**Interview #1 Transcript: Third Year Female English Literature and Media Student (04.10.17) (University B)**

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

Participant (P): At this particular university? I chose it because it had a really, very friendly, kind of, atmosphere, when I came on the Open Day, and yeah, it’s funny it was the first Open Day I went to and *yet*, it was the most *welcoming* I felt. Like, the teachers and the talks, they seemed really approachable, and I think there’s this idea that, at a lot of universities, you’re just part of the masses, but I didn’t get that feeling *here*. So, I thought of all places, I want to go somewhere where it’s going to be a good, kind of, support network where, yeah, you can go to people if you need to. Yeah, so that’s pretty much this university.

I: Okay, what about why you picked English?

P: English? Since I was a *kid*, I’ve been a really big reader and it’s just the one subject I’ve always really clicked well with, like not just that I could do it *well*, after obviously reading a lot I could, but it’s just something I’ve always really enjoyed, like in my spare time as well as in the classroom, so I knew that if I was going to have a job one day doing something I like, or even *love*, it’s going to have to be English related really.

I: Yeah. Okay. Are you the first in your family to go to university?

P: Yes.

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

P: Yes, definitely. Definitely important. Value for money? When it comes to – if you’re talking in the context of university, then I suppose… because obviously, there’s not a lot of contact hours when you’re at university, which if I’m honest was a bit of a surprise, I didn’t really expect that. I didn’t read this in many of the blogs that I looked for about what uni [sic] was going to be like so, yeah, the contact hours now, it’s limited, you expect so much *more* from them so, the content has to be really high, like quality, the teachers, you know, you almost want to go into the classroom and be like, “*Wow*, like, that was amazing!” And the way – because it’s not just the content as well, sometimes it’s the way it’s *delivered*, which is important, and then the, kind of, value for money obviously expands outside of the classroom and it’s how you feel about approaching people, and the support they can actually give *back*. So not just that they’re approachable, but that they have *time* for you, that they can actually answer all your *questions* and give you any guidance necessary and that’s the value for money, I think, when it comes to university. If they can actually tick all the boxes in helping you, in the classroom and outside the classroom, then that’s how they’re good for it [laughing].

I: Yeah, okay. Do you agree with paying fees?

P: Mmm, the £9,000 tuition fees?

I: Mmhmm [agreement]

P: [laughing] Well, they’ve got to have the money come from somewhere, you know, and I know that if we don’t pay our fees personally, it’s probably just going to be the taxpayer who’s paying it. So, someone’s going to pay it eventually [laughing] it’s just, kind of, one of those inevitable things, and like, I don’t see it as, like a real *debt*, I feel like I’ve been *taught* *not to*, in some ways. Like when they originally came to our college and tried to sell it to us, they said, “You know, it’s going to be – have all these T’s and C’s which means you’re never going to have, like, a debt collector on your door, saying ‘Out you get’ because of your student loan”, so yeah, I guess I’m, kind of, saying that I agree with them because it has to be done, not because I like them in any way [laughing]. Yeah, it’s just, someone’s got to pay for it and it doesn’t make any sense otherwise yeah, because otherwise – also I suppose we might respect our degrees more if we pay it because yeah, it’s coming out of your pocket at the end of the day still.

I: Yeah, okay. What does being a university student mean to you?

P: I guess furthering myself? Yeah, I guess it’s, kind of, it’s a bigger – it’s a stepping stone really, isn’t it? Sometimes you can see it as like a means to an end, it’s also – it’s quite fun being a university student. I feel like it’s a bit out of – it’s not real life sometimes [laughing] as in there’s no other time in my life where I’m going to have spare time, midday on a Wednesday, like today, you know, like, real life jobs don’t have this, so yeah, that’s what it is, it’s not real life basically [laughing].

I: No, true. When you said a stepping stone, do you mean a stepping stone to a career or…?

P: Yeah, a better, kind of, career, better life for yourself kind of thing, yeah. Because, yeah, I feel like there’s higher expectations if you want to land yourself a top end job, that you don’t – I mean I didn’t even realise how high the expectations were until I got to university [laughing] and then it was like, they let all that one go [laughing] and they said, “Oh yeah, a degree’s not actually enough, you can’t just do a degree, you’ve got to be doing all this stuff on the side”. So yeah, then you start to realise [sigh] “Okay, here we go…” [laughing] I don’t know what I signed myself up for! But hopefully, at the end it’s going to be a good career. We’ll see, yeah.

I: Okay. What do you think being a university student means to people outside of the university?

P: Outside of the university? People who aren’t students, have never been students?

I: Yeah.

P: Okay. That’s a hard one. I think… I think there is a, kind of, misconception around some people, as in that some people believe that, I don’t know, that if you’re a university student that you’re stuck up or that, I don’t know, they have, like, a low view of it? And that either it’s a waste of your time to be at university because they’re like, “Oh, but haven’t you seen the stats? Like, no one gets a job related to their degree, or they just end up in so much debt it’s ridiculous”. So, either it’s, you’re pretty stupid, even though you’re at university because “Don’t you know you’re just getting yourself nowhere?” Or it’s, “Oh, you’re the academic”, [laughing] and then they can take a dim view in that way, even though it’s – supposedly it’s a good thing to be academic. It’s a weird one, yeah [laughing]. Either way, I don’t think that it’s particularly *positive*. Yeah… yeah, I don’t think – I think they’re like, “Oh, save the students” sarcastically [laughing] yeah. On a 3-year holiday, I don’t know what they think, I just don’t think it’s given enough credit basically [laughing].

