**Interview #1 Transcript: Senior Lecturer (21.06.17) (University A)**

Interviewer (I): Okay, so as a senior lecturer, what would you consider to be your main responsibilities?

Participant (P): In terms of teaching? Or in general?

I: Just in general.

P: In general? Well I suppose my responsibilities are split probably between three main areas I suppose, one being research, another being teaching and another being administration of the research and the teaching and, kind of, management in general, so yeah, so I would say those three things really.

I: Okay. How many undergraduate students do you teach in a term, roughly?

P: Ooh [pause] I mean I guess it depends what you mean because, I mean in terms of lectures, I mean we give lectures on, you know, modules that have, say, 120 to 140 students and so I guess that’s a form of teaching to all those students and then, in terms of the seminars, you know, it will be smaller groups of students so, and I obviously do different levels, so if you include lectures? I guess you could probably say I would come into contact with… 250? Maybe. But in terms of seminars, probably more, like, 90? Over a whole year I would say, something along those lines, yeah.

I: Okay, do you think that’s a manageable number?

P: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don’t feel like my workload is, sort of, ridiculous. I mean I don’t always say that when it’s essay time, but yeah, it’s fine actually, I mean I, kind of, feel like I get, you know, get time to do research and also pay attention to the students and, you know, [University A] is a reasonably small institution and we’re a reasonably small department which has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that you get to know the students, you know, individually, so that’s nice. Particularly the ones in your seminar groups.

I: Yeah. Okay. What meaning does the word engagement have for you?

P: [pause] I don’t know [laughing]. In terms of engaged teaching, you mean?

I: Yeah, so in terms of engaging students.

P: Okay. Well yeah, I mean I guess it’s crucial to try to make, you know, to make sure that you foster an environment in which students feel engaged and interested in what they’re doing, that they understand that what they’re doing is important and relevant, they understand why it’s interesting as well hopefully, so in terms of the subject itself, why it’s useful and interesting but also I guess, you know, in terms of their longer term career ambitions why it might also be useful and relevant to them so, with some modules that’s easier than others I would say, within English Lit here so, I mean I teach a module on Popular Culture for example and the students are already engaged in that module before they start because it’s doing stuff that they already, you know, they already engage with so, they’re already engaged in that and in that sense it’s quite an easy module to teach. Other modules, you know, Victorian Literature, it can take, you know, a bit more time but that’s where I guess you try and foster engagement and interest and make them realise why it’s important.

I: Yeah. Okay. So, using what you’ve said then, how do you personally attempt to engage? How do you create that environment?

P: Okay. In lectures, I suppose I would do it by well, trying to make the lectures as interesting as possible, using humour, using, you know, slides and images and clips and all that, kind of, stuff, trying to keep it as, kind of, multidimensional as possible. You know, sometimes, I guess sometimes you can go down the shock sometimes if, you know, that can be a way of keeping people interested sometimes. In terms of seminars, I would say it’s about *listening* as much as it’s about talking I suppose, so, kind of, trying to I guess, realise that, you know, every student’s got something to say and maybe particularly in the earlier years, they don’t necessarily always have the vocabulary to say it in and so, sometimes you would have to, or I would have to, sort of, tease out maybe what the student was trying to say if they didn’t express themselves terribly well, and the reason I think that’s important to do that, is because then the student realises that what they have to say actually has value and that their thoughts are, you know, are valid and interesting thoughts and then that gives them, kind of, confidence that they might speak again the next time and so I suppose yeah, one way of doing that is to, sort of, reword potentially what a student has said, so if – so, sort of, say it in a different way, “Oh so what you mean is?” or maybe I’ll *ask*, you know, “So are you saying this?” so, sort of, slightly rephrase and they’ll either say yes or no, depending on whether I’ve got it right [laughing]. So it’s useful in terms of I understand – you know, maybe I have misunderstood something but quite often it isn’t that case, it’s more of a case of, trying to work out what they’re trying to say, if you see what I mean and particularly at [University A], I mean I don’t know about other institutions that you’re looking at but because we have, you know, almost entirely, kind of, state school students, most of whom – many of whom are, you know, the first people in their family to go to university, confidence is probably the *biggest* issue I would say. And, you know, I’ve taught elsewhere, where the class was different, if you like, and that brings its advantages and disadvantages, disadvantage being sometimes students with a posher, kind of, background are a bit full of themselves but it has the advantage that they’re not shy, whereas here it can often be a case of, you know, there are some really, really, really, smart people but they have *no*, sort of, self-belief or confidence so it’s about how you, sort of, I guess, try and bring them out of themselves a bit. I actually quite enjoy that if I’m honest.

I: Yeah, I bet it’s rewarding.

P: Yeah! Especially when you get to the third year and, you know, somebody who was a wilting violet in the first year has really grown into themselves, so you, sort of, see that on a pretty regular basis actually, so that’s nice.

I: Yeah. What are your thoughts on the concept of student as consumer in higher education?

P: [laughing] I can imagine what responses you’re getting about this. Yeah, I’m opposed to it, like, I think many people in the Humanities probably are, yeah, I’m opposed to it. I think it’s – I don’t think it fits education at all. I think – my understanding is that there have been at least – there is at least one, perhaps even more, studies in the US about relationship between how well students do and their understanding of themselves as consumers or not, and the research suggested that the *more* the students think of themselves as consumers, the worse they do. And that fits with my, you know, with my, kind of, prejudices if you like, of what I would – or my own personal experiences and the experiences of people I talk to of, you know, if you think of yourself as a passive consumer solely, then you’re not going to put in the work and you, kind of, think it’s the tutor’s responsibility to do the work for you and, all that kind of thing. I often think actually students *themselves*, or at least the ones we get, don’t seem to want – *most* of them anyway, don’t actually want that, you know, and most of them are actually – do actually have an understanding of, at least most of the time, of that they have to put in the work and certainly the ones that do best, it’s always, that’s almost universally the case I would have said in my experiences. Yeah, the ones – students who do the best are the ones who *don’t* think of themselves as consumers.

I: No, okay. Do you consider students to be customers in any sense?

P: No. I have to be honest, no I don’t. No, I don’t. No, I don’t. I mean, you know, they’re buying access to education I suppose aren’t they, with their fees? But they’re not buying a result and they can’t take their degree back if they don’t get the degree they want. I mean as long as we’ve not, you know, fallen foul of the Consumer Rights Act and all that kind of stuff, but, you know, as long as we do our jobs properly, if they don’t work hard, they can’t take it back so, that to me doesn’t sound like a customer.

I: Yeah, okay. In your opinion, how prevalent, if at all, is the concept in the university’s attempts to engage its undergraduates?

P: Sorry, say it again?

I: So how prevalent, if at all, is the student-as-consumer concept in the –

P: Oh, I see, right. Yeah… increasingly it is. Yeah, we had a strategic plan last year and it was talking about students as consumers a lot more than had previously been the case. But it’s a bit weird, and I’m glad this is anonymous, it’s a bit weird because our institution has started talking about everybody as being each other’s consumers so, staff being each other’s consumers in each – no, each other’s customers, sorry. We’re all each other’s customers I think was the line it, and, sort of, like, “What? That’s –?” I mean it, kind of, renders the concept of customer pretty meaningless when you make it as general as that, it, sort of, seems to me. So, I would be a customer of somebody in HR, as opposed to a colleague, or, you know, something like that, it would – yeah. It seems a bit farcical to me, to be honest but yeah, the university is pushing that more certainly, I mean, most institutions probably are.

