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**UNDERSTANDING STUDENT CHARTERS THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONTRACTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH**

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PLYMOUTH**

**UNDERSTANDING STUDENT CHARTERS THROUGH
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH**

by

JULIE ANN OSBORN

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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Abstract

The introduction of higher fees and globalisation have created a competitive environment in which UK universities operate. Higher fees and globalisation have placed emphasis on higher education institutions operating as a profit driven sector with feedback sought from consumers in the form of large scale surveys e.g. National Student Survey (NSS). Our understanding of the student experience has been framed within a broadly positivist framework, which arguably limits our understanding.

The purpose of this study was to trial a new way of exploring the student experience. This novel approach used the psychological contract as a sensitising concept. It has been used to explore the implicit understandings that employees develop about their employment but is not widely used in higher education.

A constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted that used data collected over a three-year period at one university starting at a time when higher fees were first introduced. Nine staff were recruited for phase one (individual interviews) and included academics from different subject disciplines. Phase two involved seven focus groups that included thirty-six first-year undergraduates from a variety of courses. Phase three comprised a series of one-to-one interviews with students who were recruited from the focus groups in their first and following two years of study. Three theoretical findings emerged; expectations, exchange and engagement. The interactive and dynamic nature of these findings was analysed, and a substantive theory developed as an exemplar. This study is significant as it offers a new approach to exploring the student experience. As an investigative approach it offers an interpretation of the student experience that is dynamic and multi-faceted. It is potentially of interest to policy makers and practitioners to gain new insights into the student experience and suggestions about how they can shape and influence the student experience, enabling recommendations for further research.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

HEIs	Higher education institutions
KIS	Key Information Set
LSS	Learning and Skills Sector
NSS	National Student Survey
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
PT	Part-time
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RSS	Royal Statistical Society
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UUK	Universities UK
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

1 Introduction

“We cannot understand the psychological dynamics if we look only to the individual’s motivations or only to the organizational conditions and practices. The two interact in a complex fashion that demands a systems approach, capable of handling interdependent phenomena.” (Schein, 1980, p. 99).

1.1 Introduction

This study was prompted by an interest in gaining a better understanding of the student experience through exploring what students expect and how this matches what a university offers. Delivering an experience that is understood, and matches expectations is likely to give rise to greater satisfaction for both the student and the university. The experience can, and probably should be difficult, challenging, life changing and contain the unexpected. A student’s perception of and appreciation of their university journey is coloured by prior expectations and the evolving understanding of what university can be. In essence we can argue that the relationship between the student and their university is core to perceptions of satisfaction, happiness and success. The Student Charter is one way in which a university establishes relationships between the organisation the academic and professional staff, and students. The statements in the Charter should be reflected in the experience of students.

In the early 2000s changes in funding and regulatory processes prompted concerns that a new relationship was developing between students and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Browne Report, 2010; Jones, 2010). UK universities prompted by the Student Charter Group report (SCG, 2011) were developing explicit ‘Student Charters / contracts’ that aimed to make transparent the offer of the university and the expectations of the students. This research seeks to respond to these evolving agendas by exploring students’ perceptions of their experiences.

The psychological contract approach (Argyris, 1960; Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1989) has been used to explore the relationships between employees and their organisation. While this approach has not been used in the higher education concept, it was considered an appropriate lens to use as a sensitising concept for this study. Data was collated over a three-year period as part of a longitudinal study at the university then analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach offering new insights into the student experience.

1.2 The Thesis in Context

This research project started when higher tuition fees were introduced. Following recommendations made by the Browne Review (2010), students were provided with loans to pay tuition fees of £9,000 per annum. The rise in fees triggered concerns that students' expectations of their university would increase and foster a "consumerist culture" (Jones, 2010). Higher fees led to concerns that students would expect more for their money (Bates & Kaye, 2014).

Concerns that students would demand more and complain more were fuelled by a rise in complaints. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) (2013) reported a 25% increase in complaints in 2012. Whether these complaints were due to consumerist behaviour or other changes taking place concerns e.g. improved publicity about how to make a complaint is unclear (Ramsden, 2008).

The Student Charter Group (2011) recommended that HEIs each created a Student Charter to clarify their offer and better manage student expectations. The Student Charter Group report described the benefits of Student Charters suggesting they would be "*important communication tools for HEIs to establish clear mutual expectations, and help monitor the student experience and how relationships are working.*" Capturing this information in a document was an ambitious aim.

The Charters that emerged in HEIS in the following years in many ways positioned students as consumers with needs to be satisfied and expectations to be met (Bates & Kaye, 2014). Monitoring student expectations and quantifying satisfaction gained prominence due to growing public and policy interest in the experience of and outcomes for students. The National Student Survey (NSS), first introduced in 2005, became the most widely used indicator of student satisfaction in higher education. The NSS provided an opportunity for final year students to provide feedback about

their university experience. Data from the NSS fed into the Key Information Sets (KIS) allowing applicants to compare different institutions. The media reported headline figures from the NSS and in particular the 'overall satisfaction' ratings for institutions. The attention given to the NSS gave it credence which arguably obscured the criticisms of it.

Expectations and satisfaction were treated uncritically and there was no agreed definition of these terms. Despite these concerns the activity of measurement and quantification continued as this was considered as a way of improving the student experience (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Whilst large datasets allow comparison of like with like over time, they do not provide information about causation, limiting how far they can be used to develop service provision.

The following sections will outline the rationale for the study, confirm the research gap and problems that this thesis will address before summarising how this will be addressed. The last section details how the thesis is presented.

1.3 The Research Gap

This thesis is based on the premise that our understanding of the student experience has been developed within a positivist framework, which fails to capture the detail of the phenomena under investigation, and our understanding of the student experience has been increasingly defined by the methods used to explore it. Positivist approaches assume there is an objective truth that can be measured and use tools such as questionnaire surveys to quantify specific aspects of the student experience. Large cross scale surveys have attracted criticism for failing to capture individual, subjective experiences (De Vaus & de Vaus, 2014; Oppenheim, 2000). These concerns are applicable to the National Student Survey (NSS) that is used to investigate the student experience.

The limitations of the questionnaire survey in particular and positivist approaches in capturing individual and subjective experiences give cause for concern. An alternative approach which will enable policy makers, practitioners, students and their families to acquire relevant information upon which they can base important decisions about best practice and where to study is needed. Terms such as student expectations and student satisfaction are often used

without a clear understanding of what they mean. The relationship between expectations and satisfaction is not clear. Additional information is needed to ensure that services are developed in a way that enhances quality.

1.4 Student Charters

The Student Charter (also termed 'Student Compact' or 'Student Partnership Agreement') was developed in response to requests from government to provide information about what they offer and how the experience at their particular institution differs from other universities. The Government's 'Student Charter Group' (SCG, 2011) recommended that each HEI should have a "*high level statement - to set out the mutual expectations of universities and students*" (p. 6). In addition to being a tool for managing expectations, it was seen as a resource that would help prospective student make informed choices when selecting where to go.

1.5 Psychological Contracts

The psychological contract has been used as a construct to describe the relationship between employers and employees and the subsequent behaviour of employees in studies of work and organisation (Conway & Briner, 2005). There are a variety of definitions of the psychological contract which in essence capture an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of their exchange relation with another party (Rousseau, 1995). Rousseau (1995) suggests that the psychological contract provides people with cues regarding the types of events they may expect and how those events should be interpreted. The psychological contract facilitates an exchange process between the individual and organisation as both evolve, the contract determines the individual's anticipation of inducements and understanding of their obligations as an employee (Rousseau, 1995). This continuous reciprocal cycle is considered as enhancing a person's relationship with the organisation (Meyer, 1997). Much of the research emphasis is on negative work experiences which 'breach' the expectations that the employee has of the employer (Conway & Briner, 2005; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Whilst the psychological contract can be applied to any relationship, few studies have used it to explore relationships in HEIs. Three studies that have used the psychological contracts have focus on particular sub-groups of students. Bordia, Hobman, Restubog, and Bordia (2010) looked at business student expectations of their project supervisor in the Philippines. Koskina (2011) examined the perceptions of academics and postgraduate taught students in one business school in the UK; while Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau, and Li (2006) considered the relationship between academics and their doctoral students in the USA. These studies focused on the psychological contract from the student perspective, mainly using self-report questionnaires which limits exploration of the exchange process due to the focus on one party (Conway & Briner, 2005). This study will include the perspective of academics involved in developing the University Student Charter which will provide useful insights into their understanding of the content and function of the Student Charter alongside the Student Psychological Contract.

In framing the research, it was recognised that the psychological contract potentially offers a useful outline to explore the student experience because it explicitly provides:

- Insights into the relationship between two parties;
- Consideration of the exchange process;
- Consideration of both explicit understanding e.g. written contracts and implicit perceptual understanding e.g. implied agreements.

1.6 Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the study was to take a fresh look at the student experience. In order to achieve this aim, a substantive grounded theory was developed offering an interpretation of the student experience through the psychological contract lens. The grounded theory serves as an exemplar allowing the efficacy of this approach to be considered.

The specific objectives are summarised as follows.

1. To explore and document key features of the student psychological contract at the exemplar university (Chapters 4 and 5).

2. To monitor how the student psychological contract changed over time (Chapter 5.5.4, 6.2.3).
3. To formulate a conceptualisation of the student psychological contract (Chapters 5 and 6).
4. Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of exploring the student experience (Chapter 7).

1.7 Limitations

This study represents the first step in exploring the utility of the psychological contract for exploring the student experience. It gives prominence to the student perspective, teasing out their interpretation of the Student Charter, and therefore is primarily surfacing the perspectives of the students. The views of lecturers are considered in the first year, as far as they are relevant to the exchange process.

This is a small scale, deliberately cautious study that considers a new approach to exploring the student experience. As such, the observational results are indicative and cannot be generalised to other settings, but the research and analytical processes may be applicable elsewhere. Suggestions for practice for institutions and policy makers and recommendation for future research are based on the findings from this study (Chapter 8.5).

1.8 Overview of Methodology

Positivist approaches perceives 'knowledge' as identifiable, objective and therefore measurable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This approach has been used to explore the student experience and considers the relationships between variables rather than individual subjective experiences. This study explores the student experience within a qualitative framework using a constructivist interpretivist approach (Charmaz, 2014). Adopting this approach provides an opportunity to explore the feelings, values and perceptions that underlie and contribute to the student experience.

Methods of data collection were chosen that were considered appropriate to capturing the phenomenon under investigation. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with a small cohort of students in order to explore their experiences throughout the duration of their degree programme. Seven focus

groups and forty-eight interviews were conducted then transcribed verbatim before being analysed in keeping with a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Three theoretical categories; expectations, exchange and engagement emerged. These contributed to the construction of a substantive grounded theory which was explored in relation to the literature. The construction of a substantive grounded theory offered an account of the student psychological contract.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction. Provides the context for the study, confirms the research gap and provides the research aims and objectives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review. Identifies limitations in our understanding of the student experience which are mainly due to the approaches used to explore it. This confirms the need for an alternative approach and the psychological contract is introduced as a suitable framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology. Explains the rationale for choosing constructivist grounded theory and provides a detailed description of data collection, management and process of analysis. Ethical considerations are addressed.

Chapter 4: Findings. The empirical data used to construct six categories and three theoretical findings are presented allowing the data giving prominence to the student voice.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings. Each of the six categories and three theoretical findings are selectively explored in relation to the literature and the substantive grounded theory developed.

Chapter 6: Student Psychological Contract in Theory and Practice. The substantive grounded theory is critically reviewed to confirm what this offers in relation to our understanding of the student experience.

Chapter 7: The efficacy of the using the psychological contract as a means of understanding the student experience. This chapter reflects on the study confirming its contributions and limitations.

Chapter 8: The conclusion considers the achievement of the study aims and makes recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

“Conceptualizations of the PC [psychological contract] and its processes has undergone limited revision since the 1990s despite challenges due to its tenets and advances in related fields that suggests the importance of time to such processes.” (Rousseau, Hansen, & Tomprou, 2018, p. 1).

2.1 Introduction

The four thesis aims are:

1. To explore and document key features of the student psychological contract at the exemplar university.
2. To monitor how the student psychological contract changed over time.
3. To formulate a conceptualisation of the student psychological contract.
4. Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of exploring the student experience.

It is important to recognise that researcher engagement with the literature is modified when an inductive research design is adopted because conventional analysis (read everything already published that might be relevant first) may constrain the development of ideas (Chapter 2.2). This literature review focuses on two distinct areas to underpin the thesis structure and inform the research design.

- Setting the Scene: The Context for Research on the Student Experience and the evolution of the Student Charter. Our current understanding of the student experience is arguably limited because it has been developed within a positivist framework; (Chapter 2.3)
- The psychological contract as an exploratory tool. The strengths and weaknesses of the psychological contract are summarised to explain why it can be used as a sensitising concept. Limitations of the methods used to explore it are considered in relation to its historical development (Conway & Briner, 2005) (Chapter 2.4). The rationale for using the

psychological contract to develop an understanding of the student experience is presented.

The literature review highlights gaps in our knowledge and weaknesses that need to be addressed in this study and informs the methodology adopted (Chapter 3). A grounded theory approach generally and constructivist grounded theory in particular was chosen based on my philosophical position (Chapter 3.4). The research focus was identified as an under-explored area, particularly in the context of the 'consumer' student and the introduction of higher fees. My purpose of developing a 'working model' or substantive grounded theory of the student psychological contract would require a construction based on empirical data and analytic interpretation (Charmaz, 2008a). A detailed account of the theoretical foundations for using constructivist grounded theory is provided in the next chapter (Chapter 3.2).

2.2 Sources of Literature

Engagement with the literature by the researcher is a contested area within inductive research design methodologies. Debate centres around the timing and purpose of the literature review and it is important to provide a clear justification to confirm when and how the literature is used (Dunne, 2011). Based on Randolph's (2009) advice this literature review sought to determine contextual variables; develop an awareness of theory and application; and gain methodological insights. As such, it provided a departure point for the current research without limiting my thinking regarding pre-existing concepts (Charmaz, 2006). The initial literature review was therefore not an in-depth critical appraisal but an opportunity to gain initial guidance on the student experience and the psychological contract without imposing a pre-set agenda, or expectations of the research outcomes.

The following sections were reworked after the research was completed to present a more contemporary analysis of the literature, but it is important for the reader to understand that the research was undertaken on the basis of the more skeletal review so that the student and staff views which emerged from the analysis were given prominence.

2.3 The Student Experience.

The following summary sets the scene by outlining the context for research on the experience of students in higher education. In 2000, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that education was a £2 trillion global industry. Education became redefined as a profitable industry rather than a public service and higher education has become increasingly commercialised (Healey, 2008; McArthur, 2011; Robertson, 2010). Higher education became a tradable service that was liberalised as part of the economy globally (Robertson, 2010). It is argued that this global movement has changed the nature of the university's role in society (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998).

The neoliberalist agenda moves the cost of education to the individual rather than the state. Education is seen as a market commodity and students are considered as 'consumer citizens' (Lynch, 2010) who can make rational choices about what and where they study (Rutherford, 2005). Students as consumers require information upon which they can make choices. Critics of this approach argue that not everyone is afforded choice. Those with limited resources place quality, affordability and access before choice (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998).

In this changed world, HEIs move from being considered as organisations that serve public interests into powerful consumer orientated businesses (Rutherford, 2005). Alongside this change there was a move towards the massification of higher education in the UK (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009) which has presented global challenges for how higher education is provided, managed and funded within a quasi-marketised system (Brown, 2010; Brown & Carasso, 2013). These businesses adopted new ways of working so that they could be competitive and serve their customers.

HEIs have financial and reputational reasons for improving the student experience (Rienties, Toeteneel, & Bryan, 2015). HEIs compete against each other to attract students who are offered information to help them make choices. A ranking system based on Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) and NSS data is one example of the competitive environments in which HEIs now operate (Ashby, Richardson, & Woodley, 2011; Callender, Ramsden, & Griggs, 2014).

Lynch views the move to create global league tables for universities as “*symbolically the most powerful indicator that market values have been incorporated into the university sector*” (Lynch, 2006, p. 5). Whilst universities provide data, the ranking process itself is undertaken by private operators. The ranking system has been criticised as being far from systematic and scientific (Tight, 2000; Turner, 2005). League tables direct attention to specific areas and focus on a narrow set of internal market considerations, particularly on what can be measured (Taylor, 2001). “*Incessant auditing and measuring is a recipe for self-display and the fabrication of image over substance*” Lynch (2010, p. 53). The pressure to collect data and compete globally has pulled attention away from exploring the detail of the student experience.

At its inception, this thesis sought to explore the student experience when the nature of the exemplar HEI had changed in response to these external pressures. In the same time period (early 2000s) the agenda of widening participation led to increased numbers of students from diverse backgrounds attending university (Gorard et al., 2006). It is uncertain whether these students start university with the same skills set as seen in the past and this may impact on their expectations and experience of the university (Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2013). Further evidence is needed identify factors that are likely to be influential in defining the student experience and this study will explore this by asking students to describe their viewpoint.

Rienties et al. (2015) argues that there is no single student experience as the student body includes those who have part-time jobs, study on and off-campus, and through blended and distance learning technologies. Ramsden (2008) asserts that HEIs and academics have worked hard to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student group and considers that a greater variety of students has increased the range of expectations.

The most notable change in higher education in the UK over recent years has been the introduction of tuition fees. Tuition fees were first introduced in the UK in 1998, with students contributing up to £1,000 a year towards their university education. The cap was lifted in 2004 when institutions could charge “top-up” fees of up to £3,000. Higher fees placed an emphasis on higher education operating as a profit-driven sector (Neave, 2006). In 2012, university fees in England were tripled to £9,000 in line with the Browne Report (2010)

recommendations. Student loans were made available to be repaid once a graduate started earning over a certain threshold.

The introduction and increase in fees re-defined students as “consumers” able to exercise choice and make demands (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Molesworth et al., 2009; Ramsden, 2008). Concerns were raised that the nature of the relationship between students and HEIs was changing and that students’ expectations of their university experiences would increase, resulting in greater dissatisfaction and disappointment and fuelling a “consumerist culture” (Bates & Kaye, 2014; Jones, 2010). Fears were expressed about how students would behave and what decisions they would make (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). Jones (2010) predicted that students would insist on more communication with teaching staff and may expect an “*immediate response...irrespective of the time or day*” (p.45).

Research interest in the student experience pre-dates the introduction of fees and the operation of HEIs as profit making organisations. These changes however appear to have altered the how the student experience is conceptualised and explored. Ramsden (2008) considered the ‘student experience’ (or ‘student learning experience’) in higher education in the early 1990s and offered a conceptualisation of the topic: “*The student experience is about much more than student satisfaction: it’s about how students connect with the content they learn and, more broadly, how they engage with the university where they learn it*” (Ramsden, 2008, p. 5). This broad conceptualisation appears to have narrowed as survey instruments focus on key areas (e.g. contact hours, time to receive feedback) thought to improve the student experience. The original emphasis on the quality of the learning experience for students in higher education (e.g. Entwistle & Ramsden, 2015) has been replaced by interest in facilities and the perception of satisfaction (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Mike, Noora, & Michael, 2010).

The advent of NSS style measurements may have been influenced by the “*more assertive student sense of entitlement*” (Temple, Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2014, p. 4). In addition, understanding of the student experience may have been influenced by research studies that purport to have identified what improves student satisfaction (Chapter 2.3.5). Limiting the conceptualisation of

the student experience runs the risk of failing to understand all the influential variables.

Key performance indicators, such as retention and degree classification, gained importance as part of a neo-liberal educational policy designed to effect accountability, choice and quality (Nicholson, Putwain, Connors, & Hornby-Atkinson, 2013). Whilst HEIs focused attention on the demands of more assertive students, unexpressed and less quantifiable demands received less attention. This study will address this by adopting an inductive approach to exploring student's experiences, which allows the influential factors to emerge as part of the process.

2.3.1 Terminology

Since the 2010s commentators and researchers have increasingly adopted consumerist language focusing on 'student expectations' and 'student satisfaction' (Furedi, 2010; Hill, 1995), terminology that is more often associated with private sector processes. This has in turn become embedded within the discourse of UK higher education with HEIs tasked with meeting demands and improving customer satisfaction (Moore, McNeill, & Halliday, 2012). A key mechanism for improving student satisfaction was seen as meeting expectations (Thorsten, Stefan, Roediger, & Michaela, 2010) and by implication meeting student expectations became synonymous with student satisfaction. Evidence supporting a link between meeting expectations and improving satisfaction in higher education is however lacking. This study will adopt a critical approach when using taken for granted assumptions in order to gain fresh insights.

While studies may state that consumer feedback was sought to gain feedback and improve quality (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014), paradoxically, there is no clear articulation of student expectations. Students themselves are not aware of their expectations and frequently anticipate an environment that is different to the one they experience (Ramsden, 2008). Students are unaware of the demands of a university education in terms of workload, independent learning and access to resources (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Logically, arguing that a university is seeking to improve satisfaction by meeting expectations is spurious, but this premise indicates that there is an opportunity to take a fresh

look at expectations and to consider if and how they impact on satisfaction. Further data exploration is needed in order to identify the factors likely to influence the student experience without imposing predefined categories in the research design.

The introduction of higher fees had prompted concerns that expectations would increase. This view gained attention from commentators who contributed towards the characterisation of students as consumers (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). Bates and Kaye (2014) explored students' perceptions of the level of support, contact time and resources before and after the introduction of higher fees and concluded that there was minimal support for the idea that tuition fees had heightened expectations in education. They did, however, note that higher tuition fees were related to greater expectations regarding employability, a finding supported by Moore et al. (2012).

The expectation of employability in return for paying higher fees has been recognised by HEIs who have responded accordingly. Consumer demand for a better class of degree appears to have led to institutional changes. One example of this is the increase in the proportion of first-class degrees awarded since the introduction of higher fees. In his speech to Universities UK (UUK) in July 2015, Johnson stated that "*Over 70 percent of graduates now get a First or Upper Second Class (2:1), up by 7 percentage points in the past 5 years.*" The Higher Education Academy's findings (HEFCE, 2015) reported that nearly half of UK HE institutions had changed their honours-awarding rules. Jo Johnson again highlighted the increasing number of higher degrees in his speech at the UUK annual conference in 2017 (Johnson, 2017). suggesting the demand for a 'good degree' has altered the behaviour of HEIs.

As HEIs seek to retain and grow their market share of students, they have responded to student feedback (Ramsden, 2008) with for example:

- better use of ICT to complement face-to-face learning (Joint Information Systems committee 2007);
- paying more attention to student support services e.g. careers and study centres;
- investment in infrastructure providing enhanced learning spaces e.g. libraries and halls of residence;

- swifter turnaround times for assessed work;
- contractual statements about staff availability; and
- statements about contact and teaching hours.

Despite the increased attention and range of interventions, the NSS student satisfaction scores are falling. In 2018, the NSS reported 83% of students were satisfied with their course, below the 84% recorded in 2017 and 86% in 2016 (Adams, 2018).

2.3.2 Student Charter

'Consumer Charters' were launched by the Conservative government in the late 1980s and early 1990s and included the 'Patient's Charter' and the 'Citizen's Charter'. The Charter Initiative promoted customer complaints and 'customer satisfaction surveys' as a means of quality enhancement in the public sector. Student Charters and fees were introduced at about the same time in the UK encouraging a subtle change of the university offer (Naidoo et al., 2011).

Student Charters were seen by HEIs as having a pivotal role in helping to negotiate the increased fees by offering a mechanism for managing student and staff expectations. Gaffney-Rhys and Jones (2010) considered that a carefully constructed Student Charter could *"... potentially improve the service that students receive, promote the notion that a student is a member of a community, influence student expectations and thus increase student satisfaction."* Student Charters therefore sought to *"influence student expectations and thus increase student satisfaction"* (Gaffney-Rhys & Jones, 2010, p. 20).

Student Charters were designed to offer an explicit statement clarifying expectations and defining the relationship between students and universities. Including information about their offer and unique selling points facilitated choice for prospective students. Providing clear statements of students' rights and responsibilities, is seen as helpful in clarify expectations. Parallels can be drawn between the explicit, written statements provided by Student Charters and documents used to clarify and manage the employment relationship including contracts of employment.

Implicit in the rhetoric about the Student Charters is the idea that creating a written agreement will improve student expectations. The Student Charters Group (2011) suggested the following is important:

- A summary document which signposts other information e.g. to appeals and complaints procedures.
- Published by each HEI in order “*to set out the mutual expectations of universities and students.*” (p. 6)
- Developed in consultation with students, through their representative bodies, and staff.
- Provides information so that prospective students can make informed choices.
- Regularly reviewed “*to ensure that the whole student body and all HEI staff are informed and engaged.*” (p. 7)
- Act as a communication tool “*for HEIs to establish clear mutual expectations, and help monitor the student experience and how relationships are working.*” (p. 4)

These characteristics are seen for example in the Charters of the Universities. The success of the Student Charter in defining and shaping relationships will only become apparent over time as they become embedded into institutional processes.

2.3.3 Defining and Measuring the Student Experience

Researchers exploring the student experience have considered a wide variety of topics and issues based on their understanding of the concept. For example, Temple et al. (2014) conceptualise the student experience as “*the totality of a student’s interaction with the institution*” which includes: the application experience; the academic experience; the campus experience and the graduate experience (p. 3). A report commissioned for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013) takes a ‘holistic view’ of the student experience from the students’ perspective including activities which are often traditionally outside the academic student experience. They include internships, work experience, extra-curricular activities, accommodation,

facilities, a sense of community and transition experiences, arguing that these activities have a significant role in student learning.

Very specific aspects of the student experience have also been explored, for example, classroom spaces (Temple, 2008), student integration (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), distance and blended learning and e-learning (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005), student engagement (Kahu, 2013), congruence of values between students and lecturers (Telford & Masson, 2005), assessment methods (Gatfield, 1999), learning design and teaching support and how they influence and learning satisfaction and academic performance (Rienties et al., 2015). Other factors such as physical infrastructure and the quality of services from professional services and administration staff have also been identified as influencing the student experience (Douglas, Douglas, & Barnes, 2006; Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, & GrØgaard, 2002).

