**Interview #3 Transcript: First Year Female English and Journalism Student (26.01.18) (University A)**

Interviewer (I): Okay, so why have you chosen to do an English degree at this particular university?

Participant (P): I chose *this* university because I was really conscious about not just being a number, because I had a lot of friends who went to, like [large pre-92 university] and really *big* universities, and I just felt, like, with [University A], because the class sizes are a bit smaller, and the course sizes are a bit smaller, I really wanted to have that interaction where the lecturers actually knew who I was. So, if I rang in and said, “Oh, I’m feeling really bad today” or, “I’m not feeling up to it”, they know that I’m not just hungover or just, you know, trying to spin them a line, I’m actually, you know, they’ll sit there and think, “Actually, we do know [name removed] personally and she’s not doing this just because she’s hungover”. So, I really like the fact that the lecturers actually know us all by name and that I’m in a seminar of seven people, not 30, and it’s really nice. And also, I’m a real home bird and I’m from [location removed], and I was looking at [pre-92 university] and [pre-92 university] for *ages*, and then at the last minute I just completely freaked, and I was like, “I can’t leave my mum”. So, it was that as well. So, I like to be close to my family.

I: Sure. Why did you pick English?

P: I’ve just always enjoyed it. I’ve always been that child who’s had their nose in a book. I actually really, *really* like Ethics and Philosophy, it was a real toss-up between, “What on *earth* do I *do* with that?” you know, because nobody else understands it! Everybody else looks at you as if to say, “Yeah, but philosophy’s not *real*”, do you know what I mean? [laughing] So, I was just, sort of, like, “No, I’ve *got* to go for English” and I, sort of, tagged the Journalism on because I just wanted to try something different as well. So, yeah that’s why I decided to do it, because also, I’m not really that great at anything else [laughing], as bad as that sounds.

I: [laughing] Fair enough. Okay, are you the first in your family to go to university?

P: Well I *would* have been, but my dad, really strangely, like, 2 years ago, decided that he wanted to do a medical degree just out of nowhere and just, sort of, retrain, so literally, he just got in there before me because I took 2 years out and I thought, “Oh, I’m going to be the first in my family to go” so I *was* going to be, and then he just turned around and was like, “Oh I fancy doing a medical degree” and I was like, “Great, thanks dad. Steal my thunder much”. [laughing] So yeah, he’s now finished that.

I: [laughing] Sure, fair enough. Okay, what does value for money mean for you and is it important that you get it from your university?

P: *Hugely* important. I’m not one of those people that freaks out about student loans, because the way I see it is, if you do your job well, you’ll get a job and, you know, you’ll pay your dues. And the way I see it, most people are happy to pay £60 a month for an iPhone and complain they’re paying £7.50 back for their degree, like, I don’t – that’s not my way of thinking. But I do think, especially being an English student, I’m paying £9,250*, why* am I buying my books? [laughing] Do you know what I mean? They should be like, “Right okay, so, here’s your money’s worth of the books that you’ve paid for” because the lecturers aren’t being paid that, and with the Journalism, I appreciate the facilities and, you know, the library and stuff like that so… But I think when you’re in a book-heavy subject, you should *see* it, because I get the impression that the Sciences see it because they get all this new equipment and stuff, so I think it’s important that Humanities aren’t, sort of, left out when it comes to spending. But yeah, I think, it would be nice if it was *capped*, but aside from that, as far as I’m concerned, you know, you can’t put a price on what this – what doors this is going to open for me. I just don’t think that’s an area of concern for me right now.

I: Okay. Do you agree with paying fees?

P: Hmm that’s a hard one. I would say – I would say yes. It can be difficult because I think if you didn’t pay fees, you didn’t have to pay fees, *everyone* would go to university and I think if everybody went to university, university would become obsolete, because if you’ve got something free and people are just doing it thinking, “Oh you know, it’s going to be an easy thing to do” or, “It’s a really, really accessible thing to do”, I don’t know if they’d have the same, sort of, level of commitment as to think, “Do you know what? I’m paying this back for the rest of my life, I need to work hard at this. I need to get a job that I can pay this back”, but I do think it’s – I mean one of the things that I’ve always felt is that it should be a *lower* price, but there should still be a price so that people are appreciating what they’re, sort of, signing up to. But I do think it could be an issue for people who maybe find it difficult to access uni because I know that – obviously I’m a mature student, but I’m not 24, so I’m completely independent of my parents, but I’m not independent in the eyes of student finance, so I have to work awful part-time jobs, non-stop, just to make ends meet, and my student finance doesn’t cover my rent, it doesn’t cover anything, so I’m putting in, like, thousands of pounds of my own money. So, to me, I’m, sort of, like, “Yes, you know, you should pay! *I’m* doing it, so everyone else can” type-thing [laughing].

I: Okay. What does being a university student mean to you?

P: That’s a really different one for me, because I’m a *total* nerd, and I’m, like, 80 years old I promise. I’m not, like, a party animal. For me, this is like a – it’s, like, last chance [inaudible]. I feel like – my parents have even said to me, you know, “If you decided that uni’s not for you, you *just* need to get a full-time job now [name removed], you *just* need to choose something and just be an adult!” because I think, because I’m a little bit older, for me, this is the door to my adult life. I can’t wait for my adult life to start. So, for *me*, this is just, like, I’m not messing around, I’m fully committed and it’s really – I’m just so into the learning part, I just love to learn. So, I think I’ve got a *massively* different experience to other people that you might talk to because, it’s like – I actually said to my boyfriend this morning, I was, like, you know, “Uni’s the best years of your life, but I can’t wait to finish it because I can’t – I want what it’s going to *give* me” type-thing. So, I’m *enjoying* the journey but, for me, the end goal is so in sight that it’s keeping me super focussed.

I: Okay. What do you think being a university student means to people that don’t go to university, so outside of the university?