I: Yeah… do you think they’re pushing it more internally to their colleagues or do you think they’re actually pushing it on to students?

P: That’s an interesting question [pause].

I: Because some institutions are more [pause] overt about treating their students as consumers or customers, so I just wondered what this institution was like?

P: I’m not 100% sure, I haven’t had a sense from the students that they mostly think of themselves as consumers, so that might suggest that the university hasn’t been doing that. I haven’t seen any documentation or marketing to students that say explicitly, you know, “You’re customers or consumers”. I did have a – I’m the level one tutor so a, sort of, year tutor for first year students and I did have a meeting with the level one reps and they – and I did mention, it was me that brought up the Consumer Rights Act, the new Consumer Rights Act and, you know, I said to them, “Look, I don’t agree with this concept, but legally speaking, you are consumers now” and they was – I remember they were surprised… they didn’t know. So that might suggest perhaps it’s not being pushed to the students at least *yet*, as strongly as maybe other institutions, by the sounds of it, might be doing.

I: Yeah. Okay. In – Oh, well you, kind of, answered this, but in your opinion, are there elements of the student consumer concept apparent in your interactions with undergraduates? You said not really…

P: Not loads, the only thing I would say is that, the comments in seminars which I don’t remember getting a few years ago, about, you know, this seminar is costing so much money. There’s, sort of, these, kind of, calculations about how much each seminar costs. Normally, we’d, kind of, I do find – you know, I understand the logic of why they say that, at the same time, you know, it’s a bit irritating to – well I just think it’s the wrong way of thinking about, it’s about – not about – you could sit in a seminar and not get anything out of it right? And then it’s not worth anything, if you see what I mean. And to be fair to the students who’ve said that, it’s almost always been in response to students not turning up to seminars, so other students not turning up to seminars and then the ones that have turned up are, kind of, a bit exasperated as to why their peers haven’t turned up, and they say, “Well it’s costing so much money”, so in that context, I can see well yeah, if you are paying for it, show up. I mean, surely? [laughing]

I: Yeah, course. Do you think the introduction of fees has given them a greater sense of entitlement to higher grades?

P: A little bit, perhaps. Perhaps a little bit, yeah. I hear this more from my colleagues than my own personal experience, but yeah, I think there’s a *bit* more, kind of, pushing back against grades when students aren’t happy with the grades that they’re getting yeah, I would say that there’s been some examples of that, yeah. I guess I wasn’t teaching before – I mean I was teaching just before the £9000 fees came in, I wasn’t teaching, you know, before fees or anything so, I don’t know what it used to be like. That’s my only, kind of, disclaimer on that is, you know, maybe students have always complained a bit about their marks, I don’t know. I don’t know, but yeah, there definitely have been – and certainly some of my colleagues have said they’ve noticed, you know, students complaining about their marks or thinking that their marks should be higher than they are, a bit, yeah.

I: Okay. So, moving on to learning approaches. So, in your opinion, are lectures useful for engaging undergraduates?

P: Yeah, very much so, I would say, yeah very much so. Yeah, I think it’s a way of, you know, you can engage with a large group of people in a single go. I think it’s much better to have it done – well, I think you need a mixture of approaches but, there’s a, kind of, shift to recording lectures here, which at the moment is optional, I suspect at some point it won’t be optional anymore, but at the moment it’s optional and I know other institutions have done similar things. And I’m somewhat opposed to that because I think, you know, having a physical, kind of, person in front of you gives it a very different feeling and I do remember a recorded lecture at another institution that was given and the students *hated* it, they absolutely hated it because it was really – you know, it wasn’t a good quality – it wasn’t well done. It was just one camera so there’s no movement, you know, you think compare that to what, kind of, media people are used to watching, and it’s *really* boring. You know, it’s just somebody in a fairly monotone voice, talking at a still camera with not great sound and – I mean, okay you could do it a bit better than that, but I just don’t think, you know, to reproduce the feeling of having somebody live in front of you, you would need probably quite a big budget [laughing] I think. And, you know, I would worry about, I guess, people not turning up to the lectures and things as well, so yeah, I think lectures are really useful and really, really important – yeah.

I: Okay. So, in the same vein, are seminars useful for engaging undergraduates?

P: Yeah, yeah absolutely, just as useful, if not even slightly more so yeah. Yeah I mean, you know, that’s where you hand it over to them don’t you and ideally, you would want to be a facilitator of their learning rather than, you know, preaching or – I guess that’s an ideal that isn’t always reached, realistically speaking, but when you get to that level, it’s, yeah, you know, it’s great and, you know, if you have students talking to each other and you don’t have to necessarily intervene for a few minutes, you know, brilliant. So yeah, it’s super, super useful yeah, I would say. Super useful.

I: Okay. Why do you think it’s that ideal isn’t always reached? Do you think that’s to do with individual students, or anything else?

P: Probably, well probably a couple of different reasons in terms of the, you know, the tutor or the students, or maybe both, so talking, kind of, more generally, I think, you know, sometimes – and I probably am, have been, guilty about this if I’m honest sometimes myself – of maybe, kind of, launching into, kind of, lecture mode almost, a little bit, because, you know, it’s hard not to. But also, I would say I guess it depends, you know, how many students have turned up and how engaged they are with the topic. So obviously you try to create a situation of engagement but, if students don’t physically turn up you can’t [laughing] you know, you can’t do that, can you? Obviously if that happens then you have – you know, the seminar doesn’t necessarily work as well and I don’t know, I guess when I was new to teaching, I used to take every seminar very personally, if it went well or if it went not so well and I guess, like anything, the more you do it, the more you realise it’s not all up to you. You know, sometimes a seminar will go brilliantly and that’s not because, you know, that’s not because of me and sometimes it might go not very well and that’s not necessarily because of me either, if you see what I mean. So, you know, and there’s often – sometimes there’s interpersonal things in between students that you don’t even know what, you know, is going on or – you know, there’s all kinds of things that can go on. And, you know, with English Lit it’s often connected to the text that we do as well frankly. I mean, you know, some texts students really engage with, either because they love it or because they hate it, whereas some texts, students just find too hard or something like that, and that can be a big barrier, you know, if students feel unintelligent because they didn’t get it or something like that, or they just thought it was boring or something, then that’s more difficult and I guess, the benefit of experience if you’ve done it the previous year and you’re, kind of, prepared for it, then you work out strategies for how to make them think that it’s not as hard as they thought it was or maybe it’s more interesting than they thought it was.

I: Yeah, okay. Are one-to-one sessions useful for engaging undergraduates?

P: [pause] Probably yeah. Yeah, they are yeah. We – in terms of one-to-ones sessions, I guess the only two – there’s only really two situations here in which we do that, so we don’t do, kind of, one-to-one teaching like say, Oxford do, we do – oh no maybe three actually – we have personal tuition sessions, which some of which are in groups but some of which are individual, so that’s a bit more of a pastoral thing I guess, although there are some issues around that to be honest. The second is, we do individualised feedback so, in addition to written feedback, we invite students in to talk to us, you know, and then we give them verbal feedback that, sort of, allows, you know, them to ask questions and so on. And the third one is, at third year where we have the individual supervisions for dissertations and that’s where you, I guess, get to have a slightly different type of engagement with a student, and I would say, I would say *my* experience of that has been *very* positive actually. And I would say that I always feel like the students – that’s the point at which students really, kind of, lift off almost and become more independent and, kind of, more – in a way a bit more grown up about how they approach their research and they often *love it* because I think they’re taking a bit more of a sense of responsibility and the feel in that situation where they’re just, you know, in this, kind of, one-to-one situation, that obviously, as a tutor I would know more about certain topics than them, but it feels that they – maybe they feel a bit more – it’s a bit more balanced. And I guess they haven’t got other people to worry about, you know, in a seminar situation I guess there’s all kinds of social anxieties and things that go on, right? So obviously in a one-to-one situation, it’s different, isn’t it? So, as long as you’re, sort of, nice to the student, and, you know, so on, they can feel comfortable with you and, you know, and probably the best out of them I would say.

