Dispositions to Stay and to Succeed

Final Report

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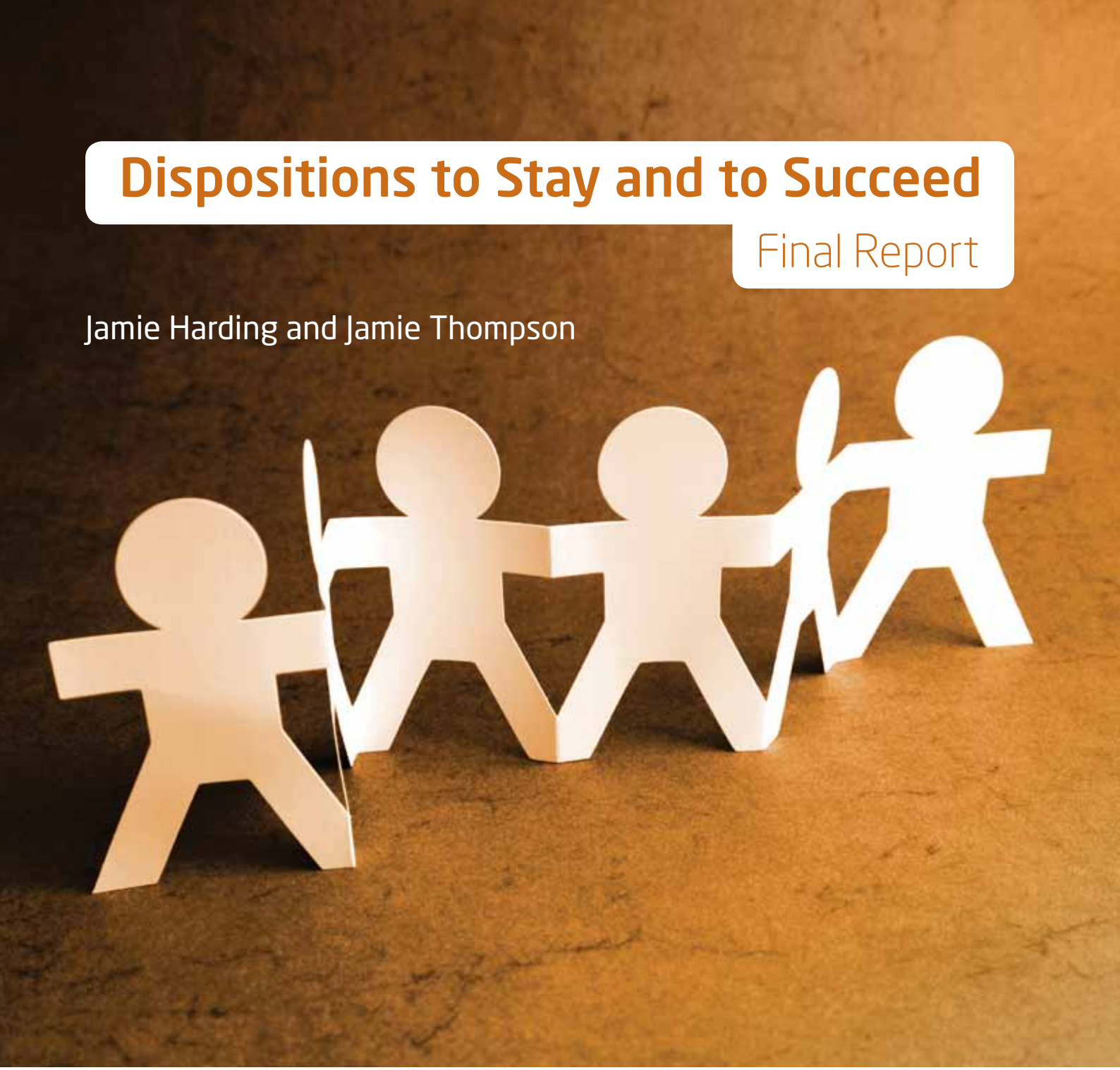

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What Works? Student Retention & Success

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1. Introduction

What works? Student retention and success programme

This report is a project output as part of the What works? Student retention and success programme. This three year evaluative programme has been initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The seven projects in the programme, involving 22 Higher Education Institutions, have been evaluating effective strategies and interventions to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The projects have been working to generate practical outputs including reports that enhance practice and associated toolkits and resources to assist other institutions to learn from their work and improve student retention and success. It is anticipated that the outputs of this programme will be particularly significant in the context of the current changes facing higher education.

The initial aims of the Dispositions to Stay project were:

1. To use The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI)[1] to identify students at risk of disengagement
2. To actively explore the use of ELLI dispositions for planned retention and success interventions
3. To use these results to identify and evaluate effective retention and success strategies

A central hypothesis was that students' 'scores' on some of the learning dispositions would be statistically related to student retention and/or success. Initiatives could then be introduced and evaluated with the aim of boosting these key learning dispositions. However, these aims proved impossible to achieve for two reasons:

1. The strong tendency of students to leave very early in their academic programme, before an ELLI profile could be completed meant that the project failed to gather sufficient profiles of students who had left their academic programmes to enable comparisons to be made with students who completed their programme of study
2. None of the ELLI dispositions had a strong relationship with student success, as measured by mean mark at the end of the academic year. The strongest correlations achieved, from across a wide range of academic programmes, were between mean mark and critical curiosity ($p=0.031$) and between mean mark and meaning making ($p=0.037$). These correlations were statistically significant, suggesting that they were likely to have an influence over mean mark in any sample. However, the extent of this influence was very small: the correlation figure for critical curiosity suggested that this dimension explained only 0.4% of the variation in students' mean marks (this is discussed further in Section 6).

As a result, in the final year of the project the aims were reviewed with the project evaluators and in the context of discussion with the project funders. The quantitative ELLI data had failed to deliver encouraging traction for the further development and evaluation of interventions focused on key dimensions.[2] However, use of ELLI had continued to engage both staff and students. The results of the initial phase of work clearly demonstrated that introducing students to issues of learner development through the language of ELLI clearly resonated with both students and staff. In this context the extensive, rich qualitative data collected in the first two years of the project was revisited. Several themes emerged from this data that relate to student retention and success:

- Student change and personal development
- Relationships between staff and students

1 An on-line tool for measuring lifelong learning dispositions, developed at the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University (Deakin Crick, Broadfoot & Claxton 2004; Deakin Crick, 2007)

2 Nevertheless two pieces of work exploring interventions were completed; Qualitative data was collected and analysed in relation to an intervention targeting Critical Curiosity (see below and 3.2.4) and pre and post test ELLI data was collected and analysed in relation to a generic 'learning power' intervention with a large cohort (see Appendix 2 below)

- Students' relationships with their peers
- Student and staff expectations of their role and contribution to learning
- Motivation and interest in the subject studied

The key themes here, about relationships in HE, are not new (e.g. Bryson and Hand, 2007; Cowan, J., 2004; Mann, 2005; Smith and Beggs, 2003). However the issue of relationships raised a number of relevant questions that became the focus of the last phase of the DTS project. Specifically, what expectations about learning and personal development do students bring to HE? How do these compare with the expectations of staff? What constitute good learning relationships with staff and with peers? What are these relationships like and how are they initiated and sustained? What supports their development – and what prevents or discourages it?

The identification of these themes and questions led to the setting of new aims for the project, i.e.

1. To demonstrate the positive changes and development that students can achieve that illuminate our understanding of the notion of student success
2. To establish the role of relationships with staff, relationships with their peers and other factors in bringing about these positive changes and supporting success
3. To identify good practice in encouraging and establishing positive relationships

1.1 Methodology of evaluation

The changing aims of the project necessitated a similarly flexible methodology. One factor that remained constant through the three years of the project was the desire to identify the most effective method of introducing ELLI to students. Clearly, this was consistent with the initial aims of the project, but it was also relevant to the later aim of encouraging positive relationships between staff and students: talking to students about their learning is good practice (see the evidence presented in Section 4 below) regardless of the level of impact on student marks.

However, other elements of the methodology had to be adjusted to fit with the changing aims. The data collection that took place each year was as follows:

Year 1

In the first year, ELLI data was collected from 590 students attending the Universities of Northumbria and Bedfordshire. These profiles could be compared with first year marks in 345 cases. This limited amount of data led to caution being exercised in the conclusions that were drawn, although it did appear that critical curiosity could be a key dimension. The qualitative data collected in the first year of the project concentrated on the most appropriate use of ELLI:

- A focus group was conducted with Northumbria staff studying for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. This group were in the unique position of being able to comment on the use of ELLI both as staff and students.
- Data was also collected on a pro forma from all academic staff known to have introduced ELLI to students.
- Four individual interviews were conducted with student ambassadors on the University of Manchester's Manchester Access Programme (MAP). These are students of the university who support potential students on MAP. They were able to comment on the use of ELLI both for themselves and for the access programme students. MAP seeks to support students from non-academic backgrounds in the transition from college to higher education. The programme runs over a calendar year, beginning part way through the first year of post-compulsory education. There is a focus on changing the style of learning to the one that will be needed in higher education. Participants are mentored by current undergraduate or postgraduate students who act as student ambassadors.

- In addition, two focus groups were conducted with students on the Manchester Access Programme and a member of staff associated with the programme was interviewed.

Year 2

In the second year, it was possible to undertake more substantial quantitative data analysis: there were 832 students whose ELLI profiles could be matched to their mean mark. The qualitative data collection in the second year was as follows:

- Work continued to identify methods by which ELLI was introduced to students and to suggest good practice. Students from Northumbria, Manchester and Bedfordshire were closely involved in the evaluation of practice at a residential event hosted by Northumbria University. A resource pack was developed which drew on these good practice discussions; the pack is one of the outcomes of this project.
- An evaluation took place of a research skills unit of study at the University of Bedfordshire, which sought to boost students' critical curiosity. Nine students were asked about the nature of their curiosity and whether it had changed as a result of studying the module. This was based on the assumption from the first year data that critical curiosity would prove to have a key bearing on success – an assumption that later proved to be only partially correct. However, the data was used to demonstrate how students could change and develop as learners. (See 3.2.4 below)
- Retention issues were studied directly through interviews with 13 students who had left an academic programme and six who had come close to leaving one. In both cases, these students were recruited through email requests to Northumbria students, asking if they or any of their friends fitted the criteria of leaving or nearly leaving. Part of the interviews focused on the ELLI learning dimensions but there was also discussion of other factors that had featured in their decision to stay or leave. While sections 2-5 of this report concentrate on the factors that can create a positive environment for students and facilitate them reaching their potential (which have an indirect impact on retention and success), the data collected specifically in relation to decisions to stay or leave is considered in section 6.

Year 3

In the third year, some new aims were agreed for the project. Additional data analysis was commissioned from the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University (Smith, M. 2011).

- The increased interest in learning relationships led to 1723 students' ELLI records being examined to explore the nature of the learning relationships dimension measured by ELLI.
- Changes to ELLI profiles in the course of a module were analysed for 182 first-year Management students, which fitted with the theme of student development (see Appendix 2).
- The entire DTS ELLI data set was analysed for dimension validity.

An in-lecture (electronic voting buttons) survey of 135 first-year Business Studies undergraduates examined their expectations about changing and also the type of relationship that they expected, wanted and experienced with academic staff. The emerging evidence of subject interest as an important motivating factor led to a re-examination of some quantitative data collected with Social Science students in 2005-2006. (Harding, forthcoming)

Qualitative data examined change, relationships and expectations. This data consisted of:

- Interviews with 32 employed graduates
- Interviews with 27 undergraduates
- A focus group of Northumbria University staff

In all cases, snowball sampling was used.