The academic and pedagogic quality of teaching has been the main focus of learner evaluation (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003). Student satisfaction with the learning experience remains a key concern (Kember & Ginns, 2012; Moskal, Stein, & Golding, 2015; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). A variety of evaluation instruments have been used to monitor and improve the teaching and learning experience (Arbaugh, 2014; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Rienties, 2014).

Generally, the results of studies show that learners who were more satisfied with the quality of teaching materials, assessment strategies, and workload were significantly more satisfied with the overall learning experience (Arbaugh, 2014; Rienties et al., 2015). Furthermore, long-term goals of learners (that is, qualifications and relevance of modules with learners' professional careers) were important predictors for learning satisfaction. Modules with strong content focuses rated significantly higher than modules with strong learner-centred focus e.g. requiring interaction between peers (Rienties et al., 2015).

Individually, these studies provide useful findings that are likely to increase satisfaction.

Universities have habitually collected feedback as part of their quality enhancement procedures. The QAA Subject Review used in the 1990s, involved specialist assessors visited departments then publishing a report based on observation of teaching sessions and interviews with staff and

students. The process was considered arduous and expensive (Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007) and in 2000, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) proposed to abandon this approach.

Through HEFCE, the UK Government sought to replace Subject Reviews by publishing data that was already collated by HEIs, and an agreement was reached between HEFCE and the Government to adopt an external mechanism for monitoring quality. The NSS first introduced in 2005 was chosen as the tool to collate data on student satisfaction and improve quality and is now the most widely used indicator of student satisfaction in UK Higher Education. In 2011 the 7th National Student Survey was completed by 68 per cent of students. It comprised 22 questions asking students to record their level of agreement on a five-point scale regarding their experiences of teaching, assessment, support and resources. The invitation to participate states that it should take no more than five minutes to complete.

A number of criticisms have been directed at the NSS. Lord Lipsey (2017) states that the, "*The NSS is statistical garbage*" citing evidence from the Royal Statistics Society (RSS, 2016) in response to the government's technical consultation about the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Lipsey (2017) highlights the following concerns regarding the NSS:

- It is not based on a random or representative sample of students as it only includes those who choose to complete it.
- Using the data to make calculations of statistical significance shows large margins of error.
- Results can be influenced by happenstance. For example, students may coordinate their responses to the NSS to express dissatisfaction as a result of one event.
- It fails to capture the wider benefits beyond academic results of attending university.
- It is not suitable for comparing widely different institutions.
- The limited variation of the raw scores from the student responses does not provide robust information upon which prospective students can make informed choices.

Concerns relating to the validity of the NSS pre-date its widespread use. The validity of the question that asks about 'overall satisfaction' has received significant attention (Fielding, Dunleavy, & Langan, 2010). Professor Harvey described the NSS as a "*hopelessly inadequate improvement tool*" (Gill, 2008) in his 'private capacity' letter to the Times Higher Education.

Interpreting national scale surveys at a local level requires contextual information. Students attend various types of institution including those with a research focus, teaching universities and a rising number of 'training universities' (Allen & Ainley, 2007). HEFCE cautions that their 2011 report "*is intended to be a descriptive analysis of the data and does not attempt complex analysis of the effects that student, course and institutional characteristics have on the NSS results*" (HEFCE, 2011). The NSS cannot therefore inform decisions about interventions that are likely to enhance the quality of provision.

Hewson (2011) advises caution when comparing subject groupings as these have been found to impact on the types of responses given to question. For example, mathematics students reported favourably on the fairness of their assessments (Hewson, 2011). Assessing maths is more objective than other subjects so it is unfair to compare against other subject groupings. Females are more likely to complete the NSS and are also more likely to report agreement with many of the 22 questions introducing potential bias for the gender mix of different courses (Hewson, 2011).

Universities were accused of advising students to respond in a way that artificially inflated the scores; students were reported for using the NSS strategically (Newman, 2008); and the NSS itself was criticised as not offering a true representation of the student experience and voice (Callender et al., 2014; Sabri, 2011); and piling unnecessary pressure on academics (Sabri, 2011; Williams, 2012).

As the questionnaire is only completed by students, concerns have been raised that this potentially excludes the perspective of other parties in the process. Sabri (2011) for example, suggests that this approach "*homogenises students*" (p. 657) and potentially creates a divide between students and academics. "*Academics are only relevant insofar as they provide a route to 'enhancing*

student learning" (Sabri, 2010, p. 197). Collaborative processes that are part of the student experience may be obscured by this narrow focus.

Critics argue that the NSS with additional criticism from the NUS accentuates "*student concern about the quality and timing of lecturer feedback, a concern continually pumped by NUS' campaigns on feedback to students*" (UCU, 2010, p. 4) Universities and College Union (UCU) argues that this creates an alleged 'quality deficit' resulting in HEIs adopting new strategies to manage feedback and assessment procedures (UCU, 2010).

Despite its significant limitations, the NSS remains influential and continues to dominate our understanding of the student experience. Data from the NSS feeds into the Key Information Sets (KIS) which is provided as a means to allow students to compare HEIs on a number of important aspects (Williams & Mindano, 2015). Other organisations, including the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), use data from the NSS in their reports.

Dissenting voices and critical voices against the NSS have not halted the continual cycle; students are encouraged to complete the survey. Staff are involved in the ongoing campaigns to promote the survey whilst reviewing their own practice to ensure favourable responses. Poster campaigns and media reporting ensure that there is no doubt that this is an integral part of the business of higher education. For most universities the result of this activity has been a one per cent increase in the overall satisfaction levels of their students (Williams, 2015).

2.3.4 Student Satisfaction

There is no agreed definition of what satisfaction with higher education is, although there is a consensus that student satisfaction is multi-dimensional (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995). Despite the concept of student satisfaction being poorly defined (Richardson, 2005), a variety of HEIs have adopted and publish student satisfaction measures e.g. the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991), the Student Evaluations of Educational Quality Questionnaire (Marsh, 1982). The National Student Survey (NSS) (Ashby et al., 2011;

Callender et al., 2014) is the most widely used satisfaction survey despite criticism that it fails to measure 'overall student satisfaction' (Chapter 2.3.3). Many universities, including the exemplar university in this study ask students in all years to complete the NSS questions as an internal quality assurance process.

The consequences of not meeting student expectations have been linked to an increase in attrition rates (Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley, & Campbell, 2015). Poor satisfaction is considered to cause damage to the institution's reputation. The assumption that meeting expectations will lead to positive outcomes has been adopted in an uncritical manner. Bates and Kaye (2014) for example, comment that student satisfaction has become a key indicator of success and fulfilling students' expectations is vital in enhancing satisfaction.

The empirical literature on student satisfaction highlights a number of suggestions for achieving this outcome. Patti, Tarpley, Goree, and Tice (1993) explored the link between student satisfaction and student services, facilities and programmes. Students were more likely to return to university if they perceived that there was a personal concern for their welfare. Hartman and Schmidt (1995) found that students who perceived that they were in a good intellectual environment were more positive about their level of satisfaction. Learning design has been found to influence satisfaction for online and blended courses. Rienties et al. (2015) identified that assessment procedures, career focus, teaching materials, and workload have an impact on overall student satisfaction. These studies offer information about changes that can be implemented although more information is needed to guide interventions. As noted, students are not a homogenous group (Chapter 2.3.3) and interventions may need adapting to meet individual needs. HEIs have been given responsibility for managing the student experience by bringing about institutional changes (Temple et al., 2014). Institutional wide interventions utilise resources and often involve additional expenditure and should be based on robust evidence that can confirm the type and timing of an intervention so that it has maximum impact. The idea of HEIs using NSS data to transform their students' experience would need fuller information to support interventions that aid retention, progression and offer a high-quality learning experience. The NSS fails to provide such information (Rienties et al., 2015).

Finding evidence as to the success or otherwise of interventions is important. The NSS claims to measure 'overall satisfaction' although this does not provide information about causal relationship. The NSS survey asks students to rate their satisfaction with the 'learning opportunities' and the 'teaching on the course' (Appendix A). Whilst these more specific questions probe topics further they fail to offer information that facilitate improvements. For example, asking students to rate their agreement with the statement "*Staff are good at explaining things*" (Appendix A) may be influenced by emotional factors. Titus (2008) found that learners primarily filled in learner satisfaction questionnaires based upon their emotional reaction to a 'good experience' (for example, friendliness and helpfulness of lecturer; enthusiasm of the lecturer). The NSS may therefore be capturing positive feedback about friendly and helpful staff rather than their ability to explain things.

The widespread reporting of the NSS results places pressure on HEIs to achieve good scores. The aim was to publish data that would help prospective students make informed choices about where to study and make HEIs accountable to consumers (Williams & Mindano, 2015). Results and analyses of the NSS are published on the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) website. Prospective students can compare results published on the Unistats website, influencing their choice of HEI (Bates & Kaye, 2014). Improving NSS scores may help to secure a HEIs reputation, but not bring about changes that enhance the student experience. In 2018, NSS scores are being factored into the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which continues to maintain the pressure on HEIs.

There appears to be a tendency to respond inaccurately or falsely to questions on the NSS. Response bias can be induced or caused by a number of factors. In the case of the NSS, the encouragement to respond positively calls into question its validity.

Measuring satisfaction with the learning experience is not a new activity and has received attention from HEIs as part of its quality enhancement process. Questionnaires developed to measuring satisfaction with the learning experience have received criticisms as to their appropriateness (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Moskal et al., 2015). Critics argue that outcome ratings in the NSS are influenced by encouragement to respond in a positive manner (The

Times Higher Education Supplement: May 2008). Reports suggest that students are encouraged to give high rating in order to enhance the institutions reputation which in turn will impact on their employability. Whilst such practice has been denied, it offers an example of an implicit understanding being developed between the student the HEI. In exchange for favourable ratings, students can enhance their employment opportunities. The offer does not need to be made explicit. The perception that the reputation of the organisation is linked to employment prospects is sufficient.

A major limitation of most student survey instruments is the lack of focus on elements of key learning e.g. interaction, assessment and feedback (Rienties et al., 2015). Student evaluation instruments are teacher-centred, focusing on what teachers do in the learning environment rather than what students do, how they engage and whether learning occurred (Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2012). Questionnaires do not measure all aspects of the learning experience for example, whether teachers are learner-centred (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Criticisms of the questionnaire surveys indicate that this approach may not be suitable for exploring the student learning experience.

Despite strenuous efforts, and an increase in tuition fees, the NSS results suggests that the satisfaction with the student experience remains static. The National Student Survey satisfaction scores have not increased (Havergal, 2015). In 2015 86% of 300,000 students reported being satisfied with their HE experiences, which is similar to the 2012 outcomes (Havergal, 2015).

This has prompted calls for a critical review of how the NSS data is used for quality enhancement (Rienties et al., 2015). Blame is directed towards resistance from staff who are criticised for hampering improvement in the education experience of students (Rienties, 2014). Staff have also come in for criticism at their lack of knowledge about how to use the data. The lack of improvement in satisfaction scores have led to the suggestion that there is a need for skilled professionals who can help make sense of the data (Buckingham Shum et al., 2013).

Data collection has become a key activity for universities yet interpreting and acting on the data remains a key challenge. The data collected using this approach is used to enhance the quality of the student experience. Rienties et

al. (2015, p. 18) note that institutions collect “*loads of student satisfaction data*” but acting on it is “*complex and at times cumbersome.*” In addition to the NSS being a flawed measurement, the data produced takes time and resources to interpret.

For data to improve services, more information is needed about the how learning context, learner-characteristics and learning design activities impact on learning satisfaction (Arbaugh, 2014). It is important to understand how to close the loop, so that evaluation leads to improvements (Rienties et al., 2015). Information from surveys does not offer information about causal relationships and therefore additional information is needed to improve the student experience.

Following the introduction of higher fees, an additional consideration for HEIs is whether they are providing value-for-money. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) showed students perception of value included sufficient contact hours and resources. They found that there was an expectation of developing employability skills through work placement opportunities and extra-curricular activities.

2.3.5 Conclusion and Summary of Student Experience

The student experience is a broad concept that lacks an agreed definition. Our understanding of the concept has been developed within a positivist framework that focuses on topics that are considered relevant e.g. expectations, satisfaction. The inductive approach offers an alternative way of exploring topics where little is known and there is a need to generate innovative ideas. Before discussing the approach for the current study (Chapter 3) the psychological contract is described and the rationale for using it to explore the student experience confirmed.

2.4 The Psychological Contract

This section provides a summary description of the psychological contracts historical development and highlights limitations in our understanding of its application in different contexts. This is followed by the rationale for adopting the psychological contract as a framework to explore the student experience in this study.

In summary, it highlights that our understanding of the concept remains theoretically underdeveloped mainly due to the weaknesses associated with how it has been investigated (Conway & Briner, 2005). This is primarily because psychological contract research has been dominated by one specific application - managing the employment relationship.

2.4.1 Defining the Psychological Contract

Conway and Briner (2005) note that there is “*no one authoritative statement or agreed definition of the psychological contract*” (Conway & Briner, 2005, p. 21). Definitions support empirical investigations by ensuring that researchers are exploring the same phenomenon. The variety of uses of the term in the literature indicate that researchers appear to be exploring different concepts (Millward & Hopkins, 1998) as Table 2.1 indicates. Rousseau’s definition of “*individual beliefs shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of the exchange agreement between individuals and organizations*” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9) remains the most widely used.

Table 2.1 below shows several definitions of the psychological contract.

Author(s)	Date	Psychological Contract Definition
Kotter	1973	“ <i>An implicit contract between an individual and his organization which specifies what each expects to give and receive from each other in their relationship</i> ” (p. 92).
Rousseau	1990	“ <i>...an individual’s beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations. Beliefs become contractual when the individual believes that he or she owes the employer</i> ”

		<i>certain contributions (e.g. hard work, loyalty, sacrifices) in return for certain inducements (e.g. high pay, job security)” (p. 390).</i>
Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau	1994	<i>“Employees’ psychological contracts specify the contributions that they believe they owe to their employer and the inducements that they believe are owed in return” (p. 138).</i>
Rousseau	1995	<i>“Individual beliefs shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and organizations” (p. 9).</i>
McLean Parks, Kidder & Gallagher	1998	<i>“... the idiosyncratic set of reciprocal expectations held by employees concerning their obligations (i.e. what they will do for the employer) and their entitlements (i.e. what they expect to receive in return)” (p. 698).</i>
Guest & Conway	2002	<i>“... the perceptions of both parties to the employment relationship – organisation and individual – of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship” (p. 22).</i>
Tekleab & Taylor	2003	<i>“...the psychological contract has been conceptualized as only one party’s – the employee’s – perceptions of the organization’s obligations to the employee and the latter’s obligations to the organization” (p. 585).</i>
Schalk & Roe	2007	<i>“In our view, the existence of a psychological contract implies that the employee is in a certain state of commitment; he or she is willing to accept work roles and tasks offered by the organization and</i>

		<i>to carry them out in accordance with certain standards” (p. 168).</i>
Colquitt, Baer, Long & Halvorsen- Ganepola	2014	<i>“A psychological contract reflects an exchange partner’s belief that certain benefits are promised by another, in exchange for certain contributions on his or her part” (p. 603).</i>
Kraak, Lunardo, Herrbach & Durrieu	2016	<i>“Psychological contracts refer to individual beliefs, created by the organization, that relate to the terms of an exchange agreement between employees and their organization” (p. 109).</i>

Table 2.1 Definitions of the Psychological Contract

A lack of agreed definition or consensus about what the psychological contract is assessing has led some to question the scientific validity of the concept (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; Guest, 1998a).

Earlier definitions of the psychological contract emphasise beliefs about expectations (Kotter, 1973; Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, & Solley, 1962; Schein, 1965). Later definitions emphasised beliefs about promises and obligations (e.g. Herriot, Manning, & Kidd, 1997; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). Rousseau (1989) conceptualises the psychological contract as consisting of promissory-based obligations which are more specific than the earlier expectation focused definitions and this set her conceptualisation apart (Roehling, 1997). Studies of the psychological contract have tended to maintain that promissory focus (e.g. Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1995, 1996) but debate still exists around the definition and meaning of promises. Conway and Briner (2005) ask whether promises can be separated from obligations and expectations. This conceptual confusion needs clarification.

There have been various attempts to categorise the psychological contract according to different typologies. One approach has been to categorise the

contents as being either transactional or relational which are broadly similar to the ideas of economic and social exchange (Conway & Briner, 2005).

Transactional exchanges include hours worked, range of duties and levels of responsibility exchanged for rewards that include pay, working conditions, and opportunities for promotion. Relational aspects include loyalty and commitment to the organisation and management in exchange for having a sense of belonging and opportunities for input into processes and procedures (Maguire, 2002).

2.4.2 Historical Development of the Psychological Contract

The psychological contract has been around for almost 60 years and has gained prominence as an important concept for understanding employment relationships and workplace behaviours (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest, 2004; Levinson et al., 1962; Rousseau, 1995; Schein, 1978, 1980). A historical overview confirms that the term 'psychological contract' has been used in a variety of ways. The term has been used as an explanatory construct and as an analytic framework for investigating and managing the employer-employee relationships (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Millward & Herriot, 2000). It has predominantly been used as a metaphor for describing the contemporary employment relationship (Makin, Cooper, & Cox, 1996). It has gained status as a theoretical construct which supports hypothetical and empirical investigations (Conway & Briner, 2005), providing a way of exploring perceptual boundaries beyond that set by formalised legal documents or employment contracts (Rousseau, 1995).

Menninger (1958) did not formally use the term 'psychological contract' until the reissue of his book *Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique* in 1973 (Menninger & Holzman, 1973). Menninger considered that psychotherapist and patient were influenced by both conscious and unconscious processes. He suggested that the continuation of the contract is dependent on both parties feeling satisfied, although the meaning of 'satisfied' is not defined. 'Feelings' have been largely ignored in the more current literature and, as noted above, the psychological contract is used almost exclusively to explore the employment relationship.

The idea of 'exchange' features prominently in the early conceptualisation of the psychological contract and remains a current focus of interest. Psychological contract theory is based on broader theories of social exchange (Blau, 1964) which propose that social relationships involve both explicit and implicit obligations and expectations. Individuals exchange their contributions for inducements provided by the organisation (Barnard, 1938; March & Simon, 1958). Reciprocity is central to social exchange theory which involves mutually rewarding exchanges over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960). Favourable responses shape the likelihood of the behaviour continuing.

Whilst Menninger is acknowledged as describing the processes involved in the psychological contract, Argyris (1960) and Levinson et al. (1962) are credited with first using the term 'psychological contract', based on their research in the North American manufacturing sector.

Argyris (1960, p. 97) described the psychological contract as a "*hypothesised relationship*" that evolved between employees and "*their foreman.*" Argyris (1960) considered that managing the relationship could improve productivity (Taylor & Tekleab, 2004). This conceptualisation of the 'psychological work contract' (Argyris, 1960) focused on tangible and primarily economic resources that were agreed and exchanged by both employees and their managers (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008). Fulfilling the needs of employees by for example, providing acceptable wages and job security was seen as a way to achieve higher productivity.

"Since the foremen realize the employees in this system will tend to produce optimally under passive leadership, and since the employees agree, a relationship may be hypothesized to evolve between the employees and the foreman which might be called the "psychological work contract". The employee will maintain high production, low grievances, etc, if the foremen guarantee and respect the norms of the employee informal culture (i.e. let the employees alone, make certain they make adequate wages, and have secure jobs). This is precisely what the employees need."
(Argyris, 1960, p. 97)

Levinson et al. (1962) developed their interpretation of the psychological contract using a case study of a utility company and listening to individuals describe expectations and obligations. Levinson et al. (1962) applied

Menninger's (1958) conceptualisation of the "*psychotherapy contract*," to the work setting (Schalk & Roe, 2007). Intangible resources were exchanged alongside tangible rewards. For example, employees who exceeded production targets were rewarded with a bonus payment and given more autonomy in their work schedule.

Menninger (1958) proposed that contractual relationships were important alongside tangible resources and Levinson et al. (1962) utilised this understanding to explain the relationship between employees and their managers. Levinson et al. (1962) defined the psychological contract as "*a series of mutual expectations of which the parties to the relationship may not themselves be even dimly aware but which nonetheless govern their relationship to each other*" (Levinson et al., 1962, p. 21). These expectations are largely unspoken, implicit, and frequently an antecedent to the employment relationship. For example, there is an expectation that the employee will arrive fit and appropriately dressed for work and the employer will provide workplace facilities (light, heat, canteen, bathrooms, equipment) that enables the worker to do the contracted job. The two parties may not be aware of the duty-bound obligations that they have towards each other as they are considered to be driven by unconscious motives.

Levinson et al (1962) work highlights the role of reciprocity and the effect of anticipated satisfaction of expectations (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008). Employees are seen as being more productive if their needs are met. Levinson et al. (1962) sees these expectations as determining the relationship between the individual and the organisation and in doing so make employee actions predictable (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995; McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Roehling (1997) credits Levinson et al. (1962) with explicitly recognising the dynamic relationship of the psychological contract: that contracts evolve or change over time as a result of changing circumstances of each party.

Similarly, Schein (1965) emphasised the importance of the psychological contract concept in understanding and managing behaviour in organisations. He argued that expectations may not be written into any formal agreement but operate powerfully as determinants of behaviour. Unlike Levinson et al. (1962) however, he considered that the employee and the organisation needed to match expectations in order to achieve positive outcomes e.g. job satisfaction,

and performance. Schein (1965) highlighted the importance of understanding both the employees and employers' perceptions.

This early phase of the development of the psychological contract shows a divergence between contributors. Argyris (1960) focuses on tangible resources e.g. tools, heating, whilst Levinson et al. (1962) and Schein (1965) included both tangible and intangible resources e.g. attention from the manager, being included in conversations. Levinson et al. (1962) viewed expectations as having obligations whereby each party feels 'duty bound' to fulfil those expectations. Levinson et al. (1962) considered these expectations were based on needs (Conway & Briner, 2005). Schein (1965) considered that matching expectations between the employer and the organisation was of primary importance. Schein (1980, p. 99) later stressed the importance of including the perspective of both the employee and employer: "*We cannot understand the psychological dynamics if we look only to the individual's motivations or only to the organizational conditions and practices. The two interact in a complex fashion that demands a systems approach, capable of handling interdependent phenomena.*" This important point has mostly been ignored with studies focusing on the views of the employees (Conway & Briner, 2009; Guest, 1998a).

This early phase in the development of the psychological contract provided a framework for understanding the 'hidden' aspects of the relationship between organisations and their employees (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall (2008) note that the early phase conveys different emphases and a lack of acknowledgement of how one conceptualisation relates to another. These ambiguities remain a source of debate within the field.

Interest in the psychological contract in UK and the USA surged in the 80s and 90s at a time when the economic downturn led to restructuring, downsizing, mergers and new attitudes and behaviours from employees. Ways to explore and manage changing employment relationships gained prominence. Rousseau's conceptualisation of the concept provided an opportunity to consider the employment relationship in a new way.

2.4.3 Rousseau's Conceptualisation of the Psychological Contract

Rousseau (1989) work is widely acknowledged as being of the greatest importance since Levinson's and Schein's, in promoting a new empirical consideration of the concept. Creating a link between the theoretical construct and practical outcomes provided researchers with the opportunity to explore changing employment relationships in the 80s and 90s. Changing industrial relations in the period saw a move from the 'task-orientated' approach to a more 'people-orientated' approach. Organisations were seeking ways to improve worker satisfaction to maximise outputs. The psychological contract offered a way to account for difficulties in the employment relationship (Noer, 2009) and was considered a helpful means of explaining the changing nature of the employment relationship (Judy, 2006).

Rousseau's reconceptualization placed greater emphasis on the promissory nature of the psychological contract defining it as "*an individual's beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations*" that arises within the context of the relationship between an organization and an employee (Rousseau, 1990, p. 390). This belief is based on the perception that an exchange of promises has been made to which the parties are bound. For example, employees may hold the belief that hard work will result in promotion. Psychological contracts are seen to encompass the perceptions that employees have of both the implicit and explicit promises that exist between them and their organizations and their perceptions of what each party is entitled to receive as a function of these promises (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Schalk & Roe, 2007). Key issues here include the belief that a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it, "*binding the parties to some sort of reciprocal obligations*" (Conway & Briner, 2005, p. 23).

Rousseau highlighted that promises are frequently exchanged, inferred and perceived by one or other party, including beliefs about performance requirements, job security, training, compensation, and career development (Rousseau, 1989). Rousseau considered that these promises existed purely "*in the eye of the beholder*" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123) indicating the individual, subjective nature of the construct. Rousseau (1989) considers that obligations arise out of a perception that a promise has been made to commit to a future action (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). She argues that there is a belief that

“contributions will be reciprocated and that ...the actions of one party are bound with those of another” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 128). This idea of reciprocation is based on Blau’s (1964) idea of the need for balance in a relationship. If an imbalance occurs, then attempts will be made to restore it (Rousseau 1989). It is unclear how individuals make inferences about what is due to them from the organisation. This information can be held at an implicit level and often employees may not be aware that they hold an understanding until a breach takes place. Exploring student expectations will provide useful information regarding this topic.

Psychological contracts manifest themselves in individuals' mental representations (schemas) of their relationship to their organization (Rousseau, 1998). Because psychological contracts are mental representations, having to do with mutual obligations, they are thought help employees make sense out of a complex employment relationship (Shore & Tetrick, 1994).

Rousseau (1989) considers the extent to which perceived obligations are fulfilled as the essence of the psychological contract. According to Rousseau, perceived obligations set the parameters of the exchange whereas fulfilment of obligations captures behaviour within the exchange. The ongoing exchange relationship between employee and employer has been characterised as an ongoing repetitive cycle of providing benefits that in turn induce an obligation to be reciprocated (Rousseau, 1995).

Rousseau’s conceptualisation considers that psychological contracts are formed by an individual’s perception of observable behaviour rather than formed by deeper level needs. This conceptualisation suggests the formation of psychological contracts takes place when an individual perceives something. It does not explain how long the formation activity takes and this activity might take, and what the key influences might be (Conway & Briner, 2005).

Therefore, whilst formation of psychological contracts is an important concept to understand, there is limited empirical evidence to understand the mechanics of how this happens (Conway & Briner, 2005). This neglected area will be considered in the current study by exploring key influences in the formation of the student psychological contract.