I: Okay, what meaning does the word engagement have for you?

P: Engagement? Engagement is more than turning up, it is also contributing, so, kind of, being alive, *awake*, when you’re there in that moment, and then actually giving something back, not just being on the receiving side of things, where you can sit there and listen to what someone’s got to say, you also, you have an opinion. Yeah, so I guess that’s engaged.

I: Okay. So, using what you’ve just said then, in what ways do university staff attempt to engage you as a student?

P: They do have the end of year form, where they ask for the student’s opinions on how they’re doing, their progress. I heard from someone, and I don’t think, I don’t know, I don’t think other students know this either, which is that depending on how these students *rate* the university, depends on what the – where the university comes on the scale, the university scale? Yeah, so if you were like, “Oh it was okay, or it was good” rather than excellent, then you’ve actually dropped your university lower and then you’re like, “Why am I at a rubbish university?” And it’s because they didn’t score, but equally you’ve got to give feedback. It’s a weird one, yeah. But yeah, you do have the opportunity to give feedback and then obviously, like, especially if you were to not turn up to classes, then they would notice you’re not in your classes, probably send you an email and therefore, try to *re*-engage you and talk to you, because they don’t want people to drop out obviously so, yeah. Otherwise obviously, lectures are the one side of things – one-*sided* things, and then seminars you’re – that’s another point of engagement, yeah.

I: Okay. So how would you say that teachers engage you during, like, lectures, seminars, or one-to-ones? Is it different?

P: *Massively*, yes. Because of course in lectures, it’s pretty much somebody talking *at* you for an hour, just unloading a *whole* lot of information, which you’ve got to try and catch [laughing]. And then seminars being that it’s supposed to be, kind of, group discussion, they give some leading questions and they hope people will make contributions and then they can develop those ideas further. The one-to-ones, the closest we’ve got is, we have tutor groups where it’s, rather than being, like, 10 of us in a seminar, it’s, like, three of us in our tutor group, so it’s that much more concentrated rather than one-to-ones. To be honest I don’t think – we literally just don’t really do many one-to-ones.

I: Okay. Do you never go and see tutors about essays and stuff?

P: Not really, I kind of just get on with it [laughing]. I just, I don’t know, I feel like if I had a question about it, obviously I would – I might – send an *email*, but no, to be honest. Or even, like, hang back at the end of class, ask my quick question and it’s as simple as that really. But yeah, usually they’re quite clear on the assignment beforehand and especially by – because I’m now a third year – by this point, it’s supposed to be that much more independent that hopefully you *can* get on with it? [laughing] Yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. What about – so you don’t have an actual personal tutor? Someone just for you?

P: I’m sure there is somebody who is supposed to be my personal tutor. I don’t think that it’s a particularly used thing though? As in, yes okay there’s someone that you can reach out to. I mean I know a couple members of staff, which I feel like if I did have an issue and I wanted to talk about the problems I was having in a particular module, or with an assignment, I do think I could go to them, sit down and perhaps they could help me to develop those ideas. But yeah, it’s just not something that I know is used, like, I don’t know any of my peers in class use it. I don’t know, perhaps it is something that *could* be used more but, yeah, people get on with it [laughing].

I: Okay. How would you say administrators or other members of staff engage you?

P: [pause] As in to get involved in just, like, the class itself, or other things, in any way?

I: Absolutely anything, just to interact with you, to…

P: Okay. I feel that it’s obviously, it’s a two-way street in some ways. You’ve got to, kind of, meet them in the middle in sometimes. So, there are the students who actively look to not engage, like, they literally, they’ll tell me about how they avoid doing eye contact every single class. It’s a bit like, “Okay… so that works for you” [laughing] but that’s not how it does. They’re like, “Just don’t look at them, don’t look them in the eye” [laughing] and I’m like, “Okay…” [laughing]. So yeah, you start by making that eye contact, making your contributions. You, kind of, show that you are somebody who’s willing to be in the class, be engaged and then you get the email saying, “Oh, will you help out at the Open Day?” and you know, “Would you be there to be, like, an academic ambassador?” So… and then once you’re doing that on an Open Day, then you meet a couple more members of staff, you have a discussion with them in the 5 hours that you’re there for, in between, like, meeting new, potential students, and then it’s just, kind of, stepping stones from there. So, once they know you then, they’re like, “Oh we know that she not only turns up to class, makes contributions, has come to the Open Day, we know now – we now know that if we look, actually, at her grades, perhaps she’d go onto do, like, peer mentoring for the First Years” which I have gone on to do, and then it just carries on like that. So, I think, earlier today I was asked to come in during Reading Week, coming up soon, just to, kind of, do like a module review or something? Which I wouldn’t have been asked to do, if it wasn’t for the fact that the teacher knows me, knows that I turn up to things, that I’m paying attention, that I could help with their module review. So yeah, they’ll keep asking the more you keep showing interest. Obviously if you don’t show any interest, it’s almost like a – it’s a dead end, isn’t it? Yeah. I mean unless they think that you’ve actually got a problem and they want to – they obviously want to help you then if they think that you’re usually always there and suddenly not, then they’ll follow it up. But yeah, I think that’s the way they’re engaging really. Yeah.