Without this development in the methodology the project would have remained focused on the exploration and illumination of the slight relationships between ELLI scores and student marks. The project has been able to begin this exploration (in the findings below) but at the same time build on the early data to continue to address the question of what works in promoting student retention, engagement and success.

Sections 2-6 discuss the key findings from the data above.

2. Motivation for studying

In order to better understand the process of student change and development, it is helpful to consider first the expectations and motivations that bring people to university in the first place. Three broad categories of motivation for choosing an academic programme emerged from the research: employment prospects, desire to develop personally and interest in the subject area.

2.1 Being motivated by employment prospects

A number of students and graduates who were interviewed were from vocational areas such as Business Studies and courses in the Built Environment (e.g. Architecture, Quantity Surveying). However, relatively few discussed employment prospects as their reasons for studying and there was only one respondent who discussed choosing a programme because they had a specific career in mind:

> *"The fact that I've been in a business management environment for the last 15 years, managing public housing and restaurants. I just decided that I wanted to take a step up the ladder and perhaps go into operations management. I knew the theories, but I just needed to know how to implement them. I went through an HEFC course last year at Newcastle College, and this was obviously the natural progression".*

Other respondents took a less specific view that their chosen programme could improve their employment prospects:

> *"My expectations were more linked to finding a job after studies. I think it provided good knowledge and practical experience."*

2.2 Being motivated by a desire for personal development

Another form of motivation discussed by a minority of respondents was the desire for personal development, for example:

> *"I came here to get a degree, to get the qualification I needed, to get what I want out of my life. I've done well previously, but I'd reached a plateau, and I just knew that I needed to educate myself further and broaden my horizons, which I've done by coming here".*

2.3 Being motivated by the subject area

A much more frequently identified form of motivation for choosing a particular academic programme was interest in the subject area. In many cases, it was the A level subjects that students had enjoyed most that pointed them to their preferred area of study:

> *"I didn't get very good A level grades, and I came through 'clearing' looking for a course that interested me. I'd done Sociology at college and really liked it, so through teachers at school we found a course that worked – and I had a sort of vague interest in politics, so I gave this course a go. As it happens, Politics is now one of my favourite things, but I came into it just for the Sociology aspect*

In some cases, respondents felt that there was a difference between their expectations and the reality of the subject area: '*you choose a course, think it's fantastic, and then it might not be suited to you*.' In situations such as these, flexibility to enable students to adjust and change the focus of their study can be important:

> *I did start off doing History and Politics and I dropped the politics because I found it quite boring and I had more friends on the history course so I changed that in the first year.*

2.4 Staff perspectives on motivation and student expectations

For staff there were two principal concerns about motivation; firstly, that students have unrealistic expectations about achieving academic success without first having developed as higher level learners and secondly a regret when students are seen to adopt instrumental approaches to the learning process – a pre-occupation with marks and passing at the expense of engagement and immersion in subject and an openness to personal change and growth.

> *They are coming for three years and expect to get 'A's in all areas ... inevitably it doesn't happen. .... (they) think it is going to be something they can get into fairly quickly. And it is not! ..... Management of expectations is something that ... has to be dealt with.*

> *… they have ... a steep learning curve in the first year, ...because it is not like school. That is what they always say – it is not like school.*

Although the basic question of expectations is sometimes not addressed:

> *Certainly, within my colleagues it is an exception when anybody actually talks to students about what we expect them to do and how to approach learning. It is very..... traditional - they just throw lecture stuff at them and they are supposed to deal with it.*

Staff often find that students are receptive to expectations being set – and raised:

> *I find students really receptive to – "hang on a minute; this is why you are doing it, and it is not about what you remember, but how you think about ... the material".... They seem always to have been told in the past "it's about remembering things to get through exams. If you remember that, you are alright at the exam". And, they are very receptive to the change, but I think it needs something changing in staff expectations ... we are not used to dealing with anybody not used to sorting out their own material. They've been brought up by 'spoon-feeding' ...it's been laid out – "this is what you need to do".*

In addressing the management of expectations on both sides, a range of approaches were discussed. Some felt the need to try and establish some group / subject / discipline identity:

> *It is about the student identity and feeling a part of the group. When our students realise the relevance of what they are doing towards architecture ... that is fine. But when.... they are lumped with everybody else and doing non-specific work with other groups ...it is just one big soup.*

There was a shared sense of the importance of addressing these issues as soon as possible and in Induction processes particularly – and sometimes this work was done to powerful effect:

> *I asked J. to talk (in Induction) about how we learn and why we learn, and those simple processes of doing so. And they go from those meeting and the comments, quotes and feedback that we've had – 'I feel so differently now, than I did an hour ago – about my perspectives about what to expect, or what you expect from us', or 'what I expect from myself'. ... I feel very passionate about doing that for the students.*

> *my job is to make it very clear to the students – right on day one, week one – "week zero – orientation" to say – "this is what we are expecting of you, and this is how I can help you; this is how everybody else can help you*

This message was reinforced in a range of different ways:

> *We are fortunate in Architecture that there is a certain amount of peer learning, and all the work that students do has been pinned up (for all to see) and they have past examples of good work to look at. There's ... opportunities for peer learning, understanding the expectations. And occasionally we have to sit down and say - you might have had 'A's at high school, now you get 'C' and 'D', but this is about learning and moving from declarative knowledge to functional knowledge .... you have to apply that to a project, to the research ... it is very much about ...*

relationships and tutorials. Lots and lots of tutorials.

Differences in expectations were noted depending on different factors e.g. age

> *... age is important. ....I was involved with the health students, who came thinking - what am I doing here? Feeling like imposters in this place called university. They didn't think they had any business being there and that they would not have been able to get through the door academically. So, it was a struggle for them in those terms.*

And culture / personal history:

> *they may have an identity in another context - with their friends and their family ... and class background – and another identity that is form(ing) ... in the university – and it's which of those is stronger. The disruptive students in the class would have been at school the class clowns and they find it difficult to tear away from that and see themselves as mature learners.*

And different programme choice:

> *They (students) are not 'shocked' and given some sort of realisation of the real world. The Mechanical (Engineers) students – they go out to industry, they see things. You don't have to shock them because they are receptive – they want it. They made a conscious choice to do a programme that they were told will be difficult. Where the Design programme ... – oh well, this one is easier than that one because it has maths taken out. It just changes the way they're looking.*

The two principal concerns identified by staff; that students need to develop as higher level learners and that students adopt instrumental approaches can be, at least partially, addressed through the strategic use of ELLI or a similar tool (see 4.4).

3. Students Developing While Studying

From these motivations and expectations, the next theme addressed was student change and development during their academic programme. The in-lecture study of undergraduates (First-year Business Studies) showed that 78.8% expected to change personally and academically during the course of their degree and 45.7% expected to change a lot. Three areas of development were identified from the qualitative data: developing job related skills, developing as learners and developing as people.

3.1 Developing job related skills

Students identified a number of work related skills that they had developed during their academic programme. In terms of gaining employment, one respondent felt much more prepared for the interview stage:

> *"I think I became more confident .... to talk to other people. I would be a lot more prepared now to go to an interview whereas before the thought of going to an interview just was horrendous".*

However, for many, it was the experience of independent learning (a concept discussed further below) that best prepared them for working environments where they would need to be constantly learning:

> *"So, you've got to go and find out more on your own, and that boosts your confidence to go to the real world and do stuff. Obviously at work, when you are working in industry, you've been only given so much information that you have to find out the rest of it on your own. So, I guess it helps you a lot".*

3.1.1 Work placements

Respondents spoke warmly of the chance to have firsthand experience of the workplace: Placements could provide more than familiarisation with the workplace. One respondent described how their marks went up by 8% after their placement, which they attributed to the practical experience they had gained. Another praised their placement for helping them to develop work habits:

> *"I was lucky to get a placement and I got a lot of experience and the company themselves put me through a lot of training and ultimately I got a job from it which in this day and age is difficult. I've definitely changed, I'm a lot more focused on my work ethic and I want to keep succeeding. Before I came I was just working in a dead end job and now I have more ambition and I want to get as high as I can".*

3.1.2 Relevance of programme content

There was disagreement among students on non-vocational programmes, particularly in the social sciences, as to how far the content of their programme should be geared towards the workplace. One respondent demonstrated how programme content could make a direct link to employment:

> *"I wouldn't have got my first job out of university had it not been for what I did at uni because it was actually my dissertation that got me to the job. My dissertation was on social exclusion and citizenship so I'd done a study on young homeless people and how they were socially exclude and the impact it had of their citizenship and how much they could participate in society. My first job was in an action research project looking at chronic homelessness and social exclusion so I think that's what got me the job".*

However, one Criminology and Sociology student expressed a wish to have seen more practical elements such as visits to prisons or the courts. Similarly, a Politics graduate was disappointed by the lack of vocational

material on their programme:

> *"It taught me a lot of interesting things, and you could say the Politics did prepare me a little bit – you could debate and you could understand what was going on around you. But in terms of preparing for a job and getting in the right direction, it didn't really help at all."*

However, for others the subject area should be valued for its own sake rather than for its employment value. One Sociology undergraduate said of their subject:

> *"It's a critical view of society, so there are no rights and wrongs – you're entitled to your own opinion, as long as you can back it up with something".*

Another undergraduate clearly valued learning for its own sake:

> *"I like learning and getting new ideas. If I could I would probably study for the rest of my life, because there are so many interesting subjects. I was thinking maybe of becoming an academic and staying".*

3.2 Developing as learners

Evidence that students develop as learners was provided by the analysis of the ELLI profiles of the 182 first year Management students who completed two ELLI profiles: one in the first semester and one in the second. For the main part, the developments from the first profile to the second were positive, although students showed significantly less resilience according to their second profile and a small increase in critical curiosity between profiles was not statistically significant. However, students showed significant positive change in the other five ELLI dimensions: changing and learning, meaning making, creativity, strategic awareness and learning relationships. (See Appendix 2)

Qualitative data suggested that lack of motivation was a factor that could hinder students' development as learners. For some, motivation was there from the beginning of their academic programme:

> *"I think it definitely developed me as a learner to firstly have a hunger for knowledge - have the problem, have the initiative, and then slowly you get to find the solution".*

However, a number discussed adopting a different attitude to studying part way through their course which seemed to be attributed to their motivation. One discussed starting their second year with '*a renewed vigour, a renewed interest*'. For another, failing a year made them realise that '*I can't mess about and that if I want something out of life I'm going to have to put something in*.'

Where students were motivated, there were a number of specific ways in which they reported developing in confidence.

