulties or a disability) which we should know about.
• Reply to our letters and phone calls within the deadlines we give you.
• Write in your application form (and tell the special needs adviser) about any special needs you have. You must do this before you enrol so we can tell you about relevant facilities at the university. Then, if you accept our off er, we can organise the support you need before you arrive.
• Tell us about any special help you need before you arrive. (This includes travel arrangements if you are an overseas student.)

When you arrive

You can expect us to give you the following.
• A suitable introduction to life as a student at the university. This includes events for international students, such as language classes.
• A handbook containing the rules and standards that apply to your programme, with clear details about the modules you will study, the choices you need to make, and our regulations and procedures for assessment, behaviour, discip line, and appeals.
• A calendar for the academic year and your timetable (seminars may be arranged at the first meeting of a class).
• Details of tutorials and other learning support arrangements, including who your tutors are, what roles they have and how you can contact them.
• Details of how to register.
• A clear statement about what you need to pass your programme and what happens if you do not pass key assessments.
• We will give you information about:
- the Students' Union;

- how you can help make decisions about the university;
- our policies on health, safety, smoking, the environment and equal opportunities;
- financial matters, including what support is available if you are having difficulties;
- the students' support service; and
- how to complain.

We will expect you to:
• read the information we give you;
• follow our rules and procedures; and
• pay any fees when they are due.

Your programme of study

You can expect us to provide the following.

• Teaching and learning activities that are up-to-date, well planned and based on students' needs.
• A range of ways to encourage and assess learning at each level of study.
• A schedule of assignments for each module within a week of starting work on that module.
• A suitable learning environment for each type of learning activity.
• The chance to tell us what you think about your programme.
• Regular chances to discuss your progress and get study advice.
• As much notice as we can if we change the teaching arrangements.
• A notice on the relevant room door if we have to cancel a class (unless we have a good reason and this is not possible).
• Details of an assignment at least 4 weeks before you have to hand it in.
• Details of how we will mark the assignment and the type of feedback you will get on it.
• Your assignments marked and back to you with feedback from the tutor within 4 weeks, unless there is a good reason why this can't be done.
• Replacement classes if a lot of classes are cancelled.
• Information about what is expected in project work, how we will mark it, and what formal supervision there will be.
• An education which lets you achieve a similar standard to those people doing a similar programme at another university.
• Continuous support for students with special needs from special needs tutors in your school (so you can discuss academic issues), the special needs librarian, and the special needs adviser (who can help you get special equipmen t if you need it).
• Advice and support for international students on matters such as food, religion and language.
• Regular international student forums, so that international students can talk about any problems they have at the university.

If your programme includes a work placement or an overseas exchange you can expect us to :

• help you find a suitable placement;
• give you a placement tutor during the work placement;
• make sure that there is a member of staff from the organisation you are working at who you can talk to about how you are doing; and
• give you a written statement of the terms and conditions of the placement and its learning goals.

We expect you to:
• work enthusiastically through your chosen programme of study or research;
• explain the reasons for any time off;
• go to classes, hand work in on time and tell tutors if you have any problems doing either of these;
• give us your opinion on the services we provide;
• follow health and safety procedures;
• give us evidence of any circumstances that you think have affected your study; and
• follow the study and assessment requirements of any placement which forms part of your studies and all other reasonable requirements of the placement organisation.

Taking part in university life

You can expect :
• information about how students are represented and involved in making decisions;
• several ways to involve yourself in making decisions in the university and chances to give your opinions and comments and get a response;
• the chance to be represented on decision-making boards and groups; and
• student representatives on decision-making boards and groups to be trained by the Students' Union.

We expect you to :
• take part in the learning process and give us feedback if we ask you to; and
• take advantage of the training provided and go to relevant meetings if you decide to be a student representative.

Research students

You can expect us to do the following.
• Provide a process to approve your research programme, supervisory team and other support arrangements.
• Arrange for a suitably-qualified member of the supervisory team to be your director of studies.
• Give you regular feedback. This includes progress reviews, constructive criticism of written work and information on the standard we expect.
• Arrange a student research forum for the whole university and a student questionnaire each year so you can give us your opinions.
• Give you a tutor for postgraduate research to sort out problems that you haven't managed to sort out in any other way.

We expect you to do the following.
• Act on the feedback and help we give you.
• Show your commitment to research by taking part in research activities inside and outside the university (for example, seminars) and in courses that the supervisory team recommends or that your research programme requires. ;
• Produce a full, detailed report each year on your research, meeting our requirements.
• Finish your degree within the time we agreed with you when you applied.
• Try to publish your research findings in relevant journals or at conferences, exhibitions and so on as agreed with your director of studies.

Learning support

You can expect us to do the following.

