**Interview #4 Transcript: Second Year Female English Student (07.02.18) (University A)**

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

Participant (P): Well, initially I applied to do Criminology and then, before I even came I decided that I wanted to do English, so I think if I’d have applied to do English *initially*, then I don’t know if I would have ended up here, if I’m completely honest.

I: Okay. Why’s that?

P: I don’t know, I just think, like, looking at league tables, [University A] for English isn’t particularly, like, quite *high*, whereas Criminology was, kind of, more limited because not every university did it. So, that’s, kind of, why I’m here really!

I: Okay, what made you decide to do English?

P: Basically, like, I – it was always between English and Criminology and then I sat my final A-Level exam and then was like, “No, that can’t be it” and then changed [laughing].

I: Fair enough. Are you the first in your family to go to university?

P: No.

I: Okay. What does value for money mean for you, and is it important that you get it from your university?

P: Well, value for money, getting the most out of it that you can really. I don’t think that’s always the case.

I: No?

P: No, like, if lecturers don’t turn up or stuff like that, I’ve still got to pay for it so…that kind of thing.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you think you get value for money from this university, or…?

P: No.

I: No?

P: No, I don’t because there’s, like, so many problems that you just think, “Well, what am I actually paying for?” sometimes, but then other times you think, “Actually it is worth it” so…

I: Okay. What kind of problems do you encounter?

P: Just, like, in seminars, people – like, it really frustrates me in seminars when people don’t talk, and you just go there and it’s, like, you don’t get anything out of it and that kind of stuff I find really frustrating.

I: Okay. Do you agree with paying fees?

P: Yes, but not as *much* [laughing].

I: [laughing] Fair enough. What does being a university student mean to you?

P: Hmm, what in, like, for my career, or socially, or…?

I: When you think of university student, what does that make you think of?

P: For me, I, kind of, came into it thinking, “Oh, it’s going to be, like, more about the social side of it”, I think it was more like that in the first year, but second year, definitely that’s, kind of, *changed* quite a lot, like, it’s definitely changed second year. I think I, kind of, view it as, like, this is, like, a step to the next thing now.

I: To your career?

P: Yes.

I: What do you think being a university student means to people that don’t go to university, or have never been to university?

P: Partying and not doing any work. Paying a *lot* to party, yeah.

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

P: Engagement…Being, kind of, focussed on your course, being aware, doing the *work*, kind of – just, kind of, being aware of what’s going on really, within your course.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, so in what ways do university staff attempt to engage you as a student?

P: I suppose – they are constantly putting stuff online for us, they are always available if you want to go and see them, but I do find it’s quite difficult to get hold of them sometimes.

I: Yeah. What, as in, they don’t reply?

P: Don’t reply to emails and that’s something that’s been a big issue, and I know that we’re trying to get a policy for 24-hours response. I don’t think that will happen, but yeah, because there’s just tutors not replying to us at the moment.

I: Okay, that’s not good.

P: No.

I: How do they engage you during, like, lectures and seminars? Does it differ and what do they do?

P: I think it’s different with every member of staff, because they all have completely different styles. So, like, some of them will be really engaging and, kind of, like, put questions out there in lectures. Some will just read off a piece of paper and not even look up, so I think it just depends on who it is really.

I: Yeah. Which one do you find, like, better? What do you prefer?

P: Definitely ones that are engaging, rather than just reading [laughing].

I: Yeah [laughing]. Okay, what are your thoughts on the concept of student as consumer in higher education? Have you heard of this?

P: Yeah.

I: Yeah? Has it impacted at all on your experience?

P: Not yet, but I think there’s been a lot of talk with the Student Union that they’re going to change the framework, so it will be like, we’re a customer.

I: Oh really?

P: So, if that’s the case then if they don’t turn up, can I get my money back? Or, if I don’t think it’s good enough, can I get a refund? Is that like – I don’t know if that’s the way it’s going to work, but…

I: What do you – do you think that’s a good thing, to be a consumer in education?