3.2.1 Developing presentation skills

One of the skills that respondents identified most frequently as having developed at university was confidence in giving verbal presentations. This was an area where, as a result of practice, fear could give way to confidence, with appropriate support:

> *"I'm a lot more confident in public speaking because you've got to do a lot of presentations as part of the course and I think that's a good element because before you'd never done it at school.*

3.2.2 Developing writing skills

Writing was another skill in which students develop confidence, given appropriate support:

> *"My writing skill and therefore my ability to produce reports improved dramatically while I was at University; it was always something I had struggled with at school and the format of writing the course helped me with that."*

3.2.3 Developing independent learning skills

Respondents discussed two aspects of independent learning that they developed during their academic programme: the management of information and the management of time:

> *"Learning something and being taught something are really different things, and I think that's the transition I made. I mean, you can see that when you look at an undergraduate essay – do you just use the sources that were given in the lectures, or do you spend an extra hour a day in the library reading?"*

> *"In the first months of my studies it was not so easy. After the second semester everything was better. I was feeling more confident and aware what I have learned. I could summarise in my mind and collect my ideas".*

For some the key issue was managing their time to ensure that they undertook sufficient independent study in an environment where there were few immediate pressures on them:

> *"I was living away from home and then just living without your parents doing a course that has less structure than previous study you've done. You have to be a lot more motivated. I guess it does ramp up as you go through the years in a way that you probably don't realise when you're doing it but yeah I think it did."*

> *"I became more independent, not just from living away but being responsible for your own things. Becoming more responsible - deadlines, lessons."*

3.2.4 Developing critical curiosity

A number of respondents were able to identify that they had become more critically curious as a result of the programme or programmes they had studied:

> *"I try and find out as much information as I can now and form my own opinion; I don't just automatically assume oh well he said that so it must be right, definitely not"*

> *"I'm critical of sources now, so I won't just read one newspaper about one article, I'll read the article and if it interests me I'll go out and find five or six of the sources about it from various places ..."*

The nature of the development of curiosity was examined further in interviews with the students who were studying the bridging programme at the University of Bedfordshire, with the research skills module that sought specifically to build critical curiosity. Most of these students stated that, prior to the start of either their foundation degree or the bridging programme,

- they were critical of what they heard and did not just accept things that were told to them; and
- they questioned things and were comfortable to air their disagreements in public.

However further questions and analysis showed that, through the foundation degree or the bridging programme, many began to understand that they could sometimes be hasty in their analysis of certain

situations and information. This manifested itself in a greater desire to find out 'the truth'.

> *"When I was in year one it wasn't like I wasn't questioning ... but now everything is 'oh! What about that, what if we do this"*

Following the bridging programme, students were able to put into practice what they had learned about seeking information and evaluating it while examining the practicality and feasibility of undertaking education research. Such a practical project enhanced and reinforced the manner in which students' curiosity had developed:

> *"The research skills module has made me realise that sometimes we take things at face value and maybe we shouldn't, I'm looking forward to doing another research project in a lot more detail"*

> *"I think it was essentially this [research] assignment [that has developed critical curiosity] ... because to be a accurate and effective researcher you need to be critically curious, you can't just be passive and take things at face value, you have to question things and you have to dig deep into answers ... I like the way our understanding of that has increased throughout the module"*

These findings demonstrate the benefits of academic staff encouraging, or even requiring, students to act in a critically curious manner and finding questions to ask.

3.3 Developing as people

One graduate student observed that learning at university is not only acquiring new academic knowledge but also learning about social relationships and life:

> *"Learning includes everything – in the class, in the library, and learning in life which is also learning. Sharing the flat with other students..."*

Respondents spoke about the manner in which they had benefited from living independently for the first time (in some cases) and meeting new people. In the case of living independently, some of the new skills developed were highly practical ones:

> *"I definitely do, just kind of generally growing up really. You learn a lot during those kind of first years of living away from home and things so, you learn new skills".*

Linked to the experience of more independent living was the ability to meet and interact with a greater range of people:

> *"I think I became more accepting of other people. Learned how to get on with other people, a lot more easily than I did before. I was probably quite shy before".*

Successfully achieving the more independent status required at university could bring great benefits in terms of students' confidence:

> *"I think I've become more confident and more responsible. You get to interact with a lot of people from different countries so that's how you develop confidence you get to learn about different cultures and different things".*

3.4 Staff views on student growth and development.

Discussions with staff focused on two themes: the nature of the personal growth and development that they wanted to see in their students, and the manner in which this growth could be encouraged and facilitated.

Staff expressed frustration at instrumental attitudes to academic programmes; they believed development to be in part about a transition from this approach to learning:

> *sharing with students about learning and the process of learning and what you will become and what a graduate looks like – it's removing some of the credentialism that we've got now because often what students want to do is get the pass. We've had that debate about feedback – often students are looking at the grade they get rather than the comment that goes along with it and I would really like to shift students away from credentialism to self development and a focus on what they will be if they fully engage with this thing and ...ELLI .. seven dimensions. I think that's what those dimension do – the student goes wow I'm the product not the piece of paper the 2:1 or the 1st or whatever.*

> *it is that – independent learning but also critical thinking so they are not just regurgitating what they've said, that they are having some sort of deeper analysis of what they are looking at.*

> *I think esteem and belief in what they are doing and that they can improve ... are important.*

Seeing such development could be a key part of the professional satisfaction that staff derived from their work:

> *I just love seeing the transformation of students – coming in naive and going out with that identity that goes with the profession you're in, being professional and you're just proud of them when they go out and do good work and are representing the school.*

However, they suggested that some students could feel anxiety about the sorts of change implied by personal development:

> *Some of their anxiety about change could be about leaving family behind who've not been to university or (leaving) friends behind or class behind or community behind or whatever ... and some of it is about humility – it's quite admirable to say I'm just the same old guy I used to be but actually you're not and that's ok. It's about partly the teaching relationship and allowing them to see (the reality) – some view university as these wonderful towers of learning but there are ordinary folks like us doing it and we haven't become elitist or distant characters.*

For some students, there would be specific cultural barriers to overcome:

> *I know the world out there is harsh and some people are coming to escape that world for a few years. I call it a Beavis and Butthead tendency.... where learning isn't cool – you're here, you're learning you've succeeded, you're good because you got the As and Bs to get in here. We have high expectations of our students and yet they come in and it's like 'talk to the hand' and you're like come on – you're paying for this experience and it all goes up next year. There is some of that 'I'm too cool for school' and you think wow this is crazy really.*

Or more prosaically:

> *suddenly you have to do everything for yourself and it's that change into responsibility of getting to class on time and doing your laundry and just really basic life skills that some of them are struggling to adjust to.*

Staff recognised the need to speak specifically to students about how they should develop as learners:

> *They develop as learners but I don't think the processes are explicit unless we talk about them*

For some this work was clearly defined in terms of skills and was a key part of their role:

> *my job is to make it very clear to the students – right on day one, week one – "week zero – orientation" to say – "this is what we are expecting of you, and this is how I can help you; this is how everybody else can help you". So, my presentations are on study skills, on group learning, on how to succeed in Medical School.*

And some saw it largely in terms of breaking down complex tasks to help students overcome lack of confidence or skill deficit:

> *It is irritating but things in academia are like that – it presents barriers to students. But we can do a simple break down of what it is, and then students are saying to each other – 'if they only told us. If we'd only known!' What was a big secret? What I think my job is about is to just break those things down.*

For some staff respondents, motivation was the key to student development:

> *.. passion as well – from what it is that they are doing, a desire and a need to be who they want to be.*

4. Relationships between staff and students

The nature of relationships with staff can be a factor that influences whether students remain on academic programmes or leave them (See section 6 below). Positive relationships with staff were also a factor that facilitated the type of positive personal development discussed above.

4.1 Best practice in developing positive relationships between staff and students

The in-lecture (electronic voting buttons) survey asked first year undergraduates about the ideal relationship between student and academic. 64.7% chose 'Less formal, like a mentor' and 13.5% 'Formal, like a teacher'. When asked about their experience of actual relationships with academic staff, over 75% said they had poor, very poor or no relationship at all. So clearly there was a gap between the relationships that students hoped for and those that existed in practice, which raised the question of how positive relationships could be developed and maintained. When thinking about the nature of supportive relationships, two recurring student themes were the need for staff and students to respect each other but also to be clear that this relationship was different from a friendship.

For some respondents, a lecturer's position created a barrier to communication from the beginning. As one put it: '*.. there were some terrifying professors, they were intimidating ...*' Another respondent discussed the need to '*bring academia down from the lofty heights of theory*'. The inhibitions that one respondent had about approaching lecturers was revealed by a comment that they made about some helpful administrative staff:

> *"They don't look like lecturers; they don't have that sort of appearance, if that makes sense. They are quite approachable, friendly people."*

A difficulty for some respondents appeared to be to see lecturers as fallible human beings. One respondent commented on the difficult of adjusting from teacher – pupil relationships and said '*apart from them being a teacher, I don't know them; I don't think I would ask for help from them.*' However, there were approaches that could be taken by lecturers to remedy this situation. One respondent crucially distinguished between those lecturers who '*treat you on the same level'* and those who '*treat you like a pupil'*. Similarly, another praised a lecturer because '*even though he has a lot more knowledge than me I never feel like he's talking down to me in a patronising way'*. An attitude of being a fellow learner was particularly appreciated:

> *"… the lecturers we worked with, it was as if they were learning everything for the first time with you, which is a really engaging way of doing it."*

Any action that suggested that staff were more important than students could be particularly damaging to the relationships between the two. There were a number of criticisms of staff who did not respond to emails; arriving at lectures late or not at all was also seen as very damaging. Another issue to emerge in interviews was the difficulty if staff were over-sensitive to criticism:

> *"You'd have to be quite careful not to be attacking the way an academic teaches; you'd have to be quite careful – they can feel quite vulnerable at times as if you're criticising them."*

In contrast, staff who had good academic reputations but were able to focus on students rather than themselves were particularly highly valued:

> *"I think I had two particularly fantastic professors – one in History and one in Social Policy – and I think what was good about them was that they really knew their stuff so they were quite respected within their field but they actually took time as well".*

Some respondents suggested that arranging social events could be part of the process of encouraging the less formal relationships with staff that were widely valued. However, the actions of individual staff also played a substantial part: one respondent appreciated lecturers simply saying '*hello*' in the corridor. Another respondent said that a member of staff chatting while they were standing outside smoking helped to break down barriers. Being recognised by a lecturer around the campus made one respondent '*feel like oh I **am** part of this academic community*.'

Despite the desire to see barriers broken down, students were wary of staff who wanted to form over-familiar relationships with students: one said that they did not need to know the name of a lecturer's wife and another that they did not consider it professional behavior when a lecturer who swore, made inappropriate comments and told sexist jokes. Another commented that, as they were paying large amounts of money, they wanted to have a professional relationship:

> *"I don't think it's a good thing if you see them too much as your mate. But just understanding them as people – that's where the gem is."*

While one respondent expressed concern about lecturers being more interested in their research than their teaching, others felt that learning about their research could be a way of seeing the lecturer as a person:

> *"They [students] don't realise that their real job and their real passion (for most) is that research project they're working on, that paper they want to get published … So I think interaction with lecturers on a personal level, a first name basis, to talk about their research."*

Unsurprisingly students also wanted staff to see them '*as a person, rather than a part of a mass they have to teach ...*' One student's perception was that staff were more likely to help quickly with an academic issue if they knew a student better. Staff being willing to listen to students was highly valued and one commented that it was important that academic staff addressed the areas of the programme that the students were most interested in, rather than those that the lecturer was most interested in. Incorporating the views of students in the planning of programmes and teaching sessions was seen as particularly positive.

Clearly a barrier to building effective relationships is the size of student cohorts; a factor that was widely acknowledged by respondents. Two commented on the irony that smaller teaching groups in the final year of a programme, combined with greater confidence, meant that they felt more able to approach staff, when support was often needed more in the earlier years.

Substantial student numbers in many subject areas may have increased the importance of the guidance tutor role. A number of respondents saw this role as being crucially important and one where an interest in a student's progress was particularly appreciated:

> *"So I think it's important that they are not only friendly and approachable but interested in your progress. I did ask my old personal tutor for help once and she was a bit dismissive so I just didn't want to approach her again, I just went to someone else who gave me the help that I needed."*

Availability was another important factor in the relationship between students and staff; lecturers who were willing to see students without an appointment were particularly highly praised, although one respondent suggested that this was an unrealistic expectation. Sometimes simply saying '*Please come to see me*' or being clear that there was an open door policy could make a substantial difference to student perceptions. In contrast, staff being in a hurry or suggesting that they were available when they were not had a particularly discouraging effect.