• Provide library facilities with enough books on specialised subject areas as well as basic reference materials. We do not have enough money to buy one text book for every student or to receive a copy of every journal.
• Make sure that each relevant library has at least one copy of each book and article that teaching staff recommend in module guides.
• Provide a detailed, easy-to-use library catalogue and have a system to reserve books and other materials in the libraries and through any computer that is linked to the campus network.
• Make sure that the libraries and resource centres are open at suitable times that are well -publicised and that they are always open at these times unless there is a good reason why they have to be closed.
• Make sure that any planned changes to the learning support and computing facilities are advertised.
• Put materials which are used a lot in the temporary reference collection.
• Provide a quiet study environment, including a silent study area in each library, and make sure that these are kept quiet.
• Provide a resource centre in each school.
• Provide reasonably-priced photocopying facilities for you to use in all libraries and most resource centres.
• Let you use the general computing facilities in each school, as long as a time-tabled class does not need them. (For security reasons, there are restrictions in some schools.)
• Put details of how to get help if you have a problem using the computer in each computer laboratory and resource centre.

We expect you to do the following.

• Respect the rights of other users by being quiet and being silent in the silent study areas.
• Return items which you have borrowed when they are due back and pay fines on items not returned on time.
• Follow rules in libraries and resource centres and do as the staff ask.
• Find out what the rules about computers are and stick to them.
• Take reasonable steps to protect computer equipment from computer viruses.

Student support

Careers service

You can expect us to do the following.

• Provide up-to-date, accurate and detailed information on what you can do after you leave the university, including education, training and jobs.
• Provide careers education as part of your study.
• Arrange for advisers to be available most weekdays to answer your questions.
• Help you during the first year after you leave us, until you find your first full-time job or register for a full-time programme at another educational institution.
• Arrange confidential careers interviews for students in their final year. You will usually have an interview within 3 weeks of asking for one, but during peak times (September to December) this could be longer.
• Invite national companies to carry out their first interviews at the university when they are looking for people to employ.
• Provide computerised career development packages.
• Help you improve job applications and practise interviewing skills.

We expect you to do the following.
• Visit the careers service during your first year at the university.
• Arrive on time for interviews.
• Tell the careers service if you can't go to activities they have arranged for you.
• Fill in a questionnaire about what you are doing after you leave university. By law we have to give this information to the Government.
• Tell us what you think about the careers services we provide.

Accommodation service

You can expect us to give you the following.
• Information and general advice on a range of issues. This includes contracts, dealing with landlords and neighbours, public health regulations, money, your welfare and university houses and flats.
If you are a continuing student you can expect us to :
• let you know whether you have got a place in a university house or flat after a draw which takes place in February or March each year;
• take into account your special needs;
• keep a register of private accommodation for you to look at from March; and
• provide a mailing list of private accommodation if you ask for one.

We expect you to :
• pay rent when it is due; and
• follow our code of practice and keep to agreements for university-owned or managed accommodation.

Childcare

You can expect us to :
• provide full-time or part-time childcare for children who are between three months and five years old at a reduced cost;
• give out nursery places on a first-come first-served basis;
• provide a friendly environment, where parents can be involved in their child's day and in our childcare policy, and where children are encouraged to learn and develop; and
• arrange a play scheme during Easter and Summer holidays.

We expect you to do the following.
• Apply for a nursery place as soon as you can. (We have one of the largest university nurseries in the UK. But the waiting time for places in the under-two age group is usually over 18 months.
For 2-to 5-year-olds it is usually 12 months.)
• Follow the terms and conditions of the contract you signed and always make sure that we can contact you quickly if we need to.

Catering

You can expect us to :
• sell a range of food and drink at the times advertised (at some sites the food and drink will be suitable for different diets);
• provide refreshment facilities for students who only study in the evening: and
• listen to any suggestions you make for improving the catering facilities.

We expect you to :
• use the chance to give us your views and make suggestions about our catering.

The Government Student Loan Scheme

You can expect us to do the following.
• Give you up-to-date information on who can have a loan. (Full- time UK students can borrow up to a fixed amount each year. This amount is set by the Government.)
• Set up an appointment system for student loan interviews. At peak times (September to November) we will make sure that there are extra staff doing student loan interviews. But even then you may have to wait up to 4 weeks for an interview.
• Arrange an emergency appointment if the Welfare Officer from the Students' Union has told you to come and see us.
• Send you information about the loans scheme if you are on a placement.
• Make sure your loan interview finds out whether you can have a loan and gives you important information.
• Run an efficient service by sending the new loan applications to the Student Loans Company every day. (How quickly you get your loan depends on the Student Loans Company.)

We expect you to :
• make your loan appointment as soon as you can and arrive on time for your interview;
• take all the necessary documents to your loan appointment (original copies only);
• provide full and accurate information on the forms you fill in; and
• send your confirmation slip to the Student Loan Company if you are accepted and want a loan.