P: I had a completely different view, I thought everybody at university was going to be ridiculously smart and when you’re a smart kid, you spend your whole life being told by teachers that you’re a smart kid, and you get to High School and they’re like, “Oh, you’re reading at degree level” and you’re like, “Yes!” And then you get to uni and you realise you’re actually really average. High School teachers only told you how great you were because you just weren’t indifferent, [laughing] but I think when you get to uni and the lecturers are like, “Yeah, you’re okay”, you’re, sort of, like, “Oh, I’m not as smart as I thought I was” and that’s like how I feel here, like, “Oh I thought I was smart” but we’re all smart and everything’s just normal. It’s *norma*l to be this intelligent and the lecturers don’t think you’re anything special at all, it’s, sort of, quite humbling. So, I think everybody outside of uni sees us as the elite, and the top 5% or whatever, and we’re *not*. We’re literally just ambling along like everybody else. Do you not – that’s just how it is [laughing].

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

P: See, I would say, my automatic thought would be the students, so it’s up to us to engage, because like I said before, the lecturers aren’t here to mollycoddle you, they don’t really care if you’re here or *not*, they just – if you’re here to learn, they will teach you and if you’re not interested, they won’t waste their time, and I think that’s really good. But I also think – I really like the engagement *here* because the *staff* are really engaged, and they do actually make the effort to get to *know* you, and I really like that with a lot of the staff, I feel comfortable enough to email them and them to know it’s *me*. So, I think the staff are really, really engaged. We’re constantly getting emails all the time about everything, and they’re so into encouraging us to *do* things and go on trips, and go on trips abroad, and I think the difference between staff engagement is, you don’t feel like you’re paying a fee to fund their research, and that’s what I really like about here.

I: Okay. Okay, so in what ways do academics attempt to engage you as a student?

P: Well, they’re really into extra-curricular stuff. So, I know my lecturers on my Journalism course have very much said, “If you’re not involved with the radio, if you’re not involved with charity work, if you’re not involved with this, this, this and this, you’re just not going to make it” so, they’re really big on making sure that you’re *not* just that typical A\* student with *nothing* else, because I know going through school, to me the most important thing was just having top grades, I had no hobbies, I didn’t do anything extracurricular. Whereas I’ve come here and my lecturers have actually said, “It’s not *enough* to be smart, you need to be *more* than that” and they’ve really engaged with me, and when I’ve reached out to them and said, you know, “Help me do this”, they’ve been *great* and, you know, I look at students now who I’m friends with and they’re literally *just* doing their degree, and I feel like the lecturers have been so good in trying to push us to be an all-rounder and be charitable and get involved with writing for the student newspaper, and not just being somebody that’s paying nearly £10,000 to come to five lectures a week. But they’re *really* good for that.

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

P: Student as a consumer? See, I don’t feel like a consumer, I feel like a *partaker*. I feel like I’ve come here and it’s very much the lecturers have this relationship with us where “I will help you as hard as you work”, so if, you know, “If you want to go out and do all of this amazing stuff, I’ll support you and I’ll help you, I’ll show you wider reading, I’ll get you involved in the radio station, I’ll introduce you to people, I’ll give you my contacts”. So, I don’t feel like I’m coming along and paying money to be *given* a service. I’m coming along and I’m paying my money, and you get as *much* as you want from the university, it’s just up to you to reach out to that. I think if I wasn’t engaged in the *wider* uni, then I would feel that, I’d feel like, “Oh, I’m paying £9,250 for five lectures a week” type-thing. But I *don’t,* and I think there’s so many services that you don’t realise that you’re *paying* for, like, there’s a guy at the library who’ll read your essays to make sure that they’re grammatically correct and they make sense, and as an English student, half of the people on my course don’t even know he *exists*, and you think – I think it’s up to the student to, sort of, see themselves as a consumer and think, “Do you know what? Am I getting everything that I’m paying for here? Am I *using* the library? Am I using these services?” Because I think a lot of students *don’t* and then, sort of, say, “Oh, well what am I paying all my money for?” And you’re like, “Well, you’ve never even been to student wellbeing, and you’ve never been along to the Job’s Fair, you haven’t met all these, you know, these people in industry who are sitting, waiting to meet you, and you’re just sat at home watching Netflix” type-thing, so I think we’ve *got* to think of ourselves as consumers in the sense that we use the uni to its full capacity.

I: Yeah, okay. Does paying fees give you a greater sense of entitlement? And if so, what kind of entitlement is it?

P: Yeah, I would say so, because, you know, potentially I’ll be paying this back for the next 30 years or, you know, the rest of my life depending [laughing] on how long it takes. But, it’s – I just think so many people are willing to throw money on finance to pay £200 a month for a car or, you know, pay every month for a phone and I do think that it’s just, like, a personal choice, to choose to pay that for an education, and I think you get all these people who say, “People with degrees aren’t any more important than anybody else”, and they’re not, but it does show a huge financial commitment, and it does show an emotional commitment because, you know, you do get a lot of students who are really stressed about how much *debt* they’re going to be in, and it is a lot of money, and you *have* to have something to show for that. If it was just free and everybody went, it wouldn’t be – you know, you wouldn’t be able to set apart the people who *really* want this. I feel like I *really* want this and, you know, working horrible waitressing jobs, or bar jobs, and just, you know, working every hour you can to pay for your education, it’s something that you can sit in front of an employer and say, you know, because I can sit here and say, “The only reason I went to uni is because I was willing to do, you know, rubbish-y jobs and work horrible hours, and work every Saturday and Sunday for 4 years, to have this life” and I think that’s really important that uni students have that, because they do work really hard for it.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you ever feel as though the university, either as an entire institution or individual staff members, is engaging you as a customer rather than a student?