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

P: As a consumer? I mean, I guess, it’s a business, isn’t it? [laughing] Hence, the paying the £9,000 in tuition [laughing]. As a consumer? To be honest, I kind of forget about it, I kind of forget that it’s a business and that I’m a consumer in it, because it’s so similar to when you were at school in some ways, in that you have all these facilities at your fingertips, you sit down in a classroom having bought all your new stationary for the new year, you know, it’s easy to forget that this is actually now something you’re paying for, because you’ve gone your entire life, not. So, I don’t actually think about it in that way, even though that is – I know it’s the reality. Yeah, I mean other than occasionally, I make it clear that sometimes it’s the reason I might go to a class, so as a combined student, I don’t just – I do Literature and I do Media, and in – there’s been modules before, in Media for example, which I’ve found very uninteresting but I’m adamant that I’ll still go to it because I know I’m paying at least £50 for that lesson. So, I guess in that moment I’m quite aware that I’m a consumer and I should try to get my money’s worth [laughing] if at all, you know. But, on the other side of things, it’s – yeah, not at all.

I: Okay. So, would you say it’s impacted at all on your interactions with staff, or your interactions with the university as a whole?

P: What, seeing it as – from the perspective of a consumer?

I: Yeah.

P: I think sometimes I’ve felt a bit, like, “I’m paying for this!” kind of thing, you know, and it’s, I think, I probably had more that opinion, perhaps in first year? And it might have just been the people I was hanging around with, who were, like, “Oh what are we really paying for then?” kind of thing [laughing]. So yeah sometimes you’ll have a thought like that. I don’t know if it’s necessarily, like, effected any way in which I interact with staff or the university in general. I think, yeah, I mean I do, you know, try and use all the facilities as much as I can, be like the online library to the physical one, to just coming over here and using, like, the student lounge to do some work. But yeah, it’s not in the back of my head, like, “Get your value for money!” or anything, yeah [laughing] it’s just, “Well I’ve got work to do, get on with it”. Yeah.

I: Yeah, okay. Do you ever feel as though the university, both on the level of the institution and individual staff members, is engaging you as a consumer rather than a student?

P: Is engaging me as a consumer rather than a student? So literally just like as another customer versus someone that they’re trying to further potentially?

I: Yeah

P: Right. I don’t think they see me as a consumer, I think they see me more as the student, and I think that, in some ways, that’s better than the consumer because while you think, “Oh” – I think when it comes to consumer – “Oh, every time, the customer is right” kind of thing, and “Whatever the customer wants” but there’s a much bigger picture to it than that. I think it’s way more personal than just consumer-business relationship. I think it’s – well especially with this university, I think it might be different at other universities, but here it’s far more, like I said at the beginning about why I chose this university, it’s because it’s that, kind of, personal relationship that you get the impression that you can establish very easily here and you *can*. So, yeah, way more student than consumer.

I: Okay. Okay so moving onto learning then. How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find lectures?

P: The lectures are very engaging, in that they’re really interesting, and you want to pay attention, especially in English Literature, like, the module choices that they have, you know, especially when you get to *make* the choice on the modules that you’re doing, like in your second or third year, it becomes increasingly easier to become engaged, and… Sorry, can you repeat the question a little bit?

I: Yeah! How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find lectures?

P: Yeah I think they are definitely really – especially – useful for learning, in that I probably write down every single thing they say and then, and then I can look back on it and then that’s probably, there’s been a few times where I’m like, “Well that’s going straight in the essay” kind of thing, yeah, and it’s just a shame that you can’t, because you’re not supposed to, because you know, in the bibliography you can’t just be like, “My teacher on this date, kind of thing, said this” [laughing]. Yeah. So, you’re like, “Okay, I’ll have to paraphrase that a little bit” but, sometimes it’s – there’s a few teachers here especially who, when they talk, and they’re not even looking at the textbook, they’re just looking at you and talking, it’s like it’s straight out of a textbook. It’s incredible and yeah, the use of the vocabulary, you know, the terminology and the way that they express something, it’s literally such an eloquent way of speaking, and you’re there like, “How did that just come straight from your brain? Like you literally didn’t even pause to think that one through. You’ve just been talking like this for a whole hour, how did you do that?” I can’t imagine because, you know, I more often than not trip up my own words and would never think to speak in such a way and yet they are, and I think, “Yeah there you go”, that’s invaluable when it comes to essay writing. [laughing] Yeah.

I: Okay. How engaging and/or useful for learning do you find seminars?

P: I think seminars are almost like where, like, the real kind of nitty gritty stuff comes out because a lot of the time, the lectures, it’s obviously, it’s more, kind of, textual I find, like background information about perhaps, like, the writer, the history and then come the seminar, it’s way more about deconstructing the text, pulling apart things you would not have thought to have pulled apart and really, kind of, challenging it, like “Well why was this included?” and yeah, it really, kind of, tries to, like challenge and lead your thoughts to places where you would not necessarily have done so by yourself. And it’s especially good when you have someone else in the class who can contribute an idea that you can then develop, and you’re like, “Oh but have you thought about it from this way?” So yeah, seminars are definitely pretty great [laughing] so…

I: Where do you choose to sit in seminars and lectures? Do you have a preference at all?