Rousseau's definition of the psychological contract is not without its critics (e.g. Arnold, 1996; Guest, 1998b). They do not reject the concept in favour of earlier definitions but call for further research to confirm if psychological contract theory can account for organisational outcomes.

2.4.4 Key Debates Around Psychological Contract

There is no agreed definition of the psychological contract and debate ensues around its key features. The following section summarises the main concerns in order to provide information about key areas that this study needs to address. It is important to gain a broad understanding of the psychological contract to inform the current study.

2.4.4.1 How Has the psychological contract been researched?

Our understanding of the psychological contract is limited mainly due to the methods used to explore it (Conway & Briner, 2005). The lack of an agreed definition (Table 2.1) has resulted in researchers exploring different topics. Questionnaire surveys are the most commonly used method in psychological contract research. These are typically conducted using large samples often from a single organisation to measure specific variables such as content and breach (Conway & Briner, 2009). The majority of studies collect data at one point in time and focus on the employee's perception. Psychological contract measures are formed in terms of promises and obligations (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). Conway and Briner (2005) identify a number of limitations that apply to most psychological contract studies: limitations of questionnaires that ask participants to recall, select and summarise events from the past; the wording of questionnaires and the limitations of self-reports to measure outcomes of the psychological contract. Cross-sectional questionnaire surveys are not suitable for studying the psychological contract and its continued use hampers theoretical and empirical advances being made (Conway & Briner, 2009).

2.4.4.2 What are the contents of the psychological contract?

The psychological contract is thought to comprise of innumerable elements (Freese & Schalk, 2008). The employee and employer may have different views as to which elements are relevant with respect to the employment relationship. Much of what is included in the psychological contract is unlikely to have been specifically discussed; contents are inferred only and are subject to change as both individual and organisational expectations change (Rousseau, 1990; Sims, 1992).

2.4.4.3 Psychological contract formation and maintenance

Limited studies have considered how psychological contracts are formed and maintained. Psychological contract research has been dominated with studies that look at how employment relationship breaks down or is 'violated' or 'breached' (Conway & Briner, 2005; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). A breach occurs when one party to the psychological contract perceives the other to have failed to fulfil promises (Conway & Briner, 2005). Reciprocity is central in psychological contracts. Morrison and Robinson (1997, p. 248) argue that *"violation comes not only from the organization's presumed failure to reciprocate goods and services as promised but also from its presumed failure to live up to the norms and standards of reciprocity and goodwill that govern the relationship."*

Breach studies have identified that employees respond to attitudinal and behavioural withdrawal from the organisation (e.g. Conway & Briner, 2005). Psychological contract breach has been found to adversely impact job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and intentions to resign. The potential importance of these areas for organisational performance may in part account for the focus on breach. In addition, violation produces more dramatic outcomes neglecting the process of negotiating the employment relationship (Conway & Briner, 2005).

Apart from reactions to breach, there is limited information about how the psychological contracts affect behaviour (Conway & Briner, 2005). Interest in the psychological contract surged due to interest in managing the employment relationship. Further information is needed to understand the behavioural consequences of psychological contracts.

Early explanations considered the extent to which an individual perceived a reasonable 'match' between that they were offered and their own contributions (Schein, 1965). In contrast, Rousseau proposed 'violation' as the key mechanism that linked the psychological contract to various outcomes. Violation happens when an employee feels that their contribution has not been met with the expected outcomes (e.g. extra work does not lead to additional recognition or recompense). An assumption is made that feelings are acted upon, but more research is needed.

Individuals hold a basic psychological contract when they enter an organisation which develops over time (e.g. De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2005; Rousseau, 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). The pre-entry psychological contract can be based on previous work experience, pre-entry information and individual emotions (Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011). Initial formation of the psychological contract includes information seeking (Rousseau, 1995; Thomas & Anderson, 1998).

Organisational factors that shape the psychological contract have received relatively little attention but expressions of organisational policy (Rousseau, 1995), recruitment activities (Shore & Tetrick, 1994) and co-workers (Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011) are likely to affect the formation process (Sherman & Morley, 2015). What is notably absent from this list is the impact of social media which is also likely to have an impact.

Individual factors that are considered to influence the process of psychological contract formation have received more attention. Individual factors are considered to influence how work information is interpreted and what employees seek from an employer. For example, 'conscientiousness' predicts a preference for a relational psychological contract information (Raja, Johns, & Ntalianis, 2004) and work values predict information seeking behaviours (e.g. De Vos et al., 2005). Individual predispositions are therefore seen as instrumental in how employees perceive the relationship with their organisation and also how they act within the framework of that relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). This research intends to focus on the individual nature of the psychological contract.

2.4.4.4 How does the psychological contract change over time?

Limited information is available about how the psychological contract changes over time as the majority of studies have only focused on one point in time (Conway & Briner, 2005). Levinson et al. (1962) attributed changes occurring as a result of the changing circumstances of either party. Other factors that may prove influential include events that happen outside of the work environment. An employee who experiences financial hardship through personal life events may focus attention on financial rewards rather than feeling valued.

One study that involved the use of diaries completed by participants over time (Conway & Briner, 2002) showed that both broken promises and exceeded promises occurred frequently. The emphasis on breach may not reflect the experiences of employees. Rather than focusing on breach or asking about promises the grounded theory approach used for this study places participants centre stage allowing them to include topics that they consider relevant.

2.4.4.5 Who is the 'other party'?

A key question in psychological contract literature is who is considered the other party (Millward & Brewerton, 1999). Reciprocity is considered an important aspect of exchange relationships (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). Research has mostly focussed on the employee side neglecting the employer perspective. The few studies that explore the employer's perspective (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 1998) provide useful insights into the managerial view supporting the call for exploring the perspectives of both parties in the exchange relationship.

Kotter (1973) argued against the anthropomorphising of the organisation arguing that individuals and not organisations hold perceptions. This view suggests that psychological contract is only held by employees and not organisations. The influence of different representatives of the organisation such as the human resources manager or the employee's line manager on the psychological contract lacks rigorous investigation. Other organisational influences such as promotional material and informal comments from people in the organisation are likely to influence the psychological contract. How organisations influence employees is unclear (Herriot et al., 1997).

As noted above, the psychological contract was initially used to explore psychotherapeutic relationships before being applied to the employment relationship. This narrow application of the concept continues with few studies applying the concept to other relationships. One exception is an exploration of student psychological contracts (Koskina, 2011). Applying the concept to a different setting will provide further information about the psychological contract.

2.4.4.6 How does the psychological contract differ from other contracts?

Attempts to define the psychological contract have led to consideration of how it differs from and overlaps with other types of contract (Conway & Briner, 2009). Whilst there are no definitive answers, the debate highlights a key issue regarding the explicit and implicit elements of the psychological contract. How far do promises have to be implicit and unstated to be part of the psychological contract? (Conway & Briner, 2005). What influence do explicit contracts have on the psychological contract? The explicit employment contract is likely to be shaped by legislation and detailed in a document signed by the employee detailing issues such as working hours, salary and benefit plans. Other, implicit, aspects of the employment relationship are likely to be confined to the subconscious (Spindler, 1994). The degree to which promises are implicit has research and practical implications (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005).

2.5 Why use the Psychological contracts to explore the student experience?

The previous sections have highlighted that the psychological contract lacks definition (Chapter 2.4.1), there is more debate than certainty about its core features (Chapter 2.4.4), and that there is a “*scarcity of research on the concept, origins and experiences of student psychological contracts in tertiary education*” (Koskina, 2011, p. 1). Given this uncertainty, the concept was chosen for this study because it provides a:

1. *Novel way to explore changing relationships.*

Psychological contracts helped to explore the new employment relationship that developed between employees and their organisations

(Argyris, 1960). Parallels can be drawn with the changing relationship that students have with Higher Education Institutions. For example, students are considered as customers (Longden, 2006).

2. *Flexible framework that considers topics that are considered influential in the student experience (Chapter 2.3.3).*

The psychological contract considers the exchange process between two parties and includes consideration of explicit understanding e.g. written contracts and implicit perceptual understanding e.g. informal agreements.

2.6 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of a review of the literature conducted to provide a summary of how the student experience is described and explored. The review highlighted limitations in our current understanding of both the student experience and the psychological contract due to the dominance of positivist, deductive approaches. Student Charters were introduced to manage expectations but evidence as to their impact is not available. The psychological contract offers a new way to explore the student experience. While the concept remains under-developed, it can be applied as a sensitising concept to explore a range of topics considered relevant to the student experience e.g. relationship between students and HEIs, what is exchanged between staff and students. The methodology and methods for the study will be described in Chapter 3.

3 Methodology

“The complexities of validating qualitative research need not be due to a weakness of qualitative methods, but on the contrary, may rest upon their extraordinary power to reflect and conceptualize the nature of the phenomenon investigated, to capture the complexity of the social reality. The validation of qualitative research becomes intrinsically linked to the development of a theory of social reality.” (Kvale, 1989).

3.1 Introduction

The literature review (Chapter 2) confirms that our understanding of the student experience has been developed within a positivist framework which in turn has been influenced by a neo-liberal agenda. Charmaz (2006) argues that *“positivism emphasises objectivity; generality; and one unitary truth serves to reduce the rich complexities of human experience”* (p. 5). Similarly, positivist approaches to exploring the student experience assumes there is an objective truth that can be measured which has led to the use of large cross-sectional survey methods which focus on specific aspects of the student experience. The literature review confirmed that empirical studies which claim to look at the student experience are often selective and focus on specific aspects of the phenomena. The methods used to explore the student experience have potentially limited our understanding of it. Alternative methodologies and methods that are suited to explore the phenomenon under investigation will be discussed and the rationale for using constructivist grounded theory confirmed.

The first part of this chapter confirms the ontological and epistemological assumptions that provide the rationale for the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2006). The second part of this chapter provides information about the study approach and details the way that data collection was planned to ensure that the study results are trustworthy. The research design reflects the research aims, questions and epistemological understandings which are appropriate to this study.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations - Ontology and Epistemology

This section addresses the ontologies and epistemologies that underpin this study. Epistemology is concerned with “*How we know what we know*” (Crotty, 1998 p. 8) or “*the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known*” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 201). Ontology is concerned with “*the study of being*” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10) or “*The nature of reality*” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). Acknowledging these is important as they influence and inform the methodological framework, and how the data is collected and analysed (Birks & Mills, 2015; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The ontology and epistemology adopted in this research considers that knowledge is not static, but is always emerging and transforming, and is interpreted by both observer and participant.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that the question of paradigm is a fundamental starting point to guide research enquiry that should come before the choice of methods. A paradigm or worldview is defined as a basic set of beliefs that guides action (Creswell, 2009, p. 6; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). These underlying assumptions guide the research strategies and methods for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The research design for this study involved the “*intersection of philosophy, strategies of action and specific methods*” (Creswell, 2009, p. 5).

Four major interpretative paradigms structure qualitative research; positivist and postpositivist; constructivist-interpretive; critical and feminist post-structural (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22) Of these, the constructivist-interpretive paradigm was chosen for this study. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (many possible realities), a subjectivist epistemology (understandings are co-constructed by the researcher and research participant) and naturalistic (non-experimental) methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, pp. 26-27).

3.2.1 Assumptions that Underpin the Chosen Methodology

“...at every point in our research – in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers - we inject a host of assumptions. These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions

shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves) can really define what our research has been or what it is now saying.” (Crotty, 1998, p. 17).

Crotty’s view that we, as researchers, enter the research process with our own assumptions about the world and beliefs about how knowledge is created are relevant to my approach to this study.

Exploring the experiences of students incorporates subjectivist points of view. These experiences will include a variety of different perspectives, all of which are valid and should be considered. Subjectivism research aims to capture the multiplicity of perspectives, and modelling them forces recognition of differences and similarities (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that qualitative research is appropriate to use when the methods are:

- complementary to the preferences and personal experiences of the researcher;
- employed to explore areas about which little is known; and
- congruent with the nature of the research problem.

These three considerations are relevant to the current study; my personal preference for exploring experiences is qualitative. This approach is congruent with the individual and subjective nature of the psychological contract about which there is relatively little known.

Miles and Huberman (1994) expressed an expanded position and indicated that qualitative research is conducted to:

- confirm previous research on a topic;
- provide more in-depth detail about something that is already known;
- gain a new perspective or a new way of viewing something; and
- expand the scope of an existing study.

This position matches the aims of this projects and confirms that a qualitative approach has a key role to play in exploring student psychological contracts. An

exploratory investigation was appropriate to generate new lines of enquiry thus providing insights into a relatively unknown topic; student psychological contracts.

The philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the positivist paradigm perceive 'knowledge' as identifiable, objective and therefore quantifiable predominantly using questionnaires: "*there is a reality out there to be studied, captured and understood*" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9). Positivism research philosophy includes a variety of interpretations but adopts the position that only knowledge gained through observation, and measurement is valid. The researcher role is to collate and interpret information in an objective manner.

The choice of research paradigm was influenced by my beliefs and feelings about the world and how it can be understood. My worldview, or ontological perspective, has been shaped by a variety of experiences. My own view is that capturing experiences using a positivist approach would fail to capture the variety and subtlety of the subjective and individual phenomenon.

3.3 Why Grounded Theory

"If someone wanted to know whether one drug is more effective than another, then a double blind clinical trial would be more appropriate than grounded theory study. However, if someone wanted to know what it was like to be a participant in a drug study [..], then he or she might sensibly engage in a grounded theory project or some other type of qualitative study." (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 40).

The aim of this study is to explore experiences, perceptions and feelings rather than confirm the efficacy of an intervention to improve the student experience, hence the selection of the qualitative, grounded theory approach. It supports the aims and objectives of this research project because of the method's capacity to interpret complex phenomena (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003); its accommodation of social issues (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); its appropriateness for socially constructed experiences (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003); its imperative for emergence (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); its absence from the constraints of a priori knowledge (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss,

1967); and the method's ability to fit with different types of researchers (Martin & Turner, 1986).

Grounded theory can provide additional value when literature fails to support the theoretical evolution of phenomena (Ellis & Levy, 2009). By taking this innovative approach we can hope to tease out relationships that the conventional, large scale quantitative surveys omit. Participants can describe feelings and actions and in doing so provide information that can contribute to our understanding of psychological contracts. Participant's accounts over time can be used to explore how psychological contracts influence behaviour, a topic which has received limited attention to date (Chapter 2.4.4).

Grounded theory methodology was selected and shares the following characteristics with other qualitative methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), which correspond to those of this study:

- focus on everyday life experiences;
- valuing participants' perspectives;
- enquiry as interactive process between researcher and respondents; and
- primarily descriptive and relying on people's words.

These points resonated for the current study. As highlighted in the literature review (Chapter 2), studies on the psychological contract focus on contents, violation and breach. Incorporating everyday experiences broadens the scope and matches the inductive aim of this research.

The research questions emphasised exploring subjective meaning and extending theory thus favouring a qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Silverman, 1993) and the use of methods requiring guided introspection such as the semi-structured interview (Jones, 1985; King, 1994; Mishler, 1986). These arguments support the case for using qualitative methods.

The approach adopted to conduct this research recognises the complex and multifaceted nature of student psychological contracts. A full conceptual understanding requires the grappling of many interlaced and overlapping issues and themes many of which have not been explored. Grounded theory methodology seeks to explain phenomena based on empirical data. New

theories consist of interrelated concepts rather than relying on testing existing theories. Grounded theory allows the researcher to inductively develop theory from interpreting the data generated by a study of the phenomena that the theory represents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.4 Why use Constructivist Grounded Theory?

My philosophical position is situated in a constructivist grounded theory orientation which involves an epistemologically subjective and an ontologically relativistic stance. A relativist stance assumes that theoretical analyses derived from the grounded theory process “*are interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reporting’s of it*” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 206). Meaning is constructed through the qualitative researcher’s interpretive understandings, an emic perspective that assumes a relativist and reflexive stance toward the data (Charmaz, 2009). This takes account of multiple realities which allows for consideration of the individual and subjective experiences of the psychological contracts that exist in the “*eye of the beholder*” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123).

Charmaz (2006) emphasises that the positivist assumptions of neutrality and impartiality implicit in earlier grounded theory disregard the presence of the researcher within the research process. Constructivist grounded theory places the researcher as co-creator of meaning “constructing” rather than “discovering” meaning as put forward by (Glaser, 2002).

Constructivist grounded theory researchers view their work as a construction or co-construction (with research participants) through the researcher’s interpretation of the participants descriptions. Psychological contracts require a degree of interpretation to decide if the participant is talking about something that relates to their psychological contract or something else. It was assumed that participants in this study would be new to the phenomenon of psychological contracts and a therefore a joint interpretation would not be possible.

Interpreting what was and what was not psychological contract information, and accessing the implicit understanding held by participants, could only be achieved by using my ‘privileged’ perspective. Acknowledging and fully accepting this position enabled me to incorporate this into the analysis and this is explored further in the section describing analysis of data (Chapter 3.6).

This approach has attracted criticism since such an interpretation is dependent on the researcher's view (Charmaz, 2006) suggesting that the views of the researcher are privileged above those of participants. Whilst acknowledging this criticism, on balance the benefits of using this approach outweigh the concerns.

Constructivist grounded theory focuses on social process and interactions (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was appropriate for the current study as social exchange theory has been identified as an important theoretical basis of the psychological contract (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1989). Constructivist grounded theory provides the basis for considering exchanges and other types of interactions between students and lecturers.

The constructivist approach grounded theory requires the researcher to remain flexible and to adopt an emergent approach to the data (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is suitable for the current study, allowing adjustments to be made in line with new information (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In summary, the reasons for adopting a qualitative approach and using constructivist grounded theory in particular are:

1. *The central role of the researcher in the analysis process and theory construction due to its constructivist epistemological assumptions.* Proponents of classical grounded theory recommend ignoring prior knowledge (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whilst advocates of constructivist grounded theory allows the researcher to use prior knowledge. This prior knowledge would be central in deciding what codes to use, what questions to ask and how the data is interpreted.

2. *Emergence is facilitated by the researcher who is not a "distant observer"* (Charmaz, 2000, p. 178). My knowledge of psychological contracts was an important feature throughout all the stages of the research process and particularly in relation to analysing the more implicit aspects of psychological contracts.

3. *Flexible approach to methods which allows for creativity and responsiveness to new and unanticipated data.* Little is known about the student psychological contract therefore it is important to engage flexibly.

4. *Initial and focused coding* which facilitates an understanding of the meaning behind the narratives and “*clarifies and sharpens analysis but avoid imposing a forced framework on it with them*” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 66).

5. *The end product of constructivist grounded theory is not specified: “the finished work is a construction – yours”* (Charmaz, 2006, p. x1). My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world not an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2006, p10).

Following the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted to facilitate the opportunity for participants to raise topics relevant to them and to tap into their individual, personal accounts (Charmaz, 2006).

3.5 Summary of the Data Collection Process

Data collection comprised three phases that took place over a three-year period from May 2012 (staff interviews) to June 2015 (final student interviews). The phases and activities for collecting data are summarised in the below (Table 3.1). Involving both staff and students in the initial stages provided an opportunity to explore the exchange relationship and consider what is exchanged. Nine staff were recruited for phase one (individual interviews) and included academics from different subject disciplines, senior managers and staff from the students' union. Phase two progressed eight months later which included thirty-two first-year undergraduates from a variety of courses. Phase three comprised a series of one-to-one interviews with students who were recruited from the focus groups. Interviews took place in October 2013 (n = 15), March 2014 (n = 13) and June 2015 (n = 11) and offered an opportunity to explore changes in student psychological contracts. At each stage, the data were fully transcribed and coded using the three-step approach advocated by Charmaz (2006): initial coding, focused coding and constant comparative methods. QSR NVivo 11 software was used to organise and code the data.

Phase	Time	Participants	Rationale
Phase 1: Staff Interviews	May 2012	9 members of staff	Gain information about the staff perspective e.g. what is on offer, what messages do staff promote?
Phase 2: Student Focus groups	January 2013	36 students 7 groups	Initial exploration to identify topics relevant to students. Important to consider how students talk about their experience, the terms they use and what they include. Identify areas to explore in more depth in the follow up interviews.
Phase 3: Student Interviews	October 2013 March 2014 June 2015	15 Students 13 Students 11 students	Exploration of key topics over time e.g. what happens to expectations as students progress through university? What is the everyday lived experience of the student psychological contract?

Table 3.1 Key Dates for Focus Groups and Interviews

Table 3.1 shows that data collection take place at different times throughout the student journey. The focus groups took place during the first semester when students were relatively new. The first set of individual interviews took place at the start of the second year whilst the third round of interviews took place 6 months later at the end of the second year. The final round of individual interviews took place at the end of the third year. Students in this phase include those about to graduate (n = 8) and students who returned from taking a year out (n = 3) either as part of a work placement year or a gap year.

3.5.1 Aims of the Study

The literature review (Chapter 2) highlighted the need for longitudinal studies that would provide insights into the unfolding nature of student psychological contracts. A longitudinal, qualitative grounded theory research methodology was therefore selected to provide an understanding of student psychological contracts (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constructivist grounded theory was considered appropriate due to its focus on social processes and interactions which would allow exploration of the exchange process through which psychological contracts are developed (Conway & Briner, 2005; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Rousseau, 2001). Charmaz's (2003) version of grounded theory "*assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and viewed, and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings*" (p. 250). This approach was central in the study design as it provided the opportunity to develop an understanding of student psychological contracts at the university that is grounded in the data.

In designing the data collection process to meet the thesis aims, it was important to also consider and be able to evaluate whether the psychological contract is an appropriate lens to evaluate and describe the student experience.

3.5.2 Ethical Approval

Research into student psychological contracts may appear to be a seemingly innocuous experience. I was however aware of the potential for the unexpected and anticipated issues that might arise. The following section provides details of the ethical procedures through the study design and execution phases (Polit & Beck, 2004). Formal ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by Plymouth University Ethics Committee in adherence with the Research Ethics Policy (Appendix B).

Informed consent was sought by ensuring that individuals involved in the study had sufficient information about the nature of the study. The information sheet and consent form were sent via email in advance along with contact details to give participants the opportunity to ask further questions (Appendix C). The information was also provided verbally at the start of each focus group and interview giving opportunities to ask further questions (Appendix C1). Forms

were signed after participants verbally confirmed their consent. It was anticipated that student participants might talk about negative events relating to their experience as a student. An information sheet signposting a variety of support services was created that would be given to participants if appropriate. Files were held securely either in a locked filing cabinet or on password-protected hard drive. Back up cloud storage was also password protected.

Prior to formally commencing the interviews, participants were reminded about their right to withdraw at any time without needing to give an explanation. Informed consent was sought each time a student took part in an interview (phase three) to ensure that they were fully aware of their right to withdraw.

There are ethical issues that are specific to focus groups. Focus group participants were advised that once the focus group had started, they could choose not to speak but could not leave the room until the completion of the focus group. Absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed in focus groups of this nature. Participants may disclose things about themselves to each other not just the researcher and may talk to each other about topics that came up after the group has ended (Smith, 1995). Anonymity was not, therefore, promised to focus group participants. Another potential ethical concern is the intensity of the interaction of the group which may lead participants to over-disclose (Morgan, 1993). Participants were therefore told about the potential for this to happen in order to alleviate any fear (Corey, 2011), and encourage self-regulation. In one focus group, participants discussed a student who was not part of the study. In this case, the discussion was gently steered towards another topic and this information was excluded from transcription.

Confidentiality and anonymity issues were explained to participants in the consent forms and verbally explained prior to focus groups and interviews. The transcriptions were given an identifying number, and names or other identifying features were removed or altered to preserve anonymity. I had considered giving participants pseudonyms but found it difficult to find appropriate names. When thinking about the participants during the process analysis their names came to mind. Using a pseudonym would have interrupted this process. Allen and Wiles (2016) recognise the difficulties inherent in allocating pseudonyms to confer anonymity suggesting it has a “*psychological meaning*” for the “*content and processes of research*” (p. 2).

Student focus group participants were originally told about the study by their lecturers. To avoid any sense of coercion and to address potential concerns about confidentiality, participants were sent an email confirming the nature of the study and explaining confidentiality. Confidence that students had understood their rights were provided by their behaviour; one participant emailed to explain she had decided not to take part as she wanted to prioritise a visit to her friend; another group explained that their colleague was not coming as he had decided to go home early. Students in one group talked openly regarding their concerns regarding their course suggesting that they felt reassured about their comments being confidential.

Confidence that participants felt comfortable with being interviewed came from informal feedback from Participant S10 who remarked how cathartic he had found the experience. Participants S2 and S7 said that they were looking forward to their third interview. The relatively high retention rate is also testimony to participants finding the experience to be positive. Of the thirty-two students who took part in focus groups, fifteen agreed to take part in follow up interviews. Of these fifteen students, eleven took part in all three interviews.

3.5.3 Description of Study Site

The university was selected for the current study as it offers features relevant to the current study. The literature review (Chapter 2.4) identified contact time and employability as key features of the student experience which were, therefore, likely to form part of student psychological contracts. The selected university's publicity notes a high contact rate (34% of time spent in lectures or seminars on the average course) and prides itself on having a strong focus on employability. It has some 23,000 students, 90% of UK origin and 80% studying full time.

A replication study at another university was proposed. Whilst the meeting with the Director of Support Services at this university, who was positive about the study and suggested key contacts, ethical approval for a replication study was submitted but refused on the grounds of the proposal lacking clarity regarding access to participants. The proposal was updated, and a second application was made but again declined. After discussion with my supervisors it was agreed that a further application would not be made. Note that the overall aim of the study was to gain an in-depth exploration of participant's experiences, rather

than being concerned with the ability to generalize these experiences to a larger population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5.4 Sample Profile

Sampling has implications for coherence, transparency, impact and trustworthiness (Mason, 2002) of qualitative research. The 'sample universe' (Robinson, 2014) or target population for phase one included staff at the university who had been involved in developing Student Charters, making them 'significant individuals' (Cutcliffe, 2000) equipping them with a unique and enhanced understanding of the student offer. The process of formalising this offer in the Student Charter would provide a helpful starting point to explore the more transactional elements of psychological contracts. As identified in the literature review (Chapter 2.4.4), understanding what is exchanged for what and capturing the views of both parties to the psychological contract is important yet regarded as a methodological weakness in the literature (Conway & Briner, 2005).