P: I would say, I could see where that could be at other unis because I know there are a lot of unis where they’re quite strict on their students and they’re more interested in, sort of, getting those grades. Whereas I feel like [University A] do actually really *care* for your wellbeing, and I’ve – there hasn’t really been an instance where they’ve, sort of – where they’ve treated us like a consumer because it’s always very much been, “We’ll approach you if something’s wrong” so they’ve always said, “If we’re worried about you, we’ll come and find you and we’ll sit you down and have a discussion with you”, but they’re constantly, sort of, reaffirming that it’s a real, *personal* experience. I know one of my lecturers stood up the other week and she said, you know, “Don’t worry if you’re getting 60%, that is fine, that’s absolutely – that’s fine. If that suits you, if that’s what you need, that’s great. We’re happy with that, and if you need any help, just come and see me”. And they’re so great and I had, the other week, I did one of my news stories, and I thought “Oh my God, I’ve screwed up” and I rang my Head of my course, and she answered the phone in 5 minutes, and she sat and had, like, half an hour conversation with me, saying “No, no, no. Okay, so maybe you haven’t done this right, *but* it’s not a problem, we can fix it” and she went through it all. So, they really do treat you like – they genuinely care about you as a student, they want you to learn so much. Whereas I feel, when I looked around a few other unis, it was more a case of they, sort of, they have this ground-breaking research, and they use us little bodies to pay for it, and I didn’t want that. I wanted a uni that wanted *me* to be happy and wanted me to learn because it makes *them* happy to see them give that knowledge to somebody else, and we’re not just fee-paying students, and they can just say, “Yeah, we’re the top university in the country because of this”, because to me, a lot of students turn their noses up at student satisfaction, but it’s a *massive* tell, as to whether you’re being treated as a fee-payer and a consumer, or as a student who just wants to learn.

I: Yup. Okay, moving onto learning then. How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find lectures, if at all?

P: I’d say the lectures are really useful, just for giving a real *general* idea. But I know that I wouldn’t be coping, if I didn’t go away and, sort of, read up on stuff or check things out because, I don’t know, I don’t know if it’s just *me* but lectures in general, because they’re literally just a starting point, I think if – I couldn’t just rely on them. I don’t feel like any student could *just* rely on lectures. I think you have to, sort of, have that where you think, “Okay, this is literally just a starting point. Anything I don’t understand I need to find out myself”, but then I think the seminars here are really, really good. So, they’re – even though the lectures are literally just touching upon things, when we go to the seminars, they’re much more thorough and the lecturers are *so smart*, it blows you away doesn’t it? And you think, everything that you weren’t quite sure about, it’s almost like they just *know*, and one of my lecturers is always saying, “Just find out the parts that you do understand and just cling on to them and you’ll be fine”. There’s literally only been the odd lecture where I’ve thought, you know, “This makes no sense, and he’s said the same thing 15 times”.

I: [laughing] Okay. So, you’ve touched on this, but how engaging and/or useful for learning do you find seminars?

P: Yeah, seminars *make* the degree. I think if I was – I don’t know, because I thought about Open University because obviously I’m a little bit older and I wanted to stay at home and live my life as I was, but I was *really* concerned about engagement, because I know that I’m not the, sort of, learner who can just hear a lecture and then be assessed on it, because I don’t feel like that’s *enough*. And the great thing about [University A] is that the actual seminars are – they’re almost not directed. It’s like they stand in front of you and they throw an idea out there and all of the students talk for, like, an hour and they say, “Right, okay, you’re done” and you’re like, “I’ve learnt so much but it wasn’t actually from the lecturer, it was from all of you guys and who knew that collectively we actually all knew so much”. So, it’s more about, they make us work as a team to learn and bounce off each other, instead of just being this person with all these qualifications who just talks at you.

I: Yeah, okay. Where do you choose to sit in seminars and lectures, like, back, front, middle, or do you not care?

P: Ooh. See, I like to – I don’t know, this is going to sound so nerdy [laughing]. I like to be able to *see*, I like to – I can’t sit at the back, and I can’t sit at the sides, I like to be just in the middle, right in the middle, where I can just see everything, because I just think, “What’s the point in sitting at the back?” And I see people sat on their phones, and I was in an hour-long lecture the other day and there was this girl at the front and she was on Facebook the *whole* time, and I was like, “Why are you *here*? This is the, like, the most – you’ve literally paid, so if we sit and work it out it’s, like, £150 a lecture, “You’ve paid *£150* to spend an hour on Facebook, that’s actually what’s just happened”. So, I tend to sit – I’m really strict with myself, I’m like, “No, as rubbish as I feel, it’s, like, 9 o’clock in the morning, just sit at the damn front, just engage”, I’m like, “No, you’ve got to” and that is because I pay fees. If it was a free thing, I think I’d be like, “Oh, yeah okay, I might sit at the back” but no, I’m like, “No, you’re paying for this. This is a £100 lecture, you’re sitting at the damn front and you’re not even going to – you’re not going to look at your phone, you’re just going to focus”. So, no matter how boring it gets, I’m always just watching them and I have to force myself to do that sometimes.

I: [laughing] Fair enough. What about seminars? Where do you sit in seminars?

P: Well, the seminars are actually really good because they tend to be a horseshoe shape, so they deliberately set the chairs out so they’re around the room, so *nobody* can hide. They’re really, really good at that, so generally I tend to sit, again, in the middle, just around that, sort of, area, but to be honest, I’ve never been – lecturers are *brilliant* and sometimes they blow you away, but I’ve never been *scared* of them, because the way I see it is, we’re here for a reason and they *know* that, and if they pick on me, they pick on me, do you know what I mean? But then, they’re really good for *not* doing that, so I don’t think anybody here has an angst about where they sit.

I: Yeah, okay. How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find one-on-one sessions with tutors?

P: That’s a hard one. I really like my personal tutor because she was a mature student as well, and she seems to understand a lot *more* of what goes on in my head than I think other members of staff would, so I don’t know if it’s because of *her* specifically, but I find it really helpful, and it’s like I said to her, I was like, “Do you know what? I just can’t get over this home sickness. I just can’t – I’m not fitting in, I’ve got loads of friends, I’ve got my job here, I go to uni here, this is my life now. But I’m finding myself pining after my adult life at home” and she like, “Well I had that as well because, you know, when you’re a teenager and you’re 17 and 18 and you go to uni, you’re leaving your teenage life and going to your adult life”, she was like, “But you’ve left your adult life behind”, she was like, “So, you’re not going to have that experience, there’s always going to be part of you that’s pining to be back, you know, with your family and your partner and your life”. So, she is really, really great. The only thing I would say, is they’re just not – they’re not frequent enough, because I feel like, literally with uni, you can do three lectures and then have an assessment, and you can be sat thinking, “Oh my God, I have no idea what’s going on”, and you can go weeks without *seeing* them and, because everything at uni is so fast-paced, *so much* can happen, and by the time you’ve seen them, the problem’s been and gone [laughing]. So, it’s, like, I can’t actually *remember* the last time I saw mine, and I had flu from New Year’s Eve until last week, so I didn’t see her, so I probably won’t see her for, like, another 3 weeks. So, I know if anything goes *wrong*, I’m going to have to email her so, I would just say that the only thing is, checking up on people just, like, even if it’s just, like, an email to be like, “Haven’t seen you in 3 weeks, is everything okay?” But then I know that they respect that we’re adults and they expect us to reach out to them if they’re needed so…

I: Okay. Okay, is there anything you particularly like about the learning style at universities, compared to compulsory education?

