**Interview #5 Transcript: Senior Lecturer and Student Engagement Advocate [name changed] (31.07.17) (University A)**

Interviewer (I): Okay, so as a senior lecturer and a student engagement advocate [name changed], what would you consider to be your main responsibilities?

Participant (P): Okay, are we tackling those both together?

I: Yeah, or separate if they don’t merge very well.

P: Well, since I – I probably ought to say this – since I originally spoke to you, I’ve taken on the role of programme leader of a new degree as well, we have here, which is English and Creative Writing, but I’m going to keep going with student engagement because I’ve applied for funding for a research project about the new degree, but also which is, kind of, linked to student engagement. So, I see, I suppose to come back to your question, my responsibilities as a senior lecturer and my responsibilities in terms of senior engagement, well I suppose in terms of paperwork, protocols and processes, they’d be very separate. So, senior lecturer would be academic, student engagement would be very much hands on, dealing with students, students rep [sic], having a lot of conversations with student voice manager in the SU and the SU themselves. But I’ve always seen those, not as two roles, but as one and the same thing, because I think that student engagement, even though we give it a title here and it’s work loaded, should be part of a lecturer, junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, etc., etc.,’s role *anyway*. If you’re not actually engaging in your teaching with your students, then you are doing it wrong, you are completely in the wrong job. So, engagement has so many levels to it, doesn’t it? It can be a formal meeting where students knock on my door, either as reps or as ordinary students, and they come and talk to me about a problem or an issue because they think this is a safe space, and then I act as a bridge between the students and the academics, my colleagues and faculty. Or it can be *creating* a safe space in a learning situation, and for me, actually, that’s most of it. We should all be doing student engagement, it should be part of the job because that’s the only way that you will engage students and get them invested in their own learning experience.

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

P: Teach in a term? [pause] Are we – is it just teaching, or are we talking about personal tuition and stuff like that?

I: All of it.

P: All of it yeah. Just over 300, including everything, yeah.

I: Okay. Is that a manageable number in your opinion? [laughing]

P: I won’t even say what I’ve just looked up – what my workload has just gone up so… Yes, yes, I can manage it.

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

P: Okay, engagement is – I don’t believe it’s something that you should pay lip service to, I’ve gone to so many conferences on this, and I know this is, obviously it will have to be anonymised, but I know this is our VC’s initiative, and that [University A] are known for this across the sector, and when I’ve been to conferences and spoken to other practitioners or other academics, I don’t think they quite understand what engagement is, in terms of the [University A] idea, they very much link it to that idea of Student Collaboration [policy name changed] so, periodically you get some students in a room and say, “Well what’s working for you on your course? What doesn’t work? And what should we do different?” Well, I think all institutions do that. Here, engagement is very, very *different*. [removed for conflidentiality] they’re *part* of that whole process, it’s very, very much a case of, if a student thinks that some, for example, a theme isn’t working in a particular module, because all students think they’re experts, don’t they? Then we would say, “*Go away*, research that, research *why* it isn’t working, research an alternative and then come back to us and *talk* to the teaching team” and students sometimes have done that, and things have been altered slightly. So I can give you a fairly recent example, some second years said, “Already, we’re fed up of doing feminism, we’ve only touched a little bit of masculinity theory” so, it was pointed out to them, “Well actually, feminism is probably, along with Marxism, *one* of the biggest theoretical and philosophical *explosions* in the, sort of, the modern era, so you have to know about it” and they said, “Well actually, we’d like to know a little bit more about masculinity theory” so we sent them away and said, “Research masculinity theory” and so they did, as a group, and came back and a couple of modules were then *restructured* to include sessions on masculinity theory. So, it’s very much about – engagement is making them take *responsibility* and ownership, you know, it’s very easy for students to say, “I don’t like that. I don’t like that novel, I don’t like that film, I don’t like that theory”, but it’s making them take *ownership* of it, having some responsibility, encouraging them to be *invested* in their learning experience, and if we see that taken seriously and it’s put to us in the same, kind of, format that we’d expect in an essay or a project, you know, not prove it because we’re not scientists, but demonstrate it, have a thesis, have an idea, back it up with research, follow it through, then we’ll listen to that. For me, that’s what engagement is, it’s not just saying to students, “Talk to us about what you want differently”, it is making them *participants* in the subject, the discipline, but also research, we involve students in research projects here. I’ve involved students in several research projects. So, it’s – when we talk about engagement, here it’s that very deep level of engagement, and it’s not just paying lip service and saying, “Well we’ve got things like student reps, come on, we’re really interested in your voice!” It’s taken very, very seriously and that’s from the highest possible level, you know, the VC down, and we *hope* it works, you know.

I: Okay, how do you *personally* attempt to engage your undergraduates in your teaching?

P: In *my* teaching? Oh goodness, we could be here all day. Well, as student engagement advocate [name changed], I’m *involved* with them pretty much right from the first day they’re here. Obviously, academics don’t have anything to do with Fresher’s Week, that’s their time, thank goodness that we don’t have anything to do with Fresher’s Week. But, in fact I’ve got the Welcome Week schedule, sort of, up here and pretty much from day one, we’re all involved, so in terms of *my* practice, they already know me as student engagement advocate [name changed] straight away, and I do, in that first week, I arrange a completely separate welcome for them, which is separate to faculty. [removed for confidentiality] Often other colleagues will come as well, we, sort of, have ice breaker games and things, and they usually, sort of, like that so, straight away I work very, very hard at making sure they feel safe and they feel comfortable and knowing that, apart from personal tutor, that they’ve always got that point of contact. And I’ve always thought – I’ve been doing this job for nearly 20 years now, and I’m probably going to say something controversial, but I think that students will only work *for* you very, very well and work for themselves probably, if actually they like you, because I’ve heard so many colleagues over the years say, “We don’t have to be *liked*, we don’t have to be *popular*”. Well no, of course we don’t have to be popular, it’s not any, sort of, popularity contest, but you’ve got to be *approachable*, they’ve got to see you as somebody who’s actually real and somebody who has the same, kind of, struggles as them, not just somebody who comments on work and gives them a designated mark. So, my teaching is often quite informal, I think. I can give you an example if you want? [removed for confidentiality] But there are certain *cultural* influences, text doesn’t just happen in a vacuum, does it? It’s a product of a particular cultural moment, so there are certain cultural influences that they can’t possibly understand, and one of the texts that we do is, [removed for confidentiality] I think it works, I think it must work, I’ve won three awards [removed for confidentiality] so I guess it does. [removed for confidentiality] Does that, sort of, answer the question?

