**Interview #2 Transcript: Senior Lecturer and Programme Lead (05.06.17) (University B)**

Interviewer (I): Okay, so as the lead of English Literature and a senior lecturer, what would you consider to be your main responsibilities?

Participant (P): [pause] Can you be a bit more specific? [laughing]

I: Okay, so what do you see as your main job role at the institution?

P: There are three parts to it: teaching, research and administration.

I: Okay. Can you go into more detail with those three?

P: Should we dialogue about particular aspects of them, or…?

I: Yeah, so, okay so, what are the – when it comes to teaching, what would you say is your responsibility as a lecturer?

P: My responsibility as a lecturer is to equip students with the skills necessary to [pause] to study literature at degree level independently by the time they complete their studies, which is a process that year on year involves adding to and developing a skill set through structured assessment and feedback.

I: Okay, in terms of research, would you see that as a separate responsibility, or does that link to teaching?

P: Very closely, for me, yes. Obviously, it depends on what you’re teaching, but certainly, I mean the core skills are common to every lecturer who’s teaching the subject at basic level. The work that I do with second and third years is a bit more specialist, so they learn the beginnings of the tools and techniques that I use as a researcher, so for example, my second and third years are introduced to increasingly complex and sophisticated ways of approaching primary and secondary material. And often engaging with things that I’m working on at the time.

I: Okay, and administration? What type of – what type of responsibilities do you have in administration?

P: I oversee the whole programme, so I’m responsible periodically throughout the year for ensuring that induction events are planned for and students are adequately inducted. I’m directly involved in the administration of one of the core modules they – all of our students, single and combined honours, take. And around that time of year I’m also involved in quality monitoring processes, so that’s everything from looking at retention and marketing of a programme to outcomes in terms of classifications of good degrees and so on and so forth. General administration, making sure that student attendance and welfare is monitored throughout the whole of the year, thinking about the curriculum design, planning and programming, especially in what we used to call Term 2 between January and March which is when our second and third year students are thinking about their options for the year ahead. And then really at this time of year, monitoring staffing, student module choices and administrative tasks that need to be shared amongst the team, so that staff have an equal share of the administrative burden alongside their teaching, so that everyone can fulfil their roles fully. That’s the year in a nutshell.

I: [laughing] How many undergraduate students do you teach in a term, roughly?

P: Personally?

I: Yes.

P: In lectures, in year one, up to 60 and in second and third year classes, mine tend to be around, so I probably teach about 40 second and third years, and then I supervise around 5 undergraduate dissertations, MA classes of up to 5 and a cohort of 4 PhD students.

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

P: [pause] It’s synonymous with participation, I think, in an academic sense. It’s students not just turning up and doing the work and reading the texts, but being brought into [pause] as we say in the current terminology, a learning community, being part of a process in which they’re involved in the studying of a topic as a team effort, it’s something – it’s why we think of a seminar leader rather than someone who is a seminar lecturer, someone who is leading the discussion and facilitating discussion rather than making interventions which are designed to provoke response and only response if that makes sense.

I: Yeah. Okay, so using what you’ve just said, how do you personally attempt to engage your undergraduate students in your teaching?

P: So, a good example I suppose of – one which I think for undergraduate teaching is some of the most enjoyable, for me and I think the students in the sense that we do develop a sense of community, is my third-year module, [name removed], which has a zingy title, that the students do go for and if you look across any university prospectus, it’s sort of, the attractive titles, the ones which do sex and death…

I: Yeah [laughing].

P: … [removed for confidentiality], they do, they do drives in that way, they do recruit well those modules. But the way in which I teach that module, it’s – part of the work is based on translation classes and it’s how – the period of literature I research [removed for confidentiality] is conventional taught which is where I’m involved in the same process of translation with the group, so we prepare a section of the text together, we go around, everyone in the class does a bit of it themselves, everyone’s involved, including me, I do some of my sections too and we work on aspects of the grammar, we talk about the literature and its context and the themes as we’re, as we’re going together, so it has that dual layer of being something like a reading group but facilitated. You know, it’s what I do in my research, so we work with – I don’t know I just reshuffled my bookshelves, but we work on, we work on – yeah, we work on a scholarly edition of a text that’s one of my recent publications so that’s really interesting with getting people to engage with some of the ideas which are very close to my heart at the same time, and of course when something is close to your own sense of purpose, it’s easier to transmit that sense of what drives you to do it. It also happens to be about [removed for confidentiality] which is an attractive theme…

I: [laughing]

P: … to tell anyone about.