Swift responses to communications, and to dealing with problems, were valued by a number of respondents. One student commented on a particularly fast response:

> *"On Sunday night I sent my report to the tutor, at 1 a.m. in the morning and the following morning she already sent me a really good feedback."*

Respondents also praised staff who demonstrated that they were willing to make an effort for students: examples given included memorising the names of all the students on their module, delaying going home to help a student who was experiencing difficulties on the computer and spending two hours helping a student to prepare for an interview. The impact that such efforts could have was demonstrated by one student who said:

> *"I remember when I was going to India, two of my tutors asked to send them an email when I reached India to know that I arrived safe. This is something that I will cherish all my life."*

Some international students felt that limited time, combined with cultural barriers, affected the quality of their relationships with academic staff. One suggested that staff made no real effort to communicate effectively:

> *"I think because we are international students the staff don't really bother with us …"*

Barriers to communication were thought to be smaller when staff had experience of working overseas:

> *"They come from another country and they understand us – us, the international student – that we have different way of understanding, so they are more likely to help us."*

However, another respondent praised staff who took the trouble to check that overseas students understood and to give them some encouragement, so again the time that staff were willing to give to students appeared to be a key factor in building positive relationships.

4.2 The role of teaching and learning in creating positive relationships

As would be expected, lecturers' relationships with their students were affected by the manner in which they delivered teaching. Again approachability played a role: a number of respondents commented that they appreciated lecturers waiting behind after lectures or seminars to answer any questions. Two other elements that were linked to positive relationships were enthusiasm on the part of the lecturer and interactive delivery of teaching. Students were confident that they could identify lecturers who were enthusiastic about their teaching:

> *"… it was lecturers who liked their subject. Because now I know a little bit about how University systems work, I know that lecturers don't always teach what they love …"*

One respondent suggested that the enthusiasm of staff could reassure students that they had made the correct decision in terms of course choice.

A respondent who expressed a preference for 'traditional' lectures was a lone voice; the large majority was critical of less interactive methods of teaching, suggesting that they wasted contact time between staff and students:

> *"When we had lessons he used to make everybody read a line from the book and pass it round. That was his form of teaching … you can read in your own bed at night, you don't have to read a line and then pass it on."*

Reading from Powerpoint slides was similarly criticised on the grounds that the student could just print off the slides. Other less interactive methods were criticised for '*throwing loads of stuff at you*' and for failing to engage students, particularly when the lecturer did not make eye contact. Teaching that was not interactive

was not only viewed negatively in its own right but was also associated by some with negative relationships between staff and students:

> "*Some established great distances very early on in the course and those would be people that you would not usually have any sort of relationship with. They would lead the lecture and you would listen."*

In addition to large student numbers, the volume of material that needed to be covered could be a barrier to asking questions: one respondent reported that they had to learn a computer program so quickly that the lecturer was unable to stop to answer questions or to explain points again.

In contrast, discussions and the asking of questions by both staff and students were seen as positive ways to learn by large numbers of respondents. However, lecturers were seen to vary in their willingness to answer questions:

> *"So I think being able to ask them about your subject and being able to talk to them if you're confused about something rather than just wanting to crack on and power through their lecture".*

One respondent criticised a member of staff for personal criticisms of the ideas put forward by students. Another felt that seminars provided the opportunity to ask question of staff – they would not have the confidence to approach them outside a teaching session – but was sometimes disappointed by the response:

> *"For some people it just doesn't seem legitimate. You know, like I say, they think you're a bit stupid for asking the question."*

There were also positive comments about discussions and seminar presentations which, when led appropriately, provided students with the opportunity to express their opinions. When this approach was taken, there were clear benefits:

> *"I think just because of the culture of the design school everyone is very much encouraged to talk about your ideas quickly because the earlier you talk about your ideas the more critique you're going to get and the more developed they are going to be and I just think they [staff members] were really easy to talk to because of the process that you go through at the design school."*

However, the impact of students feeling that they could not ask questions or receive satisfactory answers could be a major one:

> *"It lessens your motivation for the subject, because you don't feel like you've got a full knowledge of it and you feel less motivated to learn the full extent of the module if you feel you won't get help from academic staff."*

More broadly, it was acknowledged that staff could create different types of environment for teaching. One student commented that interacting with lecturers was easier when they created a fun environment with some jokes. In contrast, a lecturer becoming angry – for example, because students had not completed required work – was seen as creating a negative environment. Another student commented that: '*they need to be open and understand that sometimes students don't do the work that they are supposed to do*."

4.3 The role of assessment in creating positive relationships

The role of assessment in building or damaging a student's confidence has already been noted. However, it also had a key part to play in their perceptions of, and relationships with, academic staff. Both the advice and

support that students were given before the assessment was submitted, and the feedback they received on their work, could have a significant impact on how students perceived their relationship with staff.

One respondent was particularly pleased with a guide that they had been given to writing essays; they said that they were still using the techniques when writing their PhD. Lecturers taking some time to help students to prepare for assessments also had a positive impact: one respondent praised a member of academic staff who they had gone to see spontaneously and who had helped them to form an essay plan. Another respondent praised a lecturer who provided some extra support when they found an assessment difficult:

> *"But going that extra mile, providing that extra service for me, was really helpful, and it helped me attain quite a high mark."*

In contrast, there were also a number of communications that were reported to be particularly unhelpful, including one where there was disagreement between two staff members over the requirements for the assessment. The response of one lecturer to a student's questions appeared certain to have a negative impact on their relationship:

> *"I e-mailed a member of staff saying I don't really understand this and he sent a really nasty horrible email saying you should understand it … I thought it was a bit out of order".*

Another respondent complained that a member of staff had not been aware of their capabilities and had expected them to work more independently than they were able to. However, this highlights a dilemma for lecturers as to how much support it is appropriate to give. One respondent acknowledged this difficulty when they said that, as an undergraduate, they had expected their lecturers to help them more but, now that they were teaching undergraduates, they felt that their role should be to encourage students to learn independently.

However, there seemed to be no such difficulties in defining good and bad practice with regard to feedback from assessment. Good feedback was seen as that which showed students how they could improve and avoid making mistakes in the future. Unsurprisingly, there was criticism of feedback that was unclear, too positive (not pointing out any weaknesses) or did not give an indication of how the work could be improved. Insufficient feedback was an area where there was particularly harsh criticism:

> *" … I'd spent all that time writing the essay and I've got two sentences saying good structure, good argument, it doesn't go into much depth, they could have written a little bit more. It feels like he couldn't be a***d to write anything."*

So, as with other areas of university life, there appeared to be a clear link between the amount of time that staff were willing to invest in student related tasks and the students' perception of their relationship.

4.4 Best practice in talking to students about their learning

As was noted above, a tool that was used to encourage students to think about their learning was the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI).

ELLI was developed in the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University, initially with school-aged learners (Deakin Crick, Broadfoot & Claxton 2004; Deakin Crick, 2007).

ELLI describes seven characteristics of 'powerful'/ lifelong learners. An on-line inventory consists of 90 Lickert-type questions and produces an individual learning profile in the shape of a spider diagram. If the learner gives permission this data is then also available for analysis. A pilot project, ELLI in HE, involving thirteen universities adapted the ELLI instrument for use with adults and then tested it with an eclectic range of cohorts from across the HE sector (Small and Deakin Crick, 2008). This work established the continued validity of the seven dimensions in this sector, high face-validity of the dimensions with staff and students and strong evidence

that the use of ELLI supported learners' reflective processes and their self awareness as learners. Although ELLI describes self assessment across seven dimensions these can be thought of in relation to seven ideal strengths for a lifelong learner: creativity, changing and learning, critical curiosity, meaning making, resilience, learning relationships and strategic awareness. (For a brief explanation of each of these dispositions see Appendix 3)

The most successful introductions to ELLI, as judged by staff, were those that integrated the use of the instrument into a taught module; this gave students a relevant context for engagement. For example ELLI was used alongside e-learning modules and/or personal development and/or employability modules, containing specific tasks and assessments.

Staff found that it was much more difficult to engage students when thinking about learning was a separate or isolated task and there was no real scheduled and thorough contextualisation within a programme. Linked to the level of integration was the support that students received following their completion of ELLI. There were variations to the level of support that could be provided mainly due to the finite resources available for staff and students. In one particular module there were both individual and group timetabled discussions following completion of the questionnaire. This group of students also had access to a virtual learning environment (VLE) containing information on ELLI. This group later re-considered their learning profile and were asked to think about ways in which they had changed and developed as learners.

However, for another group of students, whilst the integration of ELLI into a taught module was seen as the greatest strength of its introduction, the lack of support students received following their profiling was seen as problematic. Focus groups with a selection of students confirmed that the lack of a structured session before and after completing the questionnaire had an impact on their level of engagement with their profile:

> *"If we had some sort of structured session beforehand, getting everybody to share their opinions on this then sent off to a workshop to do the task I think that that would probably motivate people"*

> *"I think it would have been good if we could have had a feedback session after and then we could reflect on it and kind of put it into practice to know what we were doing and why we did it."*

In addition to the time available, another factor that influenced the effectiveness of post-profiling discussions was the confidence of the staff concerned. It appeared that discussions were more effective when support was provided by the staff member who introduced ELLI to the students rather than this task being undertaken by guidance tutors. Post-profiling ELLI sessions also appeared to increase engagement if they were scheduled rather than students having to seek support in their own time.

A student perspective on the use of ELLI was obtained by asking a group at the Dispositions to Stay event to produce a poster with their 'top tips' for using ELLI. The elements that the students thought were most important are listed below:

- An explanation of why they are being asked to use ELLI which includes the idea of increased reflection on their learning
- A thorough introduction to each of the seven dimensions
- An explanation from students who have previously used ELLI, which includes the benefits that it has brought to them
- An introduction to ELLI at the beginning of the first year while students are still settling in so that they are aware of what is expected of them in higher education and that staff are interested in them as learners
- An introduction that emphasises that the purpose of ELLI is non-judgemental (this was regarded as imperative)
- The availability of a document that students can refer to post-profiling with advice on how they can become better at learning

While these findings were specifically about the use of ELLI, it seems likely that most would be relevant to the use of any mechanism by which academic staff sought to encourage students to think about their learning. It is clear that students did not feel that there were benefits to simply being given a learning tool to analyse the sort of learner that they were; considerable time needs to be invested in preparation and follow up discussions if the use of any such tool is to be fully effective.