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

P: Ugh. What are my thoughts… Well, in terms of a concept, it is a very *real* concept, I think it’s absolutely *genuine*. I think it’s very much something that emerges from that Blairite ethos in higher education, there was a shift wasn’t there? In terms of, Blair’s big words were – was it? It was inclusivity and… I’ve just done some research on this and I can’t remember. Inclusivity but also diversity, and you’ll know, won’t you? That Blair’s idea was that a certain percentage of the population should have BAs by a certain date. And I don’t believe that that’s workable and then that directly led on to the idea of fees. Do you consume education in the same way that you would consume a Nando’s? I’m not sure that you do and also, the word *consumer* implies that it’s a one-way ethos, it’s a one-way street, that the student just *takes* and *ingests*. So, I have a problem with that *wording* because education can’t happen like that, okay? And also, I’ve always felt that I *learn* things from *my* students all the time too, so what about academic as consumer? We consume from them, if we’re going to use that horrible word. But as an ideology, in an ideologised sense I guess, as long as, alongside student as consumer is Student Collaboration [policy name changed], and that idea of *engagement*, then I don’t object to it as an ideology, but I think the term is *incredibly* problematic and I’m *not* sure it’s very popular, particularly with academics at the coal-face really.

I: Yeah. Do you consider students to be customers in any sense?

P: You see, back when Jesus was a baby and I was doing my degree, education was a real privilege, and it was a *right*, you know? And what any civilised society did, was it educated those who made a conscious choice, not to leave school at 16 or 18 and go and get an apprenticeship, so I really am talking about when Jesus was a baby, but you *nurtured*, as a society, you *invested* in people. So, it’s fees that have created this new culture that we have. Do I see them as customers? *I* don’t, but the system *does*. The system does treat them as customers, and *as* customers, they deserve value for money. Now what value for money is, what *I* think it might be and what *students* might think it is, are perhaps two different things. But I don’t believe in the old, old-school way of teaching, which perhaps people like me in an Humanities or an Arts discipline for example, probably were quite familiar with so, you might go and have a tutorial and your tutor would be smoking a chicane [Sobraine cigarettes] and you might get poured a glass of sherry, and have a chat for an hour, and all very pleasant that that was, but that actually might have been just one of two teaching sessions in a week. That’s not value for money. So, things like increasing student contact time, I think *is* important and it’s something that we’ve really got to look at, particularly in the Humanities and the Arts disciplines. So, it *forces* them to be customers, and that then *forces* us to give them value for money, and I don’t necessarily think that’s a *bad* thing because it makes us think about what *we’re* doing. I just find it sad, you know, I find it incredibly sad now. That these – [removed for confidentiality] we’re just doing the whole money thing now and you just think, “It’s so sad, the debt that she’s going to be in” [removed for confidentiality] and I just think, “Stuff like that is important. It’s important for our humanity” and she’s going to be in what? £45,000 worth of debt? And I feel really sorry for students now. I feel *so, so sorry* for them because it’s *not* fair. But that was my rant, I bet I’m not the only person to have had rants like this [laughing].

I: No [laughing]. Okay. In your opinion, how prevalent, if at all, is the concept of the student as consumer, in the university’s attempts to engage its undergraduates?

P: I think it’s – I think it *is* very important. I think probably in terms of *our* institution, in *part*, and I *only* think in part, it was probably the VC’s impetus for allowing – because Student Collaboration [policy name changed] was originally designed, as you know, by [name removed] here and I know that [they] got a lot of funding and a lot of research time, and in fact at one time, [they] had a very, very big team around [them], and I think partly student as customer is *probably* what gave [name removed] the nudge to – you’ll edit that out won’t you? – gave the VC the, sort of, nudge to allow all of this, kind of, time and money and resources into it. I don’t think that was the *sole* reason, I know that, certainly the management here are very, very, *keen* that within the next 4 years, we become a centre of teaching, learning and excellence and student engagement is very, very much a part *of* that. But I think that our *culture* in HE, forces *all* institutions into that mind set now.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, in your opinion, are there elements of the student consumer concept apparent in your interactions with undergraduates? So, are you ever aware of them being customers –?