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

P: Extremely damaging. It’s, well in terms of political theory, commodity fetishism separates a person who thinks of themselves as a consumer from the thing that they are engaging with in that way. It’s a fundamentally damaging – it’s the worst thing which has happened to higher education in the past decade.

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

P: [pause] Professionally, I’m required to do so. So, in terms of the way in which we, I, am required to market and think about the programme, it’s presented as a product which has to be delivered in a certain way and there has to be consultation on that if any element of it is to change. So, on that level, yes, I very much have to be careful about the way in which we present what we’re doing. But, no if I thought of students as customers then, I wouldn’t care about them in quite the same way. I mean even in those fundamental roles which are about caring, you are supposed to be able to switch off and to separate, but when I have students who are [pause] experiencing severe trauma as many of them do, and this is my ninth year of lecturing and [pause] no, I worry about them, if I didn’t worry about them and worry about how they’re doing and think about them as human beings rather than people who are buying a product from me, I don’t feel I would be a good teacher, let alone a good person.

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

P: The sense of a consumer?

I: Mmmhmm [agreement]

P: The students are consumers? [pause] In some ways, the – that sort of language, the way in which it’s been damaging to universities, is [pause] the business models, so the models which have increasingly seen managers approaching higher education as a business and having to run universities as a business, because you have a sort of disconnect, often, and I’m speaking from experience from having worked in three other universities as well, there is a disconnect between the ways in which universities are being managed and often the people who are doing the coal-faced work, who care a lot about their students, who see their students and don’t think of them as numbers who are important to university income or numbers who are going to affect TEF results poorly if they haven’t retained from one level to another. This language is dehumanising. The word resilience is creeping into universities more and I know it exists in the health care professions as well, but it assumes you need a – that you will need a level of resilience, I think, and I think that’s quite problematic. The plus side of it is – or the *benefit* of thinking about students as consumers is making sure you’re investing properly in resources which will benefit the students and welfare support for things like mental health, especially. I don’t need to tell you that [laughing] this is increasingly the case that students have difficulties in that area and in proper systems for keeping records, managing records which are behind the times.

I: Okay. In your opinion, then, are there elements of the student consumer concept apparent in your interactions with undergraduate students? So, do you get a sense of them feeling as though they are customers of the university?

P: That language really only comes out when there are – when there’s trouble and because, for the most part, when I’m talking to students and they’re talking to me, we have a teacher-student relationship, so there isn’t that sense of, “I’m paying your wages”, there isn’t quite that sense, thankfully, yet. I feel that a lot of lecturers, less here, but in other places do feel that sense and they do have students more often saying, “Well, I’m paying £9,000 a year, why isn’t this happening?” That sort of language only comes out when there are complaints and it’s just become, of which we thankfully have very few, but that phrase is an encoded part of the discourse of complaint, “If I’m paying this, why isn’t this happening?”

I: In your opinion, do you think the introduction of fees has given the students a greater sense of entitlement to higher grades?

P: Not to higher grades, no. I don’t think to higher grades. I think, to a *degree* sometimes, entitlement *to a degree*, not to a degree if you see what I mean. I think there has been for some students the sense that, “If I turn up, sometimes, or if I turn up a certain amount and I pay my money, at the end of it I get the product”. But the point that a colleague of mine always makes is, it’s a lovely analogy, is it’s buying a gym membership, if you don’t go to the gym, [inaudible], well you’re wasting your money.

I: So, moving on to learning, then, in your opinion are lectures useful for engaging undergraduate students?

P: Yes, absolutely. I’m a firm believer in the traditional lecture format as part of a varied repertoire of varied teaching styles as a means of engaging undergraduate students. Up to an hour works fine and is still healthy I think, a two-hour straight lecture now is very rare I think, I still had two-hour lectures as a student and many of them were excellent because they were brilliant lecturers, but the traditional format in that sense I still think is extremely valuable as a way of conveying information, inspiring students and introducing them to a wide range of things. Yeah.

I: Okay, so in the same vein are seminars useful for engaging undergraduate students?

P: Yes [laughing] yeah, for the same reasons. And a seminar is an increasingly – there are so many different ways you can cut a seminar that work well, whether you’re doing that kind of translation work that I was talking about or asking people to bring their research preparation to feed into a discussion or, to work on a group activity as a workshop together, there’s so many things a seminar can be.

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

P: One-to-one tutorials are, yeah, by far the most, one of the most, useful. The only issue is time and engagement with that process and it’s often the stronger students who will sign up for tutorials like that. But that sort of feedback on your work when you haven’t – when you’ve read on text comments and you’ve read paragraphs of feedback and you’ve read a mark and you know how it fits into a marking grid can get you to a point, but 5 minutes sitting with a tutor and having them explain what that means is valuable as well.