I: Yeah. Okay. So, in your opinion, which of the above teaching methods do you think undergraduates find the most engaging?

P: [pause] Yeah, probably the one-to-one. Probably the one-to-one. It’s hard to know I guess because that one-to-one is only third years, so would – if we had that all the way through, would that be – would it have the same result? I don’t know. But I would say, yeah probably the one-to-one supervision, kind of, *first*, then seminars then, then probably lectures. Probably in that order I would say. And certainly, our student feedback tends to, kind of, roughly go along those lines.

I: Okay. Is there anything you think is particularly good about the style of learning that takes place at university, as opposed to compulsory education?

P: Yeah, it’s the independence I think. You know, it’s the fact that, you know, we have to, sort of, – I think it’s very important that we do this – we, sort of, tell them, “Look, we’re not going to make you do the work, you know, no one is, you know, you’re not with your parents, nobody’s going to be coming up to your bedroom to say, you know, ‘Have you done that yet?’ It’s up to you” and, you know, pushing that responsibility onto them, I think that’s hugely, hugely, hugely valuable and, you know, there’s an element of, kind of, sink or swim I suppose, involved in that but we try to, sort of, tailor that as much as – so we try to, sort of, have a, sort of, transition as much as possible because you, kind of, realise, you know, you can’t go from just one way of doing education from school, and maybe we stereotype that, but as a, kind of, general understanding that it’s, you know, a lot more, down to the teacher. There’s a lot more of, kind of, getting essays back and doing them again and again until you get them right, you know, and it’s almost as much the teacher’s responsibility as it is the students and moving away from that and moving to a much more, kind of, independent way of doing things, which can feel lonely I think, at first, when they first make that, you know, and I think first year is a really, kind of, crucial year in terms of trying to get, you know, students to, kind of, connect to that slightly different way of doing learning and I think the ones who do the best are always the ones who make that adjustment. And who – or who make the adjustment more quickly than others.

I: Yeah, yeah. From your own experience of teaching, is there anything you would change to improve student learning, so in terms of either your own teaching, the resources you and students have access to, curriculum and assessment or anything else?

P: I mean in terms of my own teaching I suppose, probably I have a slight tendency to try and do too much, I would say, in terms of my own personal practice. So yeah, that’s definitely something – I get, kind of, enthusiastic about the different texts, and that sometimes means, yeah, I try – I’m too, sort of, hopeful or ambitious, you know, and I end up running out of time and there’s only maybe 5 minutes for the final thing and it feels a bit rushed. I guess the more I teach a module, I, sort of, reflect on that and take things out, and then maybe still a bit too much and I take a bit more out the following year or what have you, so in terms of, yeah, in terms of my own practice, I’d probably say that’s probably the thing that I’m still, sort of, developing I’d say. In terms of [pause] I mean, I don’t know, sometimes I think, and I think some institutions do this, sort of, having marks dependent on attendance might not be a *terrible* idea because, certainly here, you know, you tend to get pretty full attendance up to maybe about halfway through a semester, and then it starts to drop off and I think there’s always a, kind of, seminar where, you know, maybe a third of students don’t turn up and then the ones who do turn up realise that, you know, they can not turn up and then, the next week another third, a different third, have not turned up, do you see what I mean? And then by the very end when their essays are due, it’s even lower than that and, if there was – and I think some other institutions do this – having, you know, even if it’s just one mark for just literally turning up, you’ve got a maximum of 10 or 11 marks if you turned up to every single one, it wouldn’t be a terrible idea because I don’t like the idea of making it compulsory, but, you know, if there was some, kind of, if there was a mark involved, I think, you know, that probably would make a difference. Because I mean, subjects like Nursing don’t have this problem because, you know, if you don’t turn up to all the things in Nursing, you don’t get qualified as a Nurse, so the students that are the same age as our students turn up to everything so it’s not – there’s nothing inherent, it’s just that they know they can, kind of, get away with it and nothing’s going to really happen, so I would definitely change that. And that is something we talk about as, you know, as a department, whether we can do that at some point in the future. In terms of resources, we used to have a big issue with resources for books, but it does seem to have been pretty much resolved, I would say, in the last couple of years, which is great. So, we don’t have the biggest library in the world, obviously English Lit needs a lot of books, and so the university, 3 years ago, introduced this [removed for confidentiality] scheme, which is basically, if there’s not a book in the library, either a member of staff or a student can order it and it’ll be bought and I think English is one of the heaviest users of this thing for fairly obvious reasons. The complaints that we used to get a few years ago, 2 or 3 years ago, about resources, have pretty much evaporated, which is pretty good really. And also for my research to be honest, I mean I always need books for research so, you know, it’s great to be able to use that.

I: Yeah. Okay. So, moving on to policy, I sent you the document that refers to the university’s teaching and learning strategy. So how does this strategy impact, if at all, on your interactions with students?

P: I’m aware of it and it gets discussed in meetings sometimes, I would say I approve of the principles of it, for sure, and I think it’s actually a pretty progressive idea, as opposed to the consumer model I guess and so I would say in a, sort of, general principle sense, it probably does inform my practice in a broad, you know, in the background type of sense. I wouldn’t say I have actively planned a seminar necessarily with this, kind of, to the forefront of my mind, but I would say the idea of having active learners is really important, for sure. And in terms of Student Collaboration Policy [policy name changed], I mean I think it probably fits some subjects easier than others because I think, I mean I know, [the person] who developed it, [name removed] I know [them] and [they’re] really good, and I think it fits with things like, you know, Photography and Creative Writing, and there are certain subjects – Art – there are certain subjects that it, sort of, fits more obviously with, than perhaps English. I mean there’s a few other things on here about getting involved in [removed for confidentiality] it’s not as if the students’ views are taken as, you know, as being as authoritative as staff, but they are taken – it is taken into account. What else is there on here? Providing feedback – yeah, students providing feedback, I mean yeah, I guess we have feedback for every single module, which is now electronic, which I don’t think actually is as good as when – the way we used to do it, which was on paper. I think that’s changed the nature of the feedback a bit, so I think the feedback is probably a bit more impersonal now than it used to be, and obviously you get the numbers now that’s turned into data, you know, for the purposes of, you know, student satisfaction and all that kind of stuff. I think that, kind of, quantitative stuff is less useful – feedback is less useful than the qualitative feedback, which we also still have and that is useful, so, you know, obviously if you get students commenting on certain aspects of modules that didn’t work very well and there’s, sort of, you know, quite a consistency on that and the number of students saying that then that’s something obviously, to take into account. Yeah, [pause] oh yeah, one other thing I suppose I should say about this, is that the department [removed for confidentiality] that developed Student Collaboration [policy name changed], has actually disbanded this year, so it’s all in flux anyway so, quite how long the Student Collaboration [policy name changed] thing is going to be around for, I’m not sure. It’s not probably as pushed as hard over the last few years as it was before that, is the impression I get.

I: Okay. So, is the Student Collaboration Policy [policy name changed] not really a thing in this department then?

