**Interview #3 Transcript: Principal Lecturer and Programme Leader (13.07.17) (University A)**

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

Participant (P): Are we talking about BA?

I: Yes.

P: Because I’m also one for the MA so, okay. God, my main responsibilities? Organisation of the programme, overseeing colleagues fulfilling their roles over particular responsibilities like admissions officer or whatever. Being a, sort of, point of contact and a *face* for the students to know you are the person to go to if anything else, if they don’t know where else to go. Being stuck between management [laughing] and the students and trying to, sort of, mediate a bit between those. Responding to marketing’s *demands* in terms of, you know, recruitment activities [pause] corralling the team as well, you know, sort of, infusing team spirit within the, you know, among my colleagues and, sort of, *leading* the possibility of democratic decision-making, I mean it isn’t about making about a lot of decisions, it’s more about giving opportunities to discuss, and will lead to a decision that I hope then everybody feels invested in and so, policy-making in terms of how we act and respond to our students. That’s probably the summary of that role.

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

P: Teach? Well as a programme leader, you have a reduction of teaching, so I don’t have a typical load. So… but do you want to know how many I’ve been teaching while I’ve been programme leader? What my more typical…

I: Yeah, so maybe, like, what was it before you were programme leader and now what is it?

P: How many undergraduate students? And what do you mean by teaching? Seminar teaching or lectures?

I: And lectures, yeah.

P: Well lectures I teach the whole cohort. I teach the whole first year, I teach the whole third year in lectures. I don’t teach any second year. In terms of seminar groups, I would probably teach about 90 students in an academic year.

I: Okay, is that manageable in your opinion?

P: I think a lot of us would like slightly smaller *groups* for the quality of what goes on in the seminar, because our seminar groups can be up to 18 and I think a lot of them would like them to be a bit *smaller*, but yeah in terms of quantity of hours of teaching and just about marking, yeah, I think that’s doable. Yeah.

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

P: In the phrase student engagement?

I: Yes.

P: Yes. *Mixed*, for me, I would say. On the one hand, I think it’s a really good word that is trying to counter a consumer model of the student as a *passive* consumer of knowledge and, you know, coming to a university, a degree factory. So, I think engagement is encouraging students to be *active* learners, to be *engaged*, to *negotiate* learning with lecturers, so I think it emphasises the, kind of, *relationship* aspect of learning and the action and the responsibility on the student as well. It also suggests they’ve got to be enthusiastic, you know, and engaged in that sense of being interested, so I think they’re all quite *good* significations. I’m a *little* bit wary of how it’s used institutionally because I think sometimes it can mean students getting involved in things or getting involved in a way that I’m not entirely comfortable with because I *don’t* think they’re necessarily the best qualified to do so. So, for example, perhaps actually being on interview panels of new staff, you know, I’m not entirely sure that’s a good idea, or it has to be done in a careful way. Yeah.

I: Okay. So, using what you’ve said, how do *you* personally attempt to engage your undergraduates in your teaching?

P: Well when you use the word in that sense as a verb, it feels a much more normal, general word that doesn’t have all those very particular policy, sort of, nuances to it, so that just sounds like a more, like, engaging people in what – in your teaching, in a sense of going into a, you know, planning a seminar or planning a course or programme in ways that you think they will find *interesting*, they will find *relevant*. I’ve thought of things for them to *do*, through which they can learn. Yeah and I engage with them as *people*, there’s a, sort of, interaction with them as well. Could you just repeat your question?

I: Yeah, how do you personally attempt to engage your undergraduates?

P: Well, I mean at every level from, you know, at the level of writing a module, I mean we emphasise research-led teaching, as most universities would, but on the other hand, you know, I think about what, kind of – how can I build a bridge between my research and module design which is, sort of, *varied* and interesting and stimulating for students? In seminars – I mean I come from a background of teaching English as a foreign language and teaching in the Open Universities where, you know, facilitating active learners is very much the ethos so, you know, when I’m planning a seminar I think, “What is it I’m giving students to do?” rather than just starting a conversation about something, like planning activities. Using resources or inviting *them* to contribute. I mean one thing I try and do, more with MA but I’m trying to do it more with BA is trying to give them more independent tasks, where *they* have to come up with, you know, they *lead* part of the seminar, or *they* find a resource that they want to bring and share with everybody, rather than always proscribing to them what I’ve found. So, I think *guided* independence is part of that. I think some of it’s just about personal relationship too, you know, a lot of the, sort of, moments where you feel you’ve *definitely* made a difference to someone is when you have a one-to-one with them, you know, whether it’s a tutorial about their essay or a conversation about their struggles or, they just come and chat to you after a seminar about something. So, I think engaging with them *respectfully* and *personally* is going to help them feel motivated about their learning I think, than if they feel that we’re impersonal and don’t, sort of, care about them personally.