I: Hmm. Why do you think some students don’t sign up for it?

P: [pause] I think there’s a wide range of reasons. I think some feel that they’ve got as much as they’re going to get from the written feedback. I think some, I think a lot of people are not comfortable with feedback, especially critical feedback, however important it is to sit there and to be told, “This is what you do well and this is what you can improve on” and I’m afraid some students can’t be bothered.

P: [laughing] In your opinion, which of the above teaching methods do undergraduates find the most engaging?

I: All three. They’re very different things. I would never come down on – on any one of those three, they are for different things and they have fundamentally different purposes. And ideally, I think they’re all part of – they are all part of different kinds of learning. I would say there’s a fourth element that I would bring into that which is, so another third year module I teach, we have small group – this is why I have a bank of chairs in here – we do up to six in here, we break up the size of the seminar group into – if it’s a seminar of 18, we’ll have an hour session of three groups of six in here, because then everyone *has* to speak and it gets to a point where they feel more comfortable – well we start off the beginning of the module by doing 3 weeks of working as sixes and that means everyone gets comfortable with the material and they get to grips with stuff they haven’t handled before, they get to know me, I get to know them and we build up to into a slightly bigger seminar setting after that so, you know, that’s thinking about the seminar and the tutorial and the one-to-one on different levels, it’s that sort of 4 or 5 is the Oxford [unintelligible] kind of approach that I’ve taught before.

I: Is there anything you think is particularly good about the style of learning that takes place at universities?

P: As opposed to schools?

I: Yeah.

P: [pause] Yes. So many things. There is room for variety and because university curriculum can be so closely tied and attuned to the ways in which researchers work as opposed to teachers because we don’t have *set* national curriculum, we have the freedom to do things which teachers are rarely able to do, certainly in the state sector, and the freedom to build in things and the *flexibility*. I think that’s more the case in the new universities than it is, for example, in Russell groups, so – which is where I taught before – so for example, at the moment we’re talking about changes to our first and second year curriculum which we are going to start implementing over the next year or so. Lots of Russell group curricula haven’t changed for 20 years and I’ve been in meetings where people have quibbled about the window of a module changing length by 3 years which have reached no satisfactory conclusions. So, it’s a real advantage that a place like [University B] has over other institutions is that we can move a lot quicker and we can be on top of more cutting-edge topics in research, so things which I’m doing right now I can make the central focus of what I’m teaching and you can’t do that in a state comprehensive system and you can’t do that in a lot of venerable universities.

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

P: I would abolish student fees and then my students wouldn’t have to have up to three jobs in order to eat food and live like normal human beings and then they would have more *time* to read and to write and to think of themselves as young intellectuals rather than as products of a consumer system which, at the same time, is driving universities to fill up the rest of their lives with increasing amounts of contact time which they don’t need.

I: Okay.

P: I sense you agree [laughing]

I: I do! [laughing] So I sent you the document that refers to the Teaching and Learning Strategy. How does this strategy impact, if at all, on your interactions with students?

P: Do you have one of these? They’ve very helpful…

I: I don’t, I’ve never seen one before

P: This is what we’re providing the teachers.

I: Oh, okay. Brilliant.

P: I have another copy, keep one for yourself.

I: Oh, thank you.

P: Which is – we were given these, they are, well when we come to re-validating or thinking about ways of developing curriculum, these are now what we have to bear in mind. It’s often the case with documents like this that, it’s a case of recognising many of the things you already do, that do exist, but there are doubtless things on here and there are things that we have learnt from these sorts of processes which are, which are useful and important so, [pause] all of those narratives about employability and making people aware of the sorts of skills that they are learning in university is a new, but I think important part, of what we are doing now – do dump that down if you don’t want it [laughing] – because as a degree which basically teaches you how to write and research and think about how the entirety of the world impacts on the way in which we do that, I think English has to be one of the most employable degrees there is, because everyone needs someone who can write and read and *think* and think about whether people are thinking. Thinking about translating that into a set of principles for students who are reading and learning about their own learning, is another step and a really important one which I think we are taking on board increasingly, by drawing up our documentation which explains why doing this exercise is useful and what you learn from this, which are a set of approaches to take on outside. And that I think is one of the useful things, transformations, which is taking place in universities in the UK. Again, I think the younger universities are better at it because they are treating it more *seriously*, I think partially because of the student demographics of the younger universities, [pause] whether are more likely to be students who are not going to be able to be financially supported for 5 years whilst they’re doing unpaid internships and looking for a job. I think needing to know what you’ve done that’s useful on the other side there is really important, so I think that aspect of the strategy is something we’re building in more and more and thinking sensibly about. [removed for confidentiality]. Digital resources and those sorts of things for flexible and responsive learning environments are increasingly important in terms of what we put online and how much we encourage students to engage with them because digital learning can be done *so very badly* as well as really well. [removed for confidentiality]. But at the same time, there are modules where we can introduce podcasting and digital lectures in different ways that I’m going to be doing next year so that, so that I can take advantage of the 3 hours that I’m going to be seeing those students for without doing the same, without simply imparting knowledge in that way. So, there are useful aspects, elements of that as well. [pause] So, yes, with a document like this there are lots of things which we do already and there are things which we don’t know we do and there are things which we need to bring out more, and some things that we may not entirely agree with. I’m not pointing to one [laughing] but, yeah.