The literature review highlights fees and Student Contracts as likely to impact on student psychological contracts, particularly in terms of the more transactional exchanges. The 'sample universe' for phase two was students starting at the university when the Student Charter and higher fees were introduced. These students were in contact with lecturers involved in creating the Student Charter.

In the sample university a University Student Charter was created by a group of academic staff and students, and then the Charter was tailored to be specific to each School with input from professional services staff, academic staff and students in the School. This gave a greater awareness of the process of development across the Institution than might have been the case elsewhere, and the localised process meant that many staff and students were involved. As part of the implementation process the Student Charter was put on the standing agenda for School and Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees, with the aim of keeping awareness of the process live for all staff and enabling the local charter to be updated as necessary in the following years.

3.5.5 Participant Recruitment Procedures

Academic interviews

Staff who had been instrumental in developing the Student Charter at the university were invited to take part in the research via an email that included an outline of the purpose of the research. Eight people indicated their willingness to participate, and a date and time was fixed for the interview. One academic who agreed to take part was subsequently not interviewed as she could not make time due to work commitments. A senior member of staff recommended interviewing two people from professional services who had been involved in creating the Student Charter. The final sample included nine participants from a range of faculties and professional services who had varying lengths of time in post. Interviews took place in private staff offices and were carried out in May 2012. A digital voice recorder captured interviews that lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. Data were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interviews. For reasons of confidentiality, staff job titles are categorised into two groups; lecturers and professional staff.

Student focus groups

Academics were asked to forward an invitation email in the autumn term to their new intake of students. This provided five initial groups which was augmented to seven groups through use of the psychology pool, comprised of first year undergraduate psychology students who participate in their research as part of the course requirements. Seven focus groups were conducted in January 2013 and included first-year undergraduates from a variety of courses. This variety of participants contrasts with previous studies which have used psychology or business students (Chapter 1.5).

Student interviews

At the end of each focus group, participants were told about the option to take part in follow up one-to-one interviews. Email invitations were sent to all focus group participants eight months later as they completed year one. Fifteen students were recruited for interviews in October 2013. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they would be willing to take part in a further follow-up interview. Invitation emails were sent in February 2014 with

thirteen students taking part in the second round of interviews in March 2014. Eleven students took part in the final round of interviews in June 2015. This provided 39 interview transcripts over a three-year period. The sample included students who took a year out for a work placement (sandwich course) and students who completed a three-year degree. Students had either come directly from sixth form college or taken a gap year prior to starting their course.

3.5.6 Rationale and Methods used to Conduct Focus Groups

Focus Groups were selected as the most appropriate means to collect preliminary information (Morgan, 1997). The exploratory nature of the study meant that it was important to give space to student voices who could guide the agenda by talking about issues that were important to them.

Focus groups are “*collective conversations*” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 375) which allow group discussions that examine a specific set of topics (Kitzinger, 2005). This approach would allow preliminary data to be gathered that could drive forward the research process. The language used by participants and topics identified as important would inform the next stage of data collection. For example, the psychological literature refers to promises, expectations and beliefs to describe employees understanding of what they might receive from their employer (Chapter 2.4.1). Using the language that students would provide insights into their views and experiences rather than imposing a descriptive label which could subtly influence how they respond.

The literature review confirmed that observing and accessing psychological contracts is problematic. Focus groups are appropriate to explore concepts that are not directly observable (Morgan, 1997). Prompt questions would, therefore, need to provoke discussion around topics that would provide evidence regarding student psychological contracts.

Focus groups were also selected as they provide the means to produce a large amount of data in a short space of time (Morgan, 1997). This was important in the initial stage of the research so that consensus/diversity of experiences could be ascertained (Morgan, 1997). Several perspectives on the same topic can be accessed as group processes help people explore their views (Kitzinger, 2005).

Focus groups allow the researcher to determine the topic of interest whilst the data themselves come from the group interaction (Morgan, 1997). I considered this important as I wanted students to describe concepts using their own language and explore topics in their own way. Judging by the informal and relaxed nature of the conversation between participants, this approach seemed successful.

Focus Group sessions were organised into the following sections:

- Introduction and obtaining informed consent.
- Discussion, with general questions to prompt as needed.
- Debriefing and ending.

General prompt questions were developed (Appendix C8) with reference to literature, and to absences within the literature. These prompts were used to varying degrees. My primary aim for this phase was to gain a breadth of views and I therefore approached each focus group with this aim (Krueger, 1990). Rather than focusing on themes, I asked open questions to provide each group with the opportunity to contribute new information.

3.5.7 Rationale and Methods Used for Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used for phase one (staff interviews) and stage three (student interviews) due to their ability to access "*the real and the representation*" (Dingwall, 1997, p. 60) and in line with an interpretivist stance this provides an insight into "*a world beyond the story*" (Melia, 1997, p. 34). Post modernists note the use of interview raises questions about the nature of that "*social encounter*" (Dingwall, 1997, p. 56) and adopting an interpretive stance allows an exploration of information that participants offer at various levels. Semi-structured interviews facilitate guided introspection (Jones, 1985; King, 1994; Mishler, 1986) which was considered appropriate for accessing information that would illuminate the more implicit elements of psychological contracts.

It was important to encourage participants to talk about their experiences rather than answer questions that could limit and constrain dialogue (Krueger, 1990). Charmaz (2006) states: "*The interviewer is there to listen, to observe with sensitivity, and to encourage the person to respond*" (p. 25). Knowing when to

remain silent and when to ask further questions relied on my judgement and highlighted my unique position as the research instrument for collecting qualitative data for this project (Cassell, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Self-reflexivity throughout the interviews and during data analysis is described further in the next section.

A focus on the importance of listening rather than questioning was reflected in the prompt sheets (Appendix C4, C8, C11). Minimal prompt questions gave participants the opportunity to develop and explore topics in a way that reflected their own stories. Prompt questions were developed from topics that were identified in the literature review as being relevant to the psychological contract. For example, the question ‘Did the first year live up to your expectations?’ seeks to explore transactional elements of student psychological contracts. The prompt sheet provided flexibility for self-identified topics to be raised and as such was used as an aide memoir to explore topics relevant to psychological contracts.

As the study progressed alongside analysis of data from each year, further prompt questions were introduced. Prompt questions were supplemented with closed questions to clarify some points. For example, students were specifically asked if they had seen the Student Charter in their final interview.

3.5.8 Theoretical Sensitivity

Constructivists describe how their positions and interactions have influenced analytical rendering (Charmaz, 2006). Adopting a reflexive approach allowed me to consider what I bring to the process, from deciding the study site through to interpreting and constructing meaning within the data: my role was not “neutral” but influenced by prior knowledge. Recognising subtle nuances and meanings in the data, deciding when to listen or ask another question and making decisions about my data and the literature ultimately impact on the developing theory to be “*well integrated*”, “*conceptually dense*” and “*grounded*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 42) My perspective is integral to the analysis process and emerging data: “*researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it*” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 178). As such, researcher and participants co-construct theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that theoretical sensitivity comes from different sources including the reading of the relevant literature, the researcher's professional and personal experience, and the analytical process itself (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 42-43). These sources influenced my theoretical sensitivity as follows: Familiarity with the literature on psychological contracts developed when I studied for a Master's in occupational psychology at Birkbeck University. My dissertation explored psychological contracts using qualitative approaches. Conversations with my supervisor and author of key works on the psychological contract, Professor Neil Conway, gave me additional insights into this construct. In my capacity as manager of disability support services in further education, I conducted practitioner-led research and became aware of the value of qualitative approaches, especially in relation to the unheard voices of disabled students. These experiences were influential in defining this research topic and methodology. During the analytic process itself, my experience impacted on the comparisons I made, the questions I asked and the concepts that were developed.

Interviewing students over a three-year period created a rapport that enabled exchanges that were potentially more illuminating than would have been possible if the participants were not followed up. In a second interview, Student P2 talked about a "*bad experience*" relating to a difficult interaction with his personal tutor in his first year at university. Student P2 explained that he had arranged to meet his personal tutor to review progress but could not find the room as it was not marked on the map. He arrived late and was chided by his personal tutor who stated that she "*was his tutor, not his personal assistant.*" Whilst Student P2 explained the situation calmly and rationally I could sense the upset that recalling this event evoked. I checked if Student P2 needed support and discussed the information sheet and explored what Student P2 would like to happen regarding both the event and the interview. Student P2 went on to explain that this event was part of his past and that he did not feel the need for further support. He also confirmed that he was happy to continue with the interview. Student P2 was happy to take part in the final interview a year later.

This incident reminded me of the importance of reflexivity and I considered how my "*interests, positions, and assumptions*" influenced my actions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344). I was aware of the importance of non-maleficence (avoiding

causing harm) and beneficence (relieving, lessening or preventing harm) whilst balancing autonomy (respect and support of autonomous decisions) (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Checking what Student P2 wanted to happen enabled a positive resolution. My background in Safeguarding heightened my awareness to the relative power differentials between Student P2 and his tutor, and recognition that I should not replicate this by providing directive advice. My respect for Student P2's autonomy in the interview prompted me to give him the choice as to what he wanted to happen. These events played out in a matter of a couple of minutes, yet the learning prompted by this encounter was one I reflected on throughout the process of analysis (Chapter 3.5.9).

3.5.9 Reflexivity

The process of grounded theory situates the researcher as an interpreter of data, active in translating and representing participants' lived experiences and covert social processes (Charmaz, 2003).

Charmaz (2014) positions reflexivity as an integral part of the research journey:

“the researcher’s scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring him or her into the process. Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports (p.344).

As a key principle of constructivist grounded theory researchers must adopt a reflexive approach and consider their contribution to theory (Charmaz, 2006). My role was influential in identifying a research topic, formulating an appropriate research question and developing a comprehensive research plan. The grounded theorist is an instrument of the research process and data analysis is reliant on the researcher's analytical skills (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

It was important to reflect on and consider my role in the process of gathering data, in terms of interview questions, coding and analysis. Charmaz (2006, p. 178) described the integral role of the researcher in the analysis process and emerging data: *“researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it.”* My role was to co-construct a theory in partnership with the participants who took part in this study. I was aware that my role in interpreting the data was

important in representing both participants lived experiences and covert social processes (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003).

Charmaz (2006) notes: “*we may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is our view: we choose the words that constitute our codes*” (p. 9).

Creating a code appears to be a relatively straightforward activity but in practice I recognised influences that impacted what words I choose, what segments I coded and also what I decided was irrelevant. One example of this was describing the offer from the university as *the deal*. The term ‘deal’ is used in the psychological contract literature (Anderson & Schalk, 1998) suggesting that my choice of word was shaped by prior knowledge of the topic. This heightened my awareness of how I was using the data and prompted me to consider whether I was using empirical data or prior knowledge to construct the grounded theory. This remained an important consideration throughout the analytical process (Appendix D.2).

Charmaz (2006) suggests reflecting on what is seen and heard. Accessing underlying social and social psychological processes “*may remain unseen and unstated but shape participants actions and understandings within the setting*” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 20). In relation to this study, this approach helps to explore perceptions and implicitly held information that contribute to the psychological contract.

Two activities supported the reflective process. Writing memos was used to capture thoughts and ideas (Chapter 3.6.4). In addition, the process of writing up the research requires ongoing reflexivity.

3.5.10 Theory Development

Constructivist grounded theory offers flexibility in the methods used to analyse the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This affords the researcher a flexible and ‘emergent’ approach to the data, thus facilitating fresh insights into the phenomenon of student psychological contracts (Charmaz, 2006).

The results are bound within temporal, cultural and structural contexts and are achieved through reflexive processes, explicitly identifying how such meanings

were arrived at (Charmaz, 2000). Adopting a constructivist approach shows “*the complexities of particular worlds, views and actions*” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 132).

A grounded theory is *grounded* in the data from which it has been generated and offers two types of theory: substantive and formal theory. Formal theories are abstract and provide a theoretical account of a general issue which can be applied to a wider range of disciplinary concerns and problems (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Substantive theories provide an explanation for a particular area and are used to explain and manage problems in a specific setting. Combining and conceptualising the results from several substantive grounded theories may lead to the development of a more general formal theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Charmaz (2006) considers that most grounded theories are substantive theories as they focus on particular problems in a specific substantive area. This study provides situated knowledge (Charmaz, 2006) as the collection of data and interpretation focuses on the explanation of a particular area, that is the understanding of the student psychological contracts in a specific university from 2012-2015. Theories generated using constructivist grounded theory tend to be plausible accounts rather than theories that can claim any objective status (Charmaz, 2006).

The aim of this research was to construct a substantive grounded theory providing my interpretation of the student psychological contract. Using an inductive approach, the substantive theory was developed that was ‘grounded’ in the data (Charmaz, 2006). This work focused on descriptions of actions, thoughts and interpretations of the participants in this study. In doing so it offered insights into their experiences of being a student.

3.5.11 Data Management

Data preparation involved listening to the interviews and then making verbatim transcriptions. Entire interviews were transcribed so that I did not lose something that might later be recognised as significant. In accordance with grounded theory method, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. Data analysis, therefore, began during the interviews as I listened and interacted with participants and continued until the findings chapter was completed.

To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the data with each participant being assigned an alphanumeric code. The codes were assigned at random and do not represent either the sequence in which the interviews or focus groups occurred.

NVivo software was used to assist with the data management and analysis but was abandoned in favour of highlighters on hardcopies, which enabled me to engage closely with the initial stories. After the final phase of data collection, with 55 transcripts comprising 136,553 words, the paper and highlighter approach proved inadequate for constant comparison over time and between participants. I therefore went back to NVivo.

Attending a workshop on the use of this software helped improve efficiency and effective data analysis and management. As part of coding the interviews in NVivo, all passages were assigned to a specific, searchable code or codes. Searches for specific text strings could be conducted across all data and relevant paragraphs compared. Time of collection information was included so that incidents and comments could be compared over time.

Data analysis and data collection occurred simultaneously, each informing the other and allowing the focus of the research to emerge as the analysis proceeded (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Meaning was abstracted from the data using my own interpretations Charmaz 2005 p. 508). This involved a process of moving from describing the data via line by line coding to conceptualising it in analytical frameworks (Charmaz, 2006, p. xii).

3.6 Process of Analysis

This section outlines the research methods used in the analysis of data, guided by Charmaz (2006) to generate a new theory to explain the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Outlining the process of analysis offers transparency regarding key decisions, techniques and practices that can facilitate critical evaluation (Hiles & Čermák, 2007).

My experience of data analysis involved false starts, abandoned efforts and wrong trails, a practice which Munhall (2012) describes as an “*infinitely messy process*.” The process involved moving back and forth between the data,

coding, memo writing, and adjusting direction. “*Qualitative analysis is like the data with which one works: intense, engaging, challenging, non-linear, contextualised, and highly variable*” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 3). Whilst analysis is an inherently messy, adopting a staged approach to coding and analysis, remaining reflexive and keeping a comprehensive audit trail, assisted me through the processes which are described in the following sections.

3.6.1 Initial Coding

Initial coding was carried out on transcriptions from focus groups and interviews. A pragmatic approach was taken to managing focus group data. Common themes were identified that would set the scene for further exploration.

It was important to remain open to exploring theoretical possibilities rather than matching data with prior knowledge (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) suggests a range of methods that were used to achieve this aim. Line-by-line coding provided a means to explore transcripts and provide an early conceptualization of ideas (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11) and the first step towards the discovery of a core variable (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). Paying close attention to the data creates a way of exploring the meaning behind the narrative that would normally escape the researcher’s attention (Charmaz, 2006).

Another way of exploring meaning and theoretical possibilities involved using participants own words (In vivo coding) to create codes e.g. ‘What’s going on?’ Using gerunds (the noun form of verbs) proved helpful in creating codes reflecting a process rather than a topic. Gerunds preserve action and captured the more dynamic nature of what participants described (Charmaz, 2012; Glaser, 1978). Using this approach, I changed ‘*sources of information*’ to ‘*finding out what’s going on*’ as this reflected the active and selective processes that students used to find out about something. This code was created by comparing incident with incident as advocated by Charmaz (2006). Incidents included checking social media, reading the course handbook and being sold an idea ‘the degree was sold to us’ and the initial codes highlighted the vast array of information sources.

Charmaz (2006) urges researchers to “*press hard in coding*” (p. 49) to avoid mistaking routine and rationale for analytic insights.” Student P10’s commented that he was “*putting in face time*” in the third interview. This statement offered insights into other implicit processes. This initial code was later developed around ‘*influencing others*’ to describe how individuals influenced the exchange process which in this case was about getting more input from his tutor.

Line by line coding also serves as a ‘corrective’ that can reduce the likelihood of superimposing preconceived notions on the data (Charmaz, 2006). The example above illustrates how line by line coding pushed forward the term ‘face time’ which was later prompted development of the theoretical category of ‘exchange’.

Initial coding was performed in line with the study phases. As a new phase was completed, codes were refined, and categories developed (Charmaz, 2006). Initial codes evolved into minor conceptual categories e.g. ‘assessment feedback’, ‘course feedback’ and ‘influencing and shaping of perceptions’ evolved into ‘impact of feedback’ which later formed part of the ‘exchange’ core category.

3.6.2 Focused Coding

Focused coding was the next major step in the coding process and is more directed, selective and conceptual than line by line coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Focused coding involved looking at times when certain experiences, and actions took place. The codes could be compared against each other to identify patterns and similarities.

Axial coding was not used in this study because the method of specifying properties and categories for each category seemed too restrictive. Charmaz (2006) regards axial coding as being highly structured and instead developed “*subcategories of a category and showed the links between them*” (Charmaz, 2008b, p. 61). I used this approach to allow fluidity in the analysis.

3.6.3 Constant Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis is an essential feature of the grounded theory methodology because intensively working with the data develops a conceptual awareness of embedded social processes within a phenomenon (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2014) defines the constant comparative method as an iterative process to compare data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category, category with category and category with concept (p. 342). The constant comparative method was used to compare incident with incident and to identify the similarities and differences in order to facilitate the development of concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Comparison was made between results and new findings in order to guide further data collections (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The longitudinal nature of this study provided an opportunity to compare events over time and to explore the perspective of both academics and students. Comparing incident against incident provided new insights and opportunities for refining codes and developing categories (Charmaz, 2006). Constant comparison developed initial codes of *fairness*, *student expectations*, *turning things around* into the theoretical category *expectations*.

Constant comparison was also used to compare and contrast codes. For example, comparing and contrasting '*worse than expected*' and '*better than expected*' provided insight into the common processes used to manage disappointment. This led to the construction of the concept of '*coping*'.

3.6.4 Memo Writing

Pieces of reflective thinking, ideas, theories and concepts can be captured in the form of memos. Memo writing is an integral part of data analysis and theoretical construction and is a pivotal step between data collection and the drafting of the theory. Memo writing provides a mechanism for drawing out the meaning implicit within data whilst also defining how the researcher interprets data (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). Memos contain "*products of analysis or directions for the analyst*" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 217). Memo writing drew on guidance provided by (Charmaz, 1995; 2006) to explain data content, enhance emerging codes, and to direct data collection and analysis processes.

Charmaz (2006) encourages the writing of memos throughout the project and I started writing memos after the first interview up until the completion of chapters related to the findings. Memos were kept as 'notes to self' and provided a means of documenting thoughts relating to codes and the emergent categories.

Where possible, memos were recorded as soon as they occurred and took a variety of formats; free writing (the process of engaging in automatic writing on a topic without regard to content and composition) mind maps; and drawings which helped make meaningful connections between data sets and facilitated a reflexive approach to analysis. Memo writing became an increasingly important feature of the data analysis process. Adding memos to NVivo provided a means of considering them alongside the data. Memos can: “*form the core of your grounded theory. Following up on ideas and questions that came up while you wrote them will push your work forward*” (Charmaz, 2006, p 94). The following example illustrates how my thinking about Student Charters was refined (Figure 3.1). One academic described a concern that the Student Charter would “*be the tail that wags the dog,*” giving students something that could be used to dictate what they do. In fact, only one final year student could remember seeing this document suggesting that ‘*providing information*’ and ‘*promoting information*’ may not have the impact the HEI intended.

Memo: Forgetting Information

Written after final interviews (T5)

Students don't remember seeing the Student Charter even though it was a key topic when they started at university and academics described putting time and energy into promoting them. The reality is very different to what was expected. Students did not use the Charter to demand more or hold academics to account.

Students may have forgot what they had heard but lecturers had similar problems:

Sometimes we do make mistakes unknowingly and as a new member of staff I've done that a few times. I thought ah well no one told me I had to do that. Where was I supposed to learn that? Where was I supposed to learn that piece of information? Hand in times; hand in locations, well it's in the guidelines. Then you think ahh I'm that student! Lecturer P16 (T1)

There are similarities to employment contracts. People don't always remember what's in them or refer to them. Maybe what happens is that every day activity makes contracts redundant. There's no need to check the rules if you're playing the game and there's no disagreement. Being busy means that we don't have time to read and think about everything. Psychological contracts allow us to focus on what's important by creating an understanding that guides actions, similar to a schema.

Figure 3.1 Memo Forgetting Information

My role as the researcher was to make abstractions and undertake the theorising. Using my knowledge of the psychological contract therefore shaped the analysis without constraining it. In practice, this allowed concepts such as expectations to be explored and new interpretive renderings were achieved (Sample of Coding 'Expectations' Appendix D1).

Theorising in this grounded theory involve developing abstract concepts and specifying the relations between them (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b p. 126). Rather than being a mechanical process, it involves taking intuitive leaps (Charmaz 2006). Understanding rather than explanation is emphasised. *"Theorising involves 'stopping, pondering and rethinking anew. We stop the flow of studied experience and take it apart...when you theorise, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience"* (Charmaz 2006, p. 135). Charmaz describes this as *"engaging the world and of constructing abstract understandings about and within it"* (Charmaz 2006, p. 128).

Theorising involves using information from a variety of sources. Alongside using participants words, it is also important to place the work and its theorising within the work of other theories and demonstrate how the work advances current understanding of the phenomena (Stern, 2007, p. 114). This consideration influenced the timing of the literature review. In this study, the three theoretical categories were compared to the literature (Chapter 5). This allowed theorising from the data before using the psychological contract to frame the findings. The conceptual development of this work was therefore developed with reference to psychological contract theory, satisfaction, student experience.

3.7 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has confirmed the rationale for adopting a subjectivist interpretivist approach and summarised the research methods used in this study in accordance with the constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Methods used to recruit participants through to data analysis are described to provide transparency. The rationale for the use of focus groups and interviews were provided and key features of the process of analysis were summarised.

4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

Having established the approach and methodology (Chapter 3), this chapter concentrates on describing and evaluating the data collected over the three years of the study. As a reminder, the research objectives are:

1. To explore and document key features of the student psychological contract at the exemplar university.
2. To monitor how the student psychological contract changed over time.
3. To formulate a conceptualisation of the student psychological contract.
4. Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of exploring the student experience.

In presenting the findings, prominence is given to the student and staff participants' voices, gained from focus groups and interviews, conducted over a three-year period, 2012-2015. The findings are presented in terms of the three main theoretical findings: expectations, exchange and engagement. Whilst the results are presented individually, in practice they overlapped and merged. The findings describe key features of the student psychological contract and consider how it changes over time (see research objectives 1 and 2). The findings are integrated to construct a substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5.5) which offers an initial conceptualisation of the student psychological contract (see research objective 3).

The substantive grounded theory is reviewed in relation to the literature (Chapter 6). Presenting the findings and analytical interpretations in this way mirrors the process used to explore and construct the substantive grounded theory. Separating analytical interpretations based mainly on the empirical data from those based on comparison with the literature offers insights into the analytical process.

As described in Chapter 3, this longitudinal study sought to explore the unfolding nature of the exchange process over time, with reference to the views of both students and academics (Chapter 2). Participant identifiers start with

either 'student' or 'lecturer' along with an alphanumeric identifier and a timestamp e.g. Student P1 (T3), Lecturer P15 (T1)/

The results led to three emergent theoretical findings, constructed from six categories:

4.2 Theoretical Finding One: Expectations

4.2.1 Category 1 "*Expecting something but not always sure what*"

4.3 Theoretical Finding Two: Exchange

4.3.1 Category 2 What is exchanged for what?

4.3.2 Category 3 Process of exchange

4.3.3 Category 4 "*You can't put this stuff in writing.*"

4.4 Theoretical Finding Three: Engagement

4.4.1 Category 5 Developing internal coping strategies

4.4.2 Category 6 External influencing

4.2 Theoretical Finding One: Expectations

The first theoretical finding comprises of one category "*expecting something but not always sure what.*" The category 'key expectations' was created during the initial stages of analysis and included examples of things and events described by students. Further analysis of this category confirmed that almost all expectations had some degree of ambiguity. This category was therefore subsumed within the generic category "*expecting something but not always sure what.*" Two subcategories were significant in the formation of this theoretical category; expectations of lecturers and; value-for-money.

4.2.1 Category 1: "*Expecting something but not always sure what.*"

Student participants were prompted to discuss what they expected from university (Appendix C8, C11). Typical answers included "*getting a good degree*", "*lifelong friendships*", and "*job prospects*". Student expectations could

be considered as being on a spectrum with definable items e.g. “books” at one end and intangibles e.g. “good time” on the other.

The analysis highlighted that many expectations were difficult to define and open to interpretation e.g. “having a good time”, “opportunities”. Further analysis led to the creation of the code *ambiguous expectations*. *Ambiguous expectations* encompassed comments that could mean different things to different people. For example, “having a good time” for one focus group participant was “coffee with my boyfriend” (Student P4, T2), whilst another participant described it as “working in the library” (Student P9, T3). Lecturers and student participants initial descriptions of “having a good time” was articulated as if there was a shared understanding of what they meant. Further questioning facilitated clarification but in everyday life, this may not take place. In the absence of clarification, students and lecturers are likely to hold their own interpretation of what was said. A lack of shared understanding heightens the potential for misunderstandings to arise.

The difficulties in defining expectations was highlighted when considering how an expectation might be operationalised. Student P7 (T3) provided a specific example of the challenges in meeting expectations when she stated, “I want a lecturer to prepare me for what they expect from me.” Student P7 explained, “I want them [lecturers] to put as much effort into my degree as I am.” Student P7’s description of her expectations was *ambiguous*; it was not possible to ascertain how much ‘staff effort’ would satisfy this expectation.