P: No, it is. I mean, it is a thing as in we know what it is and we understand the concept, and we approve of the concept and we have meetings in which we talk about the concept, but I think, because I’ve been here full-time for 3 years, I get the impression that, a few years before that, that Student Collaboration [policy name changed] was being pushed more actively and to be honest with you, the [person] [name removed] has been a bit side-lined since this got developed, so I don’t think [they’re], you know, [they’re] not perhaps in the position [they] was in, to be able to push this. So, I think in terms of Student Collaboration [policy name changed], I think we, kind of, approve of it, but it’s, kind of, as I said, it’s, kind of, in the background and over the last couple of years, it’s maybe, kind of, more faded into the background than it was before, I think.

I: Okay. Sure, because from what I understood it was where – it’s where students actively work on, like, research projects with staff?

P: Well, yeah, I mean this is where it probably doesn’t fit with English as well as it does with other subjects I would say. So yeah, in terms of that, I mean I don’t know if we’ve ever done that to be honest. I mean, you know, my research – I mean my research is individual for one thing, or mostly it is, and, you know, how I would get a student to actively engage with a piece of writing that I was doing on Tennyson or something, I mean, they couldn’t. I mean, they just couldn’t do it. I mean if you have a PhD student then perhaps you can do that but, undergraduates or MA students, it’s not going to work, I would say.

I: Okay, okay.

P: Not in English anyway.

I: Okay. So, in your opinion, should undergraduate students have greater control over, or input in, the curriculum and/or assessment design of their chosen courses?

P: Than they do at the moment?

I: Mmhmm.

P: No, I don’t think they should, no.

I: Why?

P: I don’t think they should. Because they don’t know what’s best for them [laughing]. If I can put it as bluntly as that. They don’t know, they – you know, if you’re – you haven’t got the, you know, the qualifications or the experience to know what good education is, then you’re not qualified to speak on that subject, *frankly*, which is not to say I don’t think student feedback is important, I do think student feedback is important, but in terms of getting students to design the curriculum [pause] or, to *design* assessment methods, I would be – I would be opposed to that I think. Or at least I would be very sceptical of it I suppose, maybe slightly soften my position, I’d be very sceptical of it. If I was given evidence that someone had done this and it had worked and been a fantastic success then I would be interested to read about that but, at this current point, I don’t see how our students would *possibly* be able to design a curriculum, I mean I don’t think – they haven’t *read* anything, you know, when they come to university, they haven’t read anything so, really – I mean Harry Potter and The Hunger Games, I mean *literally*, right? That’s literally what we’re talking about, so I mean how you would – how they could possibly design a curriculum seems – yeah.

I: What do you think would happen if they were to choose how they were assessed. What do you think they’d choose?

P: They would all choose essays over exams, for sure, because they find exams very stressful. I mean we actually have, I think, one of the fewest number of exams of pretty much any institution, I think. We do, I think we have at least one in every year that’s compulsory and I think maybe a couple of option modules might have them but, in theory I think students only necessarily have to do one exam per year, which I think is a pretty low amount, which I, *kind of,* approve of because I don’t – I don’t love exams as a method of assessment if I’m honest, because I think they’re quite, you know, they’re testing a certain specific set of skills about handling pressure, which is – I mean I guess there are some jobs where handling pressure is important, but, you know, there are a lot of jobs where that’s actually not very important to be honest, or that, kind of, really extreme time pressure. I mean if you’re going to be a Brain Surgeon or something then, you know, or a Pilot, right? I mean you have to work under that, kind of, like, really intense short-term pressure but, a lot of jobs don’t require that so, I mean I guess it’s a way of making sure you – you know, the students aren’t cheating I suppose, so I think there’s always that argument of having at least some exams in for that reason. Yeah, so I think, yeah if they were to design the assessment criteria, they would probably have fewer exams but actually, we don’t have very many anyway.

I: Yeah, okay. In recent government policy on higher education, students have been placed at the heart of the system. In your opinion, to what extent are undergraduates positioned centrally within this university?

P: Well, I’m not sure I agree with the premise of that question actually, in terms of putting students at the heart of the system. I mean I think the government – that’s the rhetoric from the government, yeah for sure, I mean I actually think it’s about putting money at the heart of the system, saving money, and it’s done under a, kind of, mask of consumer choice, to be honest. So, I mean, so yeah, I’m not quite sure I know how to answer the question because I don’t know if I agree with the premise of it.

I: Okay. So, do you think the university puts students before everything else?

P: Yes, actually, I probably do think that, yes, I probably do think that yeah. [long pause] I mean, I guess in terms of prioritising teaching over resea – teaching and research, I guess that, you know, I guess that all institutions try to do both, don’t they? And it shouldn’t be one versus the other. If I were to put a hierarchy on it for this institution, I would say that yeah, teaching and students probably does come first I would say, yeah. In terms of – there’s types of things that get prioritised yeah, yeah.

I: Do you think that’s come out of the consumerist framework? Or the marketisation of higher education?

P: I think in part, yeah. It’s certainly been accelerated by that, yeah. I would say – but I guess it depends what you mean as well by putting students at the heart, you know, what kinds of examples would you mean by that I suppose?

I: So, say the importance that – I mean I don’t know what it’s like here, but the importance some institutions put on student satisfaction and the lengths they’ll go to, to get higher rates of satisfaction, prioritising that above other things. I mean certain people say that teachers are put below students now, and their needs are put below students in certain institutions, because it’s so important that students give good feedback on the university.

P: Yeah, I mean certainly there’s much more pressure on the student satisfaction survey than there used to be, for sure, and, you know, the university basically bribes the students with free cake or whatever it is that they give them to fill it in and I think that the rates of people actually filling it in are still pretty low I think, it’s, like, 40% or something, so – or even lower maybe – so it’s not, you know, I don’t do statistics, but I would have thought that’s a problematically low – you know, to generalise about a whole study body on the basis of 30 or 40 percent. I would have thought it’s pretty problematic so, I guess the reason I’m, sort of, hesitating over this question is, I’m not sure if that is really putting students at the heart of education, I actually think it’s putting the government’s targets at the heart of education which I don’t think is the same thing at all. And, you know, in terms of student satisfaction, I would say that, you know, you could be *very* dissatisfied in the immediate term with something that does you a lot of good and that you only realise it’s done you a lot of good 10 years later so, I guess that’s why I hesitate over the questions because yeah, I would absolutely agree with putting students at the heart of education, absolutely agree with that a million percent. I guess I just don’t think that marketising education is – I don’t think that’s what it’s *really* doing, I suppose.

I: Of course. Okay. So, in the same vein, do you think the way in which students are positioned centrally by government or institutional policy, works to separate them at all from other members of the university so, the academics or the administrators or general staff?

P: [pause] Separate them in what, kind of, way?

I: So as, like, to put the students, sort of, as, like, a separate entity, rather than as part of the academic commun –

P: Yeah, yeah, I guess they are treated as a separate entity, yeah, yeah, yeah. And there’s probably a, kind of, slight anxiousness, there’s an anxiousness around how you deal with that entity as opposed to how you deal with other elements of the university I suppose. Because I suppose there’s a sense of them being paying customers, I guess.

I: Yeah, do you think that’s a bad thing for their experience as a student, to not be part of the community in the same way?

P: [long pause] I mean I guess students would have probably always been separate. As I say I wasn’t teaching before fees, so it’s hard to know for certain, I would imagine students – there would’ve always been a bit of sense of separation on the base of age and, you know, on the base of, you know, one’s a learner and one’s a teacher and so on. So quite how that’s changed things, I don’t really know. [pause] Yeah. Yeah, sorry.