I: Okay. I sent you the document that refers to the Student Charter [name changed]. So how would you say you implement the aims of this approach, if at all, in your interactions with students? There it is, in case you need to…

P: [scrolling through computer] I know this document well because it features very early on in the university template for our programme handbooks I’m fairly sure. Yes.

I: Oh yes, there it is.

P: So, this brings in – this brings in some of the things from the learning and teaching strategy obviously, such as, “This is what we do”, “This is what the university does” and “This is what we want you to do”. [pause] It’s useful in so far as it provides a good regular vocabulary with which to talk about what we do and for students especially, the large numbers of English Literature students who are joint honours students, which is about two thirds of our student body do joint honours, with a common approach across the university. I don’t know if you’ve looked into joint honours degrees much, but there’s a fair bit of research on joint honours, which is always about making sure it’s connected, making sure that there’s – that there’s coherence and I think that sort of thing *helps*. I’m not sure how often a student would look at it [laughing].

I: Fair enough. [laughing] In your opinion, should undergraduate students have greater control over, or input in, the curriculum and/or assessment design of their chosen courses?

P: I think consultation – regular consultation about what you’re doing is useful, which are why we have processes like student-staff liaison committees, it’s why we have now, interim module evaluations as well as end of module evaluations. [pause] And plenty of room for discussion about texts which are going to appear on next year’s modules, and things like that. Yeah, consultation to a degree there. I think it’s probably easier to do in some cases than others and there is a degree of flexibility which can be built in there. But there are still certain things which need to be done and need to be done in the right sort of way and the reason why myself and my colleagues work on the degree and design the degree is because we know what we’re doing [laughing] and we have a sense together with our colleagues in other universities, of what constitutes the correct standards to say, “This is a degree in English”, which has sufficiently educated a student in enough of a variety of materials and has tested them rigorously, using a range of assessments, which we are encouraged to do now increasingly and so much the better in some ways. If assessment design were entirely left up to undergraduate students, I would lay serious money on it being on written essays submitted as coursework and nothing else because you’re less likely to be out of your comfort zone doing a written essay as coursework than anything else. But there are things which exams test which are good and things that coursework tests which are good and presentations, especially thinking about employability.

I: Yeah. okay. What are your thoughts on the idea of students as partners in the learning experience?

P: [long pause] I think it’s a word which is *used* in order to break *down* more what was seen as, what’s seen historically as a teacher-pupil division and that the teacher-pupil-student division is important that – is important in order to maintain respect on both sides. But that good teachers are engaging students as partners in learning anyway, because that sort of dialogue and *comfortable* dialogue, needs to be there from the very beginning, and the best relationships, the best partnerships, the best working relationships between the students and lecturers are the sort of students who [pause] they’re the sort of relationships where you can engage with a lecturer from early on in the process, so I’m thinking about the students I know who have just been finishing off in third year this year and I think about teaching them in seminars or taking them for their final year dissertations and, for some of them, they’re the same students who I taught in first year and those sorts of relationships and getting to know one another and how we work together is really important. It’s quite difficult to articulate that kind of relationship using the *formality* of institutional discourse at the same time, because we’re not *friends*. We’re not going to meet up – if we meet again and have a coffee, it will be to talk about where that student has got to and how they are doing, because I’m still their teacher and they’re still a student and I want them to do well and to carry on doing well. So, it’s friendship of a sort, but one which clearly recognises that I’m doing my job and you’re here to learn and that’s the basis on which this agreement works.

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

P: I have so many things to say about government policy for a start… [laughing]

I: Yeah, I know [laughing].

P: … [long pause] this is a very student-centred university, sometimes at the expense of the other things a university is supposed to do [pause] and it’s interesting that government policy uses the word ‘heart’ in that way, but that we also use the language of consumerism in, you know, in quite that way. It’s – have you ever heard the phrase ‘cuddly capitalism’?