Student P8 (T3) talked about being the first in his family and community to go to university. He summarised what he expected to get out of going to university:

“A good degree first of all, then a vast amount of experience, also a lot of skills that can then be applied to different things. I want to take back something that I hope will be of use to my community.”
Student P8 (T3).

Student P8’s account of his expectations included his hopes for the future that will only be realised once he leaves university. This quote captures the challenges of trying to define an individual’s expectations. Student P8 wanted to take “something back” but what exactly this meant was unclear. I wrote a memo to develop my ideas regarding this observation.

Memo: Ambiguous expectations

Written after final interviews (T5)

Student P7's and Students P8's comments are typical of everyday conversations where an assumption is made that there is a shared understanding. Line by line coding and constant comparison highlighted that there were opportunities for student expectations to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. The literature refers to student expectations as a list of requirements that are readily understood and met. Questionnaires are used as a mechanism of capturing this wish list. This analysis is beginning to challenge this view. Student expectations seem vague and tentative and designing interventions based on such a tenuous basis is unlikely to enhance quality.

Student P7 wanted lecturers to "*prepare*" her for what was to come. What would this preparation involve? When would preparation be complete? Student P7 also wanted lecturers to put in "*as much effort.*" How would Student P7 know how much effort her lecturers are putting in? What would this effort be? An added challenge is that whilst expectations are difficult to define, everyday conversations do little to develop a shared understanding.

Student P8 wanted to "*take something back to his community*" I pondered what it was that he wanted to take back and what community he referred to. Might I have misinterpreted what he said due to my own cultural bias. Student P8 appears to have a very specific expectation although it is unclear how this is to be met.

Figure 4.1 Memo Ambiguous Expectations

Whilst some expectations were *ambiguous*, clarification could be achieved following some events. Not getting something or an event failing to match expectations forced the creation of a *retrospective expectation*. The following focus group participant described how she found out that her expectation was inaccurate:

“I thought lecturers taught you everything. I didn’t know that you had to do background reading so when they wanted essays I was like what’s going on? I used all my lecture notes but had to do background reading as well.” Focus Group B (T2).

This student became consciously aware of their expectations after receiving feedback. Another participant described how they adjusted their expectation:

“I thought the lecturers were there to give you a framework for writing an essay on a certain subject. I sometimes get the same train as my personal tutor, so it gives me chance to talk it through and he said no that won’t be what he’s looking for and I was a bit stunned! I thought I had to think again, this is much more difficult than I first thought.” Focus Group A (T2).

What is evident from both these quotes is the strong emotional reaction that participants experience as they recognised that they needed to adjust their expectation. This focus group participant had to *“think again”* and evaluate her original understanding which prompted a change regarding what she could expect from lecturers.

Finding out what was expected was a code used to describe how students learnt what was required of them. Another focus group participant described observing how other students *found out what was expected*:

“They [lecturers] don’t want to see what is said in a lecture written in an essay. That was one of the pointers that we were given after we handed our first essay in. A lot of people had just reiterated what they had just said.” Focus Group D (T2).

The learning took place after handing in the essay providing further evidence of expectations being shaped by events. Lecturers (T1) described the information provided to students that included the need for additional reading to complete assignments. This information may have been forgotten or ignored by students but offers insights into the challenges of establishing a shared understanding.

Student expectations included a high incidence of reference to lecturers and value-for-money. These categories overlapped as students held ‘value-for-money’ ‘expectations of lecturers’. Value-for-money was also mentioned when students described what they expected in return for paying higher fees.

Table 4.1 provides a sample of the codes that make up the categories in order to illustrate the analytic process used.

Statements	Initial code	Final Code
<p>“Having a good time.” Focus Group A (T2).</p> <p>“I want a lecturer to prepare me for what they expect from me.” Student P7 (T3).</p> <p>“I want to take back something that I hope will be of use to my community.” Student P8 (T3).</p>	<p>Lack of shared understanding</p> <p>Trying to define expectations</p> <p>Ambiguous expectations</p>	<p>“Expecting something but not always sure what”</p>
<p>“I thought the lecturers were there to give you a framework for writing an essay on a certain subject...he [lecturer] said no that won’t be what he’s looking for and I was a bit stunned!” Focus Group A (T2).</p>	<p>Retrospective expectation</p>	
<p>“They [lecturers] don’t want to see what is said in a lecture written in an essay. That was one of the pointers that we were given after we handed our first essay in.” Focus Group D (T2).</p>	<p>How do students find out what is expected of them?</p> <p>Finding out what was expected</p>	
<p>“That’s probably because our timetable includes barely any contact time.” Student P15 (T3).</p> <p>“I think that some of us sat there and worked out that we were paying £75 a lecture.” Student P8 (T3)</p> <p>“You attend a bad lecture or see a piece of equipment that’s broken. You then think I’m paying £9,000 a year for this!” Student P7 (T3).</p>	<p>Amount of contact</p> <p>Amount of money calculations</p> <p>Exchange - explicit</p> <p>Retrospective formation</p>	<p>Value-for-money – links to lecturers</p>

<p><i>“There’s a lot of students doing [name of course] and you pay £9,000 and you look at the one-to-one contact you get.”</i> Focus Group B (T2).</p> <p><i>“It annoyed me when a member of staff was in another country! I was like come on mate – I’m paying 9K for you to be here and teach me!”</i> Focus Group D (T2).</p>	<p>Calculations</p> <p>Different to what was expected</p> <p>Emotional reaction</p>	
<p><i>“there to teach”, “marking” and “taking long summer breaks.”</i> Focus Group C (T2)</p> <p><i>“They did say that they were not like personal tutors we have worked with before and they are more academic”</i> Student P2 (T2).</p>	<p>Role of Lecturers</p> <p>Compare to sixth form</p> <p>Subtle transformers</p> <p>Not this or that – creating an expectation vacuum and students left to fill in the details.</p>	Lecturers – links to value-for-money
<p><i>“It’s paying ‘customers’, and everybody was very upset with using those sorts of words.”</i> Lecturer P11 (T1).</p>	Roles	Relationships
<p><i>“We have to deliver enough of what they’re paying for.”</i> Lecturer P11 (T1).</p> <p><i>“The library is nice but it’s not big enough. There’s nowhere to sit in lectures.”</i> Focus Group G (T2).</p> <p><i>“No one comes to talk to you because they’re too busy helping someone else.”</i> Focus Group G (T2).</p>	<p>Deliverables</p> <p>Quantifying what and how much more</p> <p>Frustrations surfaced when things were not provided</p>	Defining the offer

Table 4.1 Sample of codes and categories that contributed towards student expectations

The categories expectation of lecturers and value-for-money are described in more detail below.

4.2.1.1 Expectations of Lecturers

Lack of contact time with lecturers, either in lectures, workshops or tutorials, was a specific concern for most participants. Student P15 articulated his frustrations:

“We think that lecturers could possibly give a bit more. That’s probably because our timetable includes barely any contact time. We forget that they have other things to do. We get annoyed if they are not in the office or they are hard to find.” Student P15 (T3).

Student P15 was unusual in that he acknowledged that lecturers had other things to do. The frustrations he expressed were echoed by other student participants when a lecturer was not available. One focus group participant articulated his views regarding his lecturer going to a conference:

“If he’s [lecturer] going to a conference I wouldn’t expect him to be in a 5-star hotel with first class flights because that’s not necessary. Fair enough if he goes economy, stays in a standard class hotel and brings something back to the table then in a way that’s justified.” Focus Group A (T2).

This description along with many others indicated that expectations can be realised after an event. The focus group student held expectations of his lecturer behaving in a financially responsible manner and bringing something back. This is indicative of an unwritten expectation the student consider lecturers are there for them. Student participants expected lecturers to be available in person or via email:

“There’s a lot of students doing [name of course] and you pay £9,000 and you look at the one-to-one contact you get. I have emailed my personal tutor several times and not had a reply.” Focus Group B (T2).

The lack of response to this participant’s emails raised their awareness that their expectations had not been met. The view that lecturers were “*there to teach*” was explored further and students were asked what they thought that lecturers did (Appendix C8, C11). There was a limited view of the role of lecturers which was restricted to “*lecturing*”, “*marking*” and “*taking long summer breaks*.” It is not surprising therefore that frustration developed when a lecturer was not available. This illustrates that expectations can be built on flawed and incomplete information and was a key finding from the data.

One student whose mother was a university lecturer was able to describe all aspects of the lecturers' role. This individual had a more accurate and realistic expectation of lecturers. For example, she did not expect responses to emails at busy times.

Students saw the role of lecturers as being limited and focused mainly on teaching activities, which coloured their understanding and expectations of interactions with lecturers. Students described their expectations of how they would interact, how often they should be able to contact them and by what means. The type of relationships that students expected with their lecturers was indicated by the terms such as "*friend*", "*mentor*", "*teacher*" and "*advisor*".

Lecturers provided further insights into this theme as they described their experiences of interacting with students. Lecturer P11 explained, "*Consider the school leaver who arrives with an idea of what their 'teachers' will be like... students inherit from their school career the notion of being a bit 'naughty' and that the teachers are going to be 'cross' with them and it's not like that at all.*"

Lecturer P15's description suggests he has experience of adjusting student expectations and offers insights the role that lecturers play in this process, "*I think we have got somewhere with our students when we have persuaded them we are not their mates. They can't just go Hey! Can you tell me?*" Further consideration of how lecturers influenced expectations by acting as *subtle transformers* is described in the theoretical category *working within fluid boundaries* in the third section of this chapter.

Student P2 described what he had been told about the role of lecturers.

"They did say that they were not like personal tutors we have worked with before and they are more academic. They did pre-warn us that they are not about the pastoral support that you would get in school. Here it's more academic and anything affecting academic work really." Student P2 (T2).

The expectation that lecturers were there for them may have been influenced by the use of the job title "*personal tutor*." This seemed to hold different meanings for Student P2 and the university. Student P2 tried to make sense of the role of the personal tutor role by referring to prior experience and interpreting the seemingly contradictory information that his personal tutor was available for "*academic*" issues and "*anything affecting academic work*." Such comments

demonstrate the potential for misunderstanding as they lack clarity; it is not clear where the boundary between personal and academic issues lies. The code *expectation vacuum* was created to capture how individuals respond to ambiguity and uncertainty. They were left to fill in missing knowledge and create their own understanding of what was going on.

Lecturers had *expectation vacuums* too. The introduction of higher fees prompted the creation of an expectation that they must “*provide more*” although what this was remained unclear. Lecturer P11 described her understanding:

“It’s paying ‘customers’, and everybody was very upset with using those sorts of words. We have to deliver enough of what they’re paying for. I don’t see the degree, the certificate, as the deliverable. I see education as the deliverable. I do feel that we have to give them the education that we say we’re going to give them and I don’t think that that’s happening.” Lecturer P11 (T1).

Lecturer P11 repeated the phrase “*have to*” three times, each time with increasing emphasis, conveying a sense of feeling responsible for providing more in return for students paying higher tuition fees. Lecturer P11 uses contractual language referring to what is “*given*” and the “*deliverable*.” This offers insights into a tension between the formal contract with students and how this is interpreted in practice. Higher fees led to an understanding that students would demand more, make more complaints, and their relationship with students would change. Quantifying what and how much more however can only be resolved through negotiating with individuals.

What “*more*” was expected now that students were paying higher fees was unclear. Students could not clarify what more they expected, but they were able to describe their disappointment as result of something not being provided as illustrated by the following quotes:

“Last year I didn’t find it very interesting, to be honest.” Student P2 (T3).

“The library is nice but it’s not big enough. There’s nowhere to sit in lectures. Some people sit in the aisles. It pisses some people off.” Focus Group G (T2).

“We had a timetable, but I was told it would be posted and it wasn’t.” Group G (T2).

“Not replying to emails. One of my lecturers never replies to my emails –ever. It’s really annoying and it’s the same lecturer that didn’t give us enough time for the coursework.” Focus Group B (T2).

“You get let down by not having the opportunities you thought you would. The more times you go and sit in a workshop and no one comes to talk to you because they’re too busy helping someone else or because they weren’t in that day.” Student P10 (T2).

“I do wonder where the £9,000 goes. I know it pays towards lectures and resources but how this uses the money, I don’t understand that.” Focus Group C (T2).

These comments describe a range of frustrations and disappointments that surface when something is not provided. This theme of disappointment is explored further when exploring how students adjust and respond to adversity later in this chapter.

4.2.1.2 Value-for-money

Students mentioned ‘money’ most frequently when something had not been provided or failed to live up to expectations. ‘*Money*’ was created as an initial code which allowed constant comparisons to be made and identify the context in which students talked about this topic. As fees had been introduced this code could have been anticipated as bring important

Generally, students’ expectations regarding what they would get for paying higher fees remained undefined until something happened that caused a *retrospective construction* of an expectation. The *retrospective construction* of ‘*value-for-money*’ included references to events when students described their disappointment that they had not been provided with something that represented value-for-money. One focus group participant described their reaction when they found out that their lecturer was not available:

“It annoyed me when a member of staff went on a recruitment thing, which I think was just a conference, but it was in another country! It meant that he wasn’t here for a week and we didn’t get a replacement lecturer. I was like come on mate – I’m paying 9K for you to be here and teach me!” Focus Group D (T2).

When a lecturer was involved in activities such as recruitment, conferences and visiting other countries this challenged the expectation that *“lecturers were there*

to teach.” Receiving information that their lecturer was involved in other activities prompted a review of their original expectation which led to feelings of disappointment as this expectation was not borne out in practice.

Value-for-money expectations were described by students when “*you attend a bad lecture or see a piece of equipment that’s broken. You then think I’m paying £9,000 a year for this!*” Student P7 (T1).

“I thought there’d be more lectures. There’s only two terms of lectures which I think is a little bit rubbish considering that we’re paying loads of money.” Student P3 (T3).

Both participants made an explicit link between lecturers and *value-for-money*. The importance of this connection was reinforced by comments regarding what happened when lectures were not provided. The provision of good resources was not enough to stop Student P15 feeling dissatisfied:

“We’ve got quite nice computers and I expect quite a lot of the money to go towards the tech. But I think we need actual lectures because in the second year, we didn’t have any lectures to go to. We just had a lecture fitted in with the two-hour practical and it just felt as though they were cutting corners.” Student S15 (T4).

Lectures clearly represented a key expectation in terms of *value-for-money*. Providing something extra, “*nice computers*” did not mitigate the disappointment felt when lectures were not provided.

The expectation that lectures would be provided was a core expectation. Students expected lectures to be provided even if they did not turn up themselves. Student P6 was disappointed that lectures were cancelled due to lack of attendance:

“I’m just thinking about the number of lectures we get – only six hours - and then finishing early and then being cancelled because people don’t turn up.” Student P6 (T5).

Student P6’s appeared to retrospectively evaluate her expectations during the interview. Articulating what had happened seemed to prompt a negative evaluation. Student P11 described calculating what a lecture had cost.

“It [fees] went up to nine grand so that’s a lot of money. I think that some of us sat there and worked out that we were paying £75 a lecture. Sometimes they only last half an hour and they just go

over stuff you covered in A levels and you just think you've not really learnt anything new." Student P11 (T3).

Student P11 admitted finding it difficult to turn up to lectures explaining "*sometimes you just can't make it ... the 9 a.m. lecture can be a challenge.*" Student P11 echoed the views of Student P6 and other participants when he described his expectation that whilst only a third of the students showed up for lectures, he still expected the lecture to go ahead. Whilst the lecturer might be able to get through the material quicker, finishing early prompted concerns that the session had not provided *value-for money*. These examples convey a sense of the complex interactions and interpretations that take place. This has implications for meeting expectations as individuals hold subjective interpretations of what represents value-for-money. The event itself appears to trigger a realisation that something has not been provided.

A notable feature of these exchanges was that they were unequal. Students expected lectures to be provided as advertised but they did not accept responsibility for their part. In doing so, students contravene the Student Charter which confirms that they should attend lectures. The Student Charter does not seem to influence behaviour.

4.2.1.3 Summary of Student Expectations

Students described a variety of expectations including having enough contact time and the availability of lecturers. Explicit expectations were important when students arrived at university. Some expectations were only formally recognised after an event leading to the construction of a retrospective expectation. Students held ambiguous expectations that were typically clarified when something was not provided. The most frequently mentioned expectations were *lecturers* and *value-for-money*. Everyday events prompted students to recognise what was previously held implicitly. In doing so they developed their expectations retrospectively.

Defining student expectations has been shown as problematic as they are often not recognised until after an event triggers a retrospective evaluation. Until such events, expectations are in a state of flux. These findings have implications for mechanisms that use knowledge of student expectations to improve services

(Chapter 2.3.3). A more nuanced approach is needed that is able to capture the variety and complexity of expectations.

The second theoretical category, exchange, provides further insights into what happens to student expectations as they participate in the student experience.

4.3 Theoretical Finding Two: Exchange

Exchange was a key theme that emerged from the data and is a key concept in the literature on psychological contracts (Chapter 2.4). Describing what and how exchange take place provides insights into the student experience.

Conducting a longitudinal study provided the opportunity to explore expectations of exchange against the actual transactions revealing three categories contributing to the development of this theoretical category

4.3.1 Category 2: What is exchanged for what?

A specific question was posed to explore what participants received in return for their higher fees (Appendix C8, C11). In the early phases of data collection, when students were relatively new at university, student participants described the things that they had received e.g. e-books, laboratory facilities, equipment. Interestingly, students seemed proud when offering these descriptions. Student P4 (T3), for example, seemed elated at “*being given £500 worth of e-books.*” Being able to describe what they had received seemed to be satisfying even though it failed to account for a fair return on their investment. About half of the students were enthusiastic about things they had received including “*proper books*” and “*going on trips.*” Being able to describe something appeared to justify that they were receiving something in return for their fees. In contrast, interviews that took place in T5 indicated that experiences e.g. “*gaining extra time with the lecturer,*” “*skills development*”, and “*friendships*” were highly valued. There was a shift from exchanges that involved items towards exchanges that were relational. The analysis showed that students provided more examples of *tangible items* in the earlier interviews, but as time and experience increased, there was more on the intangible benefits. Thus, “*contact time*”, a key concern in the early data collection phase (T1, T2), was replaced by an emphasis on “*relationships with tutors*”, and “*developing skills*” over time (T4, T5) (Chapter 4.3.1.1).

An in vivo code that made a significant contribution to this category was “*You can’t put this stuff in writing*” (Figure 4.2). Items that were coded in this way were intangible and difficult to define. Such examples were noted when exploring the exchange process as this highlighted a lack of shared understanding between students and lecturers.

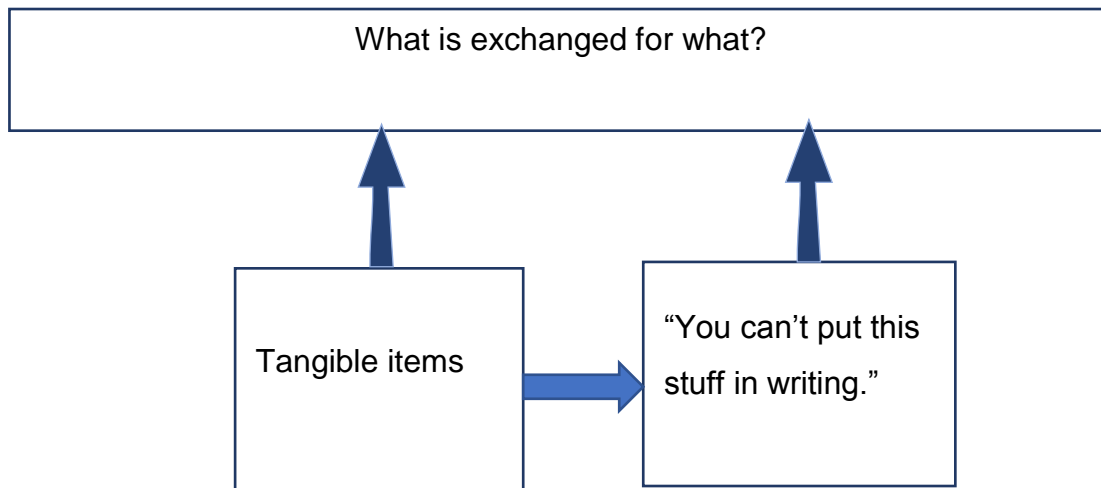


Figure 4.2 What is Exchanged for What?

Lecturer P15 highlighted what he offered his students and what he expected in return. “*I hope I give them an excitement for the cutting edge of my subject.*” In return Lecturer P15 wanted, “*that excitement to be reciprocated. If they are enthusiastic and even if for one student, I make a difference to their future, that’s my return.*” On one level this is an exciting exchange opportunity but defining what is involved is complex.

More than half the lecturers considered transition support was what they provided to students. Lecturer P11 suggested, “*I think the way in which we deal with that [transition] affects how they deal with it,*” conveying that she considered it important to have a collaborative approach to transition.

Creating an appropriate learning environment was considered important for a supportive transition:

“We’re aware that you learn better if you feel you are part of a group and you have a support network around you which you create. We are very conscious of this and that’s why we do the team building exercise in the preview day.” Lecturer P66 (T1).

Lecturer P66 described creating a social learning environment before students arrive. The description of this conveys a sense of what is on offer but there is a high level of ambiguity. This lecturer expresses their hopes that students will work as part of a group, but this may not be what students want. These examples provide insights into the challenges of describing *'what is exchanged for what'*.

Examples of relational exchanges were provided:

"They're all very good, I have to say. It's a nice surprise really, I didn't expect it from university I guess and the fact that they are always there for you and whatever, whether it's personal or academic, they're very good and if you treat them with the respect of turning up to your lectures and if you can't go to one you say, they will treat you with respect which is generally the case, which is pretty good." Student P4 (T1).

"As you get to know the lecturers it's a lot easier to deal with them, talk to them so you can just go up and approach them about any problems you have with them, the course or subject they're teaching." Focus Group B (T2).

"I have ultimate faith in them and they're very educated and you can have an intellectual conversation with them and they will support you in every way, whether you're struggling or you're succeeding." Student P5 (T2).

Turning up for lectures results in getting respect, getting to know the lecturers leads to help with problem and intellectual conversations are examples of more subtle types of exchanges.

Students were asked to describe what they hoped to receive from the university. Responses were readily available and summarised by one focus group participant:

"Experience. Employability. Enterprise. Job prospects. Knowledge. Having a good time. A bit of information." Focus Group (T1).

This response sounded like a wishful shopping list rather than a description of what might be received. It has elements of a soundbite promoting the student experience, and perhaps reflects the influence of marketing and promotional materials. At this early stage (T1), students lacked experience and knowledge about the exchange offer.

Descriptions provided in the interviews three years later provided examples of what students had received:

“They teach you things you couldn’t get from the internet.” Student P5 (T5)

“I suppose making friends as cliché as that sounds and it’s been nice to have sort of a nice relationship with the tutors like we had post-dissertation drinks.” Student P6 (T5).

“I would say the degree at the end of the day is where the money has gone. You’re generally just paying so that you can say you’ve got your degree.” Student P11 (T5).

Students described their experiences that included positive relationships, getting a degree and a real sense of achievement. In the final interviews, students were genuinely positive about many of the things they had received at the university.

Some unexpected items formed part of the exchange package. One focus group student described *“the model club”* as part of his university experience *“I found out about it through the clubs and societies day and we use university equipment.”* Clubs and societies were mentioned by a few other student participants suggesting they are included as exchange items. In his final interview, Student P11 (T5) talked about his dissatisfaction with privately rented accommodation. This was surprising as he had found his accommodation via a friend, not through the university accommodation service:

“The only thing that I would say that really bothers me about the university is the housing situation. I don’t think there’s a good standard of housing generally round here. Everyone’s house seems a bit rubbish.” Student P11 (T3).

Later in the interview, Student P11 explained that because his accommodation was in such a poor state of repair, he had to return to the family home for the last two terms of his course. Whilst privately rented accommodation is not part of the university offer, Student P11 considered that it was. Experiences that ran alongside each other seemed to have become integrated even though they are separate. In this case, the poor state of repair of private accommodation was linked to the university experience. Findings such as these have implications for defining what is part of the student experience. What is perceived to be part of the student experience is subjective and individual.

Comparing these findings with the Student Charter provide additional insights into the challenges of establishing an agreement. Hobbies and extra curricula activities, like the *model club* are referred to in the Student Charter whilst private accommodation is not. The Student Charter was designed to clarify and confirm expectations, but this example seems to suggest that it has failed in achieving this aim.

Students described what they considered being involved in the exchange process. As noted above, these descriptions often required interpretation. For example, “*opportunities*” was frequently mentioned which included *opportunities* to develop skills through giving a presentation, adding experience to a CV and opportunities for independence and personal growth:

“It’s been the first time away from home so it’s a controlled way of doing that. Moving into Halls then into rent-controlled housing. For most people, it’s a strange thing to move out for the first time so having it in a structured way makes a lot of sense. Everything that comes with that doing all the household chores and learning to live on your own and being a person on your own rather than part of a family.” Student P14 (T5).

Moving towards “*independence*” and having the opportunity to do this in an incremental and structured manner was important to Student P14. The description of opportunities highlighted wide variation in what students wanted and the manner in which it they expected it to be provided.

The Student Charter includes an outline of some of the key features that students can expect. This includes support and feedback (Chapter 2.3.2). Student P14 (T3) described his surprise that he had received this:

“One thing we had - I don’t think the course is responsible - but because we went in every week, we had this one lecturer who gave us a lot of support and feedback on our project. He was incredibly useful in advising us on what we were doing right and wrong, things you might not have considered. That was really useful.” Student P14 (T3).

The extra support and feedback provided was not considered part of the offer from the university. This indicates that defining what is and what is not part of the university offer is not universally agreed. Individuals develop their own interpretation of what is included or excluded despite information to the contrary.

Students and lecturers agreed that fees were part of the exchange package. Both parties referred to fees in the context of *expecting more*, and when something was not provided (Category 1, Expecting something but not always sure what). Lecturer P11 described his understanding of how the fees contributed towards the degree:

“Most students who understand Higher Education get that you have pay for this and it’s not a guaranteed degree. Now and again they bring it up. They will get their costs and divide it by the number of lectures they have and tell you they are paying this amount per lecture and you go ‘no you’re wrong because you’re paying for library services, for computer services that we give you for the counselling service the doctors surgery, the gym and all the lights and the electricity.” Lecturer P11 (T1).