I: Okay, no that’s fine [laughing]. What meaning does the word relationship have for you, in the context of interacting with undergraduates?

P: Hmm, I guess it means a, kind of, reciprocity, I suppose. So, you, you know, you expect certain things from students and they should expect certain things from you, and, you know, the kind of things that I would expect from them would be for them to do the work, pretty much that’s it actually, you know, do the work, turn – ideally, turn up. You know, do the work, turn up and obviously they should expect a certain level of standards of, you know, my ability and my hard work and commitment to them really, and to their, you know, to their educations. So, I guess that relationship isn’t – *ideally* it ought to be reciprocal and often it is, but I guess obviously there is an imbalance there in terms of, I guess, they’re allowed to – as, you know, I’m not saying this is a bad thing but they’re allowed to, kind of, let their side a bit down and I’m not obviously, and that’s fine because I’m getting paid [laughing] and they’re not, so that’s absolutely fine. But when it’s working well, then I think, yeah, they would have a sense of, you know, that they’re getting something for what they’re putting in, if that makes sense?

I: Yeah, okay. So, what do you consider to be the main purpose for building a relationship with undergraduates?

P: The main purpose of it?

I: Mmm [agreement]

P: The main purpose of it would be [pause] well I suppose you want them to have a good experience at university, you want them to come out of it with a good degree, be able to get a good job, more importantly, I think, to, you know, kind of, grow as people and to become interested in the world and life in ways perhaps they weren’t before so, yeah I would say the purpose is to, sort of, transform someone’s life, potentially, in various different kinds of ways, you know, transform their lives in terms of potentially their life chances but also in terms of their, kind of, inner self and the way they see the world I think. So, I think in terms of, you know, why I would – what the purpose of that engagement is, is to, sort of, I guess this is a, kind of, idealistic element, even despite the marketisation of, you know – I would still, and I think hopefully a lot of my colleagues feel the same, have a feeling of the purpose of it is to transform people’s lives in positive ways.

I: Yeah, okay. So, to what extent is the purpose fulfilled do you think?

P: Yeah, I think often it is, I think actually. Yeah, I think often it is. I think, as I said, you know, before, I think I can see by the time people get to third year, quite a big change, and, you know, you can’t put that all down to us and what we do here and the department but, some of it’s just growing up and, you know, moving away from home for a few years and so on, but it’s all part of a package and you do see, you know, definitely as I said, you know, a huge growth in confidence, you know, and independence – massive growth in independence, for the majority of students I would say. Some *really* fly, some it’s, you know, perhaps a bit less, kind of, spectacular, I would say it’s a relatively small number of students that that doesn’t happen with actually, and those students sometimes don’t get a degree I guess, so, you know, there’s a very tiny number I think who don’t get a degree in the end, but sometimes it’s those students who’ve, for whatever reason, haven’t been able to, kind of, make that adjustment or maybe just haven’t been well enough or whatever, or maybe they, kind of, just scrape a bare pass or something, but I would say the numbers – yeah the numbers where that, kind of, growth and engagement doesn’t happen is really small actually, you know, the students always seem to be – they always seem to feel very positive at the point where they’re, kind of, you know, looking back and reflecting on the experience, I would say, which is really nice.

I: Okay. Do you think there’s a link between the relationships undergraduates build with tutors and their levels of engagement?

P: Yeah probably. Yeah probably, I would say probably most of the students who do well or the ones who do the best, are probably engaging with, you know, certain tutors in particular and I think it’s always different tutors. I think, you know, there’s something weird about personality where you, you know, you never know who’s going to click with who, right? It’s a, kind of, weird thing in life in general about, you know, about social interactions and who you get on with and who you don’t get on with. You know, I think it’s always different people but I think yeah, the ones – the students who do well, students who do particularly well or the students who just do well, I think there’s always at least *a* tutor and probably several, who they’ve particularly clicked with and they’ve particularly enjoyed their modules or they’ve particularly enjoyed their style of teaching, and, you know, equally there’ll be some tutors that they haven’t got on with and that’s fine because everyone’s different but, I would say it’s usually different people I think. Or at least that’s the impression that I get, you know, that the same personality and the same teaching method isn’t going to work for everyone and that’s okay. So yeah, I would say that, kind of, personal engagement is *really* important.

I: Okay. So, using what you’ve said, can you describe to me a typical face-to-face encounter with a student? So, for example, if they come meet you to discuss an assessment or an essay.

P: Well I had an MA student in here a couple of hours ago so, so a typical interaction: he came in and, you know, sat down and he’d sent me his work – he’s doing his dissertation now, over the summer – and he sent me his work, I’d read it through yesterday, written, you know, written notes and we discussed it – he’s, sort of, at the beginning of the process of doing his dissertation, it’s the first thing he’s sent me. We’ve had a couple of meetings before but this is the first one where he sent something through and I gave him feedback on, you know, I, kind of, gave him general feedback on what I thought of the submission, the things that I thought, you know, needed work. He is quite an engaged student, I would say, and he had lots to say as well, which is really great and, I mean I think he was here for about an hour, which is quite – often dissertation meetings aren’t actually as long as that, but I think that was because he was, because he had a lot to say. Yeah, so we talked about, you know, the place his dissertation was going to go, he hasn’t quite decided on all of his chapters yet, but we discussed various different options. There were a couple of concerns I had about the submission that he’d given and I wanted to make it clear what my concerns were and why there were certain things he needed to probably avoid in the way he was thinking and dealing with the material, which I thought was good to, kind of, stamp out now. And then we, kind of, went through the, sort of, – a bit more on the small detail of, you know, the writing and those kinds of things and yeah, he was here for about an hour and then we arranged a meeting for a few weeks’ time and, you know, he knows he can email me in between if he wants to but, that was a pretty typical, kind of, dissertation type, you know, interaction.

I: Okay. Do you ever notice any implications of a hierarchy in your interactions with students?

P: In terms of them, kind of, looking up to us as lecturers?

I: Yeah.

P: Yeah, yeah, absolutely yeah. Yeah, absolutely, yeah. I mean, you know, it’s quite funny when they get here in first year, you know, you have to sort of tell them to stop calling you Sir, it’s really hilarious, and putting their hands up as well which is – it’s really sweet. Yeah it, kind of, reminds you that they’ve just come out of school, you know, and yeah, yeah there is, there’s definitely that sense of hierarchy and sometimes I get a little bit surprised by it, but I shouldn’t be, you know, I suppose, because I certainly felt the same way when I was in their position to my lecturers so, I shouldn’t be surprised by it but sometimes I am. And, you know, if you see them in town or something, they always look, kind of, nervous to see you or something which is always quite funny as well, which, again, I probably would have been the same. I would say in terms of hierarchy though, we work quite hard to reduce that to an extent, you know, perhaps compared to, I don’t know if compared to school – yeah maybe a little bit compared to school actually yeah. It could – even though maybe teachers at school maybe have more sense of responsibility for the marks the students get, in some ways they’ve got a bit more of a disciplinary role, compared to the role that we have. I don’t see our role as being disciplinary, well not never I suppose, occasionally, but not much, and so, you know, yeah getting them to call you by your first name and all that, kind of, stuff is more like, “Well I’m an adult, you’re an adult, let’s treat each other as adults”.

I: Yeah okay. You said you work quite hard to get rid of the hierarchy, what, sort of, things do you do as a department?