I: No [laughing]

P: [laughing] I think it’s – I forget where I came across it, but it’s the sort of thing you get with innocent smoothies or something, which is sort of like, it takes a couple of drops of loveliness and a few lemons and it’s – it’s why the word ‘heart’ seems so ironic, it’s because by transforming the relationship to one which is based on *money* and income, it seems like a [laughing] way of, yeah, it’s torn the heart out of things in a way. But how does that work here at [name removed] and how are students at the heart? More than any other university I’ve worked at, this is a place where lecturers look after and care for, and will bend over backwards, in order to accommodate and try and look after our students. It’s hard to put that into a more [laughing] technical way of speaking about it but yeah, when we talk to people at Open Days about what we are like here at [name removed], we say that, “You are *not a number* here, you are a name” and we do get to know our students here, and we can do that because of the size that we are, I think, in part. And sometimes it is rhetoric which interferes with that relationship and it’s the rhetoric of higher education which actually problematizes or complicates or gets in the way of what we’d like to be able to say to students more directly, in a language they understand and, I’m currently right now, going through a process of checking all of our Blackboard VLEs to make sure that they are meeting certain [knocking] thresholds… Hello?

[Conversation between participant and visitor]

P: … yeah, which is about upgrading resources and making sure that they’re following institutional language which is, I’ve said, is a really helpful thing to do. But at the same time there are things involved in writing – in writing pedagogy or systematizing pedagogy which *confuse* people [laughing].

I: Yeah. I totally agree with that [laughing]. When you said that this university was more student-centred at the expense of other things that a university stands for, what did you mean by that?

P: Yeah, time. Pressures of time more than anything is – the pressures of time and, I think, the resources of new universities are – and I know I have colleagues in several other [reference removed] and post-92 universities who are in similar positions, in terms of practical resources to get things done, and in terms of staffing – that the staff-student ratio we have doesn’t help with the day-to-day doing things, but it means there is less *time* to do things really and that includes research.

I: And do you think that’s because this is a newer university?

P: I think it’s partially because this is a new university [pause] and because of a general approach across new universities to processes such as – things like quality management, new universities notoriously have much higher levels of bureaucracy when it comes to that sort of thing. And I think lower levels of *trust* [laughing] in academics to know what they’re doing.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you think positioning students centrally works to separate them at all from other members of the university, like academics or administrators?

P: [pause] No, [laughing] no. There are parts of universities which are more or less visible to one another, and that’s been the case for here as elsewhere. I think the students and academics generally have, for obvious reasons, a closer relationship than those other bodies, and are frequently, you know, are the mediating chunk for lots of the other elements of the university, yeah.

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

P: I suppose some of the things I’ve already said, in terms of [pause] I like to maintain a very clear sense of what we are both here to do and that I will do a lot for undergraduate students, but it is very important for them and for me, that we are *not* friends [laughing]. We are not friends and it’s an important part of their professional development, knowing that they can get on with someone who is in a particular position, and that there are very good ways that you can deal with people who manage you and who are responsible for your welfare. But you have to meet certain requirements, so you know, this is email etiquette, deadlines, formatting things properly. Those are part of the rules of learning to be a good employee as well as learning to be a good student and learning to be an adult as well [laughing].

I: [laughing] Okay. What do you – you’ve touched on this, but what do you consider to be the main purpose for building a relationship with undergraduates?

P: Learning and welfare. It’s increasingly important, I think, to establish good, friendly working relationships from the outset, in case of any difficulties that the students undergo. Students *need* to see you as someone who they can talk to, not even sometimes *often*, about deeply personal and troubling things. The sorts of things that you don’t want to talk to your best friends about, so having someone who is, who you have a professional working relationship with, who understands and offers you the opportunity to talk about things that you just don’t want to say to anyone, is *vitally* important I think.

I: Okay and to what extent is the purpose fulfilled, do you think?

P: It depends on the individual [laughing].

I: Yeah, course. For you personally, is it…

P: It depends on the individual, I mean the student…

I: Oh! You mean the student, okay.

P: And some people get on better with some people than others. And it’s good to have – it’s good to have a range of people who are available to students as a port of call, there can’t just be one person to go to. Having personal tutors, but also year leads and someone who is in *my* role, or someone who’s in the role of the in-house student support officer. If there are multiple channels, students I think will feel not that they can’t go to someone who they don’t feel comfortable with, for whatever reason, you know, whether it’s because someone once made an offhand comment to them in a seminar about “Are you asleep?” or something, however, jokingly that might have been meant or, you know, for whatever reason, a student may not feel comfortable talking to a member of staff.