The majority of student participants also agreed that fees did not buy a degree. The following comments captured the view of most students:

“I was really surprised at the naivety of some of the students that they were saying ‘well I have paid 9K and I expect to be taught how to understand this’ and I say no that’s not what this is about now and the 9K doesn’t buy you a pass, it just buys you an opportunity.” Focus Group A (T2).

“You still have to work hard to get a degree. I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing to have to pay a fee to do a degree, but I don’t think it buys you a degree.” Focus Group B (T2).

Fees, therefore, seemed to be exchanged for an opportunity. This represented a complex exchange process that involved taking up a loan to invest in a course that would hopefully lead to increased employability. This transaction could be compared to gambling on a future return; money, hard work and time are invested in the hope of a better future. The hope of receiving a future return on their investment appeared to reduce their disappointment of the current return for paying £9,000.

“I’m a little bit disappointed – no not disappointed more than that - I’ve not really seen much for my 9K. Maybe, one day ... it’s an education thing you’ve got to invest in.” Focus Group G (T2).

“I think a lot of people do actually care quite a lot because a bog-standard degree isn’t going to get you very far as we have already been told multiple times. It’s all about the work experience and further degrees and all that.” Focus Group A (T2).

Student participants frequently mentioned getting a “*good degree*” which was described as leading to “*employability*”, developing “*subject specific knowledge*” alongside being able to add “*extra skills*” to CVs. Hope for the future counteracted the deficit that was sometimes noted in the moment.

“I think that the money I’ll get back from doing the University Degree would surpass what I could earn without doing it so I’ll make back the money later when I actually need it whereas now I can just have fun basically.” Student P12 (T2).

More often than not however, students described not thinking about the exchange of fees for education:

“To be honest I don’t think about the money at all.” Focus Group D (T2).

“...money just hasn’t registered.” Focus Group E (T2).

“I just don’t feel like I’m putting in any money, because the money I’m not paying now it comes out of my future wages which I’m probably only earning because I’ve got the degree.” Student P7 (T2).

These comments suggest that generally fees and money were not talked about, and not figuring as a concern in day-to-day student life.

4.3.2 Category 3: Process of exchange

The data shows that exchanges took place using a variety of mechanisms including face-to-face conversations, email and social media. Two key themes emerged that were influential in the exchange process. The first was ‘gauging and testing activity that was shaped by prior experiences. This framed how student explored, gauged and tested new experiences. The second theme described the influence of promoting the university offer. Figure 4.3 summarises the key categories that make up this category.

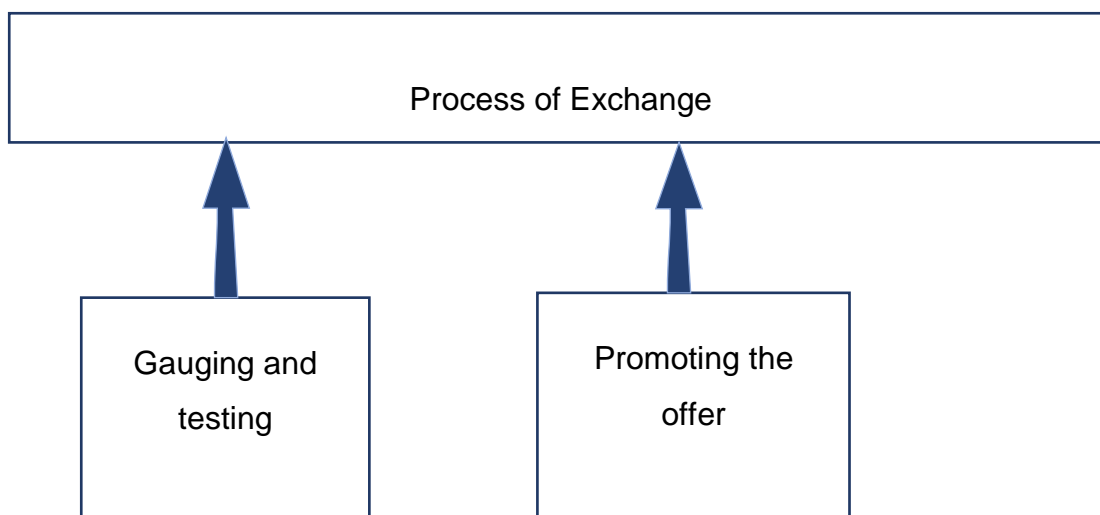


Figure 4.3 Category 3: Process of Exchange

Patterns of exchange activity are influential in defining expectations. Exchange activity took using a variety of mediums including face-to-face contact, social media and email exchanges.

“I do sometimes have to email lecturers and whatnot and most of the time I do get a response within about a day or two. So, it’s just nice getting that quick turnaround.” Student 12 (T1).

This quote shows how an expectation of getting a “*quick turnaround*” has been established. Lecturer P11 appears to have been at the receiving end of urgent emails and responded by consciously shaping expectations by providing guidance about where to find information. The exchange process itself, therefore, sets up patterns of interaction that shape the behaviour of both parties.

Facebook was used by almost all the students in this study. Facebook pages were set up for some courses whilst other interaction was more informal. Facebook provided a forum for students to actively contribute or observe what happens to others. One focus group participant described how she used it:

“It’s mainly ‘can I have help with this’, ‘what should I be doing?’ It’s mainly help with coursework and things. At the start of the year there were one or two odd people who were on it 100% of the time but then they were shot down in flames because it was ‘dickish’. But now it’s just a helpful site; there are a few main commentator’s but less people complaining about the course and they’re less than one percent. It’s just people asking questions.” Focus Group C (T2).

This participant describes self-regulating activity by peers as a result of participating on Facebook. This type of interaction allowed individuals to identify group norms and learn appropriate styles of interaction. Students actively engage and ask questions or observe others interacting. This activity allowed students to gauge and test their understanding of a variety of topics. In doing so they gained knowledge and an understanding of strategies to help them with a variety of university-related issues.

Gauging and testing was created as an initial code to describe how students explored and monitored their expectations developed through prior experiences e.g. sixth form, preview days, friends and family etc. These expectations equipped students with a set of ideas that they could use to explore *what's going on*. The gauge offered a means of selecting what to explore and acted as a comparator that allowed students to test their expectations against everyday experiences.

Testing took a variety of forms, from using Facebook, to actively seeking answers through contacts. Student participants described how they actively sought to find out "*what's going on?*" when they arrived at the university:

"I remember induction week was pretty confusing. I did the whole Facebook thing trying to find out all the different groups and network a bit." Focus Group A (T2).

The findings indicated a preference to use social networks to check information rather than refer to written sources e.g. the Student Charter. Making sense of the information involves a process of gauging and testing by comparing current experiences with similar events in the past. This participant contrasted their unstructured time at university with the structure of sixth form:

"I was in a sixth form, so it was still a 9-3.30 day and you've still got to see your tutor every single morning for registration and there is still a bell to tell you that your lessons ending." Focus Group E (T2).

Testing shaped understanding and allowed expectations to be modified as illustrated by a specific type of exchange; providing feedback. Feedback was frequently feedback from students using a variety of formats including informal feedback at the end of a lecture, sticky notes mid-way through a session and at the end of modules and the National Student Survey in the final year. The

request for feedback and providing responses set up an exchange pattern that established an expectation. A notable feature of this exchange activity was that students did not expect changes to be made as a result of providing feedback. The majority of student participants had observed limited impact as a result of giving feedback.

“Nothing ever came of us making complaints. I sat in the student ambassador meetings, but solutions weren’t suggested. Everybody was just saying how bad it was. There wasn’t really anyone saying what they could do to fix it.” Student P10 (T2).

“We complete the national student surveys... and then the university does an internal one as well... they say they listen to it, but I don’t think they really do.” Student P2 (T3).

“Yeah well, we have - what do you call it - our student survey thing for every module at the end of the year. I don’t know how far they go to making a difference, but the lecturer seemed pretty wound up about them. They probably do make a difference.” Student P11 (T3).

“I get the impression that they value the feedback, but you never see the results of it. It’s the next year or the year after that who see the impact. But personally, I’ve never given any feedback and seen any obvious changes.” Student P14 (T3).

Exchange activity had established a pattern of students providing feedback that they considered would not have much impact. A pattern of exchange was established that involved feedback being requested and students providing it whilst holding an expectation that nothing would change.

Further insights into the process of exchange was provided by focus group participants who described a sense of disconnect between paying fees and receiving something. The loan system allows students to sign up to make repayments as a percentage of their earnings may have contributed towards this disconnection. As one focus group participant explained, *“you’re never really in debt because you never have to pay it back.”* Another focus group participant stated, *“the government is definitely paying me to sit around in pubs.”* This description was similar to others and conveyed a sense of it not being *“their money”* that was involved in the exchange process. Another view was described by a participant in focus group C, *“money just hasn’t registered yet and, to be honest, I don’t think about the money at all.”* This has implications for the concerns that higher fees would lead to greater demands

from student (Chapter 1.3). In practice, the exchange process appears to be more complicated than anticipated.

The process of exchange was also influenced by *active promotion* which was a specific type of exchange that involved highlighting key aspects of the offer made to students. Marketing activity and lecturers promoting key messages were the most notable types of active promotion. This type of exchange activity typically occurred during preview days and the induction period.

The importance of preview days in attracting students now that higher fees were in operation was evident. Lecturers described how preview days were significant and explained how they were encouraged to 'volunteer' their time on Saturdays so that they were available. During the interviews, several lecturers performed their enthusiastic sales pitch which gave a sense that this was now an important part of their role:

"Yeah like I say we go 'location, location, location!' We also play to the strength of the university which is the fact that we are a new up and coming university. What we show them is if you come here you have a lot of modern facilities ...we have a strong commitment to educating our students using new technologies". Lecturer P13 (T1).

I created a memo to explore my thinking regarding *promotion the offer* (Figure 4.4).

Memo: Promoting the offer

Written after final interviews (T5)

Lecturer P17 was extremely enthusiastic and engaging. She was passionate about her subject and clearly valued working collaboratively with students. After the interview I reflected on how engaging this promotional activity was. I wanted to tell others about this brilliant course and even imaged what it would be like to be a student doing this course. Having been made aware of all the benefits and what this course offers it seemed like a great choice even though I lack the appropriate background. This experience was fascinating and felt like

I'd had some sort of evangelical experience or had been influenced by a persuasive salesperson.

How might students respond to this type of experience? Lecturer P17 said that students "*push the university up to first choice*" ahead of some of the red brick universities. This statement makes sense and I can see why students might base decisions on emotional responses rather than a rational assessment.

Promoting the offer seems to form a key and powerful part of the exchange process. Key and selective messages are pushed out tempting students to engage in certain ways. The comment "*paying for an opportunity*" came to mind and I considered whether students were in their rational or emotional brains when making this investment.

Figure 4.4 Memo *Promoting the offer*

Lecturer participants described how they intended to *promote the offer* by talking about the Student Charter:

"It probably will front end, at the very start, they will like it at induction week. This is something they can have a quick look through, it's nice and brief one page and what does it say – I have to turn up to lectures, I have to be polite and they have to be polite and courteous to me. It also says we are going to use a range of teaching techniques." Lecturer P13 (T2).

Promotional activities were active exchange periods where information was promoted, and applicants listened carefully to the promises on offer. Information provided at preview days was quoted by students during the final interviews (time 5) indicating the powerful and pervasive nature of this exchange. These findings have implications for psychological contract formation and suggests that active promotion of some information has a pervasive and long-term influence.

4.3.3 Category 4: “*You can’t put this stuff in writing.*”

Describing what is exchanged for what and the process of exchange highlighted the challenges in defining the offer. The ‘in vivo’ code “*You can’t put this stuff in writing*” captured a sense of the difficulties in defining what was on offer and how the exchange took place.

Descriptions provided by lecturers highlighted the challenges in defining the offer. The descriptions included a range of things and experiences that were coded as *intangible*. Examples include, “*a positive learning environment*” and “*developing friendly relationships.*” Lecturer P17 described his offer to students as an, “*open door policy and being available to students and a sort of ‘sandbox’ environment where people can experience skills and get insights into things in a safe way.*” This playful description portrays a sense of what students might expect yet the ambiguous nature of some of the descriptors leave them open to interpretation. Verbalising the offer to students is challenging. Exchange activity provided the opportunity to test understanding. The example quoted by Lecturer P17, of having an “*open door policy*” was subject to a variety of interpretations and ultimately frustration when the door was not open at the right time or in the right manner.

Lecturer P16 described a number of issues that he had identified regarding the Student Charter.

“I think again the literal mindedness of it is the main concern. That there is a literal minded way of applying these things which could get into difficulties about what is not written or about having to lengthen it to include things that become important. Putting it in writing makes everything seem equivalent but they’re not really. They are equivalent in one way but not in another. To be five minutes late is less important than not being prepared at all for the seminar or whatever”. Lecturer P16 (T1).

Another important finding when trying to define the offer was that it was often negotiated during the exchange process. Lecturer participants used phrases such as “*reined back*”, “*go back and forth*”, “*need a lot more divisions between staff and students*”, when describing their interactions with students. The offer was, therefore, fluid and negotiable. An example that illustrates this was provided by Lecturer P11 who described spending a significant amount of time

responding to emails and finding it difficult to balance the demands of all her work commitments:

“It took a while for me to discover where the boundaries were and what was acceptable in my practice and what was accepted by the students. It took me a while going back forth, across this line - which I didn’t know where it was - to find out. You have to go back and forth and check what is it that I am actually prepared to do. What am I contractually obliged to do?” Lecturer P11 (T1).

Lecturer P11 described a process of experimentation as she defined what her offer was to students. Her decision depended on a number of factors including her employment contract, what she was prepared to do and what was acceptable to students. Lecturer P11’s description highlights what is exchanged is also dependent on how individuals interpret and define the offer.

An ‘in vivo’ code *“you can’t put this stuff in writing”* was used to code exchange items and activities that were difficult to define. Lecturer’s experience of creating the Student Charter provided insights into the challenge of creating a document that captured the deal. Lecturer P13 summed up these difficulties when he explained:

“It’s got to be something that evolves. You can’t put this stuff in writing. I think a Student Charter outlines the basics and manages expectations. But everything else is so fluid and so dynamic that you need the flexibility to be able to adapt to that. You can’t if you formalise stuff too much...you can’t do that.” Lecturer P13 (T1).

Lecturer P13 has recognised the importance of have a guidance document but is aware of the importance of flexibility to adapt to a constantly changing environment. The importance of retaining flexibility was described by most of the lecturer participants who describe their resistance to formalising the exchange agreement:

“I wanted to develop something that was genuinely an interaction between students and staff so that we didn’t get into the kind of legalistic type of charter. I could see we could end up with a statement saying, ‘we’ll do this, and you have to sign this’ and we really didn’t want to do that.” Lecturer P15 (T1).

“We didn’t want it to say, ‘Oh there’s a line that runs down the centre of this page and we’re on one side and the students are on the other side’ and defining a line in the sand and wanting us to be very formal with them. We didn’t want that to happen so that was my biggest fear.” Lecturer P13 (T1).

“We didn’t go specific we went really general ... it should capture the spirit within which the degree operates... we’re trying to get across the mentality that lies behind things and it gives students an idea of the kind of people they are working with.” Lecturer P12 (T1)

Lecturer participants wanted the flexibility to collaborate in order to manage the relational aspects of their interaction with students. Being able to respond according to the demands of the situation and negotiate a positive outcome also appears important.

Staff who had been involved in creating the Student Charter described their personal resistance and that of colleagues towards it. Creating the Student Charter was perceived as formalising interactions and reducing flexibility to operate in the most appropriate way. Lecturers described exchange processes that involved flexibility, negotiation and *“working with fluid boundaries.”* Their professional experiences of working with students had helped them recognise what is important in the exchange activity which could not be defined. The Student Charter was designed to ‘clarify expectations’ (Chapter 2.3.2) but findings from the current study suggest that day to day interactions defy clarification.

Despite reservations, lecturer participants described how they attempted to create a Student Charter that would clarify what was on offer. Lecturer P11 suggested it included *“key deliverables that we should lay down for students ...we should be contactable within a certain agreed time. We should be visible, and careful about the reason we cancel lectures.”* These *“key deliverables”* retained an element of ambiguity. For example, lecturers could define the times when they were available but how might they define *“being visible.”* Lecturers may consider that they are visible when attending a conference, but then they are not visible in lectures which may prompt students to consider that they had not received value-for-money (Category 2, *What is exchanged for what?* Chapter 4.3.1).

Even the purpose of the Student Charter remained unclear. Lecturer participants provided a wide variety of explanations regarding how it would be used demonstrating the challenges of gaining universal agreement on something that appears relatively unambiguous. For example, three lecturer participants suggested that the Student Charter clarified what was on offer now

that students were paying higher fees. Lecturer P13 explained, *“I think it’s nice to have. It shows that we’ve tried not to adapt but to react to the change in fees.”* Other uses for the Student Charter included a *“collaboration and marketing tool”* (Lecturer P15). Lecturer P13 considered that Student Charters offered, *“a means of managing expectations so nobody got this misconception of what a student is expected to do and what a staff member is expected to do.”*

Lecturer P11 suggested, *“I felt it could be used to confirm the way colleagues go about doing their job.”* Lecturer P11 was not concerned that the Student Charter would impact on her but rather that her colleagues would have their performance monitored by students. Lecturer P15 described a frequently expressed concern that there was *“fear among some staff that this would make them accountable in a legal sense.”* Several lecturers advocated that the Student Charter was more about working together rather than creating divisions:

“It’s [Student Charter] not a tool for students or staff to beat each other with. The Student Charter is a tool for the two of us to work together and I think they will realise quite quickly that is the case and it only lays out the basic framework for how that is going to happen.” Lecturer P13 (T1).

Lecturers developed their own interpretation of how the Student Charter would be used. This was an important finding demonstrating that when a group of people work together, as happened when creating the Student Charter, they can each hold individual interpretations. Lecturer’s reservations regarding the Student Charter seem well founded as there are differing ideas regarding its purpose and the content is ambiguous.

Student S3 (T5) was extremely angry about her experience. She had a number of grievances including not having a lecturer for one module and exam questions for one paper not relating to what was taught. She met with her tutor to try to resolve her concerns, but this was not successful, and she asked how she could make a complaint:

“When I said to her how do I make a complaint she said, ‘I don’t know you just do it online somehow’. I’ve no idea – I’ve never done it before. I asked her if she would find out, but she just said you have to go online. I’m sure it’s on the university website.” Student S3 (T4).

The Student Charter was not referred to at this critical time.

A further striking finding regarding the Student Charter was that whilst they were an important topic during the first set of interviews with lecturers, three years later, only one student participant recalled hearing about them. Lecturers described how they promoted the Student Charter whilst expressing concerns that they would have a negative impact. Their impact however was limited and Lecturer P13's predictions turned out to be fairly accurate, *"I don't think it will have a huge impact in the future other than being something that people can refer to in times of need."* The impact of the Student Charter was not visible. The ethos and approach it advocated may have had a subtle influence, but this interpretation suggests a more psychological approach to contracts is in operation. This important finding will be explored in relation to the literature in the next chapter.

The challenges of using written guidance to clarify expectations was provided when exploring communication between lecturers and students. Lecturer P15 described the challenges responding to emails from students, *"Lecturers are overloaded with emails and they often ignore those from students or respond way too late and students get upset and after a while some members of staff they think it's not worth bothering."* As a potential solution, Lecturer P15 suggested that the Student Charter could direct students to *"read handbooks and find information out for themselves. This would help us make communication more efficient."* Students explained their reason for emailing a question rather than referring to guidance documents, *"time pressures," "not knowing where to look," "can't be bothered"* and simply *"forgetting what was written"* were reasons cited by students for failing to use written information. Students were not alone in experiencing such issues with written information. Lecturer P11 reflects on the challenges in her role:

"I think that the guidelines are there. I don't think that they are always made explicit to us. Sometimes we do make mistakes unknowingly and as a new member of staff, I've done that a few times. I thought ah well no one told me I had to do that. Where was I supposed to learn that? Where was I supposed to learn that piece of information? Hand in times; hand in locations, whatever ... well, it's in the guidelines. Then you think ahh I'm that student!"
Student P11 (T1).

The experiences of Lecturer P11 and students shows that time, effort and remembering what's written influences behaviour. Individuals use a variety of mechanisms to facilitate how exchange takes place that is not reliant on written information.

Exploring what happened to the Student Charter over a three-year period suggests that formal documents have limited scope; individuals desire flexibility that allows them to implement situation specific solutions; and agreeing on how a document is used is subject to individual interpretation. Written contracts have limitations and other means of agreeing on the terms of the exchange between parties is needed. An important finding is that interpreting and using contracts involves psychological activity. What happens in practice is defined in the moment.

4.3.3.1 Summary of Exchange outcomes / results

Students included items that could be considered outside the exchange package e.g. privately rented accommodation and excluded things that staff considered part of the exchange package e.g. support and guidance, suggesting that defining the package was problematic. Students initially identified tangible items as important, but later interviews confirmed that this changed to less tangible items e.g. skills development, independence. The analysis of the data confirmed that individuals decided what was part of the exchange package, further supporting the idea that information is subject to adjustment.

Students used a gauge that was developed through prior experience to select what they paid attention to and to explore current experiences. The exchange process itself involved a variety of mediums including social media and face-to-face contact. Patterns of interactions were influential in the formation of expectations. The payment of fees represented a complex transaction. Students did not expect an immediate return but considered that the payment of fees was an investment for future opportunities.

The exchange package included a broad spectrum of items including things that may not be traditionally associated with the student experience e.g. private accommodation. Students focused more on less tangible gains e.g. gaining

skills and independence, later in their university careers. Expectations regarding exchange items were therefore seen as being adjusted through experience.

Key messages are selected and promoted, and this can subtly influence expectations. Active promotion is itself an exchange activity as lecturers push out information.

Exchange activity takes place using a variety of mechanisms including social media and face-to-face contact. Patterns of exchange can influence expectations as evidenced by exploring what happened to expectations of feedback; students developed an expectation that they would provide feedback but held limited expectations that it would have an impact. Exchange activity is shaped and tested by using an internal *gauge* developed through prior experience. *Promoting the offer* shapes expectations by promoting selective messages especially during preview days and the induction period.

4.4 Theoretical Finding Three: Engagement

The final theoretical category emerged from themes and data that explored the interactions and exchanges between students and lecturers. These interactions ranged being 'cooperative' and 'collaborative' through to 'non-cooperative' and 'combative'. Interactions were enacted through a range of mediums including face-to-face and via other media such as email correspondence. Engagement was sometimes enacted at a distance and took place over space and time whilst at other times it was close and in real time.

A common theme regarding these interactions was that they allowed both parties to shape the boundaries. The concept *working within fluid boundaries* was used to describe the engagement process. This connected students and lecturers in a way that influenced and shaped outcomes. This was particularly evident when students and lecturers coped with adverse situations e.g. negative feedback, and lack of shared understanding. Both parties in the exchange process shaped how these interactions were managed and in doing so created and defined the parameters of that relationship. The final theoretical category *engagement* evolved from data describing how students and lecturers *worked within fluid boundaries* to shape outcomes.

Two main categories contributed to the theoretical category *engagement*. The first category, *developing coping strategies*, described how students responded to adversity by making internal changes. This included *evolving new skills* such as *rationalising* what had happened. The second category explores more covert processes that included *strategies and tactics* that subtly influenced the working relationship between lecturers and students. These more covert activities helped both parties to negotiate hurdles and informally decide codes of behaviour. These two categories will be presented describing how students adjust and respond to adverse situations.

4.4.1.1 Adjusting and Responding to Disappointment

Expectations were not always met during the exchange process and this led to disappointment (Theoretical Category 1, “*Expecting something but not always sure what*”). Student participants described how they adjusted and responded to a range of minor and major disappointments. The initial codes *worse than expected* and *better than expected* allowed an exploration of what happened to student expectations after exchange activity took place. Constant comparison of these codes over time and between incidents provided insights into ways that students responded when outcomes were worse or better than expected. Fewer reported outcomes were identified as being *better than expected*. The majority of events were described as being disappointing to vary degrees, suggesting this forms part of the day-to-day experience.

Minor deviations from expectations were accommodated with relative ease. For example, a student who did not hear back from his lecturer decided the matter did not warrant further consideration. The initial concern had in effect been downgraded. Almost half of the student participants mentioned frustration with course content in their first year. One focus group participant vocalised her frustration on this topic and received wide agreement from others in the group:

“I swear I’ve got three sets of notes exactly the same from A levels and from the first lecture and then from the second lecture – it’s all just repeated!” Focus Group D (T2).

Student P3 described her frustration that year one had not provided her with sufficient information to complete assignments in year two:

“I was quite disappointed is probably one word, annoyed is probably another that they expect you to do all this work this year ... but don’t give us the information to be able to work from.”
Student P3 (T5).

Whilst Student P3 was annoyed, she completed her assignments and reported receiving good grades. In contrast, major deviations from expectations were more difficult to resolve. Student P7 described her understanding that her course would include a work placement:

“Apparently, our course is one of the top in the country and it’s the only of its kind, so surely, we should get placements. Apparently, according to our leader, employers queue up to get students from our course.” Student P7 (T2).

A year later the lack of work placement continued to frustrate and upset her. Student P7 reflected on the promise of a work placement. She had been told that employers would be queuing up to offer placements:

“I wish there had been a queue. I think we were expecting more because - it seems stupid - because every time I’d say it I think that it was my responsibility to do it, but then I think more about it and think that actually, we’re still students and they said they could offer us placements. We don’t know how to get them so therefore they should be helping us with them.” Student P7 (T3).

Student P7’s considered whether she had understood the information correctly. Her search for clarification including reviewing whose responsibility it was to organise the work placement. Her frustrations evolved into a division of *“them and us”* to *“we”* and *“them”* and although she laughed as if to make light of these events, it was clear that this had had a major impact on how she felt about the course and that she had spent time ruminating over this disappointment. Similar examples of being disappointed were collated into a category that was named *harsh lessons*.

Another example of a *harsh lesson* was described by Student P2 who provided an account of a misunderstanding with his personal tutor:

“Last year I saw her once every two weeks. She was there if I needed her. I can send her an email if I need her. But I’ve been ok, and I’ve never really needed her help.” Student P2 (T5).