P: Well yeah, I mean things like, you know, calling us by our first names, by just being generally nice and friendly and, you know, don’t be afraid to – or this is what I try to do, don’t be afraid to, sort of, I don’t know, make yourself look silly and that might sound like a strange thing to say, but don’t be afraid to crack a joke at your own expense, something along those lines, you know, and, kind of, break the ice a bit, because I think if students are *terrified* of you, that’s not – especially here, as I said the issue is confidence, so, you know, it’s not as if it was a – if it was different kinds of institution, the issue might be “Actually, I might need to assert authority over, you know, kind of, cocky, you know, people who have had a certain, kind of, education” but here, that’s not the case at all, it’s actually about building them up and, you know, and a way of doing that is by making them realise that you’re just a person [laughing] right? Rather than a, kind of, Doctor, terrifying Doctor figure so, yeah, you know, I don’t know if – I remember a seminar really early on this year where it was really hot in the seminar room and I tried to open the window, because it was really hot, and I couldn’t do it and we, kind of, cracked a joke about having a PhD but I can’t open a window and, you know, there’s things like that, you know, try to don’t be – yeah, I just – I don’t know, maybe there’s something gendered to that as well, it’s maybe a little bit easier as a man, I don’t know. I’ve certainly heard from some female colleagues about – not necessarily here but where I did my PhD – about female, young female academics perhaps, struggling a little bit with the authority issue in a seminar and that maybe there were certain gendered, you know, issues going on in play there. Maybe as a male tutor, it’s a bit easier for me perhaps to crack a joke at my own expense *without* losing authority, if you see what I mean. But yeah, that’s probably how I would say I do it. I couldn’t, if I’m honest, speak for all of my colleagues about how they handle it and, to be honest, probably not all of them do do that. You know, I think some of them probably, maybe are a bit more traditional in terms of wanting to assert a certain type of hierarchy than I am.

I: Okay. Has the dynamic or the relationship between you and undergraduates changed at all throughout your career here?

P: Well I mean I’ve only been here 3 years, so it’s a relatively short period of time I suppose to talk about. As I said we introduced this personal tuition system and that has – as a response I think to the £9000 tuition fees – and I would say that has changed things with *those* students and not necessarily in good ways if I’m honest. I think it’s quite a problematic system and I think it is actually being rethought because [pause] well I mean I know this is confidential so I can talk to you about this, I had a student for example, [removed for confidentiality] I was *completely* unprepared for it. *Completely unprepared*. I’ve had no training in how to deal with a situation like that, I didn’t know what I was allowed to say and what I wasn’t allowed to say. She, you know, wanted certain reassurances, I didn’t know – I wanted to give her those reassurances, but I wasn’t 100% certain if I gave her those reassurances, if they would be kept, I wasn’t entirely sure. And, you know, all kinds of issues even down to silly things like, you know, if somebody’s bursting into tears in that, kind of, situation, are you allowed to hug them? I mean I didn’t, but I was, kind of, like paralysed with, “What do I do?” you know, it was really traumatic for – well for her obviously, and to be honest, a little bit for me too. And so yeah, obviously that – my relationship with that particular student is very different but – it’s good to have a system where things like that get picked up, that’s definitely good, I worry, I suppose that’s quite a dramatic example, but I do worry about having that, kind of, more pastoral stuff creeping in, in a more general sense but, you know, I suppose we were talking about hierarchies weren’t we? And, kind of, distance and that kind of thing, and I worry about the potential for that, kind of, academic distance to get eroded too much and to be honest, potentially even for abuses to take place, you know, deliberately or not and I’m not necessarily – you know, I’m not saying that I think that that’s happening or anything, but I do worry if that system is maintained and if that system is going on at every institution in the country, I think it’s almost probably a matter of time, to be honest until there’s some, sort of, accidental or deliberate, you know, blurring of those boundaries, in a way that’s not appropriate. So, I worry about that and yeah, we just haven’t had any training about how to deal with stuff like that. You know, even a triage nurse would have – you know, who isn’t a councillor, would have at least a basic training and we haven’t had that. I think it’s under review for that reason because I think the personal tuition system here was introduced, yeah in response to the £9000 tuition fees issue and, in order to give the students a, kind of, sense of a value-added type of thing in which they, you know, in theory they can come and speak to us about essays, about how they get better marks in essays, they can come and speak to us about their careers, you know, what they might be thinking about doing next and that kind of thing. It’s not at all, those are *not* the things they’re coming to speak to us about, they’re coming to speak to us about mental health problems and bad things that have happened to them and we are not – we are *not prepared* for it really. And all we can really say is, “Go and, you know, go and talk to the Student Wellbeing Centre” who are massively overstretched because it seems to be this massive epidemic of student poor mental health, probably partly because of, you know, extra pressure on them to perform that they’ve had from school, and social pressures, I think it’s a real social problem but, you know, and I am glad that in one sense that we are now more aware of this as an issue than we were before, that’s a positive because if tutors are not aware that there are all these social pressures on young people then, you know, we wouldn’t have any sympathy for them, would we? And just knowing *quite* how prevalent that is, I think it’s really *shocking*, but as I say, I do have concerns about that boundary line getting blurred too much. You know, like, for example, that student [removed for confidentiality], I mean I will have to mark her work at some point in the future. Can I really do that fully objectively? I mean, you know, I’ll have to try won’t I, but it’s a worry. Yeah that was a bit of a [inaudible] answer to your question wasn’t it but yeah, I think things have changed a bit. I think that system is under review because as I say, I think the only – you know, it’s not being used for what it was supposed to be being used for.

I: Yeah. Okay. Can you think of any particularly good relationships, without giving away their identity, with any undergraduates?

P: Yeah, I can, yeah. Yeah really good relationships with a number of students I would say. Dissertation students, some personal tutees, particular students in seminars, also the reps, the year reps, the student year reps, you know, some of them are particularly good, some of them are partic – not necessarily good in terms of, like, essays although they’re fine but in terms of their keenness and, you know, their willingness to, sort of, put in loads of work for their peers really and do extra things for their peers and they’re often the, kind of, people who volunteer to do extra things. So, and yeah, I’ve been asked by one student – by a couple of students actually, who – first year students – who are doing a work placement with a film producer who came to give a talk here, and they’re doing a, kind of, work placement thing with him, and they wanted – I think they’re going to do a report and they came and asked me if I would basically, you know, kind of, oversee that report and so on, and that’s an added extra thing and, you know, I thought it was sweet of them to ask actually and it’s, like, that’s something that they’ve managed to get for themselves, it’s not something we tell them to do at all, you know. They saw this guy give a talk and they spoke to him afterwards and were really keen as mustard people, and he was obviously quite impressed with them and said, “Why don’t you come and do this thing with me?” Yeah, so yeah, I mean that’s a particularly – there are often, I say every year, there are often the, you know, those kinds of students who you, sort of, have particular relationships with, it is the ones who are, sort of, super keen, I guess, you know, that it’s easier to have those kinds of relationships with.

I: Yeah okay. Okay, now is the fun part which everyone loves [laughing]. So, let me just get you a pen.

P: Okay, let me turn the light on.

I: So, can I ask you to draw your conception of a good relationship with a student?