P: I don’t have a usual seat if that’s what you mean, like, I don’t have, “That’s my seat and no one sit there” or, like yeah, you mean at the front or the back or something like that, yeah?

I: Yeah, yeah.

P: I don’t know, usually we’d – I’d like to sit in a place where, like, my view to the front is not obstructed because I just find that annoying in any situation. But I don’t make any great pain to go and sit at the back, nor at the front. I’m someone who’s, like, in the middle somewhere, you know, like I’m not making a statement, we’re not trying to hide, we’re not trying to be like teacher’s pet at the front, you know. Yeah, so [laughing] yeah.

I: Okay. Okay so which, out of lectures and seminars, do you find the most engaging or useful for learning?

P: Which one? Or am I allowed to say both, or…?

I: Yeah, you’re allowed to say both.

P: To be honest though, it probably would be the seminars, as perhaps, like, I don’t want to say the more *useful*, but sometimes it can be the more enjoyable of the two, just because I’m somebody who benefits well with interaction, and especially if it’s like a 9 o’clock lecture, when somebody’s just talking *to* you, there’s no interaction, it’s *really* hard. Yeah [laughing].

I: Yeah, I remember it is [laughing]. Okay. Do you ever find seminars intimidating?

P: I don’t personally find them intimidating. I think I know a lot of people *do* though, or at least they do in *my* class. This is what I mentioned a little bit earlier about how, like, they go and take great pain to avoid eye contact because they – it’s a mixture between, like, they said they don’t –not only do they not know the answer or they – I don’t know if they actually push themselves to think of an answer personally, they’re just like, “I really can’t be asked, I want people to spoon feed me” or whether it’s more that they *do* know the answer, but they’re way too shy to contribute it. I think, kind of, going back to that relationship you *can* build between, like, the teachers and the student, because I think I’ve put myself out there the past couple of years, they know me so, I definitely probably get picked on more than most students. Example this morning was, “[name removed] you’re pulling a face like you’ve got something to say” and I’m like, “I’m actually not. You just *know* me so you’re like, ‘I can pick on her, everyone else don’t really know so’” and I’m like, “Okay, right, I’ll try and think of something to say then” [laughing]. Yeah.

I: [laughing] Okay. Is there anything you particularly like about the learning style at university, as compared to compulsory education?

P: It’s so different. I feel like, especially in compulsory education, there was much more, kind of, interaction. There was so much more, even though it was, kind of, interaction, it was very *basic* interaction. They weren’t actually ever really asking a lot of you, and it was a lot of, kind of, guidance, spoon-feeding, hate the phrase but it’s the only one I know now [laughing] whereas here obviously, at university, it’s the –very much challenging you and, you know, “But what can you come up with?” and you need to do that, I think, almost to properly develop in this area. You’re not always going to be given the answers and I think if you weren’t challenged in this way, you’d probably leave university, kind of, wondering what you really gained from it? Other than, yes you have some knowledge, but how do you actually apply it to real life, the kind of, how to find the answers yourself. So, I think whilst it might have been an easier time in the mandatory, kind of, education side of things, here it’s probably, it’s better *for* you. Yeah, I think I actually probably do prefer this style, so yeah.

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

P: I don’t always understand what’s being explained to me. I mean, like, last year, I chose to do a module which was [removed for confidentiality].

I: I did [removed for confidentiality]

P: Did you? Wow. I don’t think I knew what I let myself into, like, sometimes I think I’ve read, like, the description for something and go, “Oh yeah, sounds cool” and then I go for it and then, I’m sitting there like, “What have you done [name removed]?” Jesus! I’m glad to say that by the end of that module, like I did – I feel like I did have a fairly good understanding, what I was dealing with, how to best approach it and felt, at least decently, prepared for the exam. But definitely, for at least the first 3 weeks or so, maybe even the first *month* you know, just sitting there like, “I’m really not sure what’s happening here” and I don’t know whether, because obviously like punctuation has got a big deal to come with it, not punctuation, grammar! Grammar, that’s what I mean, and having not done Language though, since GCSE, I felt like I was really missing out, especially since I –not being a single honours student especially, so that means I didn’t do the mandatory Language module in the first year of university. And I was looking at all my, kind of, single honours peers and thinking, “What the hell? Like, you guys have all got one up on me.” But actually, funnily enough, I don’t think they got it either, at least not until towards the end. Yeah some of those people have decided to take it here again for third year so, I don’t know if they’re mad or if they actually do understand it now? [laughing] But, so yeah. Sometimes you let yourself in for these things but, yeah it does happen and I did go to the teacher, I did ask for guidance and I got guidance and I think that’s probably the only reason why it got that much – a little bit easier to get on with.

I: Okay. So that’s quite a specific example, but say it was something in, I don’t know, some sort of theory text that you were reading. Do you think it’s – the lack of understanding – is due to the content of what you’re reading, or the language used to describe it?