P: No, because it’s meant to be an educational institution, not, like, a – I don’t know, like, I don’t feel like a customer, and if they started doing it like that, then there’s not going to be any student community because it will just be like, “Well, I’m paying for it”. But I think that is more of a problem now, kind of, everyone thinks, “Well, what am I actually paying for?”

I: Yeah, okay. Do you consider yourself to be a customer in any sense?

P: Sometimes, yeah.

I: Yeah? When?

P: Well, when you just sit there and think, “God, what am I actually getting out of this?” and, like, I think staff don’t really have the concept of like, we’re actually paying for it, because obviously I’m not actually paying for it at the *moment*. So, I don’t know, I think staff don’t really recognise that.

I: Okay. Do you think paying fees gives you more entitlement as a student, and what kind of entitlement does it give you, if it does?

P: I don’t think it *does*, maybe it *should*, but I don’t feel like I have any more entitlement, just because I’m paying.

I: Okay. So, do you ever feel as though the university, either as a whole institution or individual staff members, is engaging you as a customer rather than a student?

P: Not within English, but I think definitely with the Student’s Union, there’s been – it’s all, kind of, blown up at the moment about being consumers and what we’re actually paying for and, is it good enough? But not by, like, individual members of staff, no.

I: What’s the – what is the Student’s Union blow up? Like, what’s happened?

P: Well, they’re just, kind of – there was an email that went out about this framework and I think it confused everyone, and then, there’s, kind of, like, the usual rumours of, like, this framework about us being customers and – I don’t really know the ins and outs of it, but…

I: So, they sent you an email about…?

P: Just that there’s going to be changes to the framework.

I: Oh okay, and they used – did they use the term customer in it?

P: Not in the email, but that’s, kind of, what it implied.

I: Oh, okay. Right. Okay, so moving onto learning. How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find lectures, if at all?

P: I think it depends on who it *is* really because it differs so much. It can be frustrating if you have different lecturers for that particular module, so you’ll have one good week and then one bad week and, I find that quite difficult sometimes because you become – you’re engaged with it, and then you’re *not*, and then you *are*, and it’s, kind of, difficult to keep motivation going for that module.

I: Yeah. Okay, what makes a bad lecture in your opinion?

P: When they just read off a piece of paper and don’t even look up, and they don’t have anything for us to look at either.

I: Yeah. Okay, how engaging and/or useful for learning do you find seminars, if at all?

P: I think it depends who you’re with because sometimes you’ll get a really chatty group, and sometimes you’ll get one where no one talks and it’s just silent and it’s really awkward [laughing].

I: Okay. Is the seminars more dependent on your peers, then, rather than the tutors? [sic]

P: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

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

P: In lectures, I always sit at the front because my friend is disabled so I sit with her and she can’t get up to the high bits, so I sit at the front. In seminars, it just depends where there’s a seat really.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, how engaging and/or useful for learning do you find one-on-one sessions with teachers, if at all?

P: The only one-to-one I, kind of, get is essay feedback really. I don’t really have any other one-to-one sessions apart from that.

I: No? Do you – have you ever gone to a tutor to discuss an essay before you’ve writing it, or…?

P: Yeah. I haven’t found that to be particularly helpful though, because they, kind of, say, “We can’t say too much”.

I: Oh, really? Oh okay. What about in the essay feedback, what are they like, are they useful, or…?

P: They just, kind of, say what your grade is really, and that’s it.

I: Oh, do they? So, it wouldn’t matter if you got it online, wouldn’t really make a difference?

P: No, I mean, like, after this is what I’ve got, an essay feedback. The only reason I’m going today is because I want to know today rather than wait until Friday. I’m not going because I think I’m going to actually get any constructive feedback to improve or anything.

I: Oh, really? So, you just want your grade?

P: Yeah [laughing].

I: Okay, fair enough. Do you ever find it intimidating when you’re in a one-to-one with a tutor?

P: No, I don’t find it intimidating, no.

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

P: I like the independence of it, but then, also I initially found it quite difficult. I’d rather sometimes have a full timetable, rather than, like, having 8 hours a week. Sometimes it is quite difficult to stay motivated.