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

P: Yes. Yup. Students who interact with you more are *more* likely to engage with the material, on the whole. But the students who interact with you more are going to be the ones who are turning up anyway and putting in the work and don’t feel [laughing] don’t feel afraid of being, you know, yeah.

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

P: Yeah sure. I’m just trying to think of a good – trying to think of an example so I can model [laughing] an answer on. Students will come and meet me one-to-one to talk about an essay and they will come *in* and will generally shut the door because it’s likely to be a private arrangement between the two of us. I will ask them *how they are* first of all and, they will say they’re fine, and then I will ask them how *things* are going, which always seems like a *separate* strand and it gets them to think, not about how they are in that moment, but about how things are going academically and I generally feel like if there’s something that’s bothering them, you can often pick up on something, say, “How’s life?” And most of the time, things will be fine, but if that’s an opportunity for them to vent and to talk about something, then that can help them to feel a bit more relaxed about what we’re about to talk about, you know, if students, as they so often do, have a landlord who’s not fixing their leaky boiler or something and they’ve come into a tutorial and they’ve got this on their mind, it helps them to not translate that into the engagement we’re going to have and to break that down first. Also, it’s a really good way of, if there’s a more serious problem behind something, to actually get that out in the open, so it depends on the encounter in that sense. If it’s, say we’re talking about a student who’s been working on an extended essay for their third year, I will generally have a note of how many times I’ve seen them so far that year, I keep a tally of supervision up on the board up there, that’s my MA and PhD students for the year, just as a memoir, and I will ask them how their work has gone since last time, and they’ll say, “Well I didn’t manage to get everything I planned to do, done” and I say, “It doesn’t matter because no one does”, but then we’ll talk about where they’re up to with a piece of work, so if they sent me some writing, then we’ll talk about – I’ll ask them how it’s gone and what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses in it, *after* saying, “This is good, we’re getting on with things, I like what you’ve done here, but there are still things that you need to pick up on here and there”, they’ll make a few notes on that, we’ll talk through the piece of work, talk about things which need to be done, out of the discussion, things will emerge such as reading they’ve done or haven’t done, or things they’ve misunderstood, extra reading they can do, extra primary reading they might want to do. And if it’s an essay *like* that, we’ll set another deadline for an opportunity to review it again and I’ll say, “Can I have it 2 days before we have our meeting?”, we’ll pencil in our meeting and agree a set of objectives before the next meeting, so, I generally maintain the same approach from undergraduate through to PhD because aside from different levels of sophistication and learning, ultimately you’re making a new learning contract in that discussion to agree on a set of objectives, to overcome a set of problems, to tackle something which has emerged from the work so far and to get to the next stage.

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

P: Hierarchy amongst whom?

I: So, between you and undergraduates, like particularly in one-to-one sessions?

P: Yeah in the sense that I’m in one position and they’re in another or…?

I: Yeah! So, any sort of power differential, is it at all noticeable?

P: [pause] In the sense that I’m telling them what they need to do, yes, *of course*. I frequently like to use examples from my own experience or the things I’m doing at the moment, so if we’re working on an introductory section, I’ll pull up something I’m doing at the moment and say, “See, this is what I’m doing here, this is what I’m doing here, here and here and this is what I meant by that introductory paragraph” and I’ll say, “Well if we take a look at what you’ve done, we’ve got that here but I think that your final sentence here could be shifted up”. So, I think it’s important to give a sense of continuum that it’s – they’re not trying to get to a particular place and *stop* [pause] and it’s important for students, I think, to understand that the people who are teaching them are engaged in the same things that they’re doing, that when I finish a piece of work I send it to four people who I know will give me different responses to it, as well, and that’s the same process that I encourage them to engage with, with their peers as well is, get someone to read this or, pass your work on to someone else. As many pairs of eyes as possible is – it’s something good to get into the habit of doing early on because, better to have friends looking at work and giving you an honest opinion than submitting it blind and [laughing] hoping for the best, but that’s tough, that’s tough and getting your first bits of bad feedback is *really hard* as well.

I: It is [laughing]. Has the dynamic, or relationship, between you and the undergraduates changed at all throughout your career at this university?