P: So, you’re asking whether or not my, kind of, lack of understanding in that specific example was to do with the…

I: Well not that specific example because that’s another thing altogether but, if it was, like, I don’t know, an article on feminist theory or something? Quite complex theory. Do you think it’s the content you can’t understand or the language that they’ve used to explain it?

P: Well anything to do with the language, you can obviously, you can look up. So that’s a very simple fix. It would be the content, I think, that could trip you up and – but equally, you go through, you’ll read something, you might not understand it on the first reading, by the second reading you’ll have at least a grasp of it and then you might be able to form some questions that you can actually take to your teacher and get answered, like “So what do they actually mean by this sentence here?” So, I don’t think it’s ever really an issue if there is a text that I don’t grasp on the first, or even properly the second, reading.

I: Okay. So, from your own experience, is there anything you would change to improve your own learning, so in terms of the teaching, or the resources you’ve got access to, curriculum or the assessments that you do, or anything else?

P: There might be – for example, we, kind of, entered the idea, I think through discussions last year, about a first-year module though, which is mandatory and it’s one that was about how – how to write an essay. Did you do this? [Module name removed]?

I: We did something similar to it.

P: You had to write – one, kind of, submission was an introduction, another submission was body paragraphs, another one was conclusion, and you’re not finishing doing this module obviously until the end of that term, or even I think the end of the entire first year and actually, before then you’ve written, like, however many conclusions and you could have done with the information that they were going to give you right at the beginning. So I mean I guess if there was anything that might have helped my learning, it might have been if that module structure had been completely different and they packed things in a little bit faster, a little bit sooner, or found a different way to deliver it entirely, I don’t know, but I don’t know if there’s anything that I personally could think to change, yeah I don’t know, I think you’ve, kind of, got access I mean other than, actually no, there could be more books in the library. Right, they spent all this money on this fancy library, they’re lacking a few things, so I feel, like, if there was any – if there was a resource they need to top up on, it’s probably that: books, yeah.

I: Okay. Okay, so I sent you this document that refers to the Student Charter [name changed]. I don’t know if you’ve read it, but you can have a quick glance now, so in your opinion, how evident is this policy in your day-to-day experiences of being a student here?

P: Okay. [pause for reading] How evident is this, did you say, in the day-to-day experience?

I: Mmm [agreement].

P: So, like, for example the things that they value, I think are quite evident, be it, the kind of, like, the [removed for confidentiality], that’s like a practice that they’re doing it in every single class. Yeah, from like your turn out, interaction, the feedback that you receive on any work, which also goes right down to, like, the fact that they want to give good teaching, they’re asking, I think, for feedback at the end of each module, not like, specific module feedback as well, I forgot to mention that, as well as, like university feedback, so yeah, when you’ve got that module feedback, that’s them, like, trying to improve on themselves and the modules, and change it to what people suggest and I do know they try to put those changes in place. And yeah, I think they’re inclusive, and let’s see the university [pause for reading] yeah, they give good support, they definitely do. Yeah I actually had a problem with where I was living in first year, and I had to reach out to the university and say, “I need some help here, I need to move from one place to another” and they were really fast and efficient with it and it was super easy, it wasn’t like a long process, so yeah, I think, as far as it goes because they’ve said on all aspects of study, living and working before, during and after their programme, so that I mean, that was obviously during, but they were fast on it. [mumbling whilst reading] Students are expected to… [removed for confidentiality]… I feel like I’d be a [removed for confidentiality], I’ve given a friend a little tour around and been like, “Do you like it?” [laughing] So… take responsibility for managing your own learning, yup! I feel like that has to happen, if you’re going to be a university student, do the full 3 years and come away with a decent grade, you technically do need to be good at doing your own learning, like, you don’t come here if you’re hoping someone else is going to write your essays for you or, I don’t know, [laughing] give you, like, 10 times the amount more feedback that anyone else, I don’t know, so I think that yeah, you do have to have that anyway. It’s almost like the expectation that they have for us and then the Student’s Union [pause for reading] yeah, I feel like, Student’s Union, they look after all our societies, they have a couple of events they put on, yeah, I feel like everyone does their job here [laughing].

I: Okay, that’s good! Okay, so 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 feel like in first year, it’s difficult because you don’t know what you want, you don’t know what to expect and it’s probably only until you’re a few weeks in, a couple of months in maybe, that you start to develop ideas in, like, what you’re not happy with, what could be easier, what could be better, by which point it’s too late to make any changes. So, it’s going to be the second years, who are undergraduates, who might be able to look back and say, “Make sure you don’t do that again for the next lot of first years”. Yeah I think, I think we already *do* have a good amount of power probably, to make those changes, it’s just whether or not people choose to submit all their concerns about the course or any struggles that they found because I think a lot of people are just like, “Oh well nothing will come of it” you know, the kind of people who don’t vote because they’re like, “My vote doesn’t count” I feel like there’s a fair, probably, amount of people who do that. But yeah, I think we’ve probably got enough power, it’s just, yeah, first years who might be a bit more of a harder thing to do because, like I say, they don’t know what to expect and how to cope with it.