P: *Absolutely*. From their point of view, absolutely. And certainly, how it’s changed in the 20 years that I’ve been in this business is, students feel that if they’re paying money, they’re paying for a grade. They’re paying for a good grade, you know, they want a really, really solid 2:1 and ideally, a First. And I understand that, you know, because that’s actually the basis of our economic system of exchange, isn’t it? I bought a washing machine, for example, the other day, if that washing machine doesn’t do the job very well, doesn’t do what *I* expect it to do, as a *consumer* of that product, then I want my money back, or I want to be able to complain. But education doesn’t *work* like that and you *can’t* always guarantee that everyone gets a 2:1 or a First, as you know, because it depends on their engagement, their ability level, and all sorts, and their *personal* life, you know, all sorts of other factors. So, there’s very much that, “Well I’ve worked hard, I’ve paid all this money, so I want this particular grade”, so almost like putting 20p in a slot machine and seeing a product come out. Not *all* students have that idea and I have to say, probably it tends to be more – I see that more in the weaker students perhaps. The other thing that it does is, it’s made – that coupled with email – it’s made students demand more of us. There are *real* times, I know colleagues, from other institutions as well, feel like we’re social workers and we’re here 24/7. I am going on leave tomorrow and I’ve had to set up a *huge*, almost a spreadsheet, of where students can go if I’m not available, you know, to be able to sign post them for the different roles that I have. That’s very tricky and very, very difficult. I mean sure, most of us here will have, sort of, had that thing where a student might send you an email at – oh God, even worse than this, half past 7 on a Friday night and by half past 9 on the Monday morning, you’ve got an email, “I emailed you on Friday night”. We’ve *all* had that sort of thing because they expect – they think they’re paying *you*, you know, and I think when you then, sort of, say to students, “Well we haven’t had a pay rise in line with inflation for 21 years”, then “*Oh*! Oh really? So, we’re *not* paying you?” You know, they don’t, I think, understand the concept of ours fees or work. But at the same time, I can see it from their side, you see mine was *free*. So, it is very, very different. So yes, we have seen a shift, definitely.

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

P: Hmm. I think that lectures, formal lectures, I’m guessing you probably mean formal lectures, so you’re stood there with a lectern or a podium and you talk for 50 minutes *at* them, while they take notes. I think that they have their place, because I think that things like *listening* skills, note-taking skills under pressure and actually also, the ability to just sit bloody still for 50 minutes are actually key skills, and they’re skills that people can take into the workplace for things like, you know, meetings and things, and I mean I hate this term, the millennial generation, very famously are great at multi-tasking, they’re fantastic, much better than my generation. But everything’s quick, everything’s fast, everything’s immediate and encouraging, or even forcing [laughing], students to sit for 50 minutes and *just* *listen*, is I think, important. So, they have their place. But I don’t think that they’re helpful all the time, for every module, every single week, several times a week*, at all*. And I think a lot of disciplines are moving away from that. In the Humanities, I think it’s slow and I think that’s because traditionally, we see ourselves as an *academic discipline*, and I know that many colleagues are very reluctant to change, and that’s partly because frankly, we consider ourselves a little bit *elite* and it’s a very silly idea, and it is something that we’re going to have to start to move away from. So, I think they have their *place*, but I think now, particularly with the way that young students are *learning*, and like to absorb information, and the fact that they tend to be quite kinetic as well. There’s a lot of touch, students like a lot of touch and again, I think it’s the mobile phone, the laptop, etc., social media, and we’re not encouraging kinetic learners in that formalised lecture space, those who learn from touch and physicality. And I’m not sure what the answers to that are, but I think it’s important to keep reflecting on it and think about it.

I: Yeah definitely. Okay. In the same vein, are seminars useful for engaging undergraduates?

P: In my discipline, absolutely yes, because in my discipline, we’re asking them to read *incredible* amounts of primary and secondary texts, *every* single week. I mean, four to eight as an absolute minimum. Novels and poems, and then, you know, *all* the secondary reading around it: history, philosophy, religion, mythic systems, sociology, loads of psychology, might be neurobiology or medical humanities stuff. So, by the time they come into seminar, which ideally is *their* space, it’s *their* forum, and that the academic’s there just to chair, I think that is useful. I think it also encourages transitional skills and key skills like confidence, believing in your own voice, asking questions. Also in terms of when seminars are useful for things like group work, they’re fairly basic skills, but they’re not skills that our A-Level system in this country, actually encourages. So, for me, yes, they are. I don’t think they’re – they should again be used *solely*, you know, I think there are other ways of engaging students, *workshops*, I use a lot of workshops, which I find useful and students find useful. I think that my problem always with seminars, when there is – when I see a problem in a seminar is, it *can* sometimes maintain and perpetuate hierarchies, just in terms of the seminar space. So, you’re, sort of, sat there, and they’re all sat round and they’re looking at you and there’s that expectation that you are going to give them and they will just consume. So, I’ve always been a big believer in using the space, making them *move* from the space and physicality’s associated with learning anyway, isn’t it? So that’s a very, very strong idea that you engage the body, you engage the mind. But I do think that they have a place.

I: Okay. What about one-to-one sessions?

P: Definitely. I think they’re absolute key. As long as the student has some, kind of, relationship with the academic, with the tutor that they’re going to see. *No* student is going to say to you, you know, “Frankly, [name removed], I think James Joyce is *crap* and I have no idea why Joyce spends 20 pages describing Stephan’s urination on a beach”, you know, *if* they don’t trust you, if you don’t feel like you’re on the same, sort of, level as them *almost,* do you see what I mean? So, one-to-one is *absolutely* key, but the success of it, that’s a two-way thing, it’s about how you engage with your students, but also how they engage with you. That’s a *long-term* process actually, and it can take *months* to build up a relationship with somebody like that, and actually, the onus is *not* on the student, it is on the member of staff to create that, sort of, safe space. So, they *can* work, but it depends on the relationship between the two involved.

I: Do you think the modular system makes it more difficult now, because they switch so frequently?

P: They switch and everything’s so quick, isn’t it? I mean in terms of teaching here, we have 12 weeks and normally, the 12 week is for individual tutorials or essay workshopping and things like that, or they don’t turn up because they’re in the library because you’ve got a deadline, and they’re, you know, constantly working to a deadline. [whispering] There are some degrees here I know that have deadlines every 6 weeks. [normal voice] I really worry about that, and I mean fortunately, you know, it’s hard enough with 12, I don’t know how they manage it with 6 weeks modules. I mean I haven’t – [removed for confidentiality] it just feels to me that it’s just churning out assignments, it’s just assignment-led. So yeah, yeah, definitely, sort of, agree with that.

I: Okay. Which of the above teaching methods do you think undergraduates find the most engaging?