4.5 Staff views on learning relationships with students

Many of the comments of staff about the best type of relationship with students echoed those of student and graduate respondents. For example, staff acknowledged the need to have relationships where there was mutual respect but not over-familiarity:

> *Mutual respect not patronising, not talking down, not giving the impression that students are stupid which I see colleagues doing which is appalling.*
>
> *There is a level of professionalism that they expect and is right for them to expect.*
>
> *How do I want them to perceive me? ...there are times I feel I'm on a tight rope and I want to be friendly but I ... want to be authoritative... I want to be human, I want to (say) 'I left school (early) and I didn't do terribly well and it's ok'...I want them to respect me but... to be able to approach me... I want to share something of myself ...my failings ... my own curiosity.. my research. It's about making yourself slightly vulnerable but also maintaining a distance which allows a professional relationship to go on... letting your humanity shine through.*

One member of staff shared the view of students that there could be barriers in relationships simply because of the position and job of academic staff:

> *As far the relationships are concerned with us as their tutors, their expectations are less... they expect us to be more distant. Open-door policy – they don't get that.*

However, it was important that these barriers were broken down because, despite the diversity of students, all had a common need for support:

Staff had differing views as to the level of support that should be provided to students. For one, a very close working relationship was appropriate:

> *I have three meetings at least every term. This term I saw (one) student 20 times in 16 weeks, and it was for an hour each time. And it was very hard work. But she got her high B, so it was worth it for her and for me.*

However, for others there was a need to support students in a manner that led them towards greater independence:

> *I always tell the students if you just come and say you're stuck you'll get very little out of me - if you come and say I've been doing this and this is what I think but I'm not sure then you'll get a lot out of me. I think it's a way of respecting and telling them it's about their thinking but if we keep giving them the answers we aren't helping them to engage.*

Whatever the appropriate level of support to provide to students, there was a consensus among staff as to the personal qualities that were needed to be effective in this role. These were honesty, empathy and encouragement:

> *If you ask these burly construction guys what do you want from your leaders – honesty is the top of the bill along with 'knowing your stuff'. Now if that's what they want (at work) I say that's what they want out of you.*

> *Encouragement. What I try to do is separate the work from the student. So if there is an essay or if there is something that's not very good I talk about it in the third person – so rather than say – you can't write – I'll say – this is badly written – so trying to separate the two but starting with encouragement ....you know no one learns from getting a good kicking but unfortunately a lot of staff members go that way.*

However, there were a number of respondents who felt that these qualities were not evident in all academic staff:

> *You can't necessarily get a guidance tutor or an academic tutor to have the right sensibilities you can only hope and you can only guide. You can only hope that there are enough people around you who feel the same way.*

> *Certainly, amongst my colleagues it is an exception when anybody actually talks to students about what we expect them to do and how to approach (their) learning*

One respondent expressed optimism that some collective discussions could help to establish a common approach:

> *There needs to be some consensus with the staff because we have staff meeting but we don't talk about that sort of thing, how we approach the students in induction and what our collective expectations are and I think that would be helpful.*

5. Students' relationships with their peers

In addition to relationships with staff, relationships with fellow students is a factor that has a substantial impact on the experience of university. It was noted above that analysis of first and second ELLI test data suggested that students tended to develop in the area of learning relationships with time in HE. Some further analysis of the learning relationships dimension as described by ELLI (Smith, 2011) suggested that it consisted of four components:

- Degree of guidance in learning from family and social networks
- Openness to suggestions and collaborative discussions
- Degree of willingness to work with others on a problem
- Adaptability to working and learning alone or with others

All of these are clearly related to some extent to relationships with peers.

5.1 The value of peer support

Respondents described the different ways in which they worked with their peers both inside and outside of teaching hours. Students supported each other not only in terms of their learning but helped each other to cope emotionally with the stresses of completing a degree programme.

Respondents noted how they would often try to work through problems with other students and how their peers rather than academic staff were actually their first port of call when trying to resolve a problem:

> *"... last year when we had this exam for that module where we didn't connect with the lecturer and we found it really difficult so we went off to the library and we just sat there and taught ourselves the course because we hadn't got much from the lecturers, it is easier in a group."*

Participants found that a peer support network was a key to creating a positive learning environment where they felt motivated to engage with their course. Participants valued a supportive environment as it helped them to avoid negative feelings about studying:

> *"We study together, we prepare for seminars together or we study in the library because otherwise studying in the library alone can depress you."*

> *"If one of us had an essay to do and we needed to stay in the library all night one of us would go with or make sure that they called and got home safe, or if they needed tea taken up we would do that."*

> *"...when stressful times came, we felt stress of the assignment or stress outside of university, we kind of, we would meet for coffee or we would go for dinner."*

5.1.1 Generating ideas and problem solving

Participants found it useful to share ideas with their fellow students:

> *"If everyone is willing to chip in and everyone is teaching each other all the ideas bounce off each other and you even subliminally pick up things that you might use in your exam or that you might write in your essay."*

> *"We are all in the same boat we're all doing the same work and you can bounce ideas off each other like what are you doing for that oh I never thought of that. It's a big thing getting a group together that are doing the same thing they want to get the same things and no one is looking to*

mess about."

Participants also felt that peer relationships were important in terms of broadening each other's knowledge about a given subject:

> *"I wasn't particularly close friends with them but they were part of a little group of us that would meet before and after lectures for chats... and those conversations were always quite helpful. Getting their opinion on what they thought or what they'd read would make me think ooh.. maybe I should read up on that. It made me broaden my perspective on issues."*

Respondents also found that they could cement their learning by teaching others:

> *"...when you're talking to people on your course if you're telling them about something they don't understand you learn it a lot quicker because you're understanding it by telling it rather than writing pages and pages of notes ...People on your course as well they teach you, you understand and they begin to learn while they are telling you about it."*

5.1.2 Skill sharing

Respondents discussed how they would pool resources with other students so they could all complete their work to a good standard:

> *"...we did loads of stuff together like meeting up at the library with another two guys on the course. It was just because we knew we could work better like that ...it was that kind of support that was really important when you're in your third year and you can't do everything so pooling resources."*

Other participants commented on how they worked in a cohesive group and used each other's strengths for the benefit of the whole group:

> *"I'm a bit of a last minuter on my projects whereas a couple of other were good at planning ahead and so they would start things off and then there were a couple of us that would do all the last minute things and pull it all together so it worked quite well as a group that we had different learning styles but were all very motivated."*

> *"I'm good at grammar and stuff I'm really particular about it, whereas my friend Shona has Dyslexia ... she's good at making sure all the content is in there and we kind of do it half and half. I'd go through her work and say where the grammar was wrong and she'd go through mine and be like you've missed out this argument or you've left out this. "*

5.1.3 Peer review

Another aspect of supportive peer relationships was students looking towards their peers in order to gauge what type and level of work they needed to be doing. Participants said that they not only used other students to indicate where they needed to be but also looked to them for reassurance that they were on the right track:

> *"One of our lecturers was saying that you're best reviewed by your peers it's true especially with starting essays if everyone around you has started working and you haven't and you start and get the get up and go to start the essay."*

> *"...it was nice to be around people who you could compare yourself against and talk about experiences and stuff. You'd discover that everyone feels bad, everyone feels like their essays are rubbish.."*

5.2 Forming peer relationships

The role of staff in encouraging the creation of positive peer relationships was seen as valuable by many participants. There were a number of methods by which staff could fulfil this role.

5.2.1 Ice Breakers

Participants noted how the use of ice breakers and (non-assessed) group work in class enabled them to make that first step in forming relationships with other students:

> *"On your course you just get to know people and feel comfortable through team building activities and through group projects and you get to know everyone and they become your friends"*

> *"We did these bonding tasks in groups, and we had to make a paper structure ... it was like business-related so it was to do with the course. That was good fun and we got to know people. And a 'speed friend dating' where you had a chat with everybody randomly, and you kept moving round. It was a bit embarrassing to start off with, but it was quite a good way to meet people."*

The general consensus between participants was that ice breakers were very useful and even enjoyable when they were well thought out but the more basic icebreakers such as 'say your name' caused students to feel embarrassed and were not welcomed:

> *"...most good relationships start informally, but they have to provide the right environment for that to happen. I suggest that once in a while the school organise some 'get-together' for people to come around and just have fun together. Not necessarily academic. It would go a long way towards building good relationships and such relationships could be carried on beyond''*

Participants also felt that 'getting to know you' sessions or ice breakers should be present throughout the course and not just at the beginning of first year. Some students commented that they could begin a new module in second or third year and not know anyone. These students felt that they would benefit from frequent opportunities to make that first step in forming relationships with their peers. When ice breakers were absent from modules some students reported feeling apprehensive about getting into groups for assessed work:

> *" there (might be) 5 or 6 people who aren't in a group and they'll say have a look online and see what people are doing for their presentations and ask them if you can join. That's quite a thing sending an e-mail to someone you've never spoken to and be like can I join your group? If ... [ice breakers] were done at the beginning it would be far easier for people."*

5.2.2 Seminars

The role of seminars in facilitating positive relationships with staff was noted above. However, seminars were also an environment where staff impacted upon peer relations. Participants described how seminars could foster an environment where they were able to develop positive learning relationships with other students:

> *"...there is a group of us who met through a seminar group and we'll all help each other. We've had a few nights out but it's more of a study friendship..."*

> *"...since it's such a small course (we're only about 20 people, and other courses they're 60-80 people, or even more), and we have relatively small seminar groups as well, we've just become very close"*

Staff indirectly influenced students to form positive peer relationships through the work they asked students to complete prior to seminar sessions. This preparation gave students the opportunity to work with one other and build positive peer learning relationships outside of class time:

> *"I'm not fantastic at maths, so before going to that I'll sit with someone else who's in my group who I'm good friends with, and go through the work and compare it to each other's. And normally I've done something wrong, so he'll help me before we get into the class. So then I sort of know what's going on..."*

On the more negative side if students in seminar groups failed to gel with one another it could create a difficult environment for other students to learn in:

> *"The seminar groups I'm in are fairly cliquey – all the girls hate each other, so it's a bit difficult."*

Again, large numbers could be a barrier to forming positive peer relationships:

> *''some of my friends had smaller numbers on their programme and they all seemed to be close and good friends because they all worked together, my course wasn't a good setting for building relationships with other students as there were too many people."*

5.2.3 Field trips and residential activities

Respondents indicated that another way in which staff could facilitate good peer relations was by building field trips and residential activities into academic programmes. Vocational courses were found to provide students with the opportunity to form positive peer relationship through competitions and residential activities:

> *"we had a Constructionarium... it came at the end of second year and you really get to know each other because you're living together for a week ...that's when you get to know people beyond your comfort groups.... when you've got that initially ... out of the way of getting to know someone it's a lot easier when it comes to doing your team work and things like that...."*

Students who had experienced extended field trips and residential activities could not recommend them highly enough. Respondents reflected on how these activities had enabled them to build strong peer learning relationships that then went on to help them in all other aspects of their academic programme.

Staff play an important role in helping form positive peer relationships both directly in teaching sessions and indirectly through the tasks they give students to complete elsewhere. Tools such as seminars, ice breakers and field trips can be helpful methods to encourage students to engage with one another but they also have to be used appropriately. If seminars are not run effectively and difficulties between students are not dealt with appropriately then the whole seminar group can suffer and peer relations that are more negative can emerge. It is important that staff take into account peer relations not only when teaching a class but also when they are developing a module or programme. The need for careful management was most obvious when considering the role of assessed group work.