I: What about having power *before* you take the course? So, with the module feedback and stuff, you can affect the next students coming in, but not the course that you took yourself. So, what about having more control in how that – how you experience that module and what goes into that module and the assessment for that particular module before you do it?

P: You mean to say, like, if, you know, if you could, would you say, “Make sure there’s no exams across all of it…?

I: Yeah.

P: … Yeah, and, make sure it’s way more interactive than what you were thinking of doing to the teacher and…?

I: Yeah. Choosing what texts you want to look at, or what theories you want to look at.

P: Yeah. It’s difficult because you’re not just doing it for you, though, like as in, like, the teacher’s not just doing it for you, there’s a whole bunch of people and they’re going to have a whole load of different opinions, especially before they’ve even started the course, and I think, not only that, usually the teacher obviously will have taught it a certain amount before, they would have probably experienced it first-hand when *they* were originally taught it, and they’re going to have built up some really interesting ideas, which are usually quite effective on how best to deliver it and, having not even given that a chance and then also having to accommodate all the other people’s opinions, which might be very diverse, I don’t understand how you *can* accommodate for all those different things and really put it into practice, especially when you, as I said, haven’t even experienced what the teacher’s ideas and how that would actually pan out. Yeah, usually I mean, they’ve got their job for a good reason, you don’t just – you can’t just – become a lecturer without knowing how to deliver it, you know? And they also – I think they do, like, reviews? You have a teacher come into the back of a class and then give them feedback, like “Well actually, have you thought of doing this?” or “You’re not very much on point” [sic] [laughing] I don’t know.

I: Okay, sure. So, what are your thoughts on – I don’t know if you’ve heard of this, but the idea of students as partners in higher education? Have you ever seen anything about this?

P: Partners? As in, like, with the teachers? With the university? With…?

I: So, with the academics, students are considered partners in the learning process, so they give just as much as academics do.

P: Okay… I suppose it’s interesting, there could be – I guess you could be a partner in that, in a seminar you might contribute an idea that the teacher’s never thought of, which then can go on to help their studies as well, or even for example, I suppose, the peer mentor scheme? I definitely know that that definitely gives back properly. We had to collect feedback we did, when we did peer mentors, to – because at one point they were like, “Oh should we just, you know, stop it? Stop paying the peer mentors?” and we were like, “No we’ve got to show what we’re worth” so we asked our students to give some feedback, you know, not just like, you know, “Why do we like coming to this?” but also, “Is there anything that can be improved on? And I hate to say, but I do love to say it at the same time, there were a couple who suggested that they’d much rather go to what we were doing than what the lecturers were doing. So, in that case, as students, we were giving back way *more* than perhaps some other students were finding lecturers were even putting in, which was interesting. I mean obviously it comes down to how everyone individually experiences things, but yeah, I think you’ve definitely got the potential to give a lot back, just as much perhaps sometimes as teachers. I don’t know, at the same time, they give a *lot!* [laughing] They know so much.

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

P: I’d say very. Very important in the university, definitely very central, yeah. I mean it comes back to what I was saying a couple of times before which is about how it is such a focus and you do get that impression, just from an Open Day that it’s – I think it’s got, maybe because it’s a smaller university, maybe because it’s not so high on the scoreboard, I don’t know, but for some reason, they do make that focus really good and I think we do score quite high for, like, just student enjoyment or something like that? Yeah, so as far as universities go, I think that counts for something.

I: Actually, it’s overall satisfaction’s higher than [removed for confidentiality].

P: Eh there we go! Sorry [removed for confidentiality] yeah. [laughing]

I: Okay, what meaning does the word relationship have for you, in the context of interacting with university staff?

P: Relationship? I suppose, because obviously like, by the time you get to university, it’s so different to anything you would experience with the teachers beforehand where you always call them Mr and Mrs, and I don’t know, I feel like it was way stricter than it is now, now it’s way more casual? It’s very *relaxed*, I feel like there’s, kind of, greater possibility that you might actually talk to your teacher about something *other* than your academic problems, so they might actually be like, “Oh, so what are you interested in?” I don’t know, I think you’re seen much more on an equal level, equal footing, which is really nice, especially since, like I say, I think when it comes to university, you actually do need that support so, to have that, kind of, casual, relaxed relationship with a teacher means that you feel even more comfortable that it doesn’t matter what the problem is, you can approach them, and you know that not only will they give good advice, but they can, like, they’ll put you on the right way, on the right path, you know, so yeah I suppose that’s the relationship there isn’t it? [laughing]

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

P: The main purpose? I think [laughing and talking under breath] so you can get better grades [laughing]. Yeah, I think that the main purpose is actually – as much as it might be a joke, to get better grades, at the same time it is, like, it is the truth of it. Not like I think they’re going to favour me, but more because I think it’s easier for them to figure out when I’m struggling, because they actually know me well enough, they can be like, “You have your questioning face on” kind of thing, but yeah, and I’m like, “Okay, yeah I actually have no clue what’s going on”, so [laughing] and then, like, before you’ve had to try and admit that you don’t understand it, they’re on board to, like, explain it thoroughly and then you’ve got that better odds of doing well, so yeah.

I: Okay. So, to what extent is this purpose fulfilled for you, personally?

P: The relationship between like staff and students? What do you mean?