P: *Engaging*? Oh God. I would – well it’s got to be seminars and one-to-one. It *has to* be, because a one-to-one is very directed by them, isn’t it? Seminars? Yeah, I mean I would say that, looking at student feedback that *we* get, they *do* love seminars, but it depends on the novel, it depends on the text, it depends on how they’re feeling about it, on whether they’ve read it, and [inaudible] it depends on how good the person directing the seminar is as well.

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

P: Yes. Freedom of choice, absolutely. Responsibility. Taking ownership over your own learning. Also, being allowed to be a specialist, you know, and not that it’s *tick-boxing*. In my discipline, we spend – we almost say, pretty much the first 18 months, trying to say to them, “*Don’t* give us what you *think* that we want, because we are not teachers. You can actually give us what you think we *don’t* want, but as long as you support it, that’s great”. So, I think you would struggle to find people in higher education that don’t have a lot of issues with the compulsory education system, because we *feel* that we spend a lot of time knocking out, or ironing out, the problems. And there’s an irony there, that in my discipline a lot of students go *into* the compulsory education sector [laughing] as teachers or policy-makers, or even researchers. But yeah, we find that they just lack confidence and also, that notion of hierarchy and discipline. Now I think in compulsory education, that *has to* take place, actually, in mainstream. But nothing could be *further* from the truth, here, at universities, and anywhere I think, across the sector. *Nothing* could be further from the truth. You know, it’s that whole, sort of, then en-masse in Welcome Week, well I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it at your institution and what you’ve done, but when you, sort of, say, “Well, I am Dr so and so, but you call us by our first names here, we’re just [name removed]” [does an impression of a student with mouth wide open in surprise]. And for weeks, you’re still Miss, and they’re still putting hands up in seminars and things like that, so that hierarchy because actually that hierarchy engenders certain things: lack of confidence, “*They’re* right, *I’m* wrong”, “I need to work out what this member of staff wants me to write in this essay. Once I’ve worked it out, I’ll get a tick and I’ll pass or I’ll get whatever mark”. So, I think there are a lot of issues, but then I think, we’re talking about a whole different thing, compulsory. So, it’s why I never went into it, just I would have been rubbish.

I: I almost went into it.

P: Did you?

I: Yeah.

P: Good for you.

I: [laughing] 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: I think that in HE, there’s been an ethos for probably [pause] maybe the last 25 years, but heavily so the last 15 years, on research. So, you’re a good academic if you’re a good researcher, if you’re producing, if you’ve got outputs. Thank God now, with the TEF, we’re now looking at reflecting on our own practice and our own teaching. And for me, that’s *absolutely* key. Students don’t give a flying Scooby if you have published a monograph in the last 12 months. What they care about, is if you engage them and they have *confidence* in what you know, and you can teach complex ideas and subjects in a way that they understand, and a way that makes them – enthuses them about wanting to learn. So, I’m really, really glad now that we have the TEF. Improvements are that we should *all* be *forced*, *made* to constantly reflect on our practice and that should be *across* the sector, and I’m even talking about the Russell Group institutions now, because the Russell Groups, Oxford and Cambridge etc., always get *incredibly* high comments on the NSS about quality of teaching, and which you *absolutely* would expect, but it’s a very different way of teaching. So, lectures there, for example, are not compulsory, most teaching is *one-to-one* or one on two, so *obviously* they’re going to get a very, very high category for that. I have several colleagues who work at Oxford and Cambridge, but again they’re not – these academics aren’t reflecting on practice, because it’s a system that just works, so they just keep doing it all the time. But equally, people like us, in new universities, should be reflecting. It *should* be as important as research. We’ve all met them, either in our own experience professionally or as students, those great *academics*, you know, who make a name for themselves in their subject area, but they’re utterly *bereft* of talent and *any* empathetic relationship with students in your seminar rooms, haven’t we? And you know how that impacts on you, doesn’t it? You know, I know how that impacted upon me, especially in the area of specialism I went into. When I was an undergraduate, were the academics someone who cared about the subject, thought about their teaching and formed a connection with me. So absolutely *more* of that, let’s have *more* of that and less emphasis on inputs and research. There needs to be more of a balance I feel.

I: Absolutely yeah. Okay. So, moving onto policy then. I sent you the document that refers to the university’s teaching and learning strategy. Do you think this strategy is a successful one for engaging undergraduates?

P: *Yes*. Overall it is, because it is one that’s constantly modified and constantly revisited. And it’s not just one of those, sort of, strategies, I mean we do have them here, everyone has them, all institutions have them, where a strategy is devised, it’s put on the portal, an email goes out, “Read it, be aware of it” and then it’s forgotten. This strategy’s reviewed constantly and it’s monitored and there are lots and lots of focus groups that go on that involve people and students from *all* members of the university, at all different levels. So, it is constantly reviewed. Where things aren’t seen necessarily to work, they will be, and are, modified I think. So yeah, I think it does work as a strategy overall. I don’t think it’s perfect but, yeah.

I: Nothing’s perfect. Okay, so I sent you the document that refers to the aims of the Student Collaboration [policy name changed] policy. How would you say you implement the aims of this approach, if at all, in your interactions with students?