P: Yeah, to a degree. And it depends who I’ve been teaching and where and when. [pause] When I finished PhD studies, I was still very young. I look about 10 years younger than I am as well [laughing] so, and have always done consistently, so, there’s always been a strange kind of flatness there, in the sense that one of the first teaching jobs I had was covering some teaching at [removed for confidentiality] and every student in one of the classes I taught was 15 years older than me, *at least*. It was one of the best classes that I’ve ever taught, it was covering [removed for confidentiality] and it was a fantastic experience. So, I would have to say that my experience has not been uniform, it’s been over a decade of much learning for me, in terms of my own research but also, teaching and formalising my teaching practice increasingly, meeting different kinds of lecturers and learning different ways of doing things. Dealing increasingly in – about halfway through those 5 years, with different levels of time pressures, it’s often the case that, particularly for early career, post-doctoral or PhD students teaching, that they’ll be doing multiple jobs whilst trying to apply for jobs and finish off research that they can manage and trying to do grants. Those are some of the most pressured teachers and [coughing] I started off here on a point five contract and had one elsewhere at the same time and – a point five contract is really a point eight contract in terms of the amount of time it takes for people to do anything – so what you can do, and where, and how you fit into hierarchies and have different relationships with students and staff varies *enormously*. And then there are things such as institutional approaches which have a big effect on that and class features in that as well *significantly*, and is underrepresented in the ways we talk about universities, generally. Yeah, so no straightforward answer to that one.

I: [laughing] Can you think of any particularly *good* relationships, without giving away their identity, with any undergraduates and tell me why you’d characterize it as good?

P: Someone who I supervised, well who I taught and then supervised in second and third year at another institution, who I taught as an undergraduate and when we started working together on their third-year topic, it was one of those learning relationships which is really *interesting* because we were both interested in the same sort of area and it was a [puts on deep voice] *shared voyage of discovery*, sort of thing. And that kind of process of learning *together* with students is, some of the most exciting – forges some of the strongest bonds in learning and that student’s now in their third year of PhD study and yeah is absolute superb and will go on to rule the world.

I: [laughing] Okay. Do you have a pen?

P: Do I have a pen? I have many pens, what would you prefer?

I: Oh no this is for you, so… [laughing]

P: Oh right [laughing]

I: Can you draw for me your conception of a good relationship with a student? It can be anything you like.

P: [laughing] Can I just say no? [laughing]

I: [laughing]

P: [pause] I always hate these diagrams of pedagogy, I included one in my [affiliation removed] bit and yeah, it was very much like this diagram, which is sort of, you know, emphasises the reciprocity of it. You know, I’m not sure I can do much better than that [laughing].

A picture containing sky, wall

Description automatically generated

I: [laughing] No that’s fine.

P: It’s a process of learning a thing, and thinking about how you’ve learnt the thing, and passing it on, then it comes back to you, this could be a cycle of the academic year as well and thinking about what went well this year and what didn’t go so well and how can it be upgraded for next year [pause] [removed for confidentiality].

I: [laughing] Okay. Fair enough. Can you draw your conception of the *opposite*, so a bad relationship – what you consider a bad relationship?

P: [long pause] Well it’s either going to be a blank piece of paper… which, you know, to give you something more figural to work with, you know, it’s two sides of a field and nothing happens.

A picture containing sky, outdoor, skiing, snow

Description automatically generated

I: Okay, so a separation then?

P: Yeah.

I: Yeah. Okay, there’s often a lot of encouragement for students to engage with different experiences at university, so join societies, get involved with the Student’s Union, that sort of thing. What are your thoughts on this?

P: [pause] Sports are a terrible thing and no one should do them [laughing]

I: [laughing]

P: … No, I’m sorry I’m being flippant, but I do always make a point of saying I think, to first years and this is increasingly hard with the pressures of work that people are under, “You have to have time for yourself as well”. There has to be time for oneself and it’s something, for me, that in my professional practice, I’ve got *better* at doing, and I have to lead by example there and for my colleagues as well as my students, and say, “I check my emails until 5 o’clock unless I know there’s something coming in after, which is very important, and I’m off until 8am the next morning. Friday at that time until Monday, I’m off as well”, and students need that as much as anything. And for some of them, a big part of their identity is doing sports and extracurricular things and we all *need* that, and I think that people need to be encouraged to do that. *Pressure* to do that sort of thing, not so much, I mean that’s why, you know, I’m being flippant when I say, “No one should ever have to do that”, but, you know, I’m speaking as someone who, you know, doesn’t like *organised fun* [laughing]. Yeah, and lots of people do and that’s *fine for them*, but in terms of pressure to join things, that’s not something we often see on this side of, yeah, on this side of the coin. I don’t – I can think of two examples in my time *here* of people whose time has been impinged on by having to do sports and we had a serious conversation in both cases, with those students, and they made a decision about what they were going to do. And I’m not sure it was the right decision, but it was ultimately their decision.