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

P: Yeah, it’s not nice [laughing]. It’s a difficult one because I, you know, I come from the days where we just about had a grant, I mean it wasn’t quite enough to live off but nonetheless, you know, we didn’t pay fees and didn’t entirely pay living costs so, I have a lot of sympathy for the present-day student who pays for their education and I can see how that *utterly*, *utterly* changes how they understand university education. They have to feel there’s an economic benefit. I think, yeah, I mean there are all sorts of problems with the words, education isn’t a thing you can buy, you know, it’s an experience you can go through and, you know, what you get out of it is so much what you put into it that it just can’t be equated to a product, you know, it just *can’t*. But I realise that the, kind of, structures of universities and higher education, to some extent, have to be framed by that financial transaction and perhaps, more than ideally, have been influenced by that model. So, I think a *lot* of academics certainly, are constantly trying to, sort of, work against that ethos, but you don’t *always* feel that other parts of the university are, you know, you feel you’re battling the marketing model really, in a lot of ways. I think you can have quite decent conversations with students about this, I’ve *not* experienced very much sense of students, sort of, feeling entitled, or being demanding, and that might be partly to do with the, kind of, cohort of students we get, but I don’t – I actually *don’t* feel that my experience of teaching has been massively corrupted by that ethos, you know, I don’t feel the students are relating in the, kind of, most banal way of consumer, but I do think it’s important for a department to have a constant emphasis on some other model to counter that, so there’s a, kind of, ethos that students abide that counters the worst of that ethos.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you consider the students to be customers in any sense at all?

P: Well they are in that they’re paying a lot of money and they probably feel a bit cynical in some ways. So, I can see from *their* point of view, they are. I mean I suppose I might think more of the word customer, because I’ve done jobs in which the idea of customer *service* is important and I think, “Well, yeah, we can’t, sort of, mess them around, we have to treat them respectfully”, not just because they’re paying, because they’re here, they’re people [laughing] and we have a responsibility to them. So, I’m not sure the money makes a difference or not with that but, yeah, customer service I would take seriously in that sense that, you know, you treat them respectfully, you fulfil *your* obligations as a tutor and you show that you’re being responsible so they respect *you*, you earn respect from them, you don’t assume it. So, in that sense I think the customer model is, to some extent, useful, it’s more, kind of, *contractual*, rather than assuming a teacher authority is inevitable. But yeah, the idea of students *consuming*, being consumers of education, it just doesn’t work. Education isn’t a *thing*.

I: Okay. In your opinion, how prevalent, if at all, if the concept of the student as consumer in the university’s attempts to engage its undergraduates?

P: Well, I mean as you’ve recognised, the university has a very *distinct* counter policy and I would say, among *academics*, certainly in the Humanities areas, which is, kind of, the world I’m in, we all, sort of, stand by that counter ethos. I can’t really speak for the departments that do things like Business and Law, and, you know, things that might lend themselves a bit more to that, I don’t know what answers they would give. I think our university’s *fairly* good on not having gone down the line *too* much. I mean I do know other universities that have been *ruthless*, really ruthless business-like model, you know, shutting small courses, shutting financially non-productive courses even if you could argue that they’re *important* for other reasons, you know, and *jumping* to everything students say they want because they’re *scared* that the customer will be put off. So, there’s some of that here, but I think it’s a reasonable balance at the moment. I don’t feel I’m working in a really unpleasantly commercialised ethos.

I: Okay. Are there elements of the student consumer concept apparent in your interactions with undergraduates? So, are you ever aware of them being customers when you interact with them?