P: Student Collaboration [policy name changed] very much evolved into student engagement, so it began with [name removed] and then it was something that was really, sort of – [name removed] had this big team, with a designated space, and designated rooms, and a *core* body of undergraduate and postgraduate student helpers who were supporting [them] and [their] team in this new ethos, if you like. Student engagement – it evolved into student engagement, which absolutely rolled out across the *whole* of the university, undergrad and postgraduate, so all members of staff now are seen to be involved in it, you – each School has an advocate [name changed], don’t know who thought of that [laughing]. [removed for confidentiality]. But here we go, we have student engagement advocates [name changed] who are absolutely at the coal-face of it, and are expected to attend conferences, teaching and learning events, generate teaching and learning events. *On the ground*, I see it working incredibly well, but then I am student engagement advocate [name changed] so I’m probably going to be seeing it more than perhaps a lot of my colleagues would be. I mean I was at a meeting, what day are we on? Friday? I was at a meeting, two-hour meeting, on Monday with the Vice President of Academic Affairs in the SU and we were point by point by point reviewing a lot of the things that we’ve just talked about. How useful are seminars? You know, what do you think about students as consumers? What can we do about that, [name removed]? So, I really do see it as being effective, and those students that come on board with it, really, really do, sort of, sing its praises, I mean, we’re interviewing – in 2 weeks’ time we’re [removed for confidentiality] From that point on, students who want to be involved in that process, and have shown themselves to be engaged in other areas of Student Collaboration [policy name changed], you know, it’s not just a case of somebody putting their hand up and saying, “Oh I quite fancy that”, you know, there’s got to be, [removed for confidentiality] something that we trust about them as well. [removed for confidentiality] So, I do think it absolutely works, I think where there are issues, is that students – we’re still not doing this very well, getting it across to students and even colleagues, *what* it is, what Student Collaboration [policy name changed] is and what student engagement is. You go to conferences and you talk to SU leads and colleagues who are interested in this area from other institutions and they all know it, you know, they’ll all, sort of, say, “Oh [University A], [University A]”, “Oh yeah, we know about that, we know about that sort of thing”. But you might ask a colleague in the [university hub] when you’re getting coffee about something and, “Oh yeah but we’ve heard of that” but then I actually think that’s because we’ve been focussing too much on research. And we need to get this out more to the students, I mean we’ve got things like the [University A] Award, I don’t know if you’ve heard of the [University A] Award, so that doesn’t just *encourage* Student Collaboration [policy name changed] and facilitate that, it *rewards* them for it, you know, with something that they can then put on a CV and take to an employer. So…

I: Yeah, okay. In your opinion, should undergraduates have greater control over, or input in, the curriculum and/or assessment design of their chosen courses?

P: *Absolutely*. Absolutely, withouta *shadow* of a doubt. They *cannot* have free reign because the reason why you’re an undergraduate and a reason why you might have, I don’t know, 20 years’ experience in your field. But that doesn’t mean that new voices can’t come and shake *you* up, make *you* re-evaluate. The ways in which I was learning x number of years ago, are not the ways in which new students learn and you can become incredibly disconnected if you’re not careful. So, I think that it’s very, very important that they have a voice and that they feel they should have a voice, but it still has to be within parameters because we’ve still got LOs, learning outcomes, you know, we’ve still got the QAA, HEFCE, all those, kind of, things, we’re still – even though we’re incredibly autonomous compared to the compulsory education sector, we still have our own guidelines. As long as it falls within those parameters and frameworks, then yeah, absolutely *of course* they should. Why not? Absolutely.

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: In this university?

I: [nods]

P: I think we’re *quite* successful here, I think we’re probably more successful than a lot of institutions, that I know of. I think our higher management would say that we’re leaders, I think there’s more that we can *do* and I think that there’s still that ethos of the fact that they are treated as consumers, in some ways. But again, as I’ve already said I think that’s a problem across the sector and it’s a problem with the fee system, I don’t think it’s a problem of any particular institution at all. Here I think we do a good job of it, I’d like to see that rolled out even more on a personal level, but I think we do a really, really good job of it.

I: Okay. Do you think positioning undergraduates centrally works to separate them at all from other members of the university, such as the academics?

P: To *separate* them? [pause] I think the idea is that they’ve become, not a learning community *separate* to us, but they understand that they become part of that learning community the minute that they enrol, as a first year. Traditionally – I’m always mindful of the degree ceremony, the actual ceremony itself, and the fact that it was based on that old medieval ceremony and the student walks up onto the stage, don’t they? They touch the hat, it used to be a doff, but it’s a touch now and the VC or the pro-VC gives you a little nod if you’re absolutely lucky, you know, and *that* is symbolic of what used to be a very, very, formalised system of the graduand going onto the podium and *deferring* to the academic community, and then the nod is the *acceptance* of that graduand into the academic community, which, at that point, they become a graduate. So, it was the *inclusion* to that point, wasn’t it? “You are now one of us” and then of course, doctorate is very, very different again, and it’s the removal of the cap, and the putting and the everybody claps, and it’s marvellous and, you know, the senate involves you. I think that’s appalling and outdated. It’s great as a ceremony, but I hate the ideology behind it. It should be the minute that they walk through the door in Fresher’s Week and sign their name to say they’re now a student at the university of whatever, it should be at that point they become members of the community. So I *hope* it doesn’t work to separate, I hope it works to *include* and make them feel that – you know, I always say to the students right from day one, “It is true, that we’re here to grade you, and offer you feedback, and we will spend a lot of our time teaching you and guiding you, but *you* also teach us” and it is part of that – I think any academic who thinks they can’t learn anything, *anything*, from the students should go and play golf or something, you know, I *really* do, I’m not just saying that. I feel that very, very strongly. So, it *shouldn’t* separate, it should *include*.

I: I mean I only say because I’ve had some comments that some academics think that students being at the heart is not always a good thing, because it’s at the expense of other things, like research and the student becomes the most important thing of the university.