P: I like that I can focus on stuff that’s important to *me*. But, I think the only issue with uni is that, you can spend a long time not actually knowing if you’re doing okay [laughing], and you can spend like – it’s going to sound ridiculous, but sometimes you *do* just need a pat on the head, and you do just need somebody to say, “You’re doing really good”, do you know what I mean? [laughing] And you just don’t get that at uni, and you can literally go 6 months and be like, “Am I good? [laughing] Am I smart?” But I think that’s where – and you get, you know, you get this feedback and they’re like, “Email me if you want any more” and you’re like, “Oh okay”, so it’s almost like the lecturers, sort of, *assume* that everything’s fine unless you tell them otherwise, and they do, sort of, say here, that you know, “You are like a little duck where everyone seems calm, but their little feet are going under the water” and they’ve said, you know, “Unless you tell us, we don’t know how hard, you know, how hard you’re paddling. So you just need to come and let us know”, but it’s nice they’ve got that trust in us, that trust that “You’ll tell us if you’re not fine” but I think the one thing I do miss about secondary school is, you know, having that teacher who does say sometimes, you know, “You’re doing a really good job, well done” and that’s the difference. It’s not as much *personal* relationships, so you don’t *get* that [sic].

I: Yeah, okay. Do you always understand what your teachers are explaining to you? Or the material you’re set to read?

P: Yeah, most of the time actually. But then I’d say that’s because – I get a lot of students, sat around me saying, “Oh I just don’t get this” and they switch off, and like I said before, I’m *really* strict with myself about that, I’m really strict with myself thinking, “No” you know, because you might listen for 5 more minutes, and it just click, and I think if you switch off and start going on your phone, start scrolling through Facebook and, so – then you’re never going to get it. So, sometimes I do sit there and think, “What on *earth* is he talking about?” I’ve got one lecture particularly where he is just, it’s like he talks in riddles, he’s just *mental.* He’s in his own little world, and I sit there I think, “I have no idea what you’re talking about” like, literally, nobody knows, you see every single person in the room just a complete blank. But I think I just keep listening and keep listening, and then eventually he’ll say *something*, and then it will just *click.* But, there was a couple of lectures that I had of these where I just had no idea what was going on, so I just went on the wider reading that he’d put on there and just read it from – in somebody else’s *words*, and then it clicked. So, I think every student has the opportunity to understand it, but you *have* to put in that effort to go that extra step, or read it in a different context, but I think a lot of students *don’t* do that, and that’s where it’s, “Oh, I don’t understand my lecturers” comes from [sic].

I: [laughing] Okay. Do you – would you say the lack of understanding is to do with the content or the language that they use to explain it?

P: I would say content, because I think what a lot of people don’t realise about uni is that you *have* signed up for quite a *meaty* amount of learning and, you know, you can’t – it’s very, very difficult for somebody, especially who, you know, probably has a PhD in their subject and is doing research in their subject, to take what they see as a really, really *basic* concept and just make it smaller. So, I think with uni it’s very different because they give you A and they want you to get to C, they’re not giving you the B in the middle, whereas High School, you’re used to, “Right, A, B, C, got it”, and they don’t, they say “Right, here’s A, find C” and you think, “Oh my God”, but I think because they’re – they know you can do it, and I think if they gave you B, you would never get to the level that they’re at, because I think uni *expects* you to bridge that gap, so I think it’s good that they don’t have that sympathy that if you don’t understand it, and you don’t go home and you don’t at least just try a quick Google search, or even just go to the lecturer at the end of the lecture and just say, “Can you just clarify this?” It’s understandable that – you know, they’re doing ground-breaking research in what they’re doing, if they’ve tried to simplify something as much as they can, and you’re not taking that extra leap, you know, what more can they *do*? Because they do, sort of, modify their language and make it easier for you, they are very conscious of that here.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, from your own experience, is there anything you would change to improve your own learning. So, in terms of either teaching, resources you have access to, curriculum and assessment or anything else you consider important?

P: What would I change? I think the main thing is I would see my personal tutor more. And I also think it’s – it’s very difficult when you’re like, especially a first-year, feeling like you have the right to go and knock on a lecturer’s door and take up their time, because you think, “You must just have so many important things to do, and you’re a Doctor, so how am I supposed to knock on your door and go, ‘Oh I don’t understand this. This is really basic stuff, I just don’t get it’”. So, it’s almost not – the one thing I would change, and it’s more of a *personal* thing, is not, maybe not putting lecturers on a pedestal where they’re these unapproachable academics, where they’re actually, you know, they were in their first year of their degree at one point and they know *exactly* where you’re at. But, I think it’s really important that the university drills that home to us because, you know, they say, “Oh, our door’s always open, you can always ring me”. When you’re sat there with your phone, you’re like, “Oh my God, I’ve got to ring Dr [name removed]”, you’re like, “I can’t, I physically can’t, he’s so scary”. So, I think it’s really important that the uni, sort of, says, “Look, you know, we were undergrads once, we get it, just ring me” and I think they should push that more. That’s the one thing I would change, that the lecturers came across as more approachable, or even if they just had the odd drop-in session at the library, where they’re just sat there and it’s just more *casual* than knocking on their door.

I: Okay. Okay, so I sent you the document that refers to the Student Collaboration Policy [policy name changed]. Are you familiar with this policy?

P: Yeah.

I: Okay, that’s good.

P: A lot of people don’t know about it.