5.3 Assessed group work

Although assessed group work provided a further opportunity for students to work together, there were differing opinions about a number of features of this method of working:

- Working with new people – students tended to pick their learning partners outside of the classroom for revision for exams and essay preparation, but would sometimes be put into groups for tasks by lecturers. A number of students felt positively about the opportunity that group work gave them to get to know

students who they had not previously spoken to. However, others found difficulties such as ongoing inhibitions – '*we felt uncomfortable speaking to people we didn't know so the debates weren't particularly helpful*' – and difficulties in the timing of work. Timing difficulties were felt particularly keenly by one mature student:

> *"And every single time I tried to reach them and say: 'look we have to do it' – 'no we have plenty of time'. That was not so good for me because I have family".*

- Preparation for the workplace – one respondent believed that group work was a useful preparation for work, saying:

> *"When you're on a site and you're working with different people you don't always work with people you like or people you get on with and forcing you to be in groups does help".*

- However, another student suggested that the environment of the workplace could not be reproduced within a university:

> *"… It's not like you're in the workplace. Academia is a very specific, quite odd setting …"*

- Dividing the labour: some students commented that the advantage of working in a group was that everyone could contribute in their area of strength and that the whole could be more than the sum of the parts. However, more frequently there were complaints about an element of unfairness because some people did not make a sufficient contribution. Respondents variously described this factor as '*not very good*', '*annoying*' and '*a little bit wearing*'. However, for some, at least, this was a price worth paying for the benefits of group work:

> *" .. I know that within group tasks you sometimes get a lazy person, you get a variety of individuals, but I still think it's a really important task to undertake."*

- Tackling unequal distribution of work – linked to the earlier point about the workplace, one respondent suggested that there were not the same options in terms of tackling non-contribution:

> *"At the end of the day you've got to do it in the real world but in the real world you get sacked or warnings. At uni there should be a warning system if someone is not pulling their weight, you don't want to be bitching about people because that's not what you're here to do."*

However, while warnings or dismissal were not options, one respondent described a group that was effective because there were clearly defined rules. For two others, the attempt to ensure fairness carried dangers because a controlling person could have a negative impact on the group.

Two respondents spoke positively about a lecturer's response to problems with group work:

> *" .. the other day we emailed one of our tutors about a person who was doing our group coursework who hadn't been helping us or being in contact, just kept making excuses, and he gave us an email back within ten minutes saying just don't include his name on the coursework and it wouldn't matter …"*

> *" … I did an extra report and I got the signature from every group member as well to explain how the whole process worked and what were everyone's contributions. At the end he [lecturer] totally understood how I felt and sent me an email explaining the work I have done is worth much more than the marks I have got. I was happy at the end knowing that he understood me."*

While the second example did not resolve the issue of unfairness, both demonstrated the advantages of lecturers being prepared to become involved when difficulties arose.

5.4 Learning partners

When it came to participants describing the characteristics of a good learning partner (i.e. someone they enjoyed learning with) they largely preferred peers who they viewed to be similar to themselves.

5.4.1 Motivation

Participants felt that those with similar motivation levels were ideal peers to work with and reported difficulties when group motivational levels differed.

> *"There is a group of us that stick together and before we even came back we said if there is any group work do you fancy sticking together because we've all got a good work ethos because you get the odd ones who don't want to."*

> *"Bad relationships would definitely be not having the same goal. I met classmates who just wanted to pass. So their motivation was wrong. Having different motivation and goals would definitely be bad."*

5.4.2 Interests and beliefs

Respondents felt that they were able to bond more easily with those with similar interests and beliefs as they were able to connect with them on a number of levels.

> *"We were all very focused on what we are doing. Long discussions after the lectures. We all had the same interests. We all studied the same thing."*

> *"Just that way you naturally start to talk to people at the beginning of a course and getting to know different individuals and I guess we were fortunate enough to have similar interests on the course as well."*

5.4.3 Background

Respondents also preferred to form learning relationships with peers of a similar background. Students from working class backgrounds noted how they felt uncomfortable in the more 'elite' universities and those who had gone to independent schools struggled in universities with a more working class student population. Participants not only reported feeling out of place but also that it was difficult to engage in discussions as their views often conflicted with the majority:

> *"...there were so many people from really affluent backgrounds and that threw me with their confidence and their cliques. So I knew Newcastle was going to be like that so I'd lowered my expectations of what my experience would be at Newcastle in terms of what had happened at Edinburgh. It was similar it was full of people who have really privileged backgrounds and it's really an elite university and people were happy to behave as if they were, well it was just very elitist."*

> *"I think a lot of it was the people on the course; their opinions were what I really struggled with. It seemed to attract people who didn't share my view of things ... they were very upper middle class people who had never had any contact with the real world and I'd worked in homelessness beforehand so when we were talking about class and all of those issues that sociology brought up their views were not in keeping with mine at all."*

5.4.4 Lifestyle

Participants noted that having a similar lifestyle as another student made them an attractive learning partner because they could empathise with difficulties that they might experience:

"[Those] on the nursing course, people who had the families and things like that, they seemed to sort of all be friends together. Not exclusively but, I think it is having an understanding of your own circumstances and other people's circumstances and then it was the support and also helping, helping with assignments and things like that if you were struggling and then obviously the experience as well, being we learned to share and listen to other people's experiences as well."

"I think the good relationship is when we have similar priorities because, me and Steven, he is 33 and I am my age (36) so he does have a mortgage and family, so we know why we are here. We want to achieve something, and we do not want to play around. The rest of the students, they play around but I think it is about priorities. If you find someone who wants to achieve something, we want to make really good grades because the competition on the market is really huge."

5.4.5 Age groups

Respondents preferred to form relationships with students of a similar age group:

"...probably people that I gelled with ... were a similar age to me and you did kind of see that across the group. There were definitely like younger people who kind of gelled together, older people who gelled together"

This caused problems when students were in the minority in terms of their age range. A participant who had been considered a mature student at the age of 21 was moved into student accommodation with people who were much older than him. This participant had found it difficult to build up relationships because of the age gap that existed between himself and the rest of his housemates:

"the people that I lived with had been students before, and they weren't interested in doing it again, really. So I found it a bit harder to make friends last year, because of where I was living."

A number of respondents reported finding it difficult to form learning relationships with peers because they were older than the rest of the students on their programme:

"I am the oldest in my whole course. So, I don't have much of the contacts with other students, except with one or two – they are my age. But, more or less they are all young and that is what they have in common. I also noticed during the first year they formed groups. In the second year they will come and would not even recognise me anymore or greet me as before in the first year. ...I am older and don't fit in their group..."

So, although many students found it beneficial to work with those they perceived to be most like themselves, these findings suggested that some could be left feeling isolated as a result.

5.4.6 Learning partner characteristics

In addition to the preference for learning partners who they had something in common with, there were a number of generic 'likes' and 'dislikes' when thinking about the partners who students wanted to work with:

- Respondents wanted learning partners who they could trust not to copy and to pull their weight:

"I was really struggling and they took the time out of their work to help me through it and there is an assignment now and I've started and they haven't so I've sent them my work ...I know they won't copy it, it's just so they can read through mine and think oh right that's the kind of direction."

- Respondents believed that it was essential that there was give and take with learning partners. The sharing of notes, essay plans, etcetera need to be reciprocated:

  "... me and a couple of the lads work really well together, even if we are doing the same assignment we all read each other's work and it's not to copy but to see how other people have structured it and you get the idea if yours is completely different you think well what have I done wrong. ...this girl I was working with we don't work well together ...she'll write what you've written word for word... it's such a different relationship because obviously I want to help her... I know she's not doing it maliciously but you think that's my work and you don't want to get into an argument"

- A good learning partner was also ready to give constructive criticism:

  "A good working relationship is a relationship where you can bounce ideas off each other, they'll be helpfully critical, but not criticise..."

- Respondents needed their learning partners to be good listeners:

  "you also need to find someone that's going to listen to other people – if you don't listen to other people, that's never a good thing because it makes people feel stupid, and they'll resent that person for not listening to them.."

- In contrast, students disliked their peers who were patronising or thought that they knew more than others:

  "Someone who's not patronising, not someone who will look at it and will say this is wrong that is wrong when you haven't asked. Someone who thinks they know more than you is no good it irritates you but if everyone is on the same level that's good "

- Similarly, overbearing peers were disliked:

  "When I was doing A levels, there was always somebody who had to speak the loudest and talk the longest and try and bully everybody into getting their point of view. ...I think in university you want to have freedom of speech and thought. ...I think the idea of going to university is that as long as you have the evidence to demonstrate what you're saying is right, then that should be allowed."

The consequences of finding the most appropriate learning partners could be very positive:

"...unintentionally I end up doing more research on Marketing than Management, because I know that when I meet my Marketing group whatever I say will be heard, and whatever I'm saying that has some value will be included. Whereas with my Management group, I will do the basic part of it, because I know they won't give me that much attention and they won't include my findings that much.."

5.5 Barriers to forming peer relationships for international students

International students reported a number of barriers to forming effective peer relationships. One was the tendency of the Students' Union to promote events that involved the consumption of alcohol. They felt that there was not enough diversity in terms of types of event:

> *"Most of the things they have in the university is like having gigs and parties in the bars but not every culture wants that... The Students' Union is mostly people from here – you won't find any Indians or Pakistanis or any other Asians so I think they should have people from different countries so they can understand what different students want.''*

Some UK students also recognised the difficulties associated with effective integration:

> *"...there's not a lot of integration from certain communities within the university. There's a big Chinese community here and most of them are very, very closed. Even in seminars, they tend not to talk to any of the other people. I don't know whether that's a cultural thing. But the Chinese students who are from Hong Kong are very open to Western ideas, and are very chatty and want to be part of it. But it's a balance and a respect for each culture, I suppose."*

Language was also a barrier for some international students:

> *"Sometimes, yes, it becomes hard – I face problems understanding people's accents because they are very fast and they join words together. But with time I've developed my understanding of what they are saying. Actually, most of the time I don't know what topic they are talking about – it could be a British comedian, or a British actor, or a TV series. So sometimes it happens that I end up just listening to them. But whenever I listen to these guys talking I go back home and do some search about them, like who they are, what they did, and maybe the next time they could talk, maybe I could add on a little bit more."*

5.6 Location

One very practical issue affecting the formation and maintenance of effective peer relationships was where people met. There were several locations where students chose to work with other students including the library, at each other's homes, in spare classrooms, in the students union, in cafes / bars and in computer labs. The location in which students worked with each other largely depended on the nature of the work they needed to complete, with respondents preferring to use areas where they were able to talk freely for group work and using their homes or quite study areas in the library when revising for examinations. Another location where students reported engaging with other students was in the lecture hall whilst waiting for a teaching session to begin. These micro interactions were frequently referred to by respondents; they were seen as a valuable way to discuss the content of their course. Two other locations which were deemed valuable, but to which not all respondents had access, were student accommodation and project rooms / studios.

Those living in student accommodation valued the interaction they had experienced with peers:

> *"...in halls there were a few people in my block who were on the same course as me so it was nice ... We used to go to the library together and chat there so I suppose that was quite helpful. I probably would have felt isolated if there wasn't anyone in my block that was doing my course...."*

> *"in our block of flats we got some really good friends ... then moved in together in the second year ... It was a really supportive house ...we all had essays due in at the same time we would make each other cups of tea, we'd have discussions. ...on a Wednesday we'd buy the Guardian*

we'd sit over cups of tea all afternoon discussing the things in it that were really important for the courses that we were studying.."

"On my course I don't think I had any friends that I'd actually made through my course. My friends were the people I'd lived with rather than through the course."

Participants on some vocational programmes benefited from the provision of studio spaces and project rooms. Respondents who had been provided with studio space argued that it provided a great place to form relationships with peers from disciplines other than their own:

"...in the final year we shared a room ...and it was really interesting to see a sub-culture of design working with you because it opens your eyes to different approaches to things ..... mixing outside your discipline (was) really helpful because you can borrow their expertise ..it helped just physically being in the same environment."

5.7 Staff views on student peer relationships

Staff had little doubt that students tend to turn to their peers first when they have a problem, which again reinforced the finding of perceived barriers between staff and students:

There is a very clear set of rules the students have – who to ask and when. And they always turn to the student body first. The notion that the lecturer is too important to interrupt with the question seems to be quite strong.

Some had tried to create an environment encouraging peer support.:

It was facilitation; we were not forcing them in any way, but giving them the opportunity to be able to get together. If they don't do anything, that's fine. We gave them the opportunity. And generally, especially at that level, people take that as a good opportunity, and genuinely do something productive.