P: But *shouldn’t* they be? I mean that’s why we’re paid, that’s why we have a job, that’s why these buildings exist, that’s why this room exists, that’s why – I just, I don’t understand that ethos at all, and it is this *blasted* research-led idea. I can’t believe that *anybody* would actually say that, I can’t, I can’t believe that anybody would think that students should not be at the heart of the university. We exist *for* the students, it makes me so angry, you know, I can still do research, I can still do outputs, I can still be involved in research projects. I do, I really just think that’s metanarrative for laziness. When these – you probably don’t want to put this, well maybe you do actually want this in your project, when I sit in staff meetings and we’re talking about Student Collaboration [policy name changed], engagement stuff, I cannot get a lot of people on board and it’s because they’ll say, “Well, my workload, workload, workload, workload”. Well actually, we’re not driving buses, you know, we’re not doing 12/14 hour a day shifts, are we? At the coal-face, as if we’re miners. We’re on a pretty good screw really. I just, I don’t understand it, it makes me really, really angry.

I: Yeah. Okay.

P: *Students not at the centre of the university*?!

I: [laughing] What meaning does the word relationship have for you, in the context of interacting with undergraduates?

P: You cannot do your job well without having a relationship with your students, you *absolutely* cannot. Obviously, there *have to* be boundaries, you are *not* their mate and they’re not your mate. There’s got to be professional boundaries, but also *personal* boundaries, I mean we are – a big debate we’re having here at [University A] is based on our personal tutoring system and we’ve had to devise all this [shows a flowchart] which is a, sort of, signposting thing for students in crisis. So, when we – when they come and talk to us, where we signpost because we were having members of staff that, you know, weren’t sleeping at night, were having to be on anti-depressants because of the – because of students sharing so much information. And we do hear some *horrible* things, some awful, awful things, you know, where you see a student and you have to leave the room and go and cry for 10 minutes in the toilets, and that actually, I think, is just being human [laughing]. If you’re that, sort of, person, you are. But you can’t ever, ever allow yourself to get over a particular boundary and threshold, but you should have a relationship with them. I think that is *absolutely key*. I listen very carefully to my students and I often do it when they’re coming into the seminar room and, you know, I might be going round and giving them a handout out or, doing something, or get a PowerPoint up or something, and they will have conversations and they forget you’re in the room. And you can pick up so much from students there, you know, you might find somebody’s mum’s dying of cancer, you might find that somebody came in that morning, but actually they’ve been up all night and they think they might have Fresher’s Flu or, all these, “My dog died the other day”, you know, and you can pick those things up and I think it’s then really important to remember little things like that, you know, so that later if they come for a tutorial, you can, sort of, say, “I heard about your dog, how you getting on?” “How’s your mum getting on? If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but I just – how are you? How’s this impacted upon your work? Is there anything we can do, you know, to help you with that and stuff?” So, little bits of information like that, from the student’s point of view, I think they – they think, “Well, you know, this person cares, actually, and is interested in me and invested in me”. So maybe it’s not even about having a relationship, maybe it’s just about being *interested* in them actually, as people, and not just seeing them *as* students. Maybe… But I think that’s *key*. God yeah, absolutely, I mean I really do believe [interviewer], that they won’t do their best work for you, if they don’t like you.

I: Yeah. Okay. What do you consider to be the main purpose for building a relationship with undergraduates?

P: Because you should – for 3 years, as undergraduates, you should be central to that transition, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually if you like, as well as academically that they undergo over 3 years. They come in in year one, and they’re completely different people by the end of 3 years, even look different. It is an *incredible* period of transition, as you’ll know, there’s been lots and lots of research in HE done on that. But you’re not just there to pass proceed them from first to second year and second year to third, you are *with* them during a really, really *key* point in their development as people. I don’t mean to sound like an American, or anything, or particularly airy-fairy, but you have got to be there as a guide, and you *will* if you have a relationship with your students, you *will* learn a lot about them, and you *will* learn about their nuances as people, and they will learn a lot about, you know, you as well. It’s *key* to it and you *have to* do it because you’re in an incredible position of *privilege* and I certainly don’t think my job is to be in loco parentis, or any of that stuff. I know we’re all having vulnerable student training now and I understand why we’re having that, but that’s not my job. These are all post-18s and it’s compulsory education [sic], and I’m not their mother, I’m maybe as old, or maybe older, than any of their mothers but that’s not my role at all. But I do see myself as being a voice, you know, and an ear, and somebody they can come and talk to and I just think that’s really important. I see in my own department the members of staff who, as you’re, sort of, walking around the building, they have students outside their door and the ones that don’t, you know, and I know why that is because I know the colleagues, you know, I know the colleagues that students will veer towards, and that’s really – I just think that’s so important, even just tutorials, something as basic as a tutorial, sometimes they actually, they’re not stuck at all, they just don’t think they can do it and they just want you to say for 5 minutes, “You can!”

I: Yeah, yeah. Okay. [coughing] To what extent is this purpose fulfilled here, do you think?

P: I don’t know if I can speak for the institution as a *whole*, but if I had to, I’d, sort of, say, we’ve got *so* many policies and processes in place and we have *so* much training about this, that I think probably overall, it *does* work really well. I wouldn’t like to comment on how it works for our overseas students, I think that’s a whole different ball game, but if you’re talking about a, sort of, white middle-class demographic, then I think it probably does work really, really well. I think in English it works incredibly well and I think our NSS results definitely, sort of, speak to that, that students feel *very, very* supported. So yeah, I guess I would have to say, I think it does work here.

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

P: Okay. Well if they came to see me to discuss an assessment, there would have been, for example, an email trail probably first, wouldn’t there? So, what I ask students to do, if for example, they’re second semester second years, I would ask them to bring with them to that meeting, just the front copy, so the feedback copy of – do you know what I mean by that?

I: Yeah. If they’re the same as when I was…

P: [shows feedback sheet] This is our front sheet.

I: Yup.