He got lost when he went to see her and arrived late:

“I had a bad experience with her. She wanted to meet in a room that I couldn’t find on the map. She just said she’s my tutor, not my personal assistant. Sometimes I find her a bit unapproachable. I also find we get fobbed off with ‘it’s in the handbook’.” Student P2 (T5).

This account suggests that Student P2’s personal tutor considered that he saw her as his, *“personal assistant”* whereas Student P2 had got lost. In the interview, Student P2’s reflections conveyed a sense of injustice. His original expectation that she would be there if needed had been falsified in that exchange. Describing these events two years later prompted an emotional response that suggested he was reliving this painful incident. It was as if he had parted company with a close friend. Student P2 shifted the conversation to suggest improvements:

“It would be nice if they explained as many people come from school and it’s not what you are expecting. At school, a tutor was someone you could speak to about welfare issues, but it’s now focussed on more uni stuff.” Student P2 (T2).

The use of *“they”* and *“its”* depersonalises his comments in a similar manner to the *“we”* and *“them”* language used by Student P7 above. Depersonalising and altering language seemed to offer a protective function by allowing the student to distance themselves from these emotionally charged events. During the interview, it was as if they had taken a virtual deep breath and put on a ‘brave face’. Both incidents were emotionally charged, and I wrote a memo captured my thoughts on what was happening at such times (Figure 4.5).

Memo: *Harsh lessons*

Student P2's interview left me feeling extremely sad. His description of events gave me insight into the raw emotions that he experienced. I likened his experiences to the sadness of losing a close friend. Student P2's *harsh lesson* had catapulted him from his halcyon days to a more brutal and stark reality. His world axis had shifted, and I wondered how this event had impacted on his expectations of others.

Whatever his personal tutors' intentions were, her comments seemed to have provoked a strong emotional reaction. Student P2 described being "*told off*" which suggests that she was behaving in an authoritarian manner. His personal tutor was "*not his personal assistant*" but an authority figure directing and dictating his actions. Student P2's sense of pain was tangible and seemed to have had a long-lasting impact.

Student P7's interview reminded me of Student P2 as she also described being "*let down*." The promised work placement that had been *actively promoted* had not materialised, and she began to doubt what she had heard and what she might have done to achieve a different outcome. Student P7's descriptions were emotionally laden and there was a sense that this experience was still largely unresolved.

Both Student P7 and Student P2 seemed to be left with an emotional legacy following these events. How might this be resolved in the future? When might such emotions be activated again?

In theoretical category 2, I conceptualised how students used an internal gauge to help them decide what to do. These strong emotional legacies seem to have a lasting impact and may contribute towards the recalibration of gauges.

Figure 4.5 Memo Harsh Lessons

This section highlighted that adversity was part of everyday experiences. Responses varied but students appeared to find mechanisms that enabled them to move forward. *Harsh lessons* could leave students with a negative emotional legacy. These mechanisms are now explored in more depth under the category headings *internal coping strategies* and *external influencing*.

4.4.2 Category 5: Internal Coping Strategies

Analysis of the data highlighted students use a range of strategies to cope with disappointment and negative experiences. Coping strategies ultimately help students avoid or reduce experiencing negative feelings. Coping comprised of the following code clusters; *developing strategies*; *rationalising negative experiences* and; *evolving identity* (Figure 4.6).

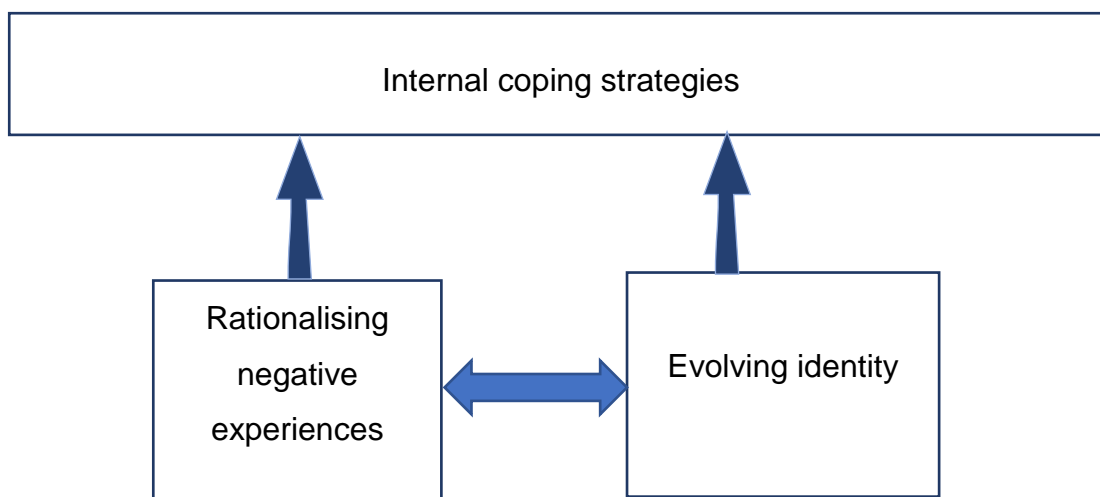


Figure 4.6 Category 5: Internal Coping Strategies

Faced with adversity, students developed a variety of coping strategies. Seemingly small events such as *“not able to get hold of a tutor,”* or being *“unsure of what’s required”* acted as a mechanism for developing coping strategies. Developing coping strategies had additional benefits as the following memo illustrates:

Memo: Developing Coping Strategies

Written after final interview (T5)

Student P10 (T2) considered that the high dropout rate for his course was due to a range of factors including modules that did not relate to their core subject, a failure to deliver on the promise of a placement, and frustration at the lack of input from lecturers. Over half the students had failed to return after their first year. Student P10 described how he had shared his frustration with peers on his course which resulted in them collaborating to complete assignments. In the final interview, Student P10 described how collaborating had helped him become independent and entrepreneurial.

How did Student P10 cope so well? Being part of a close-knit supportive group helped. He could vent his negative feelings, and this seems important as he also said that he found it useful to reflect on his experiences during the interviews. He talked about his desire to be an entrepreneur and made a link between coping with the course and his future. At times he said he felt angry at how he had been treated but surprisingly he looked back on his time at university with genuine fondness. He summed it up when he said, "*I'll take the positives with me and learn from the rest.*"

I wonder what Student P10 will do next? He has managed his own psychological contract in a way that maintains a positive appraisal of his interaction with the university.

Figure 4.7 Memo Developing Coping Strategies

A challenge identified by many student participants was coping with unmetabled. Contact time was less than expected for the majority of participants and how to make the best use of unstructured time required a

period of adjustment. This was more apparent for students who had come from a structured sixth form environment. Student P2 described how his prior experience of coping with free periods at college prepared him better than a student who had some from sixth form, a theme echoed by several other participants.

“I think that helped. A lot of my friends who went to the sixth form found that change a lot more drastic. At college, we had free periods but because I went to college it was a bit more laid back and we had free periods, but it was still a change going to uni but not as drastic.” Student P2 (T2).

The degree of change was not as drastic for Student P2 as he had learnt to cope with unstructured time. In this case, prior experience was a resource that could use to develop coping skills. Whilst developing skills in this way may not be perceived as part of the student experience, it meets the expectation of gaining additional skills and is perhaps what lecturer participants referred to as *“more than getting a degree”*:

“I think the development of general skills and interactions and the confidence to speak in public all those kinds of things. I think we do a good job on that.” Lecturer P15 (T1).

The section on adjusting and responding to adversity identified that this was an everyday activity. Presumably, each event presents an opportunity to develop coping strategies and therefore fulfils an expectation of developing skills. As previously noted however in, *defining the offer*, capturing this process formally is difficult, resulting in such exchanges remaining implicit.

A specific coping mechanism was *rationalising negative experiences*. Just under half of the student participants described their frustration at repeating material covered previously:

“Overall looking at the modules there is a lot of overflow between my Level 3 BTEC and Year 1. However, I’d say that is to be expected. It has to be all-encompassing and welcome everyone.” Focus Group E (T2).

“It’s good to go over it again though but generally, you just sit there bored and hung-over! Or in my case just leave!” Focus Group D (T2).

“It eases you into it and they set it out just in case you don’t know. You start from scratch to avoid picking up bad habits.” Focus Group F (T2).

“They are trying to make the first year very broad.” Focus Group E (T2).

Collectively these quotes indicate that negative events have been rationalised. One student participant took the process a step further, suggesting that repeating information avoids *“picking up bad habits.”* Similarly, a focus group student offered her positive interpretation of the benefits of not being able to access support:

“In a way that’s good and really straight forward but now with the course work you don’t get much guidance at all and if you get a little bit stuck with it, you can go your own way; it’s quite nice to find your own way.” Focus Group C (T2).

The positive reinterpretation of negative events was noted in a variety of situations. It was as if students had invested their interests in the university and wanted to create a positive impression. The most striking example of positive promotion was provided by a student who described how he got involved in a presentation at a preview event attended by his friend:

“I asked him if he would like a student to do a talk and explained that he was boring people. I said, “it’s just you are talking at people; you need someone who’s going to connect.” So, I ended up doing the talk and then into the next one. I was standing in a room in front of about 30 people. It was weird because I was a first-year student only about four or five weeks in and I didn’t really know much and if anyone had asked me any questions I’d have said well I actually don’t know what I’m talking about, I’m just trying to break up the presentation a bit!” Focus Group C (T2).

This student was very proud of his efforts to make the event interesting. Presumably, he wanted his friend to be impressed and therefore took proactive steps to help with the sales pitch.

The development of coping strategies appeared to impact how students saw themselves. This was particularly evident during the transition phase from college and sixth form:

“I think especially University as a whole and the moving away from home and living by yourself. It’s kind of seen as a rite of passage.”

"If you don't do it people are like 'Oh you are not going to Uni?'"
Focus Group A (T2).

"I felt really lost to start with then on day two I thought why have I done this and had a bit of a wobble. But I didn't realise that everyone else was also having a bit of a wobble because they looked very calm and they obviously thought I did too! When we got to know each other later we realised we all felt the same way, completely out of our depth not knowing where to go or what we're meant to do, but everyone else seemed as if they did." Focus Group A (T2).

"It was like a fog. We were trying to find out if we were provided with text books or did we have to order them." Focus Group A (T2).

These quotes capture some of the challenges of this transition period and a sense of the opportunities for students to explore, evaluate and develop coping strategies. A parallel process that ran alongside this was that students developed their identity. Identities that student sought to achieve included the *good student* and *independence* and together these codes represented *idealised identities*. The *good student* and *independence* were typified by activities such as turning up to lectures and spending time reading around a topic. Developing coping strategies, therefore, has an impact on supporting students develop a sense of who they are. Development of self-identity had an impact on external influencing which is presented next.

4.4.3 Category 6: External Influencing

Lecturers and students described a range of strategies and tactics that were used to influence others. This was important as it allowed students to impact what was happening around them rather than relying solely on coping strategies. Strategies and tactics could be used combatively or collaboratively (Figure 4.8).

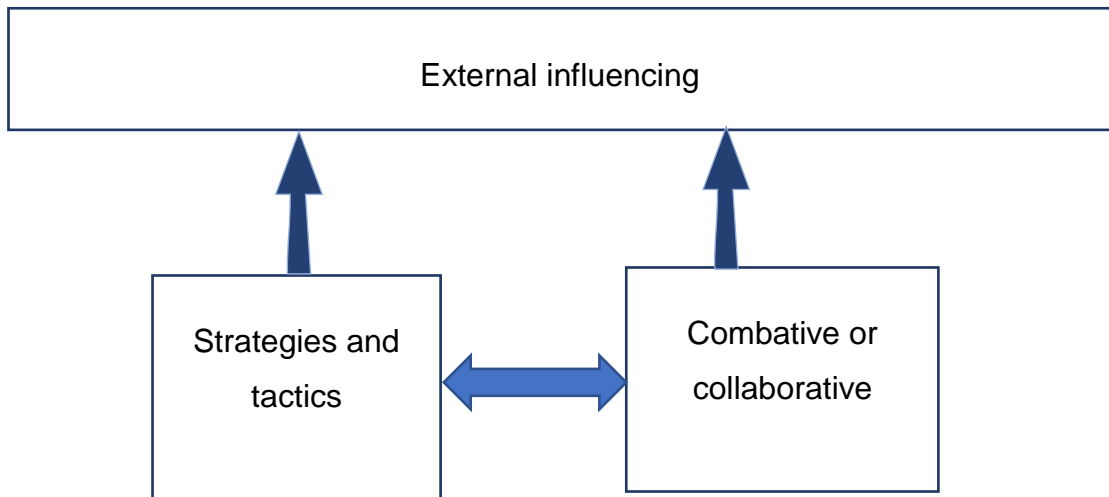


Figure 4.8 Category 6: External Influencing

Lecturers described various tactics that they used to influence student behaviour. Tactics included “*giving information*” and “*clarifying expectations*” as Lecturer P11 explained, “*we have the official briefings where ‘look this is your programme guide. You need to read this. It has regulations with respect to course work submissions etc.’*” Other tactics used by lecturers included a “*kindly, supportive conversation*”, “*gentle advice*” and an “*open door policy*” through to “*disciplinary procedures.*”

Initial data coded from early phases in the research suggested that students had little influence on lecturers. Comparing initial data against data from later years, however, indicated that students develop a variety of tactics that they used to influence lecturers. Lecturer P11 considered that the Student Charter itself might be used to influence her behaviour:

“If I pulled that student agreement on one of those students emailing me then it’s nothing. If they pulled the student agreement on me it’s something. I don’t think it will be much of a weapon for us against student’s behaviour.” Lecturer P11 (T1).

None of the student participants used the Student Charter to claim anything. What was evident was the use of other subtle tactics that enabled students to achieve positive outcomes. Lecturer P12 described the subtle tactics that she used to influence students:

“I also think it’s a matter of the culture and the environment you set from day one. It’s a friendly ‘we can talk about things’ environment treating people as mature people rather than as

‘you’ll do this, and you’ll do that and if you don’t like it you’ll have to complain about it’ sort of thing which is probably something that arises accidentally in some areas.” Lecturer P12 (T1).

The process starts early on by using a “friendly” approach. Students are treated as “mature people” and an expectation set up that collaboration rather than complaints will be the norm.

The most striking example of students using tactics to influence the behaviour of lecturers was “putting in ‘face time’.” Student participants described putting in ‘face time’ with lecturers” to influence behaviour. This involved turning up to lectures and actively participating when appropriate. As a result, student participants got additional input from a lecturer.

“We had this one lecturer who gave us a lot of support and feedback on our project. He was incredibly useful in advising us on what we were doing right and wrong, things you might not have considered.” Student P14 (T5).

Strategies and tactics were evident when student participant and lecturer participants talked about ‘them and us’. A combative approach was used when necessary:

“I don’t think it [Student Charter] will be much of a weapon for us against student’s behaviour.” Lecturer P11 (T1).

Another example was described by a lecturer in response to students threatening to give negative ratings in the National Student Survey because of the introduction of a new assessment process:

“The thing is students have become very aware that schools and programs are very sensitive to the NSS it’s hard not to be aware of that. And so, they are starting to use it as a negotiating – I’m putting it nicely – but effectively it’s a threat. If you don’t do what we want, we are going to give you a poor rating in the NSS they see that direct connection.” Lecturer P16 (T1).

Students had threatened staff with poor ratings in the NSS. The matter was resolved through a process of negotiation:

“I came down on it very hard I said, ‘look actually that’s really inappropriate this is work in progress, we’ve not had a chance to respond to it’ and when we did we sorted it in a day, and the National Student Survey if it’s going to be of any value it has to be done honestly and if people start to use it as a weapon...” Lecturer P12 (T1).

Another lecturer talked about strategies that they used to manage student behaviour. Tactics included *“using the disciplinary tool ...when students have over-stepped the mark and become too disorganised, undisciplined, they find we can change quite rapidly ... it reinforces that division.”* Lecturer P13 went on to explain that he had *“sent students home”* and used the formal disciplinary process. Lecturer P11 described how she moderated the relationship with students:

“So, it’s not ‘good cop bad cop’ routine but they need to know we can switch between being lecturers but at the same time very approachable. It can become a fine line at times.” Lecturer P1 (T1).

Whilst lecturers worked tactically to manage behaviour and reinforce boundaries this was not always a negative process. The *zone of perfection* was used to code incidents when things worked well. Getting the relationship right was often mentioned by lecturers

“That’s a brilliant moment and that’s when you feel you’ve got the relationship right and this is where the Student Charter has to go out of the window. You’ve got their respect and you respect them and everything is working fine.” Lecturer P11 (T1).

Lecturer P11 went on to say, *“It’s observable, it’s visual, it’s there – you can feel it and I know that’s exactly what I should be doing.”* Lecturer P11 described a sense of feeling that things are right. This offers support for the student experience encompassing more than can be written down (Category 2, *“You can’t put this stuff in writing”*).

4.4.3.1 Summary of Engagement

Categories 5 and 6 explain how individuals adapt internally and externally to cope and influence everyday situations that involve overcoming adversity. Learning to cope involved developing internal strategies and tactics e.g. rationalising negative experienced, promoting positive information. Transition into the university was a crucial time that provided opportunities for students to develop coping skills. Developing coping strategies helped students to gain confidence. These changes involved internal processing.

External influencing summarised key strategies and tactics that were used to influence others. More explicit techniques included using the disciplinary system

and referring to the Student Charter were options that lecturers and students could use. Subtle techniques, such as being friendly and putting in 'face time', however, were more frequently used to influence others. Strategies could be used in a combative or a cooperative manner but ultimately, they provided ways of engaging others to achieve desired outcomes.

The final category described the engagement process between students and lecturers. Engagement was on a spectrum of activity that ranged from combative through to collaborative and involved both parties negotiating and defining the working relationship. Strategies and tactics were used to develop internal coping resources and influence the other party.

As students developed coping resources and influenced others their confidence and skills levels increased thus engaging them as more active participants in the exchange process.

4.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented the empirical findings that contributed to the development of three theoretical findings that comprise of six categories. The findings highlighted topics that are important to students, supporting the use of a qualitative approach to explore the student psychological contract. For example, students described maintenance activities which would not have been forthcoming if the focus had been on breach. The student accounts indicated their role in influencing outcomes supporting the view that bi-directional exchange takes place (Chapter 2.4.4.3). Students used information to inform their understanding of the offer from the university, providing useful insights regarding the 'other party' in the exchange relationship (Chapter 2.5.4.5)

The categories identified overlapped and influenced each other. This integrated model is now explored in relation to the literature in order to contextualise and evaluate the findings (Chapter 5).

5 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

The findings (Chapter 4) allowed the development of three categories expectations, exchange and engagement. The analytic process continues by comparing these core categories and theoretical findings to the literature allowing the findings to be informed, compared and developed in relation to the work of others (Charmaz (2006). This further analysis allows hidden processes to be explored and new insights gained.

As noted in the methodology (Chapter 3.2) this approach was selected to ensure that the process is driven by empirical data rather than being constrained by theoretical concepts. Each of the three theoretical findings and six categories are explored by deep immersion. The process of analysis evolves to describe the substantive theory that has been constructed through this process. Table 5.1 summarises how this discussion is structured.

Section	Key Discussion Points
5.2	Theoretical Finding One: Expectations
5.2.1	Category 1: <i>“Expecting something but not always sure what.”</i>
5.3	Theoretical Finding Two: Exchange
5.3.1	Category 2: What is exchanged for what?
5.3.2	Category 3: Process of exchange
5.3.3	Category 4: <i>“You can’t put this stuff in writing.”</i>
5.4	Theoretical Finding Three: Engagement
5.4.1	Category 5: Developing internal coping strategies
5.4.2	Category 6: External Influencing
5.5	Substantive Grounded Theory

Table 5.1 Structure of the Discussion of Theoretical Findings

Identifying which concepts are most relevant to the research findings has been recognised as a challenge for grounded theory. Theoretical concepts from

diverse fields may be relevant to the current study. Literature was selected based upon its relevance to the research questions and the extent to which it generated observations which would contribute towards theorising in this area.

In this study, the literature was mainly drawn from studies in organisational psychology and higher education. Retaining a focus within these domains provides the opportunity to discuss the concepts in a more unified and coherent manner rather than widening the scope of the discussion. Later in the study it was important to explore the concepts of coping and resilience which formed part of the theoretical category of engagement, an emergent topic.

Reviewing and comparing the themes in relation to the literature facilitated the development of a substantive grounded theory. The substantive grounded theory acts as an exemplar, offering the opportunity to critically evaluate the efficacy of using this approach. This final part of this chapter summarises the contribution made by the student psychological exemplar to our understanding of the student experience.

5.2 Theoretical Finding One: Expectations

The theoretical findings for expectations evolved and developed and were subsumed into one category *expecting something but not always sure what*. This theoretical category captured a sense of expectations as being in a constant state of formation. Expectations were shown as being flexible, open to interpretation and difficult to quantify.

5.2.1 “*Expecting something but not always sure what*”

The theoretical category *expecting something but not always sure what* highlighted the difficulties in identifying and defining student expectations. Everyday events prompted students to review their expectations that up until that point were held implicitly. For example, a lecturer not being available prompted participants to recognise that they held the expectation that lecturers were there for them.

This finding challenges the view that students have clear expectations (e.g. Kandiko & Mawer, 2013) regarding their university experience. The findings show expectations as being ambiguous and often based on inaccurate or limited information.

Over time, expectations change as more information becomes available and original expectations are revised. Expectations fluctuate as students review various sources of information. They may refer to the Student Charter and course handbooks, alternatively, they can turn to social media to *find out what's going on*. Information used to frame and reframe expectations may arise serendipitously, for example, an overheard conversation, or notice posts on social media. Whether information is actively promoted through marketing or by lecturers emphasising a key point, students are bombarded with information that will influence their expectations.

These findings offer an explanation as to why it is difficult to translate students' expectations into something that can be fulfilled. Expectations are not precise as illustrated by students wanting "*more contact time*", "*more information about background reading*", "*more time with lecturers*", "*more clarity about the standard required*". Fulfilling these expectations would require a knowledge of how much would satisfy the request. Students themselves do not know how many hours would fulfil the expectation of *more contact time*. In practice, it was only after an event that students considered if '*the more...*' expectation was met.

'*Lecturers*' and '*value-for-money*' were the most frequently cited expectations and these two categories are reviewed in relation to the literature.

5.2.1.1 Expectation of lecturers

The vast majority of students in the study held a narrow understanding of the role of lecturers that included teaching, marking and providing support. Similarly, Bligh, McNay, and Thomas (1999) found that administration and research activities were not acknowledged as part of the lecturer role. Students understand that lecturers taught and considered that lecturers were there for them, and most of the time lecturers behaved in line with this expectation. Lecturers were present in the lecture theatre and responded to emails. When this pattern of behaviour changed, for example a lecturer being absent due to

attending a conference, this implicitly-held expectation was raised to a state of awareness, and then reviewed. A change in patterns of behaviour provides further information about the lecturer and an opportunity to revise expectations. This sequence of events can be seen as an adaptive response that helps students to cope in their environment. The view that students have expectations waiting to be fulfilled is an oversimplification of the process.

Students may hold false expectations based on inaccurate information and these can be maintained due to a lack of disconfirmation. This study offers an alternative interpretation and suggests that unrealistic expectations may be held by students yet remain unproblematic until something happens to make things explicit. For example, a lecturer not turning up highlighted the expectations that 'lecturers were there for me'.

Findings from this study challenge the view that unrealistic expectations are likely to remain unmet Clinton (2009). HEIs are tasked with managing and fulfilling student expectations as these are seen as an important precursor of satisfaction and retention (e.g. Crisp et al., 2009; Longden, 2006). Findings from this study suggest that this assumption is incorrect and highlights the complexity of managing expectations. Holding an unrealistic or inaccurate expectation is not in itself problematic. The expectation may be disconfirmed. Alternatively, it may be revised in the light of further information before opportunity for disconfirmation arises. Disconfirmation activity is more prevalent during the induction phase as students explore tangible items and compare these to past events.

5.2.1.2 Value-for-money

Value-for-money descriptions were most frequently made in relation to the input provided by lecturers. Students described not getting value-for-money when a lecturer is not available or finishes a lecture before the scheduled time. Such events prompt students to question what they are getting in return for fees. At such times students reviewed the expectation and calculated how much that lecture had cost. The value-for-money expectation was made explicit after an exchange where something was not provided. The students are not making these explicit financial calculations on a day-to day basis. Lecturers were

however concerned that the Student Charter would be pulled out when students compared what they had paid against what they had received but there was not one incident when this happened. These findings contribute useful information concerning the debate on whether students are getting value-for-money (Chapter 2.3.4).

Evaluating whether something represents value-for-money is a complex process. The £50,000 'debt' that graduates accrue are widely reported in the media (Coughlan, 2017). Student participants in this study were the first cohort to pay higher fees and had few experiences upon which they could draw as a frame of reference. Students compared past experiences to explore whether they were getting value-for-money. For example, they compared what they were getting in sixth form and talked to students in the year above them who had paid lower fees (Chapter 4.2). Such comparisons involved the more explicit aspects of their experience including the number of contact hours and equipment. The results of the HEPI/HEA Student Academic Experience Survey (June 2017) indicates that students' perception of value-for-money is related to input from lecturers. The more implicit and relational aspects of the student experience which contribute towards a positive experience does not feature when considering value-for-money. Assessing value-for-money is inherently individual, subjective and limited by past experiences and current networks. Information processing activities will also influence how individuals perceive and make sense of complex information.

5.3 Theoretical Finding Two: Exchange

The second theoretical finding includes codes and categories that evolved into three theoretical findings; *what is exchanged for what, the process of exchange and you can't put this stuff in writing*. Collectively, these themes describe the exchange process that takes place between students and HEIs. Exchange activity provides information about what happens to expectations over time.

5.3.1 What is Exchanged for What?

Exploring items involved in the exchange process provided information about the contents of the psychological contract (Chapter 2.4)

Findings from this study highlight tangible items e.g. eBooks, emails, fees, contact hours and employability were important items in the exchange process which have also been reported in studies looking at the student experience (e.g. Bates & Kaye, 2014; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006). This study also identified items that are outside the traditional exchange package, including private accommodation and informal interaction with lecturers.