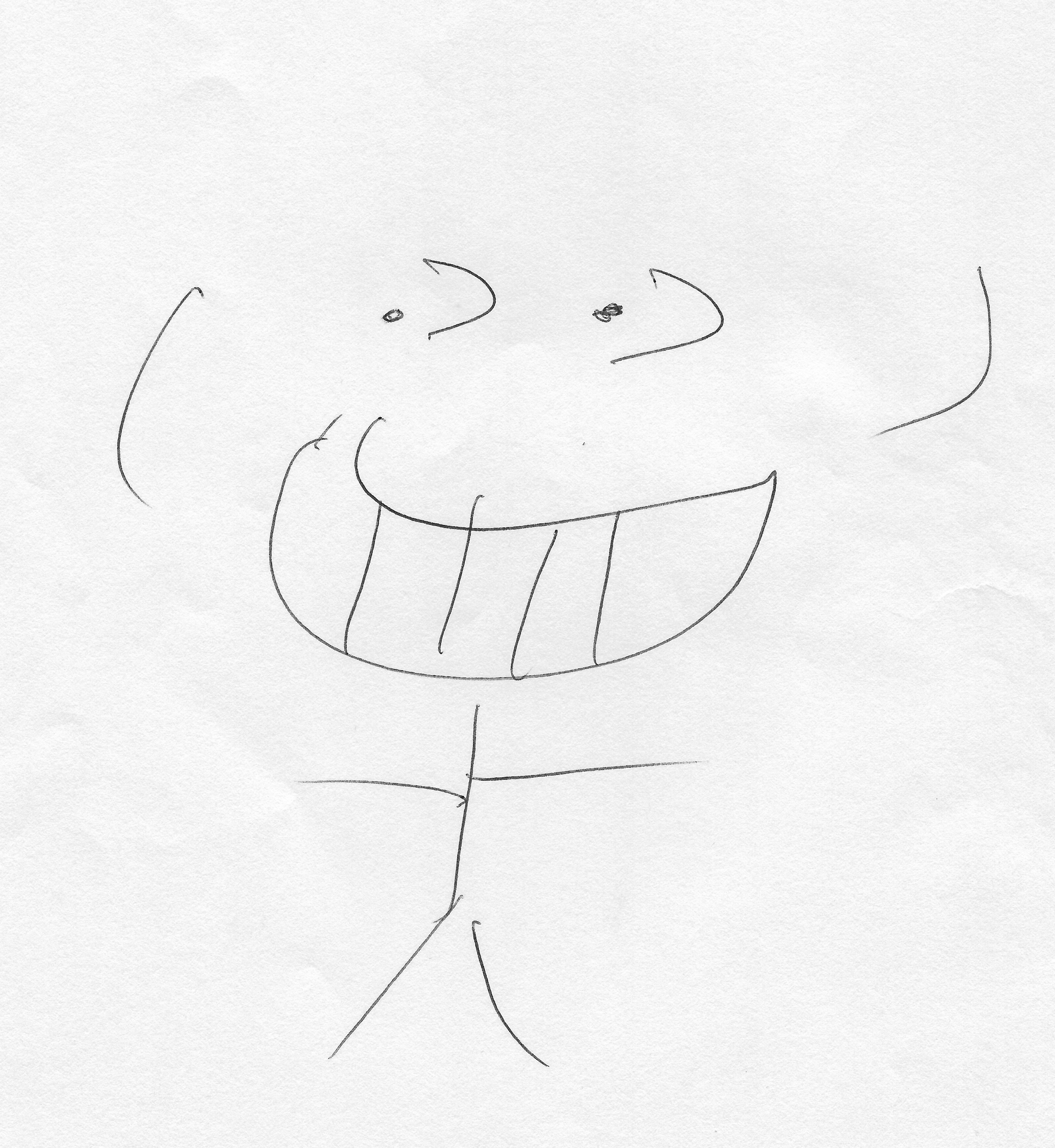
P: [laughing]

I: [laughing]

P: You’re kidding me. I can’t draw.

I: It can be anything, abstract if you want, stick people…

P: Oh, my goodness [laughing] it’s going to have to be stick people, I can’t do anything else, are you kidding me! Oh, my goodness. [laughing] Okay that’s bizarre. I’m always like, “What am I drawing?” [laughing]



P: Yeah, there you go. There’s a smiley student [laughing]. Yay, smiley student, there you go. How’s that? [laughing]

I: Okay [laughing]

P: [laughing] Honestly, I’m terrible at drawing, I can’t draw, I quit Art when I was about 13.

I: [laughing] Don’t worry I’ve had some really interesting ones so far.

P: [laughing]

I: So, why did you draw a smiley student?

P: It’s probably the only thing I can draw? [laughing] If I’m honest. I don’t know I guess in a relationship with a student you would want them to be happy, wouldn’t you? So, one would want them to be happy, one would want – so yeah, a happy student is probably an engaged student I would have said.

I: Okay, thank you. So…

P: Is that it for drawing?

I: There’s another one [laughing]. Can you draw the opposite, so a bad relationship? [laughing]

P: [laughing] Can I just turn that upside down?

I: [laughing]

P: [laughing] Seriously.

I: You can draw it upside down.

P: Okay, I’ll draw it upside down, okay. [laughing] I don’t even know if I can actually. [laughing] That’s hilarious. I’ll do a nose this time.

A drawing of a person

Description automatically generated

P: There you go, there’s a student, an unhappy student. [laughing]

I: [laughing] Okay. So why did you draw an unhappy student?

P: [laughing] Yeah because an unhappy student’s probably the student that’s not really engaged and, you know, I think students would probably be engaged if they felt that it was working or there was something in it for them or that they were good at it, or there was something they were getting out of it and there’s got to be something that’s gone wrong if they don’t feel – if they’re not engaged, something’s gone wrong there so, they either think they’re not very good at it or maybe they’re not very good at it, I guess, in which case they may have chosen the wrong topic or, you know, maybe they shouldn’t even be at university, and in a small percentage of cases that’s probably true – tiny percentage, but probably true. Or something, you know, else has gone wrong, they are not getting on with tutors or, something’s gone wrong in their personal lives, and that’s preventing them from engaging. You know, all the kinds of personal problems that prevent them from engaging, so I guess yeah, I guess I, kind of, feel that, if everything is going as it should do, then the norm would be having an engaged student, so if they’re not engaged, something has gone wrong *somewhere*.

I: Okay. Okay.

P: Phew, is that it for drawing now?

I: That’s it for drawing, you can relax now.

P: I can relax. You didn’t tell me I was going to do that because I might not have said yes if you’d have told me that [laughing].

I: [laughing] Everyone’s always so shocked when I bring the pen out.

P: Yeah [laughing].

I: There’s often a lot of encouragement for students to engage with different experiences that university offers, so joining societies or getting involved in the Student’s Union, so what are your thoughts on this?

P: Yeah great, brilliant. Yeah, we’ve got, I mean, like, most universities, there’s tons and tons of societies. Students are often setting new ones up if there isn’t something that suits their needs. Fantastic yeah, brilliant, I think the more that they do that kind of thing, the better to be honest because I think, you know, it’s something that we are, as academics, not involved in, so they’re doing it with their peers and I just think that, you know, the more that they’re integrated into groups *socially*, the happier they will be and the more engaged they will be and, you know, who knows what kind of thing they might discover that they enjoy doing that they weren’t sure that they’d enjoy? But I think probably the social aspect of it is more important.

I: Yeah… Do you ever find any issues of balancing extracurricular with learning?