P: *Occasionally*. Occasionally I’ve heard students talking about, you know, they’ve worked out how much per hour they’re paying [laughing] or, how much per hour, you ought to be, you *must* be earning and they never understand everything they’ve got to take into account, they just think of the teacher, they don’t think about all the other support service and that. So occasionally I have overheard conversations *like* that. They’ve not been particularly embittered, but yeah, certainly students are very aware of the financial side of it. But not, yeah, not much. I don’t feel it’s really effected much, you know, most of the students I’ve engaged with, I feel they *want* to learn, they *know* they have to put a lot in, they *know* we don’t produce degrees for them, and they respect tutors who work hard to be good teachers, you know, I think they can – you can have a more mature conversation with them than I think a lot of people think. You don’t have to stay on the other side of the, you know, the fence from them, you can actually talk about what we’re doing. I mean the only other thing is, yes, sometimes as a personal tutor, some of them have financial difficulties and troubles, so that’s where you’re aware, you know, you’re very conscious that they are *paying* for this, but I don’t think that gives them a, sort of, customer mentality particularly, it’s more that just financial struggle is part of being a student.

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

P: They can be, depends how they’re *done* and I would also say that part of lecture’s purpose is not just to *engage* undergraduates, depending how you define that word. I mean, yeah, students need understanding, knowledge, context and the stuff you can cover in a lecture that’s an *efficient* way of doing that rather than saying, “Well go and read 15 articles about this” or, “Right, we’ll do five seminars to cover this” [laughing] you know, there’s an efficiency about a lecture that I think is important. I do think it’s important for lectures to be engaging, so I mean I, increasingly, do activities within a lecture so that it certainly isn’t just 50 minutes of one-way talk, you know, they maybe have to do a quiz or, you talk through a concept and get them in pairs to apply it to an example for a few moments, so the learning can, kind of, sink in, or you stop and ask them to write something for a minute. So, I think depending how you – I think it’s important to incorporate active elements in lectures to keep them engaging. I’ve not yet heard of an alternative model that covers what lectures *achieve*, that I would – you know, I think, actually, students would have to do a huge amount of work to fill up what lectures achieve. But I mean they do – particularly in the first year we do get moans about lectures and obviously students find it very challenging to get *used* to that. By the end of the third year, they’re not moaning about lectures so I think it’s partly just a, sort of, familiarity thing.

I: Okay. Are seminars useful for engaging undergraduates?

P: To me, *yes*, in my view. I’d have thought that’s where they do the *most* engaging because that’s where their voices are important. They’ve thought about a topic, they’ve come ready with ideas, you know, and we get a lot of feedback which says that students – where students say that seminars are the things they like most, they love sharing ideas, they like hearing other people’s views, they like being able to voice ideas and opinions and not be *judged* and they develop confidence in doing that. So yeah, again, as long as seminars are structured in a way that are there to, sort of, facilitate students being as vocal and active as possible, then I would say *yes*, and our feedback would say *yes*, definitely.

I: Okay. Okay, what about one-to-one sessions?

P: Yes. *Undoubtedly*. Because you can be so totally focussed on where that student is at, at that point, so whether – I mean for example, on one of my modules, I do a, you know, I timetable a tutorial for everybody to come and talk to me about their project ideas, so, you know, they get, sort of, a conversation which is *entirely* focussed on what they want to do, what their queries are, what their thinking is, you know, and I think that can be a very *satisfying* experience for tutor and student to really feel by the end of that, they’ve crystallised what it is they’re going to do, they feel *empowered* by that, they’ve felt listened to. So *yes*, and I sometimes think *more* one-to-one stuff would be good, even if it was maybe a mid-point tutorial, halfway through a semester, just to say, “And how are you getting on with this course? What are you enjoying about it?” Not just in a group setting, but individuals, and I actually think *more* one-to-one stuff, if we had time to schedule it, would be a *really good* way of engaging students and helping them feel *valued* and *heard*. Yeah.

I: Which of the above teaching methods that we’ve just mentioned, do you think undergraduates find the most engaging?