Access fund

You can expect us to provide you with :
• information on how to apply to the access fund (sometimes called the hardship fund);
• information on who can apply (basically, full-time UK students who have serious financial problems);
• a response to your application within 15 working days;
• a cheque for any money you are given within 10 working days;
• clear reasons why you can't have any money if your application is refused:
• a way to appeal against the access fund panel's decision; and
• the chance to talk to a financial specialist and debt counsellor.

We expect you to :
• give full and accurate information on the application form you fill in. These forms should be given to us before any deadlines.

Sports, social, cultural and leisure facilities

You can expect us to give you the following.
• The chance to take part in, and information about, a wide range of sports, social, cultural and leisure activities that are run by the Students Union, the City of Sunderland Leisure Service and other city sports and cultural or ganisations.
• Sport and leisure facilities which provide a balance between individual and organised group activities.
• The chance to represent the university in matches that are recognised by the British Universities Sports Association (BUSA). You will be allowed to miss classes for these matches.
• Accurate information about the facilities and the hours they are available.

We expect you to do the following.
• Use the facilities we provide responsibly and follow rules on health, hygiene and safety.
• Keep up our reputation for well-behaved sports teams.
• Pay a membership fee each year if you want to join the sports centre. Once you have paid the membership fee you do not have to pay for any of the basic facilities at the sports centre.
• Do what the staff at the sports centre ask. Use the booking system and keep the bookings you make.

Counselling

You can expect us to do the following.
• Arrange for you to see a counsellor within 10 days of you asking, emergencies will be quicker. You will not have to wait more than 3 weeks for any future appointments.
• Make sure the service is completely confidential.

Complaints

If you think there is something wrong with the service, you should complain to the person you normally get the service from. If you are unhappy with their answer, you should speak to:

• a level or programme leader;
• if you are a postgraduate student, the postgraduate tutor;
• the director of your school; or
• the director or head of the service you are complaining about.

We aim to sort out 99% of all complaints in this way.

If you feel that your problem has not been sorted out properly you should go to the Student Service Unit in St. Mary's building, or to the Students' Union. Or you can phone the Student Service Unit on 515 2946/2090.They can help you take your complaint further through the formal procedure. If things have gone wrong, we will try to put them right.

Appendix seven

Obligations breach questionnaire

Your course: _____ **Your age:** 18-22 ☐ 0ver 22 ☐

Year: 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ **Gender:** M ☐ F ☐

How were you employed immediately before you joined the university? School ☐ College ☐ Work ☐ Other ☐

What do you feel was the **main influence** in forming your opinions about what university would be like **before you came here?**

University prospectus ☐
Friends☐
Family ☐
Teachers☐
TV ☐
Visit to the university☐
Admissions staff ☐

When students join a university they usually have ideas about what they can expect from their tutors during their course. University staff also might make implicit and explicit promises during recruitment, which obligate them to provide certain things to students. Universities vary in the degree to which they subsequently fulfil those promises and obligations to students.
Read over the following items listed below. Think about the extent to which the university made implicit or explicit promises to provide the type of tutor support mentioned. Then think about how well the university has fulfilled those promises. Using the scale provided, could you please indicate the extent to which you think tutors are **obligated** to fulfil the service mentioned, and in the second column indicate to what extent you think the obligation has been met.

Tutors are obliged to:	Not at all obligated				Very obligated	Not at all fulfilled				Very well fulfilled
Be approachable	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Be available when needed	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Be encouraging	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Be understanding	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Give academic advice	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Help me develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Help me enjoy my time here	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Motivate me	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Show me how to learn	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Take an interest in my progress	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Robinson, S.L. (1996) 'Trust and breach of the Psychological Contract'. *Administrative Science*

Appendix eight

Theoretical basis for obligations interviews and interview schema

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE (Shore & Tetrick paper)	**RELATED QUESTIONS TO STUDENTS**
Individuals are likely to store and recall incomplete information and also fill in incomplete information based on existing schemas. New hires ar elikely to base their psychological contract on information that is only partially generated by the external environment. Two people given the same information....are likely to differ in how they make sense of the information presented.	What was your background before coming to university? Have any of your family attended university before you? If so, what university did they attend?
Potential employees approach the employment relationship with a set of expectations about the relationship (pg 96)	What impressions of university did you have before you got here? What did you think Sunderland Uni. would be like ? Did you feel that it would be different to say, Durham or Newcastle? Why was that? What or who were the main influences on your expectations of university life?
People have goal-orientated motivations for seeking information about the psychological contract. These can be transactional and relational (pg 97)	What were your main reasons for coming to university? How did you decide if Sunderland University would meet your needs?