P: So, this is the one they keep and then there are others. So, I would ask them to bring either the front sheet with the feedback from other tutors and a mark, or the entire essay with the feedback sheet attached to them. Unless I knew them really well, unless they were third years and then obviously dissertations, because I think it’s really important, one thing that students perhaps don’t do enough of, is – they can be very grade centred which is another problem of the fees I think, and they’re not actually valuing very much the feedback. So, I get them physically to bring that feedback here and we go through it, so almost like a system of feedforward, and you’ll often find that there are parallels, there’s a theme: weak conclusion, lack of structure, lack of coherent argumentation. So first of all, we’ll talk about those and we might look in previous essays, I mean obviously not for long, I mean I’m only talking, you know, about fairly, fairly quickly, but what I want to try and do is start that tutorial, focus them straight away on areas that they need to improve. And then what I try and do is get them to talk through their ideas with me, I *always* ask for a plan, and that can be that [indicates a small paragraph with hands] before they come and talk to me, because I want them to focus their ideas. The worst, kind of, tutorial are the ones that come, sit down and say, “I don’t know what question to do and I don’t know what novel to do and I don’t know what theory to do and what should I do?” because that’s not what we do here, is it? You know, it’s got to be a very, very different way of teaching and learning and so then we look at feedback, using it for feedforward, and then talk about the draft that they’ve – not a draft, a plan, that they’ve produced and how can we use that feedback in order to construct a workable essay that they might want to think about producing for me in that particular module? And it’s so – God that’s such a broad question, it depends on the relationship you have with the student, it depends on how *good* they are, many will come and absolutely know what they want. The weaker students are obviously the ones that take more time and if there is a problem there, then I often will ask – write down or ask them to write down certain things, so “Think about your methodology, we’re not scientists but we still have to use these big words like methodologies” and in our discipline, a methodology might be: what particular area of literary criticism are you going to use to pull apart that text? And get them to either write that down or I write that down, to give them, sort of, pointers. *Then* they would, sort of, go away, particularly, you know, I’m talking about the weaker ones, and I usually ask to see them again a few days later, a week later, and then come back and see what’s emerged from that. But it largely – that’s a massive question, it largely depends on the module. Yeah that’s probably the best way I can answer that. But I encourage them to look at – it’s really important for me to see feedback from previous essays, because I need to be able to identify their weaknesses, they might have a great argument about Jane Austen, but if they can’t write a conclusion, it will fall flat at the end.

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

P: Only from the leftovers from compulsory education.

I: Okay, so it, sort of, goes way the longer they’ve been here?

P: Yeah, mostly.

I: Yeah okay.

P: Unless they’re American students and then it never goes away.

I: Oh really?

P: Yeah, professor, you’re always professor. Can’t bear to call you by first name.

I: [laughing] Can you think of any particularly good relationships, without giving away their identity, with any undergraduate students?

P: Existing undergraduates or past?

I: Or past. Yeah…

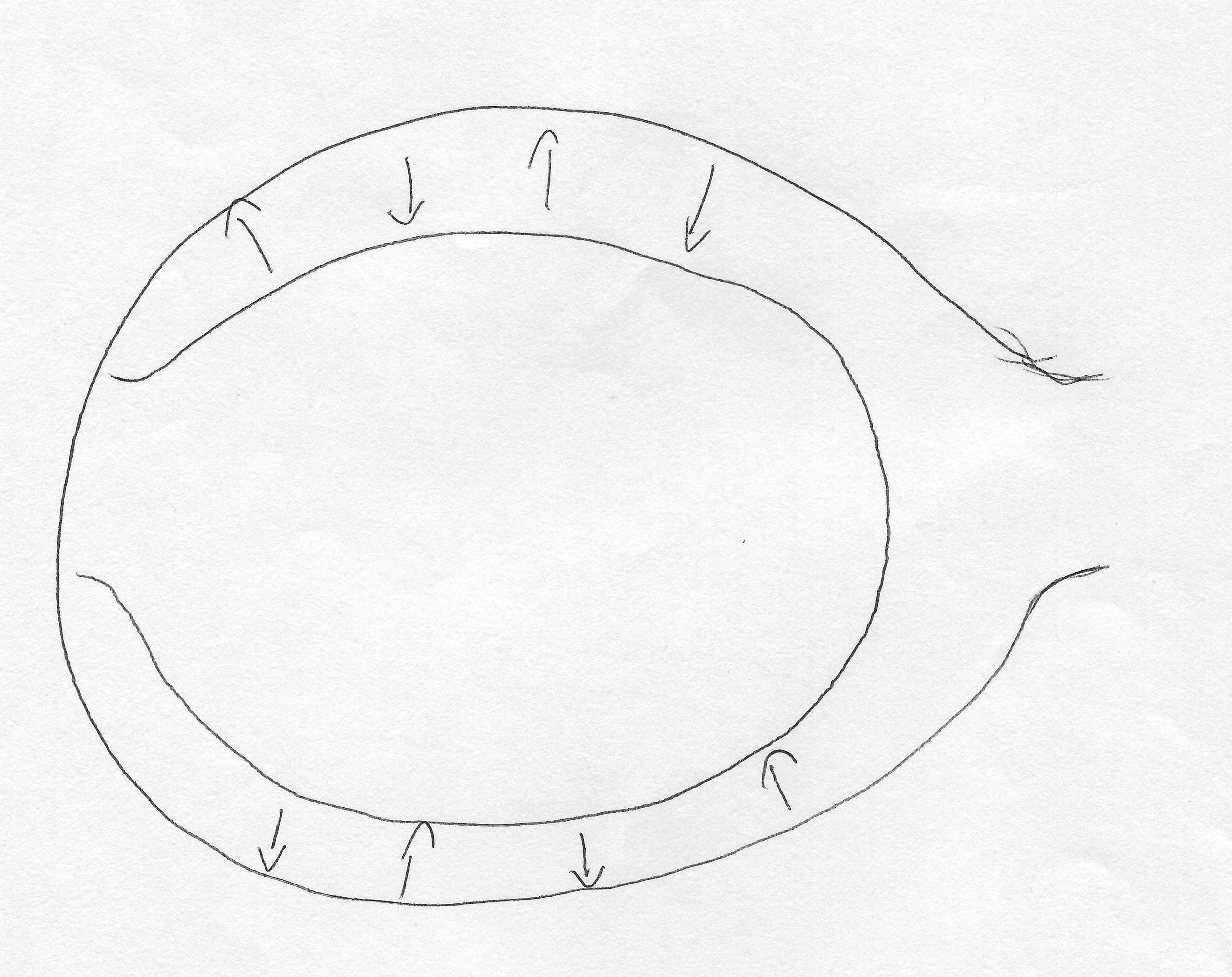
P: Well after I’ve seen [colleague] after I’ve met you, I’m going out for drinks with three past students tonight. I’m in touch with an awful lot of them. Most people on Facebook are my former students. I’m going to [removed] next year to stay with two former students [laughing]. [removed for confidentiality] The greatest – my family always laugh at me because I can go into any shop in [location removed] and often former students are managers of them, and get discount everywhere [removed for confidentiality]. *Notable* ones – notable relationships, I could give you an example. A lot of years ago now, probably about 11 or 12 years ago, I had to – I’m not a creative writer but, we were short staffed and I had to teach a creative writing module and I always said to my students, “If there’s anything that you want to write, you know, I’ll anonymise everything” – a really important part of it was being able to share and having the confidence to share your work and for other students to be able to feedback on work appropriately so, not just “Yeah that was really good”, you know, proper criticism. You know, I always said, “If there’s anything that you don’t want to read out, but you want feedback on, or you want comments on, email it to me or give it to me physically a couple of hours before a workshop and then I’ll just photocopy it and distribute it and nobody needs to know who you are or your gender or anything” and this happened this one time, this young student bought me this – and I didn’t have time to read it before, but *I* read it out [removed for confidentiality] And she’s a *huge* friend of mine, she’s probably one of my closest friends now, and I really love that. Most of my closest friends are my former students and it doesn’t happen to every person, every year, and it certainly doesn’t happen while they’re undergraduates. But I do – a lot of them really, really do keep in touch, which is really, really nice. I love that, actually yeah, I think it’s really important.