I: No, no they don’t! Lots of people don’t know about it. So, how evident would you say this policy is in your day-to-day experience of being a student?

P: It’s not there. [laughing] It’s not, no. To be fair, the only reason I actually know about it is because I was looking at changing from English and Journalism to just English next year and I kept seeing Student Collaboration [policy name changed] everywhere and I was like, “*What* is this?” It literally sounds like [removed for confidentiality], so I was, like, I actually looked up on the university website and just read around what it was, and students getting engaged with research, with the lecturers, I was like, “I’ve never heard of this”, I was like, “No lecturer’s ever asked me if I want to help with any research” [laughing] and I’m thinking it must be something that’s for third-years? Or, I don’t really know. But, it’s a great idea and it’s a great concept, but you get – I think they have to really *push* it on us, because you know, you’ve got first-years and second-years who would think, “Oh my God, that’s amazing, I would love to, you know, do Student Collaboration [policy name changed] and work alongside my lecturers and do extra research and stuff, because it looks so good on your CV and it’s just so interesting” and like I said before, that would bridge the gap between lecturers being these *big*, scary people and us being, you know, the little people who don’t know anything. But, it’s not something that’s well *known* in the university, per se, I would say. And Student Collaboration [policy name changed] is really confusing because I thought it was just – when I first read it, when I was actually applying for my degree, I assumed it was a [removed for confidentiality] thing because of the way it’s phrased.

I: Yeah, it’s got a misleading title, hasn’t it?

P: It has, yeah, because if I was a Biology student, I’d think, “Oh, that’s not for me then”, but I *did*, that’s what I thought.

I: Yeah, that is true, that is true. Okay, brilliant. Well that’s good that you know what it is because most people are like, “Never heard of it”. So, I also sent you the Student Charter, so are you familiar with this? Have you seen this before, or read it before?

P: I was *less* familiar with this. I mean, for me, this is just basic *manners*, like, if you’re – so, you finish uni at 21, so if you’re 18, 19 and you’re not treating – if you’re being *told* by adults that you need to treat people with respect, I’d be worried. So, this is just something that I think, that when I signed up I was like, “This is just manners”, so I didn’t really take a lot – it’s more, like, you know like every business has to have, like, a business plan, they have to tell you what their aims and objectives are, and I think the university by law has to have this strategic plan, where they tell all their students to be *polite*. I think if you’re 18 and you’re being rude to other human beings, you’ve got no place in further education anyway. It’s just the way I saw it.

I: Yeah, fair enough. Okay, are you aware that this Student Charter is technically meant to be your contract with the university?

P: Yeah. I did figure that. That’s why I thought, you know, when they’re saying about their values and what we have to do. I mean I appreciate that, say for example, I behaved badly towards another student, this could be pulled up and said, “Look, you know, this is what you’ve agreed to – this is how you’ve agreed to behave, and you’ve breached this” and I don’t know, maybe it’s because of the way I was raised, a lot of this just seems, like, basic, standard how to not be a… you know! But, I think it is important that students know, because I mean it is quite easy, I mean I’m not on social media, but I do see a lot of stuff on social media and I think, “You could get in so much trouble with the [uni] for that”. So, there’s, like, a group chat, like, a uni group chat, and I would *never* be a part of that because oh my God, you could just say one thing and your life is over [laughing]. So, yeah, I think it is important, especially because, like, some of my housemates that I live with have literally just turned 18, it’s really important that the uni can stand there and say they’ve got a set of guidelines as to how they should behave, but I feel like, because of my age, this isn’t as applicable to me, it’s just common sense and it should be common sense at this point, for everyone! Yeah, so that’s, sort of, how I treat this.

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

P: Yes, I *do*. But, I know why they do it, because I have a feeling that at 18 years old, you’re very – you’re very ignorant to what’s *good* for you, and I think when you do the first year of your degree, they force you to do cores for a *reason*, and you know, you can’t do an English degree and say, “I’ve never studied the Victorians, I hate the Victorians” because that’s – you can’t just take 100 years out of your literary knowledge, it’s not – you can’t do that. So, I think if you gave 18-year olds free reign to study *whatever* they wanted as of Year *One,* you’d literally have people having degrees in Lord of the Rings Elvish because they wouldn’t – do you know what I mean? If I – honestly, I’m quite clued up about the fact that I need to know the boring parts of English, but if they said to me, “Oh, you know, you didn’t have to study sounds in poetry”, I’d be like, “Yes, great, don’t have to do that anymore” but I know that going *forward*, I’d tailor my degree too much. My degree would just become – you’d become ignorant because you’d only learn what *you* wanted to learn and I don’t think you can sit there and say, you know, “I have a Bachelor’s degree in English” if you’ve only studied things that are interesting to *you*, and you’ve completely ignored *massive* chunks of knowledge that other scholars think are *really,* really important. So, I think it’s really good that they make you study certain things, because it means you can hold your own against other academics and even if it’s not your *specialism*, you’ve still got that *basic* degree level knowledge from, you know, right from Beowulf through to 21st Century Literature, it’s really *important*. And then if you do want to specialise in something else later on, you *can*. But, I just think at 18, with free reign to study your own stuff, is a *bad* idea because you’d just get a load of people who have massive gaps in knowledge.

I: Yeah. Do you think the students should be in, like, *dialogue* with academics to, like, to discuss what they could do and discuss what they could do for assessment?

P: Yeah, I think *that* would be a good idea. I mean maybe even if they had core subjects that – even if they split them up so, you know, they have the core subjects and the optional subjects, and that only really starts in Year Two. Even if you do your first semester, and you do assignments in each of your cores, and then when you get to the second half of the semester you say, “Right, I’m not quite as good at that”. I found with my Journalism, we do the History of Journalism, the Law of Journalism and then the actual writing of stories. Great at the Law, great at the History, world’s *worst* journalist. And, so I’ve got to semester two and I’m like, “I can’t write a news story”, like, I’m getting Firsts in my History of Journalism and Law of Journalism, but put me in the News Room, they’re not going to *care*! So, I’ve got to semester two and I’m like, “I can’t write” and [inaudible], “Produce news stories” and I’m like, “Uh, that’s great”. So, I think semester two, maybe you could do all of your cores in the first semester and then maybe hone in on which ones your best at and *then* do those. So, they’ve – but they can sit there, and we can *both* say, me and the lecturer, “Well, you’ve tried, that’s not quite for you” so I know in semester two, I can do the Law of Journalism, the History of Journalism and that’s that. So, it’s just unfortunate that I’m bad at the most bread and butter part of the career. So, yeah, that’s what I’d change.