I: Yeah, some of the clubs do take *a lot* of time to be committed to.

P: I don’t know how much English Literature students are necessarily engaged in sports [laughing] I think maybe less so, but I don’t know. Geography was my experience, people who did rugby did *Geography* [laughing].

I: [laughing] What are your thoughts on the role of the Student’s Union in terms of engaging undergraduates?

P: I don’t really know what they do to engage undergraduates. Student survey figures about the Student’s Union and their function are – I get the impression from NSS scores across the country uniformly, lower than everything else because I don’t think the students know what the Student’s Union is *for*. I think that they think the Student’s Union is a bar and they don’t know what a Union is supposed to be for, but then staff participation in Unions is not good either. It is – not with the SU, but with Trade Unions, is poor as well.

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

P: I think that the university could be – this university could be investing more effectively in marketing in the representation of the university and what we have here. But trying very hard and it’s all hands to the pump with academic participation and that, we have many, many recruitment events throughout the year. Last year I think I was on duty for six or seven of those, which is a *lot*. I think it was about, yeah. But that’s the kind of place we’re in and that’s *what* fees and the lifting of the cap on university places and the increasing consumer language around universities has done to the sector.

I: Do you think it’s even more difficult for a newer university to recruit students?

P: Yup. New universities don’t – can’t trade on the kind of wealth of older universities or the perceived strengths of those universities. So, all the things that new universities have to strive and work very hard to improve and pick up on and develop – things like the student survey, which we have battle plans for every year, we work very hard to tackle areas of the student survey which are weaker. If you look at competitors in other universities – naming no names – but many which are much higher up the pecking order, *much weaker*, *much weaker* scores, which sort of makes a nonsense of the kind of work which really goes in and, you know, when I say about [University B] and other institutions, I know in similar positions, the amount of dedication of staff to the welfare of students and the wellbeing of students and to teaching, at the expense of other things. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy because if you don’t have staff with the time to do certain things, then they can’t do the things which help to hoist universities up the league tables. League tables are a nonsense anyway [laughing].

I: Do you – do the universities attempts to engage undergraduates differ at all from the departmental attempts?

P: I would say that we do it on a more *friendly and personal level* because we know who they are and we know the kind of students they are, and universities *in* *general* use a different sort of language and, yeah, [pause] are necessarily, I think, less personal and just have very broad range of people to speak to.

I: Yeah, okay. So, there’s perhaps ways in which university could broaden engagement across the student body and I wonder whether you have any comments around that?

P: Around *specific* ways in which…?

I: Yeah, well ideas, or…

P: Ideas? [pause] I don’t think one size fits all so, no there isn’t any one way of doing that. The answer certainly isn’t to transform all lectures into podcasts and lecture catch up. If anything that gives you an excuse, or the *belief* that you don’t need to attend a lecture and that you can do it on your own and I think it would be a great mistake for universities in general to approach digital learning environments in that way and to think that they are, in any way, a substitute for being in the same room as a person who’s teaching you and who wants to get to know you and to help you learn things. [pause] The key thing here I think, for students and for staff, is making time available for learning and for flexibility in learning and some of those things are really outside of the university’s hands and they are to do with universities country-wide and they’re to do with money really, they’re to do with money and investment and putting money and investment in, in order to see returns. Austerity *doesn’t work*. [knocking] Hello?

[Conversation between participant and visitor]

I: Just one more question, then, do you think the university relies on individual departments and/or individual staff to maintain levels of engagement once students have begun their studies?

P: Yeah, entirely. Yup.

I: So, the university engages them as they’re *recruiting*, but then leaves them to…

P: It’s the responsibility of staff and programmes to do that. Yeah. I don’t think that’s necessarily a *bad* thing, I wouldn’t be in favour of institutional level intervention into the work that programmes are doing because it would necessarily be quite blanket and the students don’t like that kind of thing, I don’t think. I don’t think being summoned to attend a set of workshops on something which you don’t feel has anything to do with your degree, engages *anyone*. I think that – yeah. And we know, *everyone knows*, that those kinds of things don’t work and are poorly attended. [laughing]

I: Okay, well, thank you very much for taking the time.

P: No, it’s been really, it’s been really informative for me.

I: Yeah, I’ve got some really valuable stuff, really insightful, so thank you. Do you have anything you want to add that we haven’t covered about interactions with students?

P: Not particularly, I think that sums up everything, yeah.

I: Ok great. I will keep you in the loop about my research and I can send you a draft of the analysis if you’d like to have a look at it, when it eventually gets done [laughing].

P: That would be lovely.

**[End of Recording]**