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

P: I think it depends on the tutor because some of them, kind of, do it, like, say it in – it feels like they’re saying it in riddles, and, like, in a really academic way and you just don’t get it, so – and then you feel stupid having to say, “What do you actually mean?” So, yeah.

I: Okay. So, the lack of understanding is more with how they’re explaining it, the language they’re using?

P: Yeah.

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

P: I think I’d try and, kind of, really push for help with essay planning, but the policy is that they can’t really look at any, like, even if you just had, like, a plan, like, obviously not a – like, even a start of an essay, they can’t look at it, so I find that really frustrating, because then you’re, kind of, going in, writing the essay with like – not even knowing if you’re along the right lines sometimes.

I: Oh, okay, right. I didn’t know that. Okay, so the policy section. I sent you a document that refers to the Student Collaboration Policy [policy name changed]. Have you ever heard of this policy before?

P: I have heard of it, yeah.

I: Yeah? Do you know what it is, what it’s about?

P: Not really, no.

I: Okay. So, it’s, like, it’s a policy that’s meant to try and make the student a [removed for confidentiality] of their own research, so they become less passive learners and more active [removed for confidentiality], more like researchers. So, that being said, is this policy evident in your day-to-day experience of being a student?

P: No [laughing].

I: No? [laughing] Okay, so the English department don’t really do anything like this?

P: No. Well, apart from obviously you, then there hasn’t – since I’ve been here in the last 2 years, there hasn’t been any other opportunities to become – to get involved in research, apart from yours.

I: Okay, so do you find that it’s more they just, set an essay question and then tell you to go and write an essay? Is that pretty much…?

P: Yeah, I mean they do hold, like, extra seminars on things and have people come in, but I find that that’s always more aimed at, like, postgrad. I have been to one and I found it very intimidating because it was all staff and postgraduates, so maybe they do for postgrad, but I don’t think so for undergraduate, no.

I: No, okay. Okay, so I also sent you the Student Charter. Have you seen this before?

P: No, I haven’t.

I: No? Okay. Okay, this is your contract with the university basically, so, how evident are these values and these ideas in your experience of being a student here? Do you see them come through, or…?

P: I think the Student’s Union promote them, but I don’t know if that’s necessarily seen within my *course*. And I think the fact that I wasn’t aware of that, I should have been aware of it. So, I think there needs to be more of an emphasis on that really.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you think it’s important to have a Student Charter that outlines…?

P: Yeah, definitely, so people know what the expectation is.

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

P: I don’t know really, I find it frustrating when you sign up for a course, expecting a particular text, and then they change it, because sometimes you think, “Oh yeah, I really want to do that, particularly for that text” and then you get there, and they’ve changed it. That’s very frustrating.

I: Yeah. So, do you think it would be good that – if undergraduates were, sort of, in, like, a dialogue with academics to talk about what they wanted?

P: Yeah, I mean we have, like, reps for each year group, but there’s no kind of – we – like, it’s just, kind of, put in the Facebook group chat, like, “Oh, we’re going to see so and so, does anyone have anything they want to say?” and then, like, they’ve had the meeting, but I want to know what the outcome was of that, you know, just because I’m not a rep, I want to be informed of that *too*. So, I think there needs to be some, kind of, system for that.

I: Okay. So, there’s a bit of a disconnect between the reps and the rest of the student body?

P: Yeah.

I: Okay. Okay, in recent government policy on higher education, students have been placed at the heart of the system, which is their words. How central or important do you think students are in this university?

P: I don’t know, I think, well it should be because that’s, obviously, like, students outnumber staff and we’re here to *gain* something. But, like, for example, this year we’ve had to pay £250 extra on our student loan for the course, so it’s now £9,250, the university used that money to give all members of staff Amazon vouchers, instead of putting it back in to – for students.

I: Oh right, okay.

P: So, I don’t know how much the students are the centre of it, I don’t know.

I: Yeah, okay. But they should be in your opinion?