New hires may use a variety of approaches to seeking information relevant to the psychological contract, including *inquiry, monitoring* and *negotiation*. (pg 98)	Where did you go to for information about the University? What impressions did that give you? How realistic do you think those impressions were now , looking back?
Prior to entry, an individual will develop their psychological contract based on the organisational agents that they come into contact with, usually a recruiter or HRD representative (pg 101)	Did you attend an open day before you joined the university? If so, what was you impression of the staff that you met with then? Do you think that was representative of what you've now experienced during your time at the university? How does that make you feel? You must have had some contact with admissions staff when you joined. What was your impression of them? How did they make you feel? What was your impression of the staff that you came into contact with during induction week? What were your feelings about the university and your decision to come here during that week?
There is much evidence that co-workers play an important informational role in the socialisation process. Co-workers may be a useful source of information about the psychological contract in a number of ways. (pg 101)	What contact did you have with second or third year students during your early months here? How did they affect your opinion of the university, if at all?
Even a poor performing or disruptive employee may not view themselves as having a responsibility in organisational violations or contracts (pg 102)	Have you done better, worse, or about the same as you expected at University? What do you think that is due to?
Violation of the contract (starts pg 102)	Looking at the student's answers to the expectation questionnaire, go through and ask which were considered to be obligations, and why. How did they feel when those obligations weren't met?

Rationale for changes to the original pilot schema:

The pilot interviewees appeared to acknowledge no difference between the academic prestige of Durham/Newcastle and Sunderland. This seemed surprising, given the reputation of Durham in particular. Most interviewees said they chose Sunderland because it was near to home, but if this was the main criterion, then Durham would also have been an acceptable choice. So why wasn't Durham considered, if they really didn't see any difference between the two? My interpretation is that they know there was a difference, but have suppressed the impression for some reason. Additional questions have been added to interrogate this further. The implicit contract is particularly affected here. Several questions included to determine if students are aware of the communitiy's perception of Sunderland – friends, relatives, and importantly, employers.

Further investigation of the effect of university staff is required. Questions therefore included on academic staff attitudes towards students, the Uni., management and the course. (HF: Students will be less affected by staff complaining about management than they would be if they felt that staff were devaluing the education that students' were getting).

A question on complaints is included, to investigate how 'lucky' students feel to be at the University (HF: Students who feel lucky to be there are less likely to complain than those who think the University is lucky to have them!) This starts to investigate the relationship that students think exists between themselves and the university.

The nature of the perceived relationship is questioned explicitly at the end of the interview.

Response to various violations also investigated, using questions to distinguish between transactional, relational ,and procedural violations.

Interview schedule: (Final version)

(Items added as a result of discussion of pilot findings included in italics)

Name; date; course

What was your background before coming to university?

Has any of your family attended university before you?

If so, which university did they attend?

What impressions did you have of university life in general before you got here/

What did you think Sunderland University would be like?

When you told family/friends that you were coming to Sunderland, how did they react?

How did you feel about telling them – proud, embarrassed...?

Did you think it would be different to say, Durham or Newcastle?

Why was that?

What sort of grades do you think are needed to get into Durham?

Do you think that you might have been able to go there if you'd wanted to?

What or who were the main influences on your expectations of university life?

Where did you go for information about the university?

What impressions did that give you?

How realistic do you think those expectations were, looking back now?

Did you attend an open day before joining the University/

If so, what was your impression of the staff you met then/

Do you think they were representative of the staff you've encountered since then/

How does that make you feel?
You must have had some contact with admissions staff. What was the impression you got from them

What was your impression of staff during induction week?

What were your feelings about the university and your decision to come here during that week?

Did other,older students affect your expectations of the university in your early months here?

What were your main reasons for coming to university?

How did you decide that Sunderland University would meet your needs?

Have you done better, worse, or about the same as you expected?

What do you think this is due to?

Have you ever made a complaint, and if so, what was it about?

Was your complaint resolved?

How did you feel about the outcome?

What do you think the academic staff thinks about the university?

What do you think the academic staff thinks about the courses on offer?

What do you think the academic staff thinks about the management?

What do you think the academic staff thinks about students?

When something goes wrong, who or what do you get angry with?

How do you think you would react under the following circumstances:

- *Another student gets a much better mark than you for a very similar piece of work*
- *A member of staff treats you disrespectfully*
- *You submit valid mitigation for a late assignment, but it isn't accepted and you end up being referred in that module.*

You're graduating soon. How do you think you'll fare in the job market with a degree from Sunderland?

What do you think the relationship is between yourself and the university? Do you see yourself as a customer, or like an employee?

If you think of yourself as a customer, does that imply that you see getting a degree in the same light as ,say, buying a computer?

If not, what do you think the difference is?