I: [laughing] Okay. Okay, in recent government policy on higher education, students have been placed at the heart of the system, that’s their words. So, how central or important are students in this university do you think?

P: I think they are really, really important. I know [University A] is really up there for student satisfaction, and I just think everybody’s *happy*. I haven’t met anybody – I’ve met people like me, who are like, “Maybe I’m not that great at Journalism. Maybe it’s just not for *me*, but I had a go”. But this is the thing, my attitude towards it, *because* of this uni is, “Had a go, it’s not my strength, it’s fine I’ll just do English next year” whereas I think if I was at another uni, like, a top uni, the *sky* would be falling, because it would be, “Well, you made that choice, you obviously didn’t research it well enough” but I think sometimes you just can’t *know*, until you get here and I think *here*, their attitude to that is so *good*, they – you know, because they don’t make you feel stupid if you didn’t quite choose the right degree and they don’t make you feel stupid if you *just* missed the mark, they’re quite good for that. But I also think, with uni as well, a lot of it is, you have to put trust in the fact they’re academics, and that they are top of their field, and they know what they’re doing, and sometimes you just – you do just have to sit back and accept that you’ve *just* got to learn that. So, as much as they try and put us at the heart of everything, it’s like they’ve said, “You’ve *got* to learn the Law, if you break the Law as a journalist, you have no more rights than anybody else”, so they’re good for that. They’re good for putting their foot down and not letting us get a bit petulant, definitely.

I: Okay. Do you think students should be the central focus of a university?

P: *Definitely*, definitely. I mean, I’ve said it before, I really have a – it really gets me when you have universities and they’re like, “Oh we’re doing this great research” and you’re like, “But you have *thousands* of students who are *miserable*, so it’s obvious that the only reason you’re making this research is because *they’re* paying £10,000 each” so I think – I just think student satisfaction is *the* most important thing because, what else is uni *for*? Because if not, they should just be a research centre, do you know what I mean? You’ve got, like, Pew Research Centre and places like that, if you’re not interested in student satisfaction, student happiness, you’re not sharing and imparting your knowledge for knowledge sake, you’re just *using* them as a way to pay your fees, so I think that’s the difference between a *research* centre and a *uni*. That’s the *only* difference, is how your students feel.

I: Yeah, okay. What meaning does the word relationship have for you, in the context of interacting with academics?

P: [laughing] I’d say *tentative.* You always feel *stupid*, like, literally, you could have the *best* point ever and they, sort of, look at you as if to say, “What?” There’s been a few times, where you feel like you have a genuine, *really* good question and it’s almost, like, they’ve already thought of it when they’re brushing their teeth in the morning, and so, I think, especially as an undergrad, you never feel like you’re on their level. But that’s *good*, because I’ve always been a firm believer in a healthy amount of *respect*, because I really want to go into teaching, and I always saw it that, how would I stand in front of a class of 16-year olds at 21? How can I – you know, I was *there* myself 4 years ago [laughing], do you know what I mean? So, I’m a real firm believer in healthy respect and the fact that I sit in front of my lecturers and I think, “Do you know what? I’m not going to go on my phone because you’re so clever it terrifies me”, that is *good*, that’s a good thing, because I think if you don’t – if you don’t look at your lecturers in awe, what are you aiming for? Because I look at them and I think, “Oh my God, you’re so clever” and sometimes I listen to the things they say and I think, “I could be like that one day” and I think that’s great, because if I just had some guy in jeans and trainers stood in front of me, who didn’t really *care*, I’d think, “Well, is this what I’m aiming for? Is this what happens when you spend £40,000 on your education?” It’s really, really nice. I saw one of my lecturers’ Twitters the other day, I don’t have social media, I saw it on – through a link on the uni or something, and I was like, “This is the most sophisticated, intelligent Twitter *ever*”, literally he didn’t tweet memes, he didn’t tweet jokes, every single thing he tweeted could be in the newspaper, and I was like, “But it’s so adorable” because this is his Twitter, it’s his public Twitter, but it’s the fact that when you’re that educated, that’s who you *become*. You don’t make crude jokes, you’re not rude to people, and I look at my lecturers and I think, you know, “You’ve actually, you’re so educated that even your social media is sophisticated and tasteful and diplomatic” and I think that’s a *great* thing to aim towards.

I: Okay. Okay, what do you consider to be the main purpose for building a relationship with academics?

P: It’s a bit of – it’s going to me sound like a real *user* [laughing] but to suck knowledge from them, to *steal* what’s in their heads because why else am I here? What else am I paying for? And I sit in front of my lecturers and I’m like, “I want to know everything you know”, so I think it’s great, but I also, the thing I really love about this uni is that, they *want* to share it. It’s not, “Oh, I’m really, really smart and you’re never going to be as smart as me”, which is the impression that, when I went round on a couple of Open Days, that was the impression I got from a few of them, it was, “Oh, you know, you’ll never be at my level, but you can get your Bachelors” and – but it’s not like that here. Here it’s, like, you’ve got these really, really clever people who are like, “Oh yeah, you know, 10 years ago I was just working in Sainsbury’s” and you think, “*Wow*”. So, I think it’s really important to build that relationship, so it’s really inspirational. But also, I went to college and I did an access course, I didn’t do my A-Levels, and so I met a group of lecturers who were – who literally had *nothing* before they had their education. There was a few of them who had been on benefits and they thought, “Do you know what? I’m going to do an Open Uni degree”, and now they have their PhD and they have their Masters. So, for me, I’ve got a huge amount of respect for lecturers because I do – literally, I’ve *met* people who, one of them, he had eight kids and he was working two jobs and he got his PhD, and he was a single dad. And I think, I just look and him and I think, “Oh my *God*!” So, for me, lecturers have always been those people to *look* to, to realise what you can do and there’s – that’s why I just think there’s no excuses, I *have* to get these grades, even working a part-time job, even volunteering, going back and forth from home, it’s achievable and the lecturers can help you do that and I think that’s good, it’s really, really good.