However, others questioned the extent to which academic staff could influence peer relationships:

Every student has a mentor who is himself a graduate, so the system is fantastic, but it doesn't really work that way, does it? I suspect that there is no time for the mentor

One respondent suggested that a key difficulty to overcome was a competitive ethos:

I said "look around this room, you are not in competition with anybody here'' ... the world we are living in is very competitive, and it will be when they leave university – and every element – what you are wearing, which university you went to, did you get A or B, etc. It is about the competition. So, I say to people "cooperate". But that is about challenging the culture as well.… We give them something to do as group-work, to either put together a poster presentation or a verbal presentation, and they have to write together and a tutor will help them through that. So, that's what I meant by 'shocking them'. The idea is – this is going to be a fundamentally different experience.

Other respondents also identified the value of working with other students through group work:

The important thing is that people are working together. If somebody cheats they will get caught somewhere out on the line. But if it is authentic to what they do in practice, I think it is really important.

6. Specific Findings in Relation to Retention and Achievement

The issues discussed in the previous four sections all have a major bearing on the student experience. The themes discussed have emerged directly from the project's engagement with staff and students about retention and success. Success and retention are associated with learner motivation, learner personal development / growth and positive relationships between and with peers and staff. However, there were also elements of the research where factors affecting retention and achievement were measured more directly.

6.1 Quantitative data

The project failed to find strong correlations between academic success and ELLI dimensions. This was perhaps surprising and there are a number of possible explanations.

- Perhaps because ELLI was originally developed in schools the element of motivation or reason to study is not a distinct part of the profile. Unlike school, HE involves an element of voluntarism and choice and the project has found that motivations to study are significantly related to marks in the first year.
- Significant relationships that might exist in particular contexts may have been flattened out in whole cohort analysis. The project data does show differences across different subject areas and across demographic factors (e.g. age, gender) and a number of separate small scale (single cohort) studies are underway to explore this further over the next year.
- A radical but potentially important reason may be a mismatch between what ELLI describes and measures (the dispositions of a successful lifelong learner) and what is described and measured in HE assessment (a variety of codified criteria). Notwithstanding the evidence found about student change and development over time, does HE assessment routinely attempt to measure learner development?

ELLI has been a focal point throughout the project. The statistically significant relationships that were established should not be ignored. In the second year of the project, 832 students had their 'scores' on the ELLI dimensions matched with their mean mark at the end of the academic year.

Before calculating relationships between mean marks and the dimensions, those students with mean marks of 25 or less were excluded as correlation (the key statistical measure to be used in this case) is less accurate when there are 'outliers'. The dimension scores proved to be insufficiently correlated with mean mark to use multiple regression, which examines the relative impact, and predictive power, of a range of independent variables on the dependent variable. Correlations between individual dimension scores and marks were calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficient r. The correlation scores were:

Changing and learning -0.003

Critical curiosity 0.066

Meaning making 0.063

Creativity -0.027

Resilience -0.004

Strategic awareness 0.000

Learning relationships – 0.028

The correlations between mean mark and critical curiosity ($p=0.031$) and between mean mark and meaning making ($p=0.037$) were statistically significant, suggesting that they were likely to have an influence over mean mark in any sample. However, the extent of this influence was very small: the correlation figure for critical

curiosity suggested that this dimension explained only 0.4% of the variation in students' mean marks.

Despite the limited predictive power of the learning dimensions for mean marks of the student group as a whole, further analysis was undertaken to examine the impact of the dimension scores on sub-groups. When considering men only, there were no significant correlations between the learning dimensions and marks. When considering women only, there were significant correlations between mean mark and critical curiosity (Pearson, .146, $p=0.001$) and between mean mark and meaning making (Pearson .131, $p=0.003$).

The larger cohorts of students were also examined separately. The results were as follows:

- Among Business Studies undergraduates, there was a positive correlation between resilience and mean mark (Pearson .123, $p=0.034$) but a negative correlation between creativity and mean mark (Pearson -.117, $p=0.041$)
- Among postgraduate students on the Law conversion course, there were no significant correlations.
- Among Psychology undergraduates, there was a negative correlation between creativity and mean mark (Pearson -.317, $p=0.015$).
- Among undergraduates of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences, there was a positive correlation between critical curiosity and mean mark (Pearson .190, $p=0.017$).
- Among Sports Studies undergraduates, there was a positive correlation between critical curiosity and mean mark (Pearson .320, $p=0.000$).

A second strand of quantitative data analysis was linked to qualitative findings showing that interest in the subject area was linked to both motivation and retention. The data was, in fact, collected in 2005-2006 from first year social science students at Northumbria University. The 183 respondents were asked how far they agreed with various statements about possible reasons for studying. The percentage of students either strongly agreeing or agreeing with each statement is shown in the table below:

Reasons for Studying

Reason	Percentage of students strongly agreeing or agreeing
I am studying at university because I am interested in my course	96.2%
I am studying at university because I wish to improve my employment prospects	96.1%
I am studying at university because I want to experience student social life	80.3%
I am studying at university because I enjoy learning	79.6%
I am studying at university because I am uncertain which job I would like to do	51.4%
I want to get a degree regardless of the effects that it may have on my job prospects	45.3%
I am studying at university because I want to do a particular job for which I need a degree	34.8%
I am studying at university because it is what my parents want me to do	12.2%
I am studying at university because it is what my teachers at school or college expected me to do	8.8%

Further analysis was undertaken to determine the relationship between these factors and mean first year mark. Spearman's rho showed that students were likely to achieve higher mean marks the *more* strongly they agreed with the statement that they were studying because they were interested in the course (Spearman .174, $p=0.012$) but the *less* they agreed that they were studying because they wanted a particular job (Spearman .183, $p=0.009$). These were the only statistically significant relationships. Of course, it should be borne in mind that these were social science students, and that motivation based on employment may have had a more positive impact in a vocational area of study.

6.2 Qualitative data

The importance of interest in the subject area was reinforced by qualitative analysis of the interviews with the 13 respondents who had left academic programmes and the six who had considered leaving. By far the most common reason for leaving was the nature of the course: 10 of the 13 leavers identified course related factors as being most important. In most cases, a simple lack of interest in the subject area was the key factor, for example:

> *I loved English before that, but then when I was doing it at a higher level I really wasn't enjoying it and I thought I would and the course was a lot different from what they explained to me and I just wasn't enjoying it overall.*

However, there were also other factors: one respondent changed their career aspirations and so found that the course was no longer relevant. In addition, one highlighted the potential negative effects of group work by saying that they felt the amount of this, with less motivated peers, had brought their mark down. While the potential value of placements was discussed earlier, one student identified a key factor as a failure to receive adequate support for this activity:

> *… we started and we'd have a few lectures a week but then in the very first term they'd send us out on placements a day a week in primary schools and mine was on a quite rough council estate in xxxx and they expected us to be able to teach – I expected that they'd teach us how to teach and teach us the subject that you'd need to teach.*

Feelings of isolation were also recorded among the leavers, although these tended to be of secondary importance to factors associated with the course. In contrast, the nearly leavers were most likely to identify social factors as being key difficulties, suggesting that there is a greater prospect of such difficulties being overcome. While this, of course, should not be assumed, one nearly leaver in particular showed how such difficulties can change with time:

> *… since November onwards I get on really well with one of my flat mates and I have started making some friends on my course as well.*

While earlier material has highlighted the personal benefits that could arise from leaving home for the first time, the experience of a minority of both leavers and non-leavers highlighted sharing in student accommodation as being a potential problematic issue. This was usually not a key factor in leaving or coming close to leaving but an aggravating one, most notably in the case of a leaver who stated that their main difficulty was not being able to cope with the freedom of living away from home:

> *When I was down in accommodation even at nights I was trying to get some sleep to carry on, it was hard as there is always people around and stuff and it was quite wild my flat and it was good when I wanted it to be but when I wanted to get on I couldn't get to sleep, I just wanted to get some sleep and get my head down and get working but I couldn't.*

For two of the nearly leavers, various difficulties were aggravated by the fact that they had children. As one of them discussed:

… I've got two teenagers, I have a sixteen year old who loves getting into trouble, a fifteen perfect, absolutely perfect couldn't ask for a better child and then I've got a disability, I was in and out of hospital all over Christmas and it just makes it so hard to get round my work.

A small number of respondents reported that difficulties had been aggravated by the response or non-response of members of academic staff, with one saying that their lecturers were unapproachable, one that they were not contacted when they failed to attend teaching sessions and one that staff failed to deal adequately with complaints. This contrasted with one respondent whose experience of academic staff support had been a key factor in enabling them to stay on their course:

At the minute I am happy to stay because I've got all my work back from the first semester so it's all working as a 2:1, which I am quite impressed with because I was only in three or four times for the first semester and that was it, but it was talking to [academic staff member] and [academic staff member] really.

One respondent who had left a programme and joined another attributed their happiness with their current situation largely to their relationship with the academic staff:

"There wasn't much guidance and tutors weren't as readily available to speak to you as much as they are here [current university] and it was harder to contact them and things."

Lack of confidence was another secondary theme that appeared in a number of the interviews with those students who had come close to leaving academic programmes:

"I put my pen down and cry, I do, I put it down and then I will go to Emma and I'll be like I cannot do it, I'm not doing it."

Sometimes this crisis of confidence was affected by assessment marks:

"I hadn't failed them [assignments] but it wasn't as good as I thought. So I was sort of going from school where I did A levels and got quite good marks and then I was like sort of confused as to why, why that had happened and I sort of expected a higher score and that knocked my confidence a bit …"

Indeed, for both leavers and nearly leavers, assessments were often a key point for decision making. For some leavers, the decisive point was a failure to submit work to deadline, some nearly leavers were still waiting for assessment marks before deciding whether to stay and some reported that good marks had convinced them that they should stay on their course – for example:

I got a first in one [assignment] and a 2:1 in the other, so that really made me want to stay because I thought if I managed to do that then I shouldn't worry too much about anything.

Finally, it should be noted that although all the leavers now took a positive view of their decision to end a course (and the majority had returned to higher education), most spoke about this being an extremely difficult decision to take. One respondent pretended to still be at university for some time after leaving, while others described a sense of failure, of feeling that they had let others down or of finding it difficult to tell others about their decision. For example:

At first I felt a bit, I was so devastated that I was a drop out 'cos I was like I've dropped out of Uni…

7. Key Messages

The personal changes that students expect as part of a successful experience of HE can be achieved if they are interested in their programme of study and are facilitated by successful learning relationships with staff and with peers.

Students do expect to change and develop as part of their experience of HE but this expectation rarely survives lack of interest in their programme of study. Initial interest in the subject and the sustaining of this interest constitute the important bedrock of success and development in HE. Change and development as a learner is facilitated by direct engagement that seeks to raise awareness about and reflect on the self as learner. ELLI is a powerful and proven catalyst for this and successful (usually less formal) learning relationships between staff and students and between students is the key vehicle through which students are engaged, develop and succeed.

Interest in the Subject Area

Interest in the subject area is the single factor that has the greatest impact on retention but also had an influence on results, motivation and academic development.

Encouraging students to develop as learners

Students do change and develop as learners over time in HE.

Learning is understood by many students as a change process. Similarly many accept that self-awareness is an important starting point for change and learning. A commitment to change was often acknowledged and was particularly emphasised by students on vocational courses.

It is important for staff to communicate explicitly to students at an early stage (e.g. Induction) the expectations that they have about their development as learners.