I: Okay. Can I get you to draw your conception of a good relationship with a student?

P: Ooh. Draw a conception. Oh, my goodness. Just any way I…

I: Yeah, anything you like.

P: Okay. [pause for drawing] Interesting because I know what I’m going to draw, I’m just thinking, “What the hell would a psychologist make of this?” [pause for drawing]. That’s my conception.



I: Okay. Why have you drawn that?

P: Because that’s a safe – this is how I see myself, ideally, I don’t know if I do it or not. This is me, this is a safe space and as I was doing it, I thought “Shit, that’s womb-like” and this is almost, sort of, foetal, isn’t it? So, this is me as a safe space ideally, this is what I *hope* I achieve with my students, and this is them being nurtured. But also, there’s a, kind of, process of osmosis, it’s a *two-way* process there. They’re not just taking from me, or consuming, and I’m not from them. That’s…

I: Okay. Interesting. And can you do the opposite, so a bad relationship?

A picture containing sky, snow, text

Description automatically generated

P: Oh, a *bad* relationship would just be [pause for drawing] and I suppose, it would be them just taking from me. Just be a one-way system. No interaction, no engagement, just them.

I: Yeah, okay. Brilliant, thank you. There’s often a lot of encouragement for students to engage with different experiences that the university offers, such as joining societies, volunteering or getting involved with the SU. So, what are your thoughts on this?

P: Absolutely, it’s *central* and it really, really helps them in terms of finding an identity, or finding *multiple* identities as well so, joining societies is incredibly important. I would encourage anyone to do that.

I: Okay. What are your thoughts on the role of the SU in engaging undergraduates?

P: Massive. Absolutely *massive*. One thing I really, really love about working here is we’ve got a massively *powerful* SU, and it is *incredibly* powerful. They are as powerful as middle management, without a *shadow* of a doubt. They are involved in everything, they liaise with academics, you know, *almost* to the extent of, they click their fingers and you say, “How high?” Which isn’t actually a *bad* thing, in many respects, you know, I know that they’ve got some *incredibly* dedicated staff with them, they’re *all* former students, not necessarily of here. I think it’s really important, I think the SU – good, you know, because for many, many years, for decades, the SU were just, sort of, like, a token thing, they’d do RAG week and, you know, but not here. They are *very, very* powerful in their own right and they should be.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you think undergraduates value the SU as a space dedicated to them?

P: *Yes*.

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

P: I think overall, we do an incredibly good job. I think I’ve said probably enough about our *own* undergraduates. In terms of prospective undergraduates, we have designated Schools, colleges and liaison officers within School and that’s one of my roles as well, it’s one of my roles that I’m hoping to give up now. [removed for confidentiality] So, I think that we do try and engage quite a bit, and we do make ourselves very, very accessible to schools and colleges in the, you know, in the fairly local area. We’re always getting phone calls from head teachers, or emails, “Can you come in and do something or talk to our students” and we will do that, yeah. So, I think – I mean it’s always a fine line, isn’t it, are you engaging or are you marketing? And again, that often depends on the attitude of the person who’s going in and doing the role, doesn’t it? But we do *try* and engage straight away, yeah. We also, [University A radio station] I don’t know if you know about [University A radio station] that’s *very*, very busy with schools and colleges, *lots and lots* of schools and colleges [removed for confidentiality] but we do a *lot* of things like that, [removed for confidentiality]. So, we allow our spaces to be used, so I guess that’s engagement as well, isn’t it? In some respects.

I: Okay.

P: Okay?

I: Alright well brilliant thank you so much!

P: It’s a pleasure.

I: I’ve got some excellent stuff. Is there anything you want to add that I haven’t covered?

P: No, I don’t think so, it just sounds really interesting.

**[End of Recording]**