P: [pause] I would – *not* lectures [laughing]. [pause] I don’t know I’d have to do a survey of *them* to find out whether they would say seminars or one-to-ones because broadly – yeah, as a regular teaching method, seminars, because they get so many more of those and, you know, they can be fun, there can be a vibe about the interaction that’s fun, but on the other hand, particularly quieter students I think, *might* find the one-to-one conversations – they can be the life-changing ones where they, you know, you suddenly, sort of, give an encouragement that’s very directed at them, that’s not generic, that I think could actually be the thing that inspires them to think they’re better at this than they thought they were or, there’s a new idea they can follow up. So, I’d have to do a survey to answer that question [laughing].

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

P: Well, it’s quite a while since I was *in* compulsory education. What – the impression I get from what *students* say in their feedback about *what* they like about their studies at university compared to school, and we particularly hear this is in the first year, obviously where it’s all fresh in their minds and in our personal tutoring groups, you know, we give them a chance to talk about what they’re adjusting to, what’s different. I mean the, kind of, things they talk about is the fact that lecturers have designed the courses, so that they’re enthusiastic about material in a way that is very difficult for the most committed, conscientious school-teacher to be, who didn’t write the curriculum. So, I think our self-authored curriculum is really important, that make it more engaging because the students can *feel* our passion [laughing] you know, and our interest. Secondly, I guess the range of *choice*, you know, they get – not so much in our first year here, but at higher levels, their chance to choose modules they want to do, whereas obviously, if you’re doing A-Level English, you don’t, and your school chooses your texts and so on, so – and even within the structured modules they have to *do*, when it comes to their actual *assignments*, there’s still *loads* of choice for them to follow up their own interests so I think that level of independence and autonomy, in a way, designing their own learning programme, I think is *way more* engaging than the, sort of, more, kind of, everybody does exactly the same all the time, that’s, you know, part of school learning. The smaller groups, even if you have got a seminar group of 18, that’s smaller than a standard classroom size by half maybe, so the level at which they can get involved and be *heard*, and the emphasis on their active engagement, and their *responsibility*, I think that’s a big leap for a *lot* of students anyway, depending on what their A-Level background was, and they’ve – you know, in some ways, they have chosen to be here. I know there’s lots of pressures that shape that choice, but nonetheless it is different from compulsory.

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

P: Well I mean I’m constantly reviewing what I do and trying to hear about new ways of doing things from teaching conferences or, from what colleagues do or, ideas from students and student feedback about what’s working and what’s not. So, when you say, would I, I mean I do on a regular basis so I’m not sure what…

I: Yeah, so is there anything that you would like to implement but perhaps can’t at this stage or, there’s restrictions on what you can do and can’t do.

P: Oh okay, yeah. Well I think more of those one-to-one conversations I think would be *really* valuable and that, but that’s a matter of, sort of, having the time allocated to do that. I mean I think, you know, we do a reasonable amount of personal tutoring but I think for the *module* tutor to actually talk to each student in their *class* for a few minutes halfway through and ask for feedback, I think that would be a *really rich* conversation. Helpful for tutors’ reflection on what they’re doing as well as for students to, kind of, measure they’re point and feel engaged so, *yes,* I would like to do more one-to-one conversations. I find our seminar rooms are a bit *numbing* environments [laughing] sometimes. So sometimes you’re, kind of, doing the best with a bad job in terms of the, kind of, physical environment you’re in and the, sort of, lack of inspiration in the setting, you know, we’re here again, we sit in a circle again, you know, that, kind of, thing. Sometimes I’ve tried to – there are things I’d like to do but in a way students stop me doing it. So once I tried to get students more involved in *leading* parts of the seminars, but I made it optional, because I thought, “Not everybody wants to do that”, and I thought, “This is particularly good if you want to be a teacher, you know, this is your chance” but *nobody* wanted to do it, so I think I need to think harder about why they didn’t and what I might be able to do to try and reach a point where they would, because I think that would be a really good thing to do. So sometimes it’s – it is that moment where you feel students don’t want to be as, kind of, engaged and active as we might like to think they want to be [laughing]. You know, maybe students quite like being passive sometimes, not being too engaged, yeah fair enough. Yeah, I think they’re the only things that immediately come to mind.

I: Yeah, okay. So, moving on to policy, I sent you the document that refers to the university’s teaching and learning strategy.

P: I have read this of course…

I: [laughing] How does this strategy impact, if at all, on your interactions with undergraduates?