I: Okay. Do you consider there to be a link between the relationships you build with academics and your levels of engagement in their classes?

P: Yeah, *definitely* because I spoke to one of my friends recently, she’s at [large pre-92 university], a much bigger uni and she said that, in her lectures, there’s over 200 people, she said in her seminar, how much… like, 50 odd people in each seminar. She said there’s *loads* and she’s on quite a – she’s on a really, really popular course, so she said they have *massive* seminars, and I said to her, I said, “Do the tutors not know your name then, like, the lecturers?” and she was like, “No” and I thought that’s really *sad*, whereas here I know I can walk into a seminar group and the lecturer’s like, “Oh I haven’t met you before” and it’s really nice, or they say, “Oh, I recognise faces in the room” and some of them do even know you by *name*, I mean I had a bit of an issue where I uploaded something to our site that you upload it to when you have your submissions, and when I submitted it, one file had replaced the other and my lecturer contacted me and he was like, “Look, I know it’s you, you’re not – I know that’s not you, I know you wouldn’t have just *not* submitted it. Just submit it again, it’s fine, don’t worry” but that’s the difference, because you’ve got lecturers who know you as a *person*, and they know that it’s not a case of, “Oh, she just hasn’t bothered to submit it”, so I think it just makes all the difference, because I feel like I’ve learnt *so* much *more* because I’ve got a lecturer who sits in front of me and says, “Do you know what? You’re not cut-throat enough for journalism”, whereas I could get to my third-year and just fail, because I’m not willing to go that extra mile for the story, and I 100% trust that my lecturers will tell me the truth and say, you know, “Your moral compass is too good, if you’re not willing to do this, you’re just not ever going to get the scoop” and I respect that, and I’d rather *know*, and I think here, they’re really good for that.

I: Okay. Okay, so can you describe to me a typical face-to-face encounter with an academic, so if you’re discussing an essay with them or something, how does that play out, that interaction?

P: So, I’ve only really had one session where I’ve had one-on-one feedback, because they tend to do it all online. So, you can look through all of their comments and they mark it up virtually, and then you contact them if you’ve got any problems. But there’s a *couple* of them who still do it face-to-face and they’re just so great about it, they’re very *honest*, which is something that really surprised me, compared to secondary school, because there’s none of this, you know, “You tried really hard”, it’s more like, “This wasn’t very good. This was good, this wasn’t” type-attitude, which at first I was like, “Oh,” but then once you get over that and you realise that’s your ego, you, sort of, look at it and you think, “Yeah, this is great” and I think the face-to-face aspect is really, really good because it’s, like, one of my journalism lecturers kept writing on my feedback that my writing was clean and solid, and I was like, “Is that good?” It sounds good, but it’s not very – it’s not very excited is it? He doesn’t seem into it, so I said to him, I was like, “Why are you so unenthusiastic about my work?” And he was like, “I’m not unenthusiastic. It’s clean and solid”, I was like, “But solid? Is that the best you could come up with? Is it good?” And he was like, “Well, it’s not great, but it’s solid!” And I was like, “Right, I’m really glad we’ve cleared that up”. But, in his mind, solid in your first year of uni is really on track, and it was that – whereas if I’d had – when I read that on the screen, I was like, “Oh, I’m solid, I’m just average”, whereas to him, solid is, “No, you’ve *got* it. The idea is in your head, it’s there, and your holding onto it, and that’s great”. So, it was that face-to-face interaction that showed me, “Okay, so that’s what he meant then”.

I: Do you prefer getting face-to-face feedback to online feedback?

P: Yeah, I feel like if it was a crucifixion, *no*! I feel like if it was like, “This is absolute rubbish”, but then sometimes it just takes you to ask the right questions because it’s very easy for them to put on there, you know, “This isn’t coherent”, whereas when you’re actually sat in front of somebody, they can tell you *why*. So, yeah, I do definitely agree with still doing face-to-face.

I: Okay. So, can you think of any particularly good relationships, without telling me who they are, with any academics, and why you’d say it was good?

P: One of my seminar tutors was really, really good because as I said before, he would – you’d go in, and he’d give you a question, and he did give a question to each table, and we’d discuss it, and then he’d be like, “Okay, so can you now feedback to the rest of the group?” And you’d be like, “Wow” because he – I don’t want to say he didn’t actually *do* anything, because he did, because he would float from table to table and challenge you, and be like, “Well can you prove that? Why are you saying that? There’s – I don’t see any evidence of that, find it” and he was really, really good for that and he is probably the definition of self-directed study, where he would just nudge us when we needed to be nudged, and then we’d feed back to the group and honestly, I feel like I learnt – I *know* those books more than the books that I’ve had, like, PowerPoints on and general overviews on because you – he’d come up, you know, you’d say, “Oh, I think this” and he’d come up to you and say, “Well, find it in the book and prove it, else it’s not true”. So, you’d end up leafing through these books and you’ve got five of us all finding different parts of the book that are really, really interesting, and then two more tables, so by the time I left that room, I had, like, three different tables worth of knowledge and I knew that book inside out, and I feel like that all started with him just asking us one question and just floating from table to table. And it just seemed so effortless for him, but we all learnt so much, and I’m gutted that we don’t have those seminars anymore, because now it’s like, “Oh, look at the PowerPoint, what do you make of this? Take notes” type-thing, and that’s just not, I don’t know, at this *level*, that’s not the way *I* feel you should be learning.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, so now can I ask you to draw your conception of a good relationship with an academic?

P: A good relationship with an academic? [laughing]

I: Yeah, it can be anything you want.