Although the strength of the relationship found was limited, increasing critical curiosity and meaning making may improve marks of female students in particular. Tasks where students are required to identify and articulate questions for inquiry for themselves can increase critical curiosity.

Building positive staff-student relationships

Lack of confidence and/or motivation are key barriers to students developing as learners.

Relationships with staff that do not support change have a negative impact on student retention. Good relationships can enable students to understand themselves as learners, increase their confidence and motivate them to succeed.

Mutual respect, honesty, encouragement and empathy are important attributes for staff to build good relationships with students. Not all staff display these attributes.

Staff who make clear to students that they are also learners build effective learning relationships with students.

Learning relationships are associated with interactive forms of teaching in which dialogue and questioning is encouraged and seen to be appreciated.

Making time and being seen to make time for students is important, both to offer support and to provide thorough feedback and feed-forward on assessed work.

ELLI is a powerful tool for the engagement of students (and staff) in reflection about learning and for raising self awareness about development as a learner. ELLI (or indeed any methods used to engage students

in development as learners) is most successful when delivered as a planned and timetabled part of the curriculum.

Encouraging positive student-student relationships

Relationships with peers and peer mentors are very significant and play an important role in facilitating change and learner development. Positive learning relationships with peers are a key factor in creating a positive learning environment. When relationships are positive, students will consult each other rather than lecturers, pooling expertise, using each other to assess the standard of work required and teaching each other. Such relationships are associated with retention, enhanced experience and success.

Staff must explicitly encourage the development of peer learning relationships and support the development of collaborative skills.

8. Implications for practice

The following recommendations for practice arise from the key messages discussed above:

8.1 Managing expectations

- Universities should communicate very clearly with prospective students about the nature of the subject and the curriculum that they will be studying. It would be interesting to know how effective university open days are in shaping realistic student expectations. Opportunities to hear the experiences of first year students and how they adapted, changed, survived and succeeded (perhaps on video) might also be effective.
- During Induction all new students should discuss expectations - their own, those of the course team and those of the university. In particular they should understand the ethos of the course and its delivery, the expectation that they will develop as independent lifelong learners and the characteristics of a graduate, and that they will need to manage their time. This induction is best thought of as a process rather than an event involving reinforcement throughout the first year.
- Whenever possible learning programmes should be organised in a manner that facilitates students changing courses in the first year if they realise that they have made a mistake and are not sufficiently interested in the subject they are studying.

8.2 Managing the learning experience

- Activities such as work placements and group work should be encouraged, although staff must be willing to intervene when there are difficulties with groupwork.
- Feedback on assessed work must include specific recommendations as to how it could have been improved.
- At an early stage of their programme students should be encouraged to identify and articulate their own questions for enquiry.
- Programmes should be designed with integrated sessions that allow students to consider their own learning and in particular raise their awareness about themselves as learners.

8.3 Managing learning relationships

- All academic staff should be given opportunities to raise their awareness of students' experience of the early stages of university life and the impact of relationships with staff.
- All academic staff involved in guidance tutoring should be properly trained and supported.
- Staff should consider introducing ice-breaker activities whenever new groups of students are brought together.
- Students' Unions and other parts of universities should examine their proposed social activities to ensure that they are more inclusive.

9. Implications for policy

To improve retention and completion in HE students need to have clearer expectations about the processes and purposes of learning at this level. Strategically this means that HE must articulate these processes and purposes with increasing reference to increased self-awareness, personal development and change. Furthermore HE must reflect the value and relevance of university by promoting relationships that encourage a collaborative approach to learning and an understanding of how collaboration shapes effective action in the world.

Notwithstanding national and institutional drivers to improve student satisfaction and raise the levels of student achievement, success for learners in Higher Education is a more problematic and complex issue. The difficulty experienced in this project to find relationships between lifelong learning dispositions (ELLI) and academic success may reflect this complexity. Whilst measuring student success in terms of scholarly standards applied to codified curricula Higher Education must also seek to own and take responsibility for a transformative experience through which students become lifelong learners equipped to act successfully in public, social and private spheres. It is a twin challenge;

- First, to deliver this transformation - to facilitate individual personal change and a process of personal development and of becoming.
- Second, to equip graduates to act as confident, critical global citizens in the worlds of work, community and family.

In policy terms this requires two development strands. First there is the need to articulate and act upon a vision of the university that expresses itself more ambitiously than simply as a very satisfactory environment in which good degrees can be achieved. Second, universities need to focus as much on student outcomes as student outputs. In particular, learning processes in HE need to close the gap between the gold standard of individual academic achievement and the gold standard of the real world – action, action that is contingent on collaboration; collaboration that in turn is contingent on successful (learning) relationships.

This has implications for policy at the highest levels:

- Marketing of HE needs to reach beyond simple notions of high satisfaction (great city, great campus, great teachers, great facilities – university as service) and high achievement (great degrees, great proportions of firsts etc – university as product) and sell the HE experience increasingly in terms of challenge and change. ('If you're looking for a degree and a good time on the way ...don't come to the University of Rutland – unless you also enjoy a challenge, expect and want to change and develop so you are equipped to collaborate, contribute and succeed in life').
- Institutional structures and processes should reflect collaborative principles in relations with external stakeholders, between and across disciplinary areas and departments, between learning and teaching and research and between staff and students.
- The knowledge, skill, understanding and disposition associated with the creation and sustaining of strong learning relationships should be increasingly apparent in descriptions, definitions and assurance of the roles and responsibilities of staff. This will have consequences relating to; job descriptions, selection processes, staff appraisal systems, required training provision and provision of staff support.
- Programme development. Developmental processes should be built in to all academic programmes (Magolda and King, 2004). The way in which this is done will vary considerably in different contexts but should always include;
  - integrated provision and support for students to develop increased awareness of themselves as developing learners
  - opportunities to express learning relationships as collaborative tasks and projects.

10. Practical Outputs and Tools for use by Other Institutions

Drawing on our work the DTS project will produce three tools that will reflect these practical approaches:

- A Good Practice Guide to the Use of ELLI in HE
- A Manifesto for the development of critical, confident lifelong learners in HE
- A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in HE

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Appendix 1: Dissemination of Learning

Clark, W., Adamson, J., Thompson, J. and White, A. (2010) *Illuminating and measuring Personal Development: the impact of this work on Learning and Teaching.* PDP UK Issue 20

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The list represents a wide range of dissemination; formal papers at conferences, some written output, joint work with both formal and informal partners at other institutions and with internal partners. This list does not include a large number of various workshops and seminars delivered to small staff groups across Northumbria University although we have included the staff CPD seminar delivered at Liverpool University. Of particular note are: the papers delivered at the ELSIN conference that constituted a Symposium theme for the conference (Journeys in Learning: Transitions, Resources and Reflection) representing joint work with partners at Manchester University and the Open University, the very successful and heavily attended HEA seminar as part of the Access and Success for all series and the important Spring Event – an internal event to the project but one that drew in colleagues and students from across Northumbria, Bedfordshire and Manchester in what was an extremely productive process.

Appendix 2: Intervention with first year Business Studies students

Second-testing case study.

First-year Business Studies students, Northumbria University – Management module.

In the second year of the DTS project this cohort had been invited to undertake ELLI and the data contributed to the interim report findings. Participation numbers had been high as had student interest in the ELLI dimensions; there were a large number of volunteers to be interviewed about their experience of using ELLI. As a result the cohort was selected for the delivery of an intervention in between first and second ELLI tests.

ELLI was introduced to the cohort in a lecture in October 2010, some three weeks into the start of their programme. At this lecture the group were invited to undertake ELLI in the context of better understanding themselves as learners and in preparation for a second related lecture session In January 2011.

In January another lecture represented a formal intervention; the cohort was invited to consider their ELLI profile in the context of their overall objectives in Higher Education. In particular a connection was articulated between the ELLI profile and the structure and assessment of the Management module. In part the module asks the students to consider the knowledge, skills, understanding and qualities of a contemporary successful manager (they are asked to interview a current manager) and consider these requirements in relation to their own capabilities and qualities. The intervention lecture suggested that successful managers draw on more than what they know and what they can do but also rely on qualities and dispositions some of which are articulated by ELLI. The intervention suggested that their ELLI profiles might help them to articulate these qualities and to analyse some areas they might want to target for their own development. No one dimension was emphasised in the intervention lecture except indirectly the Change and Learning dimension – in that in both the introductory lecture and the intervention lecture the notion of change was implicit – sic.... *'at University you do more than learn and demonstrate skills and knowledge, you are involved in a process of 'becoming' .... of developing a sense of location and direction and of the qualities you will need for successful lives. For example many of you will want to be successful managers in the future ....'* The intervention lecture ended with an invitation to complete a second ELLI profile thereby having the opportunity to look at any changes in profile and to think about how and why these changes happen.

A third lecture was delivered in March to consider changes in learning profiles – and how and why such changes might be explained. At the same lecture students were encouraged to second test if they hadn't already done so.

The study produced 187 pre and post ELLI tests. The project commissioned an analysis of this data from the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University[3].

> *'for these Management students, their learning power has increased with moderate effect size on four dimensions- meaning making, creativity, strategic awareness and fragility and dependence. On changing and learning and learning relationships there is a slight overall increase in their learning power on these aspects. No progression on the critical curiosity dimension was detected overall across the students. On fragility and dependence there was an increase with moderate effect size. This means that students became less resilient over the time period'*

Although it is clearly not possible to isolate the factors responsible for the change these findings do demonstrate the malleability of the ELLI Learning Dimensions and their amenability to improvement in the process of learning.

These findings invite further longer term investigation within the context of this particular programme. Can the lack of change in Critical Curiosity be explained / improved? Can increased fragility / dependence be

3 Alongside some whole data analysis. Full report in Appendix ?

explained / improved? How do changes in dimensions map against academic success? Do dimensions continue to develop over the course of the academic programme? Does the ELLI engagement improve the quality of self awareness and reflection?

The ELLI in HE report (Small et al 2008) describes the malleability and situatedness of ELLI dimensions that are confirmed in this case study. That report also describes the strength of ELLI as a catalyst for student engagement in raising self awareness and reflection that again are confirmed here (nearly 50% of the entire cohort undertook both pre and post tests, the academic leading the intervention subjectively reported high levels of student engagement in the sessions and subsequently in e-mail queries and discussion and requests for one-to-one discussions).

Appendix 3: The ELLI Dispositions

Creativity

The extent to which students are able to look at things in different ways and imagine new possibilities, rather than tackling every task in an identical, rule bound manner.

Changing and Learning

The extent to which students expect to see themselves grow and develop as learners, taking new approaches to expand their repertoire of learning skills, rather than believing that learning power is fixed and difficulties simply reflect their limitations.

Critical Curiosity

The extent to which students want to ask questions and get below the surface of what is going on, rather than accepting what they are told and believing that 'received wisdom' must be correct.

Meaning Making

Meaning makers look for links between what they are learning and what they already know, enjoying seeing things 'fit together', rather than approaching learning sessions piecemeal and responding to them on their individual merits.

Resilience

Resilient students like a challenge and are willing to have a go at something when the outcome is uncertain; they carry on when learning is confusing or frustrating. Students without this characteristic are risk averse and react negatively to getting stuck or making mistakes.

Learning Relationships

The extent to which a student is able to work effectively on their own or with others, striking the correct balance and not becoming isolated or dependent – the extent to which they are willing to seek help where appropriate.

Strategic Awareness

Students with high levels of strategic awareness plan their time, like trying out different approaches and thinking about their own learning, being able to explain their reason for taking a particular approach.