P: Yeah.

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

P: I find it quite difficult to have relationships with staff, like, with my tutor, I’m going to start needing references for when I graduate and I’ve only met him twice so, I feel like I’m going to have to ask for a reference, but he’s not in the position to give one, so you’re like –he doesn’t know me after meeting me twice, so I think maybe more regular tutorials would improve the relationships between staff and students.

I: Yeah. What about with your, like, seminar tutors? Are you able to build relationships with them, or…?

P: They, like, wouldn’t know anyone’s name or anything like that so, yeah, I think it’s – but then for them as well, they’d say, “Well, we only see you for an hour once a week” so maybe, I don’t know, I think it’s difficult.

I: So, do you think it’s – do you think it’s because you change seminar tutor so often that it’s difficult?

P: Yeah, yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, what do you consider, or what would you consider, to be the main purpose for building a relationship with an academic?

P: I think it would improve your overall experience. I think it would help you academically because then you would have someone to go to if you needed help with essays, or, like, any personal issues or anything like that. I think it would improve the experience as a whole.

I: Yeah, 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 because if you have a relationship, like, I get along with one tutor really *well*, and if I’ve got her, I think, “Oh yeah, that’ll be a good seminar”, whereas if you don’t, you’re, kind of, indifferent to it.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, can you describe to me a typical face-to-face encounter with an academic. So, when you go and get essay feedback, how does that, like, actually play out? What happens?

P: Normally they’ll ask me what my name is [laughing], and then they’ll find the essay, tell me the grade, ask me if I’m happy with it, and that’s it.

I: Right, okay. Do you ever get like a – are you ever aware of, like, a hierarchy when you interact with them?

P: No, not really, no.

I: Okay. Okay, can you think of any particularly good relationships with any academics and tell me why you’d characterise it as good? But don’t tell me who they are.

P: I have a really good relationship with the Head of Level 2 for this year. I’ve just found her to be really helpful, like, she’ll always reply really quickly and she’s always happy to see you, and that kind of stuff, so…

I: Okay, so, like, a supportive role is important?

P: Yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, so can I now ask you to draw your conception of a good relationship with an academic? So, it can be anything you want, it can be stick people, it can be abstract, or whatever.

P: Okay [pause for drawing]. Do I have to explain it?

I: Yeah [laughing].

P: Okay [pause for drawing]. Okay, this is me and this is the tutor, and these are all the other tutors. This tutor is actually talking to me and taking the time and the majority aren’t.

A close up of text on a whiteboard

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I: Okay. Okay, cool. So, it’s more of an individual focus?

P: Yeah.

I: Okay, good. Thank you. So, can I get you to draw a bad one then.

P: A bad one?

I: Yeah.

P: [pause] Okay. [pause for drawing] Okay, that’s me *trying* to contact. No contact and I think that is the main thing that has caused problems with relationships, it’s just you email and get *nothing*, and I think the *main* contact between staff and students is email, unfortunately so, yeah.

A flock of birds flying in the sky

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I: Okay. Okay, how does that make you feel when you don’t get any contact back from them?

P: Really frustrating, and then when you see them and they’re like, “Oh, I have seen your email, but I haven’t replied”, I was like, “Yeah, I know” [laughing].

I: [laughing] I’m aware of that. Would you ever go and knock on their door to chat to them?

P: No.

I: Why not?

P: I just don’t think it’s the done thing.

I: No?

P: No. You *can* go in their office hours, but I’m still a bit reluctant to do that.

I: Why?

P: I don’t know [laughing]. The only time I ever go is if I’ve got an appointment, so yeah.

I: Okay, yeah. Is it more like you feel like they’re – you’re wasting their time, or they’re going to be too busy, or…?

P: Well, the thing with office hours is, they’ll have, like, a two-hour slot and you could, like, turn up and they’ve got someone with them and you’d have to wait so, yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, last piece of drawing [laughing]. Can you draw your conception of your relationship with the university as a whole institution?

P: [pause for drawing] This is a very basic drawing but…

I: That’s fine.