P: [pause] So are you focusing on the Student Collaboration [policy name changed] idea that’s described there?

I: Mmmhmm [agreement].

P: Okay, yeah, well quite a lot of this I recognise in practice. When it talks about students being involved in all aspects of teaching and learning, I mean that might sound a bit odd to some students, as if they’re running their own sessions, but that’s – I think for me, that’s more about having an open dialogue all the time about what it is we’re doing, you know, “We listen to your feedback” I mean there are lots of forums that we have for student reps to tell us how things are going, for module feedback that we do read and discuss, and try and respond to, so definitely there is a, sort of, ongoing dialogue between tutors and students, I think we have a lot of interactions with them that aren’t just, sort of, the most obvious formal opportunities. The work placement bit is a bit specific to the degree you do and so that’s not something that we’re really engaged with, although we *do* think a lot about employability now, and try to incorporate into our styles of teaching, and what we ask students to *do* and how we assess them, you know, we have in mind *skills* that are transferable to work contexts, so for example, we have a module which is assessed partly by an interview, like a job-style interview. The idea of students, sort of, collaborating with staff [pause] [muttering] share knowledge by working in collaboration with fellow students and academics – I mean in a way this is what university teaching’s always been as far as I can see and this is what seminars are. In some ways, I think they’re just trying to use a language to emphasise those things here, but I should think most universities are doing a lot of that. It’s not trying to make the student into anything that they weren’t, it’s just repackaging that term, in a term that emphasises it differently. But I would say, I would say here that yeah, student experience is rated a lot more *highly* and a lot more importantly and listened to more than, I am sure, at quite a lot of universities.

I: Yeah, okay. What are your thoughts on the Student Collaboration [policy name changed] policy?

P: I think it was a helpful, political move to create a counter ethos to the possibility of the student as consumer model becoming the norm. So, I think it was a really good *strategy* that we can *allude* to, I mean as I say I don’t think it means we’re necessarily – I think it’s a difference in degree rather than quality of what we’re actually trying to get students to *do*, compared to what a lot of universities will be getting their students to do. I think labelling it, and having it in big letters, and talking about it, helps create an ethos which, I think, is really valuable. Yeah.

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

P: Mmm, yes that’s interesting because I recently heard, at a teaching conference, a colleague whose name I mentioned to you that’s in a different department, talk about how well they’d exactly done that. They wanted to revise their first year and they did a lot of consultation with students throughout the degree on, “What do you think would have been important in your first year?” And I’m certainly interested in exploring that in relation to our subject, so I think there’s got to be a *balance* because, on the other hand, I do believe in the notion of the expert as well, it’s not terrifically fashionable but I do, and I think if you, you know, if you want university education still to be led by people who are designing curricula based on their specialist research expertise rather than being written by the government, as A-Levels are, then there’s a sense in which it’s *got* to be academics-led, but on the other hand, I think that can be done in dialogue *with* students inputting in terms of, yeah, perhaps what skills do they think is important [sic] for them to develop that we can then incorporate into methods of teaching, or methods of assessment, you know, if they felt there needed to be a *bit* more emphasis on certain things in the first year to prepare them better for second and third year, we can certainly, sort of, take that into account so, yeah, I am interested in that. And I think on an informal level, we, sort of, do that already by just reading module feedback for second and third year and personal tutor groups, where you hear what students are saying, and that just feeds into our group discussions where we might, sort of, say, “Oh, you know, we’ve got to make sure we do this in our first year essay skills sessions because this is still a problem at third year” so in a sense, it’s happening *already* but I think there will be room to do it in a more overt and recognised way. As it is, I mean in terms of module surveys, we all respond to our module surveys, we have to write module reports, and very often make adjustments in response to student feedback. It might be content, it might be the ordering of things, it might be certain skills that need more support so, an example would be, I taught a module – wrote a module – that was quite a popular undergrad option, I included some film in it and there was some sense people didn’t feel they were – they enjoyed it but they weren’t confident to write about it in their essays so in subsequent delivery, I did more, sort of, Film Studies skills teaching within it, so in a sense, the students *have* shaped the curriculum, have shaped what’s taught to the next people anyway. Yeah, so that, sort of, thing goes on all the time in our module review.