I: So, the purpose of doing better and getting the most out of the staff to get better grades, how… is that fulfilled for you so far in your degree? Has that happened?

P: Yeah, no, I believe so, definitely. I think the fact that I can interact the way I have been able to, has probably effected my grades, I think, because it’s weird I never found that grades – good grades – came very easy to me, prior to university. For some reason since being at university, even though I stress about them each time, they’re far more, kind of, obtainable than they’ve ever been before and I don’t know whether that’s, yeah, because I’m able to just be in the midst of it all and, I don’t know, properly be engaged in the way I’ve been allowed to, yeah but for some reason, it’s been somehow easier [laughing]. Yeah.

I: [laughing] Okay. So, can you describe to me a typical face-to-face encounter with a university staff member, so either an academic or an administrator?

P: Okay, so is there any context in this? So, for example, am I bumping into them around campus, am I – do I have an organised thing after peer mentor, or is it in the classroom?

I: Whatever is the most common interaction for you.

P: Common okay. Well if it’s a proper interaction, so far it’s, kind of, been mostly after doing peer mentoring, we have to report back to – it’s like the [removed for confidentiality] [laughing] and yes, just, kind of, tell them how the session’s gone and pass on any, kind of, feedback or problems from the first-year students to the [removed for confidentiality] and then, yeah, kind of, talk about our ideas that we might do for next peer mentoring, kind of, workshop thing. And yeah, I guess in that, kind of, encounter it will be simply, you know, you have the, kind of, niceties, your greetings, you go onto how it’s actually gone, like the turnout, we’d probably start off with any feedback we got from them about their other modules, straight onto what we covered, how they responded to it, perhaps what we’re thinking of next time, but between each of this [sic], sometimes it’s, kind of, paused to have just general conversation. So, be it about how our other modules are going, like, they’re – it’s [name removed], [they]’ll usually, kind of, query that, [they]’ll be like, you know, “Are you okay with your other modules? Is it all okay?” and “Oh, you know, what else are you doing today?” or… yeah so it’s quite friendly, it really is, yeah so it’s not just to the point, “Right, you get out” kind of thing. Yeah.

I: [laughing]. Okay, are you ever aware of a hierarchy in your interactions with staff?

P: I know that there *is* a hierarchy, in that there is obviously a Head of Department, who’s supposed to keep the runnings going [sic], but I also know that that hierarchy is passed around a lot, in that they – it’s such a big job to be Head of Department, they don’t tend to do it, I think, for more than, like, a year and then they pass it on to someone else so, I don’t feel like it’s so much a hierarchy perhaps so much as a passing on a whole lot of responsibility? [sic] Towards, you know, who people should be going to, to have all their questions answered, or, have things organised. Yeah, so I think amongst staff, it’s not, I don’t know, as apparent and then, like, student to staff it’s, I don’t know, I don’t feel like it’s ever *impressed* upon you and I think, like I said, you no longer call anyone Mr or Mrs, it’s way more casual, yeah, hierarchy just isn’t so strong, I think, here.

I: Okay. Okay, can you think of any particularly good relationships, without saying who they are, with any university staff and why you’d characterise it as good?

P: So, without saying who they are, but you could probably guess actually [laughing]. But, so I think, from like the very first lesson that I ever had with them, they delivered *such* a good class, that I was very confident in their teaching method that I thought, come second or even third year, I would more than happily say, “Yeah, I’ll take your module” even if I was like only, I don’t know, say 75% interested in their module, because they were teaching it, that would be the other 25% basically. So, I was, like, “That’s fine, I’ll go for it” because yeah, first of all, yeah, they’re *really* good at teaching. This next one’s a funny one, but also because they’ve got a *really nice* voice. I think that’s really important when you’re teaching, you’ve got to have a good voice. If you’ve got an annoying voice [exhaling] it’s a struggle, isn’t it? [laughing] So, I feel like because they have a good voice, because they can deliver their teaching so well and then, I think as well as that, just *very* approachable, *very* friendly, yeah so, I think that’ll be it [laughing].

I: [laughing] Okay, so here’s the fun bit.

P: Okay…

I: Can I ask you to draw your conception of a good relationship with a staff member? So, it can be whatever you want. Abstract or real, or…

P: Abstract! Okay… [pause for drawing] I’m going to go for stick people [laughing]

I: [laughing] Everyone goes for stick people!

P: I just don’t feel like I’ve got time to be an artist, you know? [pause for drawing] [muttering whilst drawing] Pretty much. Do I need to explain what’s in my picture here?

I: Yeah.

A picture containing text, whiteboard

Description automatically generated

P: Yeah, okay. So, this is their office, which means that it’s fine because, you know, you can just go to them at any time. You can notice our chairs are equal height, equal footing, there we go! You don’t feel like anyone’s, kind of, unapproachable because you’re all on the same level. Yeah, I feel like it’s just, kind of, one of those things where you can just sit there and chat away and it’s just very easy going.

I: Okay! Thank you

P: That’s alright.

I: Now can you do the opposite, so a bad relationship with a staff member?

P: Oh okay, right. So… [pause for drawing] I’ll try not to do too 3D because, you know, I’m not very good at that.

I: [laughing].