P: Would it really freak you out if we’re holding hands? [laughing]

I: [laughing]

P: So, I would say, sat at a desk with – that’s my paper and my pen, I have no arms at the moment. And I would say [pause for drawing]. So, it’s a bit small. That’s me on my – sat at my desk, I’m quite close to the lecturer, with my pen and my paper, and I’m asking questions and they’ve got the board, they’ve got a book *and* they’re talking to me. So, they’ve got all different mediums, and they’re like, “Okay, so this, this and this”, and then they’ve got a book and they’re reading out a quote, and they’re talking to me. Because, to me, if they’re stood at the front and they’re just talking at you, or they’re *just* using the board, or they’re *just* reading from a book, if they – *here*, they’re really good for having different things, so my lecturers tend to float around with their book in their hand and talking on the board. The lecturer that I just spoke to you about, he always had questions on the board *and* he was floating around talking to us*, and* he always had a secondary source and was like, “Look at this, look at this”. So, yeah, that’s what it would be.

A close up of text on a whiteboard

Description automatically generated

I: Okay, brilliant. So, now can I get you to do a bad relationship?

P: Oh God, okay. [pause for drawing] So, it would be me sat at my desk again, having no idea and it would literally just be a lecturer stood there, talking *at* me, and just yeah, just going on and on, and I have no idea what’s happening.

A close up of a whiteboard

Description automatically generated

I: Okay. And last one [laughing] is your conception of your relationship with the university as a whole.

P: Oh, really? Oh, that’s alright then. I don’t know, I’d just put a smiley face because I feel like even when you don’t have *any* clue what’s going on, you’re still happy here, it’s really odd.

A picture containing sky, kite, outdoor

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I: Okay, brilliant. Okay, thank you. Okay, so last few questions then. So, there’s often a lot of encouragement for undergraduates to engage with different experiences that the university offers, such as joining societies and volunteering, or getting involved with the SU. So, what are your thoughts on this?

P: Really good here, really, really good. To the point where the Student’s Union almost *harass* you, but no, they’re great. Every day I get an email from a lecturer, “Oh, there’s a trip here. There’s a trip here” and even this morning, I checked my emails before I came here and it was like, “Oh for those of you who can’t afford it, here is all the information that you need to apply for scholarships through banks and all these different people”, so there’s – they’re just so great for it and I remember in my first lectures, especially my journalism ones, they were like, “Right, if you’re not doing the radio station, if you’re not doing the newspaper, if you’re not doing this, you know, you’re at a disadvantage. You’re, sort of, treating yourself with a disservice if you don’t *do* this” so they push us so much because, I think, I don’t know if it’s because they’re not a top five uni, they understand that it’s not enough just to slap your CV onto somebody’s desk and say, “Look at the name of where I went” do you know what I mean? They’re so *good* for that because, if I was an employer and somebody just walked in and they’d only ever done uni and they expected me to be impressed because they’d gone to a *specific* uni, I wouldn’t be impressed because I would think so much more of the person who came along and said, you know, “I held down a part-time job, I was on the student newspaper, I volunteered at Oxfam a few nights a week and, you know, I did wider reading and I was engaged in research with my lecturer, I did Student Collaboration [policy name changed], I went on a couple of international trips, all funded by the uni”. I just think, this uni understands that there’s more to life than just being clever, and I think they’re setting us up really, really well for a real diverse workplace, where we’re philanthropists and we go out of our *way* to access every opportunity that they give us, and they’re really, really good for making us do that.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, what are your thoughts on the role of the Student’s Union in terms of engaging you?

P: They’re really, really great. I mean, I look at the Student Union and I think, “I have no idea how you’re full-time students” which I think is a really good thing because they’re always *everywhere*, everywhere you go, at every event, the Student Union team is *there*, and you think, “Are you not doing your degree? How are you doing this?” And they’re always thinking of stuff, it’s, like, the Student Union President is treating his job as seriously as if he was the President, and I just think it’s amazing. I could never *be* one because I’d – they’re just so selfless and so committed and it’s almost like, they’re almost willing to sacrifice their own commitment to *their* degree to make sure that everyone else is having a great time, and it’s really, really good. And I know that the uni is really *proud* of their Student Union, because the staff – the staff, sort of, know that we’re looking after each other, whereas I think if we had a really weak Student Union, the staff would feel like they had to mollycoddle us more, whereas I know if push came to shove and I couldn’t get hold of a staff member, or I was concerned about something and I didn’t want to talk to the uni because I didn’t want to offend anybody, or, you know, I had a problem with my lecturer, that I could go to the Student Union and it would be sorted out with students, and that they could deal with it, without feeling like you’re making an enemy of your uni if you’ve got a problem. Yeah, so I think they’re really good.

I: Okay. Okay how much of a valued member of the university do you consider yourself to be?

P: Good question. I think at undergrad it’s very easy to feel invisible and feel like, I don’t know, especially with the whole, “First-year doesn’t really count” thing, you, sort of, feel like you’re not as important as everybody else, because everybody’s always like, “Oh, it’s only first-year”. But I also do think it depends on how much you engage with other aspects of uni, like, I really get involved with all the extra-curricular stuff so I know that there are teams of people who rely on me, and you’ve got third-years, sort of, saying, “Oh it was really good what you did at the meeting today” and you think, “That’s great” because you feel really valued. So, I do think if you don’t do anything and you *don’t* engage, and you’re *just* a first-year, just plodding along doing what they have to do just to pass, *that’s* when you start to feel like you’re *not* a valued part of the uni because you’re literally, like, the Year 7 again.

I: Yeah. do you think it’s more department-based, your value, or would you say you’re valued from the whole institution?

P: Ooh. I would say – I’d say this uni just comes across as being very student-orientated, and I think if we didn’t have the SU, maybe *less* so, but I don’t know, I just – it’s really weird, I can’t explain it, because obviously half the time *nobody* knows who you are, but I do just feel like *here*, you don’t feel like at any point, you’re not, like, a *member* of the uni. You don’t feel like somebody who just pops in and does lectures. Even the people who I know who travel in still feel like an active member of the uni, because they just make you feel that way. I don’t know *how* they do it, I couldn’t say how they do it, they just *do*.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, well that was the last question, so thank you very much for your answers. Is there anything you want to add about your student experience or interactions that we haven’t covered?

P: No, I think we’ve covered all of it!

I: Okay, brilliant. Okay.

**[End of Recording]**