I: 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 institution?

P: I would question your first statement, that the government have placed students at the heart. I really would question that.

I: That’s their discourse. So, you don’t agree that that’s what they’re doing?

P: Well no because if they placed students at the heart then fees perhaps wouldn’t exist, you know, there’s just a whole lot of politics around that, you know, the government are *not* the people to tell us what is best for students. Students might be, but not the government [laughing]. So yeah, I think students are at the heart of this institution, I mean of course, you’ve got to balance the needs of, you know*, money*, structures, organisation, you know, those things, you know, they’re not, sort of, babies are they, that just, sort of, get fed, you have to fit in. But yeah, I do, I think the student experience and offering good quality teaching and worthwhile degrees, is at the centre, as far as I can tell.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you think positioning students centrally works at all to separate them from academics and other members of staff?

P: It *can* do. I mean that’s an interesting question because yes, it can be the university structures that set up the consumer model of – where you’ve *got* to do what students want and you think, “Well we don’t want to” or, “We don’t think that’s best” or, “I’m sure if we had a conversation with students, they would understand why we don’t” or, you know, that, kind of, thing, so to *some* extent, I think the university’ structures of things like constant surveying, *can* produce a, sort of, *demanding student model*, which clearly puts our backs up a bit sometimes and I think it is – I think that structure is created by some of those – that relationship is constructed by some of those structures rather than that it *needs* to be like that so, yeah there is a bit of that I think, yeah.

I: Okay. What meaning does the word relationship have for you in the context of interacting with undergraduate students?

P: Yes, I think that’s very *important*. Well again my, sort of, background in other kinds of teaching and teacher training very much emphasises the emotional aspect of education, in the sense that, you know, one of the biggest barriers to learning is people not being *happy* or not feeling comfortable, or feeling on edge, or feeling anxious, or being worried about stuff that isn’t the subject that they’re studying, for example. So, I mean there are lots of things students can be experiencing or going through that we can’t really have a lot to do with as academics, but I do think the *personal* dynamic between a tutor and their students is *hugely* important to helping students feel comfortable and most able to learn and to get the best out of them. So yeah, that’s about being *personable* and to some extent being accessible whilst getting your job done, and, you know, creating a *warm* dynamic and atmosphere in your teaching settings, having those one-to-one conversations, where you can. Yeah.

I: Okay. So, what is, for you, the main purpose of building a relationship with undergraduates?

P: The main purpose? [pause] Well on one level, it’s just a human thing of making life pleasant for everybody [laughing] for them and me. But I mean I would give a pedagogical, sort of, slant on that and say, you know, they will learn best if they feel comfortable. Yeah.

I: Okay. Can you describe for me a typical face-to-face encounter with a student? So, if they come and meet you to discuss an essay or something?

P: Individually?

I: Yeah.

P: Well, to begin, they would have made an appointment so it wouldn’t be a surprise to anybody and I’d have *some* sense of what they were coming to me about, which can be helpful. I would start by asking them what they’re thinking, where they’re at, you know, what their concerns are, what they’re thinking so far about their essay so, you know, the *listening* is important there I think first, *affirming*, and then *suggesting* other areas to go to or things to follow up or things to think about to help develop what they’re doing, and then I think making clear responsibilities so, you know, if I, sort of, suggest, “You really need to explore this issue” then, you know, sort of, “So go along to the library and, you know, have a good search on the – for secondary sources on such and such and then get back to me if, you know, if you’re struggling” or something like that.

I: Okay.

P: Nothing exciting really.

I: [laughing] Do you notice any implications of a hierarchy in your interactions?

P: Well our students in some ways are perhaps a bit deferential and I think this is about what demographic we get. Certainly, compared to other people I know, you know, who do similar jobs to me at other universities, *our* students are very polite, very respectful, virtually never had a, kind of, *challenging* student, in terms of *rudeness* or… So, I don’t know if that’s just, sort of, politeness or, whether there is some sense of deference that they trust you because you – they trust that you are the expert in your knowledge and in your teaching profession. So, I think there is a, kind of, respect for professional *expertise* from the student, I don’t think there’s hierarchy in the sense of expecting *unnecessary* deference or, you know, I think the culture of our department is quite *low-key* and student-centred and, you know…

I: Okay, do you ever experience any negative associations with like a hierarchy, or a power imbalance, in that students are anxious, or won’t come and see you or…?