P: I feel very distant from it, as you can probably tell. I feel very removed from it, and just, like, quite despondent with it at the moment, so yeah.

A picture containing text

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I: What’s led to that? Has it always been like that, or…?

P: Yeah, like, I think because I always thought that I was going to do Criminology here, so then when I changed to English, I thought, “Well maybe I should change to a different university” and I didn’t, so in the back of my mind I’ve always thought, “Well, what if I *did*?” So, for me, I think it has, kind of, been harder because I’ve always thought, “Well, what if?” And because the experience hasn’t been particularly *grea*t as well, it’s, kind of, been like, “Oh, I should have done that”. But, I’m this far in, [laughing] so I’ve just got to keep going with it now.

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

P: I think there *are* lots of societies, but my experience of the English society hasn’t been *great*, just because it’s purely, like, about going out and drinking and I think, like, “*Yeah*, fair enough” but I think there should be other things as well that they do, which is why I’m not really involved in it because I want to do other stuff apart from just that. I think it would be good if they did, like, some trips or stuff like that as well.

I: Okay, is that the only society you’ve joined?

P: No, I have joined others, but I think, like, directly to the course – I think it would be good if there was, like, a really good English society to get people from the course together because I think there is a bit of tension sometimes.

I: Yeah, okay. What about the other societies, are they good? Do you enjoy them?

P: Yeah, I think they’re more like – they’re, kind of, different. I think everyone – you’re, kind of, expected to join the society of your *course*, but yeah.

I: Okay, what about, like, volunteering or getting involved with the SU, or do you not…?

P: Yeah, I volunteer as a student consultant, so yeah.

I: Okay, that’s cool. So, do you think it’s important to do extra-curricular alongside…?

P: Yeah definitely, and, like, I do the [University A] Award as well, so…

I: Why is it important to do it?

P: Well, it would appear that your degree isn’t enough, and that you have to have other stuff as well.

I: Yeah, I’ve heard that a lot, do they specifically tell you that? Or is it just something that’s implied?

P: No, I think, like, I think, like, if I’m going for a job and someone else is there that’s got an English degree with the same classification as me, what’s going to make me different and stand out? So, yeah.

I: Is that a result of, like, more people having degrees than ever before?

P: Yeah, probably, yeah.

I: Okay. What are your thoughts on the role of the Student’s Union, in terms of engaging you as an undergraduate?

P: They do, kind of, like, have surveys every now and then, and we have to do module evaluations, but I think it would more effective if they did the module evaluations that are anonymous and then we, kind of, got – could have a conversation *with* that module coordinator because, like, I’m giving my feedback, but I don’t know if that’s actually being listened to or…that kind of thing.

I: Yeah, okay. Okay, do you consider the Student’s Union as a valuable thing for students to have?

P: *Yes*, but I don’t think it’s impacted on me directly, I think it’s, kind of, more the broader university, across the university, yeah.

I: Okay, do you consider yourself to be a part of the Student’s Union?

P: Well, I don’t – I wouldn’t say that I’m – well, I don’t know because I am involved because I do student consultant with the Student’s Union, but I don’t necessarily feel *involved* with it, I wouldn’t say.

I: Right, yeah, okay. Okay, so final question. How much of a valued member of the university do you consider yourself to be?

P: I think I probably am valued, but I wouldn’t necessarily say that I feel valued all the *time*. I think sometimes you just, kind of, think, “I’m not –” that you’re not being listened to, so yeah.

I: Okay, do you think your value comes from your department more, or the whole university?

P: I think the department because that’s who you’re in contact with.

I: Yeah, so what would you say you are to the university?

P: A customer.

I: Yeah?

P: Yeah…

I: Okay, so not an individual?

P: No, I don’t think so.

I: Okay fair enough. Okay, well thank you very much for your answers, very valuable. Do you have anything to add about your experience, or interacting with academics, that we didn’t cover?

P: No, I don’t think so.

I: No? Okay. Okay, brilliant then.

**[End of Recording]**