P: [pause for drawing] Yeah you can imagine that’s a lot of talking and a lot of students sleeping basically [laughing]. So, I think this, kind of, is it being completely limited to a classroom, that you’re turning up and they bore you to sleep and yeah… [laughing]

A close up of text on a white background

Description automatically generated

I: [laughing] Fair enough. Okay and the last one, I promise, [laughing] is your relationship with the university as a whole.

P: With the university? Okay. [pause] Okay. [pause for drawing] [laughing] This is getting increasingly worse. Yeah okay so, I’ll just write coffee here basically [laughing]. I think on campus, I think, it’s quite a relaxed vibe I suppose, you can turn up, you can, you know, be relaxed [laughing] or yeah, it’s not like there’s any rush anywhere because obviously you may only have, like, one class a day, you can, kind of, come and go as you please. Yeah, it’s hard to say what [laughing] sort of relationship you have with a university and you draw coffee [laughing].

A close up of a whiteboard

Description automatically generated

I: That is quite a hard one. Okay, brilliant thank you. Okay, so there’s a lot of encouragement for undergraduates to engage with different experiences that the university offers so, joining societies, volunteering or getting involved in the Student’s Union. What are your thoughts on this?

P: I think it’s a brilliant thing. I think it can probably be people’s saving grace by getting out of their homes. It’s way too easy to just stay put in your house and only make friends with your housemates, but if you fallout with your housemates, where are you supposed to turn? Especially if, like, say you’re first year and you’re a combined student like me, which means that you spend half your time in one department, half the time in another, which means you’re never spending all of your 8 hours in the week at university with one lot of people, you’re spending 4 hours in a week with one lot and 4 hours with another lot, which means you don’t get to, kind of, build up those relationships at all, which means that say if you do fall out with your housemates, you need to have somewhere else to fall back on. So, like not only use it as another support place, but I think also, CV building-wise it’s probably a pretty good idea, like I said, right at the beginning of university they said, “A degree’s not enough so you, kind of, need to be pushing yourself out there to distinguish yourself from other people”. So yeah, it’s your future and it’s also your mental health, so… [laughing].

I: Okay. Do you ever find any issues about balancing learning and extracurricular?

P: Sometimes extracurricular can seem more fun than the learning so, *yes*, it can be, like, “Which work *should* we be doing right now? Should it be the stuff for the society we’re with or the people who are actually going to get you a degree, which is *why* you came here in the first place?” So yes, it can be, like, you need to remind yourself your priorities, what the end goal is. Yeah it could be quite easy to let the thing you’ve joined up with get the *better* of you, for sure.

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

P: I don’t know, I mean I feel like the societies do a great job, I feel like the Student Union I don’t… I don’t know, I feel like I haven’t had a lot of interaction with them personally. Perhaps if I’d gone to everything they ever do, like all their quiz nights on a Sunday, maybe I’d probably have benefitted quite well but, it literally – interacting with them has not been high up for me. I’m not sure that the effort to be engaged continues all *year* long? Or whether they make a substantial effort at the beginning, whether that continues, I don’t know, I don’t feel like that’s definitely a thing but, yeah.

I: Okay. How valuable do you see the Student’s Union as a space dedicated to students?

P: [removed for confidentiality] is – it’s pretty good, I think it’s probably even better if you’re, like, living at [location removed] for example, where it’s connected to it, you know, if that’s the case it will be a really great social space to just, kind of, grab something cheap to eat or drink or whatever but, again I think it comes back to how limited interaction I’ve had with the Student’s Union, kind of, follows that – if I’d had more interaction with the Student’s Union, it would be followed that I was at more of their events at [removed for confidentiality], would have used and benefitted from it more but I just, yeah haven’t personally, but I’m sure it probably is a really good space yeah.

I: Okay. Do you consider yourself part of the Student’s Union?

P: Not a lot, not really, yeah. Yeah just coming back down to how much *I’ve* engaged with *them* probably. Yeah, I don’t know, I mean I’ve done a lot of things with [removed for confidentiality], but – and because they, kind of, operate in their own way, between [University B] and [pre-92 university] and the community, you feel like you’re much more of a, kind of, bigger thing than the Student’s Union with them, yeah, I don’t know. The Student’s Union just feels very limited to just [University B], [removed for confidentiality] and a couple of events, like a drunken quiz where you have to get on stage and dance or something, I don’t know, but not my cup of tea [laughing].

I: Okay sure. Okay last question then, how much of a valued member of the university do you consider yourself to be?

P: I reckon I’m probably *fairly* valued, I mean in that – but I think that comes down to how I’ve engaged again, in that I’m valued because I make contributions in class, because I do the peer mentoring so I can help the first years, because I can help promote events going on by being part of [removed for confidentiality] and then also, kind of, promote that to first year students as well, so that they have another base to get out, be involved in, which is always good to, kind of, help your university experience as a whole which will then reflect better on the university in general when they feedback on it. So yeah, I feel like there’s a few ways that I probably can be valued and I am valued. Yeah.

I: Okay brilliant. Well thank you very much again for your time, really insightful answers, really appreciate it. Is there anything that you want to add that we haven’t covered?

P: I don’t think so.

I: Okay. Alright brilliant.

**[End of Recording]**