P: Yeah I think there can be some of *that* because occasionally I’ve had students come and see me and then, particularly when I used to have a role that was a much more pastoral role, you know, dedicated pastoral role towards students, I used to get students coming to see me about various problems and they always said, “I’m *so* glad I’ve come and I wish I’d come earlier but I was, you know, scared to” so there is, yeah, there is – it’s in students’ minds not *ours,* I think sometimes, that they’re, they’re worried about taking up our *time*, or, you know, or they don’t want to make out they’ve got a really big problem if, you know, they think we’ve got other things to do. I mean I think we’re countering that a bit now because we’ve improved and expanded our personal tutoring system so I think the notion that academics are there not *just* to mark your essays and teach, but you can go talk to them about other things, I think that culture’s *growing* so I think that fear is decreasing as far as it *was* there. I think there’ll always be some students who are just perhaps quite anxious and *maybe* not terrifically confident or mature in *themselves* and don’t want to go and talk to a grown up or, yeah, or just shy, nervous and, you know, people – and to some extent we can’t help that however much we try and be accessible and personable.

I: Yeah okay. Can you think of any particularly good relationships, without giving away their identity, with any undergraduate students you’ve taught?

P: I can think of a lot that I’ve had a *warm* dynamic with, I wouldn’t say I’ve had a particularly *special* relationship with any because I *avoid* that. I don’t want to become favouritist [sic] so yeah, I can think, particularly of third year students, who maybe I’ve taught in the first and the third year and I’ve got to know them a bit and seen how they developed academically across the course of that. With third years as well you can have a bit more of a, sort of, equal, jokey vibe, you know, they’re more *confident*, they’re less deferential. Not in a bad way but, you know, in the next year they could be my colleagues, they’re at that age so, yeah, so I can think *immediately* of lots of third years that I’ve had a nice dynamic with.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you have a pen handy?

P: That’s an easy question [laughing] yes.

I: Yeah! [laughing] Can I get you to draw your conception of a good relationship with a student? [laughing] So it can be anything you like.

P: [laughing] I’m not a good drawer, or a good conceptual artist.

I: [laughing] I think every academic I’ve interviewed has said, “I’m not a good drawer” [laughing]

P: No! Draw a relationship… [long pause] See I mean I just wouldn’t [laughing] I can’t think of any situation in which I would draw a relationship.

I: Are there certain like…

P: Metaphors?

I: Yeah! Are there certain, like, words you would associate with good relationships with students?

P: Right okay.

I: Or certain aspects of the relationship that you would notice again and again in good relationships? Things that are always present?

P: Do body parts, a smile and quite big ears for listening.

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

I: [laughing] Is that you or the student?

P: Me [laughing] unfortunately. Yeah, yeah.

I: Okay. Cool, so happiness and listening.

P: Yeah, smile, welcome and listening, yeah.

I: Okay.

P: Are you going to publish that?

I: [laughing] Yeah, and can you draw the opposite, so a bad relationship?

P: [long pause] This is where my drawing abilities will be letting me down, I’ve got the concept.

I: It’s mainly the discussion that comes out of the drawing that’s important.

P: Mmm [agreement]. I mean in a way, the bad image is, you know, a desk with somebody – this will be me – in a way, just too busy working at the desk to do *that* stuff, which can be about work pressures, but it can also be about your mentality and what you prioritise, so the, sort of, head down, kind of, buried in desk tasks and forgetting that the relationship is actually the primary context.

A close up of text on a white background

Description automatically generated

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, thank you very much. That’s the end of the drawing. So, there’s often a lot of encouragement for students to engage with different experiences that the university offers, such as joining societies and volunteering, getting involved with the Student’s Union. So, what are your thoughts on this?