P: Not in terms of societies, no. But I would say in terms of work, that they’re, you know, them working, yes, I would say so, yes. I would say that there’s – students are probably working too much and that’s because, you know, they don’t have any money and probably it’s partly to do with fees too, I would have thought. And that, you know, it’s a problem in terms of their – the amount of time that they have to do all the reading because it takes, you know, the number of contact hours is relatively small but, the number of hours it takes to do the reading for each week, is pretty – it’s pretty hard actually. You know, they have four modules on the go at the same time, and, you know, we do try to make sure that there aren’t four massive novels every single week but, I mean sometimes there might be, and sometimes it might be some poet – but it’s a lot, you know, they have a lot of reading to do. So yeah, they’re working, you know, and I guess sometimes maybe they might prioritise the short term over the longer term if you see what I mean. So, they might prioritise having money in their pocket next week as opposed to, you know, as opposed to the degree which will have a longer-term benefit. But that’s an understandable, if perhaps mistaken, you know, way of prioritising their lives, but, you know, given the pressures they’re under and, you know, their age, I think it’s – yeah, I think it’s understandable that they sometimes make those choices. It does worry me sometimes because, you know, I often try to get students to see me at particular times and they say, “I can’t because I’m working” and, you know, in *theory*, it’s supposed to be a full-time commitment, so in *theory*, they should be able to meet me pretty much at any time, as long as they haven’t got a seminar or lecture, they should be able to meet me pretty much anytime and increasingly, that’s not the case, I would say.

I: Yeah. What are your thoughts on the role of the Student’s Union in terms of engaging undergraduates?

P: [laughing] Well the reason I laugh is, I mean you may be aware of some of the hoo-hah with [University A] Student Union in the last few months…

I: No?

P: No? Well, [removed for confidentiality] to me what that pointed out, up, was the way in which – in a situation of £9000 fees, Student’s Unions are increasingly becoming arms of university marketing departments, it seems to me, and that they are increasingly, kind of – which is again, you know, going into that issue about, are students really at the heart of this? [removed for confidentiality] So, it’s as if the university’s Student Union have been, kind of, been co-opted by the university marketing department and, you know, students can’t ever say anything bad about the university. [removed for confidentiality] I think that idea of bringing the university into disrepute I think is such a nebulas and dangerous concept, to be honest, and, you know, students can fall foul of that and quite frankly so could lecturers, quite easily. You make a negative comment on Twitter and all of a sudden you’ve got, you know, somebody knocking at your door or something [removed for confidentiality] it seems to me over the last few years that there’s been some quite negative things that have gone on with the Student Unions. At least here anyway.

I: Okay. Do you think undergraduates value the Student Union as a space dedicated to them?

P: Not at the moment they don’t. No, I don’t think so – I think at the moment if you asked a lot of [University A] students, they would probably talk to you about the issue I just mentioned. You know, there have been reports in the student newspaper about it and, you know, there’s a lot of students pretty angry about it I think. So, I mean they might say, “Generally, we do value it” but, you know, at the moment I think they probably would tell you that they’re pretty unhappy, with the Student Union, I would have said.

I: Okay. What are your thoughts on the university’s attempts to engage its current and prospective undergraduates?

P: [pause] Could you give me, sort of, some more context for the question?

I: So…

P: Prospective meaning students coming for Open Days, is that what you mean?

I: Yeah, so yeah, prospective would be how they, sort of, try and recruit new students and how they engage students that they want to come here, but also students once they’re enrolled here, how do they – how does the university as a *body* keep the students engaged, if they do at all?

P: In terms of current students I would say the univer – I don’t know, I don’t know if the university does a lot centrally, I would say the departments – it’s more the departments that try and keep their own students. I would say it’s, you know, probably more, sort of, decentralised so, you know, the departments, well English – I can only really speak about English – but, you know, obviously in terms of teaching but also in terms of, putting on extra events, putting on research seminars, all kinds of different things that – you know, trips to places, there’s all kinds of various things that we try to do to keep students interested and engaged. In terms of *prospective* students, I mean we have Open Days – a *lot* of Open Days actually, probably too many if I’m honest. A lot of Open Days, so we have Open Days in the first semester, before Christmas which are more, kind of, speculative, if you’re interested in doing English, come along, listen to a talk about English, you get a chance to – we, sort of, sit at the – you know, sit behind a desk and potential students can come and talk to us about what they’re thinking of doing and, we have in the semester B, we have what we call Applicant Open Days which is basically people who have said that they are first or second choice, you know, applying to [University A] so then we do, like, a taster seminar, “This is what it would be like”, you know, and all the different tutors do different things for that. So, it’s just something that I guess each individual tutor thinks students might find interesting. I do something on [removed for confidentiality], which is a bit controversial probably, but I don’t know, I’d rather keep them interested even if they’re, you know, even if they think, “Oooh” a bit, rather than bored, if you see what I mean. [removed for confidentiality] try to, kind of, keep them interested and there is often a bit of awkwardness, you know, at first, but then usually by the end they, kind of, get where we’ve, kind of, gone to, if you see what I mean, so I, kind of, feel that people are engaged if they feel like they’re learning something. That’s the way I do it but it’s not a university policy, you know, it’s – I mean the university suggests that we do taster days, but what we do in the sessions is, kind of, up to us, which is probably how it should be I think.

I: Yeah, okay. So obviously the university’s very successful in engaging its undergraduates, but there’s probably more that could be done, ways in which it could broaden engagement across the whole student body and I wondered whether you had any comments around this?

P: I mean it would be good to get more students going to research seminars I would say. I mean we had – a couple of years ago, another of these very keen student reps, you know, I had a meeting with him and he, sort of, said, “Can’t we have more of things going on, can’t we have more events like, kind of, people coming into give talks on different subjects?” and I was like, “Oh you mean like all the research seminars that we have?” and he was like, “What?” and it turned out that he didn’t know. So, this was a couple years ago, so since then we’ve much more, kind of, aggressively *marketed* the research seminars, which are for staff primarily – well I say primarily, yeah, they primarily are for staff and PhD students, but we also a lot more aggressively market them to students as well. And also, we do have some talks that *are* more designed for students but, in terms of the numbers of students who go, we get a *core* – a small core of *very keen* students who come, most students don’t. So, it would be good if we could get them engaged with that more. I guess it’s hard because, you know, you don’t want to, I don’t know, you don’t want to, kind of, filter it down too much, the actual, you know, research paper. So, you know, at least one external speaker was a bit surprised that there were students there and said, you know, “I might have done a slightly less dense paper if I’d have known, you know, might have made it slightly more like a lecture if I’d have known” and one of the problems is you never quite know who’s going to turn up, sometimes there’s more staff, sometimes there’s more students. So – but yeah it would be good if we could have them more engaged because I think, you know, getting students to, kind of ,engage with research and realise that staff are involved in the production of knowledge on an ongoing basis would be *very* positive I think, for their, kind of, for themselves as, kind of, seeing, this is what research is, this is what they can also do and also, kind of, their interactions with us, you know, and, kind of, perhaps sometimes, students don’t always realise that we’re *doing* research, maybe, you know. They see us as teachers sometimes perhaps, slightly more hippy teachers or something, you know [laughing], like, slightly more laid back, you know, teachers, but I’m not saying all students think that and I think they’re all, kind of, vaguely aware that we do research stuff, but actually knowing what we do, unless they’ve happened to come to a research seminar that we are giving – I think that would be really beneficial, if that was done in our department and also probably across the university as a whole I think.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay well thank you very much for your time.

P: You’re welcome, you’re welcome.

I: I’ve got some really valuable and insightful comments, so thank you. So, as I said I can send you the draft of the analysis when it’s done and you can have a look, might be interesting for you to see.

P: Yeah, I’d be very interested in that.

**[End of Recording]**