P: Yeah, I *utterly* agree. For me, university has only done half its job if it just – if it gives you a degree. For me, university should be an *immersive* and transformative experience and that partly comes from your learning, but it partly comes from the social world in the wider *sense* of, I think ideally moving away from home I think ideally, though I know there are financial reasons why lots of people don’t do that, getting involved in societies, meeting people from a whole *range* of backgrounds like you didn’t know before, trying out activities that you’d never heard of before, being part of this community and, you know, taking on roles like running societies, or standing as a, you know, Student Union rep for this, that and the other. For me, it’s almost like citizenship training and it’s *holistic* and I feel university teaching is *part* of their experience, it’s – I think it’s sad if that is *all* they do. I think universities should be a real, kind of – like a world of their own, but really a transformative… yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you ever have any issues concerning balancing learning and extracurricular with students?

P: Well I think the saddest thing I see is a lot of students who *don’t* do all those wider things because they – on top of study, they’re working to earn money and they don’t have time to do the immersive stuff, and I think that’s the saddest situation really. I mean if I’ve occasionally got a student who doesn’t come to a seminar because they’re in a hockey tournament, I, kind of, think, [whispering] “Okay”. [laughing] Because I do think that’s important too, obviously there’s a balance there. I don’t know, I mean I’ve got students who don’t come to many seminars and I don’t know why they don’t. I’ve never had a student come and say to me, “I’m not doing that because I’m doing so much football” or whatever, so I don’t know. I wouldn’t be able to answer for the students really.

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

P: *Important* because it is that forum where students have a go at taking responsibility and becoming political in a broad sense, and it’s also a, kind of, *structured* way that enables students to dialogue with the university, with their lecturers and so on. So, I mean ours, for example, offers training to students for being reps, being effective reps, you know, and roles like, I don’t know, Societies Officer of whatever, these sabbatical roles. Yeah, I generally think they’re important and they’re good and it’s good that students engage in that, definitely.

I: Do you think that undergraduates value the Student’s Union as a space dedicated to them?

P: I really couldn’t answer on their behalf.

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

P: That’s a very broad question. I mean, you know, who do you mean by the university?

I: So, like, the ways that they try and recruit students, their marketing strategies…?

P: I don’t know, I mean we’re recruiting well I think, so I presume they’re doing alright. But yeah, I don’t know everything about what the whole university’s *doing*. I mean, you know, recently we did an Open Day, where yeah, having an academic stand there and talk about what we do is important, you couldn’t just have a marketing person standing there and saying, “Oh well the English degree does this”, you’ve got to have a person who’s teaching on it standing there, but then we also have a *student* standing there and saying, “This is what I like about it as a student, this is what I find distinctive about [University A]” and that’s really important.

I: Do you have a lot of freedom as a department to market your courses, or is it…?

P: We’re given structures by marketing as to how, you know, the website, the prospectus, the brochures they want, you know, we get told, “Oh, we’re now doing leaflets like this”, write the copy. So, I mean we’re in control of what goes *into* them, but the structures and the formats are prescribed because the university wants a, sort of, standard approach across departments. But then, when we’re standing there doing our talk, nobody’s told us what to say and I mean, we as a department, have collectively agreed a, sort of, general set of stuff to go through that we think is valuable for people to hear. So, in one sense we’re in control of what we put across about ourselves as an English department.

I: Okay. Do you think the institution’s attempts to engage undergraduates differs from departmental attempts at all?

P: [pause] Not as far as I can see, though I don’t feel like I’ve got a lot of knowledge. I mean, for example, the central marketing people recruit students to be volunteers at Open Days, so in one sense they’re doing that without any reference to us, but on the other hand, you know, we can then, kind of, brief the students a bit on how we think this will work, but then we give the student space to, kind of, say what they want to say. So, I can’t think of any examples immediately, but then I don’t know everything about how they engage students.

I: So obviously the university’s really successful in engaging its undergraduates, but there’s probably more that could be done and ways in which it could broaden engagement across the student body, and I wonder whether you had any comments around this, or thoughts, ideas?

P: [pause] I think students would need to answer that, otherwise I wouldn’t be being student-centred would I [laughing], you know, if I said, “Oh I know, I know what’s best”, I’d want to know ways in which students felt they wanted to be engaged more, in what areas, in what respects and then have a conversation with them about how they feel that could be done within the, sort of, structures and departments that exist, sort of, thing, really.

I: Okay, yeah. Okay, that was the last question so thank you very much for your time, I’ve got some really insightful comments.

**[End of Recording]**