Students did not make reference to the Student Charter when describing what they considered part of the exchange package. Fears that it would be used to make demands and that it would make staff accountable are not borne out by the current study (Chapter 4.3.3). Student Participant S3 was critical about her experiences and described how she escalated her complaint. At no point did she refer to the Student Charter even though it signposts the complaints procedure. Subtle prompts during the interview itself did not create a link between wanting to make a complaint and the Student Charter. It was as if the Student Charter did not exist raising questions about its function and future.

Considering what was exchanged highlighted tangible items including books and contact hours and less tangible items such as informal interactions with lecturers. The transactional exchanges noted in the induction phase were replaced by relational transactions in the final phase.

Two ideas are put forward that account for the pattern. Firstly, the positioning of students as consumers focuses attention on things that are tangible. The Student Charter for example emphasises explicit aspects of the student experience such as excellent facilities and student accommodation. This emphasis on tangible items is reinforced by paying higher fees. Students are positioned as passive customers and given a shopping list of what they will receive. Students are told they will get a 'good degree' and this has in part been facilitated by more first-class degrees being awarded (Chapter 2.3.4). Students themselves may be working harder to achieve higher class degrees but universities appear to have moved classification rules to fulfil this demand.

Secondly, students learn about the relative value of different exchange items over time. Whilst contact time and facilities are initially important, students realise that interpersonal exchanges are rewarding. During interviews with students, it was clear that informal interactions with tutors and friendships with others were highly valued. The exchange activity e.g. interacting with lecturers enabled students to experience and value this type of activity.

5.3.2 The Process of Exchange

Exploring the process of exchange over time provided a number of useful insights that are described below. This category that shows exchange includes a variety of processes and mechanisms.

5.3.2.1 Patterns of Exchange

Experiencing repeated patterns of activity was influential in the formation and maintenance of expectations. Getting a quick turnaround on an email for example, maintained the expectation that the *lecturer was there for them*.

A more frustrating example was provided by students completing feedback forms yet not expecting to see changes themselves, since changes will in many cases affect students in the following years (Chapter 4.3.2). This interaction illustrates exchange in action. A cycle of interaction is set up and maintained for all modules creating a familiar pattern of interaction. Both students and lecturers engage in this reciprocal exchange activity that becomes self-maintaining. The original reasons for requesting feedback can appear to have less importance than engaging in the exchange activity, and the behaviour represents a habit rather than a meaningful interaction. Herriot et al. (1997) considers how perceptions relating to the psychological contract evolve and suggest that “*perceptions may be the result of formal contracts, or they may be implied by the expectations which each holds of the other and which are communicated in a multitude of subtle or not so subtle ways*” (p. 151). The findings from the current study extends this argument to include perceptions that are set up by the exchange process itself and maintained through habit.

5.3.2.2 Maintenance

Then findings showed how students maintained their psychological contracts. The following strategies were influential; adjusting expectations, rationalising negative experiences (Chapter 4.4.2).

Employability was as a key student expectation (Chapter 5.2). Breaching this expectation is difficult as its success can only be fully tested once the student has graduated. This is different to the psychological contracts in employment where breach opportunities are potentially part of everyday events. For example, an employee can find out if they are overlooked for promotion or not given the option to attend a training course when such events arise. Maintaining the student psychological contract 'offer of employability' relies on maintaining the promise of employability. Rousseau (1989) considers that the *perceived* exchange is important. The findings from the current study support for this view but also notes that individuals test the likelihood of receiving anticipated exchange items.

Exchanges that related to employability such as work placements or the opportunity to add value to a CV were significant to students. Not getting a work placement resulted in students expressed negative emotions. Work placements were related to employability and serve an important function in helping students to test the likelihood that this promise will be fulfilled. Everyday examples may therefore take on greater significance as they are linked to key exchange items. When a lecturer does not respond to an email it challenges the key expectation that the lecturer is there for them, thus having a greater impact.

Failure to reciprocate the other party's actions has been linked to an erosion in the quality of the exchange relationship (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). Findings from this study suggest a more complex arrangement whereby individuals look for evidence that they will receive an exchange item. In addition, the anticipation of potential breach taking place prompts students to take remedial action (Chapter 5.4).

5.3.2.3 The Other Party

Exploring the exchange process allowed consideration of the other party, a topic which has been contested within the literature on the psychological contract. Whilst the exchange relationship between an employee and employer/organisation i.e. the 'other party', is unclear (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Rousseau, 1989), findings from the current study indicate that information is obtained from a variety of sources including lecturers, social media, marketing and peers. This is an important finding and recognises that other sources of information are influential in determining what students consider as being part of the university offer.

This finding contributes to the debate concerning how an organisation communicates with individuals (e.g. Herriot et al., 1997; Rousseau, 1995) and who represents the other party (Chapter 2.5.4).

Rousseau's (1995) definition identifies the psychological contract as being shaped by the 'organisation'. Critics argue that organisations are not able to hold perceptions and cannot therefore be considered as the other party. Findings from this suggest that whilst the organisation shapes what is exchanged and how this process takes place, additional influences come from outside of the organisation. Research is needed to explore this topic further.

The organisation communicates using formal sources including lecturers, Student Charters, module and course handbooks. Information from other sources is also available and whilst this has not come from official sources at the university it can influence perceptions. For example, third party accounts from peers was used to decide whether or not students were required to attend lectures.

Students described how they discriminated between different sources of information (Chapter 5.3.2). Information from peers was considered alongside information from lecturers. Frequent references were made to using social media as students assessed what formed part of the deal (Chapter 4.3.2). On occasion, social media and peers appeared to be given greater credence than official sources. Findings indicated when students used different sources. Faced with conflicting messages (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007) students referred to social media and peers rather than their lecturer or

the Student Charter. Students for example decided whether or not they needed to attend a lecture based on information from peers and social media.

Anecdotal information from peers was preferred over the Student Charter.

Guest (1998b) noted that information provided both explicitly and implicitly appears to be perceived equally. Students in this study showed a tendency towards favouring information that was presented verbally or via social media. Students observed Facebook exchanges rather than reading guidelines or checking the Student Charter.

Knapp and Masterson (2017) consider the exchange partners of university undergraduates and note that “*students navigate a web of diverse exchange partners both inside and outside the university*” (p. 4). There is support for this finding in the current study which also recognises other information sources that are involved.

This has important implications for practice. Information used to understand what is involved in the deal may be unreliable, which increases the likelihood of holding an inaccurate psychological contract.

5.3.2.4 The Role of Emotions.

Emotions featured in descriptions of exchange activity. Both lecturers and students described examples of when things felt right. Lecture P16 described being in the *zone of perfection* characterised by positive emotions. Informal contact between lecturers and students could evoke positive feelings. The outcome of the meeting being more an emotional pleasure than transactional satisfaction.

Affective responses seemed to be influential when deciding what was working, as can be seen from the example of the lecturer’s describing “*moving back and forth in order to make the deal.*” This suggests that exchange can be guided by emotional reactions, a finding gaining attention in the more recent psychological contract literature (Rousseau et al., 2018).

Participants experiences were sometimes difficult to articulate. Participants described their feelings and outcomes more often than providing concrete examples of the exchange process. We can see that the exchange process

involves emotions which are complex and difficult to articulate, the challenge for participants was to describe something that is visceral. This emotional linkage ties into the early conceptualisation of the psychological contract from psychoanalytical relationships, described as meeting needs for the relationship to continue.

Emotions can be related to feelings of satisfaction. As noted in the introduction, HEIs seek to improve student satisfaction but measuring and defining satisfaction is a difficult task. This study highlights the importance of emotions and social interactions in the student experience. Consideration of the emotions and reactions noted in this study may provide useful insights into the student experience. Psychological contract studies included consideration of the social and emotional aspects of the exchange (Sparrow, 1998).

5.3.3 “*You Can’t Put This Stuff in Writing.*”

The ‘in vivo’ code “*You can’t put this stuff in writing,*” captured the challenges of trying to define the exchange relationship in writing. Lecturers described the challenges of documenting the offer to students when creating their Student Charter.

The active promotion of information did not consistently lead to it being remembered. One explanation for this is offered Hermida and Luchman (2013) who identified the importance of ‘information seeking’ in psychological contract development concluding that “*not all information is equal*” (p. 228). They found that information from supervisors led to less psychological contract breach than when it came from peers. Similarly, information quality was important for an accurate conceptualisation of the employee-employer relationship which impacted on the development of the psychological contract.

Findings from this study however show that students were more likely to ask peers about their experiences to make sense of the deal on offer. Written material was often bypassed in the rush to get an answer. Rather than using course handbooks or referring to the Student Charter, students sought a quick response using social media.

5.4 Theoretical Finding Three: Engagement

The third theoretical finding describes engagement activities between students and lecturers. Engagement took place face-to-face and using other mediums, including email exchanges. Engagement activity could be a single event or a series of linked activities over time and is significant as it shapes and defines expectations and how exchanges are enacted. Engagement describes the sense of agency that each party brings to the exchange activity.

Engagement activity provides an opportunity for individual expectations to be tried and tested thus allowing the student psychological contract to be modified and shaped. Engagement involves exchange activities e.g. interactions between staff and students but also includes consideration of the more covert and subtle processes that take place e.g. persuasion.

Engagement activities were accompanied by different feelings and reactions that students acknowledged to a greater or less degree. These feelings prompted a variety of actions that took place at an internal or external level. For example, sensing disappointment triggers coping strategies that potentially mediate that disappointment. Alternatively, students can influence the other party in order to adjust the outcome.

Two emergent categories were developed that described these two key activities that contributed towards engagement. The first category included a range of examples of individuals using internal coping strategies which typically resulted in an adjusted attitude or approach. The second category described external influencing included a collection of strategies that actively influenced the other party.

Internal coping included examples of internal changes whilst the second category referred to actions that influenced the other party. These are now discussed in relation to the literature.

A key finding was summarised using the code '*working within fluid boundaries*'. This described how individuals worked within fluid boundaries allowing students and lecturers to shape outcomes. '*Working within fluid boundaries*' involves the use of cooperative and collaborative strategies through to non-cooperative and

combative approaches, highlighting that an outcome can be influenced by one party more than the other.

Initially, the process of engagement was uneven as lecturers were more proactive and knowledgeable around using strategies and tactics to influence exchange activities. Lecturers are familiar with the systems and processes at the university and can draw on this experience to influence interactions.

Students developed skills and coping mechanisms that they could then use. Over time, students took a more active role in shaping outcomes and became more proficient and confident using strategies. Later data collection phases saw both parties being more equal in the engagement process. Students provided accounts of how they influenced lecturers using a variety of strategies. This finding has important implications for the debate on the nature of exchange and supports the view that it is bidirectional in that both parties influence each other.

Coping strategies and influencing tactics are influential in shaping the psychological contract. The literature does not explicitly refer to the use of coping strategies and tactics although personality has been linked to perceptions and feelings of contract violation (Raja et al., 2004).

Hermida and Luchman (2013) found that breach is mitigated by the use of coping strategies, a finding supported by the current study. When employees attributed causation to themselves, perceptions of breach were minimised. Employees who saw their own actions as contributing to a negative outcome held reduced perceptions of the organisation failing to deliver on a promise.

5.4.1 Internal Coping

The findings offer insights into how students develop and internal coping responses when experiencing a potential psychological contract breach. In contrast to the notion that students would be openly critical of HEIs (Jones, 2010), students who were unhappy internalised their frustrations. Internal coping strategies did not always stop negative feelings being created but they did stop students engaging in negative behaviours. *Harsh lessons* categorised events that caused disappointment and frustration. Such events could not be mitigated using coping mechanisms and often led to students harbouring high

levels of negative emotions. These intense emotional responses appear to bear the hall-marks of violation which has a “...*quasi-irreversible quality where anger lingers and “victims” experience a changed view of the other party in their interrelationship*” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 129).

Jones (2006) predicted there would be a change in the relationships between HEIs and students and suggested that students would be openly critical of HEI who in turn would treat students more like customers. Findings from the current study offer a different interpretation that suggests students internalise their emotions. Responding to adversity in this way may be linked to mental health difficulties and input may be required to support students to adapt.

Studies on breach show that individuals cope by adjusting their response to losses and that individual responses to violation have been vary widely from constructive to destructive and active to passive (Rousseau, 1995). The use of internal coping strategies is a critical area to explore further. Findings indicate that the student experience similarly comprises of a range of experiences and emotions. The complexities of the concept suggest that the NSS question about ‘overall satisfaction’ is unlikely to provide accurate insights. Students internalised their feelings and therefore this may not have informed their answer to this question

5.4.2 External Influencing

The findings showed how students influenced the exchange relationship over time. Whilst internal coping seemed to result in negative emotions, there was evidence that students used tactics and strategies to secure their expectations. The description provided by Student P10 of how he used face time to get extra input from his tutor was one powerful demonstration of how a student influenced the behaviour of their lecturer. Rather than a breach becoming a violation, this suggests that strategies can be used to ameliorate the impact of breach. In addition, this finding offers support for a bi-directional exchange of the psychological contract. These two areas will now be discussed.

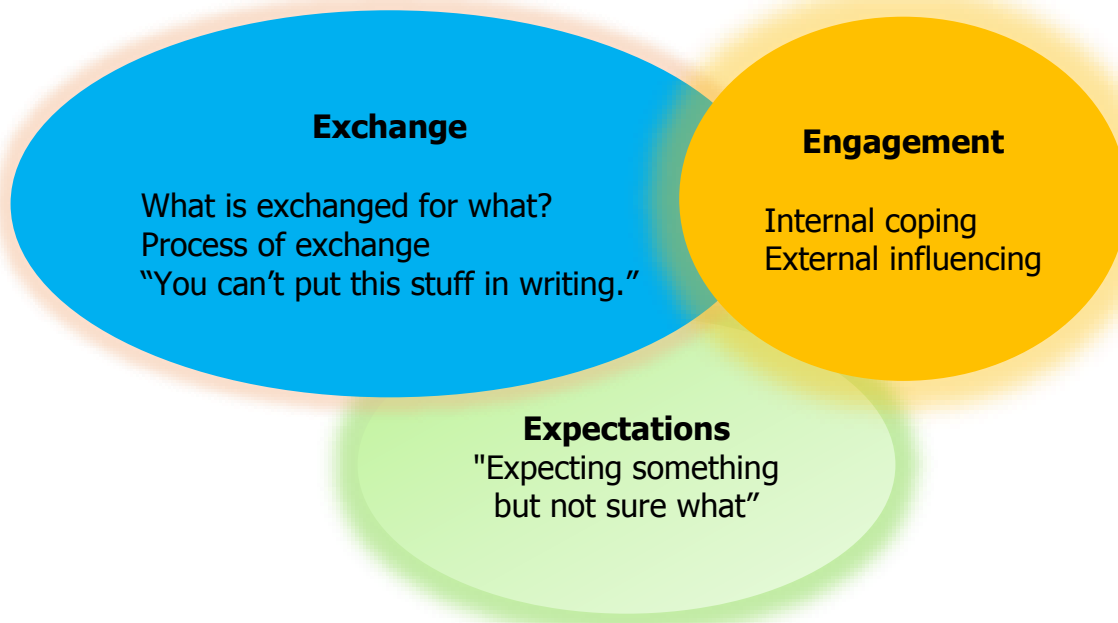
Various strategies helped students to reduce the negative impact of breach. When breach was noted they employed tactics to avoid negative outcomes and secure an outcome that was in line with their expectations. As the ‘face time’ example shows, the student was able to get the expected input from their

lecturer by using such tactics. The desired outcome, in line with expectations was achieved and the negative feelings that can occur as a result of violation were minimised (Conway & Briner, 2005; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Student P10 achieved the positive outcome through collaboration, in a manner that some might exemplify as 'partnership'. Both the student and the lecturer moderated and adjusted their behaviours as a result of the engagement process. In doing so the nature of the psychological contract was altered. Similarly, other studies show that psychological contract outcomes and breach are moderated by changing the relationship between employee and organisation (Bal, Chiaburu, & Jansen, 2010). These psychological contract outcomes can be viewed as being specific to the engagement situation. Breach can be mitigated by using coping strategies (Hermida & Luchman, 2014) and improving the quality of relationship between employees and managers (Ng, Feldman & Butts, 2013).

These findings contribute to the debate about the relationship between students and HEIs. The psychological contract is moderated by the actors in the engagement and therefore both parties have a key role in shaping outcomes and re-defining the deal. Consideration of the other party in the psychological contract exchange process has been debated (Chapter 2). This study provides support for this relationship being bi-directional and identifies how students can influence outcomes.

5.5 Substantive Grounded Theory of the Student Psychological Contract

The three theoretical categories were described (Chapter 4) then explored in relation to the literature (Chapters 5.2 – 5.5). These categories have been presented separately, but in reality, each area influences and shapes the others creating an integrated, dynamic system (Figure 5.1).



Formation	Maintenance	Breach
Comparison with past experiences Information e.g. preview day Transactional exchanges	Updated using current information Emotional appraisal of transactions Understanding of university offer develops	Cognitive comparison Breach violation feelings internalised and long lasting.

Figure 5.1 Substantive grounded theory

This integrated model is now presented and represents the substantive grounded theory of the student psychological contract created in this study. The description follows the key questions outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2.4.4).

It is important to recognise that for individual student, their psychological contract is ephemeral, ambiguous and fleeting. It is influenced by numerous factors that are both external and internal to the individual. Portraying this concept as it applies on summary to a student population relies on using approximations that may fail to capture these subtleties.

Grounded theory can be presented in many forms. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 31) suggest “*Grounded theory can be presented as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories*

and their properties.” The latter approach was chosen as it offers a dynamic interpretation compared to listing a set of propositions which ‘freeze’ the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The narrative that follows includes codes and categories (in italic) to illustrate their role in the substantive grounded theory.

5.5.1 Contents

The contents of the student psychological contract for the 2012 student population were confirmed through asking students to describe what they got in return for higher fees (Appendix C8, C11). The first-year students described tangible things including e-books and contact hours. In their final year, these same students enthusiastically described relational activities such as informal contact with lecturers, collaborative working, and opportunities to gain employability skills. Students had learnt to value these intangible aspects of the university experience through experiential learning.

Relational interaction evidenced what they considered to be value-for-money, although participants did not use this term. Students described the personal benefits they received, such as feeling happy or important. The nebulous nature of these intangible benefits highlights the challenge in capturing key parts of the intangible elements of the student experience. Students familiarity with university, developed over three years, enabled them to develop their *understanding* of what was on offer.

Positive events created a favourable appraisal of the student experience, as reported in the final interview. Students who had considered making complaints (Student’s P3 and P10 second interviews, T5) described the positive interactions with lecturers that had influenced their decision not to make a formal complaint. It is interesting to note in passing that in psychological contract studies, different content elements do not carry equal weighting (Herriot, Manning & Kidd, 1997; Conway & Briner, 2005). Further research is needed to focus on the critical aspects of the student experience that enhances satisfaction, and to consider whether some thought is needed about a hierarchy or weighting within the contents.

Lecturer participants described what they hoped to give students which included *excitement, and employability skills*. In return they hoped for that excitement to be reciprocated and for students to *engage*. There appears to be mutual agreement regarding the *exchange package* that is enacted through *engagement*. The Student Charter describes aspects of the student experience but underpinning it is the psychological contract which acts as a powerful but invisible mechanism for shaping the student experience. This emphasis on engagement is interesting, and prompts speculation that a greater understanding of the exchange-engagement process might prompt lecturers to consider co-creation and partnering in a different, more practical way.

5.5.2 Formation

Formation is influenced by prior experiences including sixth form and other pre-HE experiences (Chapter 4.3.2). These experiences were used as *comparators* against which the current experience is *gauged*. Students compared contact hours at university with school timetables; the role of lecturer with teacher; and a full timetable with apparent *free time*. Differences were recognised as potentially problematic and students took action including making further check to *find out what's going on*. First year student participants talked about *how many* and *how much* whilst they became accustomed to university which formed part of an information gathering exercise. Through the induction and socialisation processes students adjusted to university life and updated their thinking as they used current experiences to assess the *exchange package*. Using these new university-based sources (e.g. lecturers, social media, students in other years) resulted in fewer discrepancies being identified. Students developed more *intuitive and emotional appraisals* which allowed checks to be made to assess whether the *exchange package* was satisfactory. If the appraisal indicated a problem, then further checks were made using *various sources of information*. Student participants opted for using informal information sources, frequently Facebook and peers, rather than the official sources such as the Student Charter and handbooks. It is important to recall that student psychological contracts are informed by emotional evaluations and inaccurate information, in contrast to written employment contract agreements.

Unlike the employment contract, the student's psychological contracts are based on individual interpretations and are constantly updated and revised.

5.5.3 Maintenance and Breach

Maintenance activities contributed to the evolution of student psychological contracts across their study period. Typically, the data showed that rather than breach taking place, psychological contracts were regularly updated so that they maintained relevance. However, students used information to update the psychological contract from a range of sources which had the potential to lead to inaccuracies. An event can prompt students to become aware that adjustments need to be made and they use internal coping resources to adjust their emotional reaction. For example, Student S15 developed a positive interpretation of using the time for independent study when a lecturer did not turn up. *Strategies* (e.g. threatening to give a low score for NSS, asking to make a complaint) are also used to negotiate, change and influence outcomes.

Although many of the students could be seen as taking a robust view, evolving and adjusting to change and unanticipated situations, and essentially being happy with their experience, this was not universal. Significant breach events (e.g. not getting anticipated support) resulted in feelings of 'violation' that lasted long after the original event took place. Emotions were internalised but talking about the original event caused them to surface a couple of years later. This has implications for student support and reassurance over longer periods than lecturers might anticipate.

5.5.4 Change Over Time

Time has been shown to have a number of influences on the psychological contract

- Students change the *gauge* they use to assess their psychological contracts. Comparing with the past changes to comparing with the present.
- Exchanges evolve from being transactional to relational.
- Students develop coping skills and internal strategies that can mediate positive outcomes.

- Accumulated experience helps students recognise the benefits of the less tangible exchange items e.g. informal interactions, independent learning.
- Evaluation mechanisms become less mechanistic and more intuitive over time.

5.5.5 The Other Party

Students used information from a variety of sources, typically, lecturers and peers, to *find out what's going on*. In the university context the other party, who represents the organisation (Chapter 2.4.4.5), is a mixture of verbal and written information and anecdotal information from peers. Students *checked their understanding* with peers in order to assess their interpretation of the situation.

Lecturers provide directive information during induction weeks and when the rules need clarifying. On a more regular basis, they subtly influence students using kindly conversations, gentle persuasion and timely reminders. This type of interaction guides student behaviour and provides information that informs the student psychological contract.

Engagement activities allow students and lecturers to exchange information and shape the nature of the interaction. The process is bi-directional with students exerting greater influence as they develop new tactics. The simultaneous act of exchange and engagement influences the psychological contract which is then shaped and updated within a specific context.

Engagement can therefore allow individuals to explore and negotiate their needs and create a positive outcome. In some cases, the outcome is more favourable to one party.

A wider definition of exchange is needed that extends beyond the other party and takes into consideration information used to define the offer.

5.6 Summary and Conclusion

Six categories and three theoretical findings that were constructed from the data (Chapter 4) were explored in relation to the literature. This continued the process of constant comparison and contributed to the substantive grounded theory of the student psychological contract. The grounded theory offered a dynamic interpretation showing how the student psychological contract changes over time. These findings contribute to the key debates around the psychological contract (Chapter 2.4.4). The process of defining student expectations through the exchange and engagement activity was described. The fluidity of engagement results in difficulties capturing these activities in writing. Maintenance activities generally secured a positive psychological contract, highlighting the importance of focusing on this topic.

6 Student Psychological Contract in Theory and Practice

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the substantive theory developed in Chapter 5 with reference to the relevant features and key debates in the psychological contract literature (Chapter 2.4.1, 2.4.4). Explicitly comparing the student psychological contract findings with the literature provides an opportunity to claim, locate, evaluate and defend my position, highlighting the contribution to knowledge that it makes (Chapter 6.2). It then explores potential uses of the approach in higher education (Chapter 6.3).

6.2 Comparing the research outcomes with the literature

Chapter 2 made clear that while the psychological contract is a well-known framework in employment research, it is little used in other domains, and that where it is used there is a tendency to focus on the employee's perspective at one point in time, using questionnaires, rather than exploring the wider picture. This study adds to the limited information about psychological contract formation, maintenance and considers the other party in the exchange relationship. This section explores critical phases of the framework's implementation in turn to tease out if and how this study adds value.

6.2.1 Psychological Contract Formation

Formation of the student psychological contract involves two key activities; comparing current circumstances to past events and selectively attending to information about tangible exchange items. These findings add empirical support to Rousseau's (2001) view that pre-employment experiences and recruitment activities are influential in psychological contract formation. These

findings contribute to an important but relatively unexplored area in relation to the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2001; Sherman & Morley, 2015).

The data showed the student behaviours focussed on these two activities in their first year. Quantifiable information, such as the number of contact hours proved to be particularly important during formation. They compared their prior high school experience with the sparser university timetables, a gap that was particularly clear to arts students. Their school experience of tutoring again led to high expectations of support. In both these cases, the reduced contact and classroom tutoring support prompts a review of expectations.

In this early stage, students commented on the tangible exchange items that had been promoted through open days and the website, particularly around financial support, cost of living, provision of books and work placements. These match the specific exchanges that take place over a finite period for new recruits (Robinson et al., 1994). Terms and conditions of these transactional contracts are confirmed in writing and are concerned with economic exchanges e.g. pay for a specified number of hours worked.

These points accord with the literature and give us the sense that in the pre-university and transition phase messages need to be clear and the offer transparent. Importantly the offer needs to be reiterated on arrival and themes such as contact times, tutor support, book provision and costs need to be discussed explicitly, which supports the formation of a realistic psychological contract and offers 'maintenance'. Written information which included the Student Charter and course guides were not referred to by students, indicating the importance of ongoing discussions and the need to promote these resources.

The influencers who have shaped these students psychological contract development include high school and sixth form, information from friends and family and the information provided by the universities that students had researched, visited and applied to. These multiple players contrast with the view that the psychological contract is formed only by an individual's interaction with their current employer (Rousseau & Greller, 1994; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni,

1994). In managing the students experience, all these players need consideration.

6.2.2 Maintenance and Breach

Psychological contract research has focused on breach, with relatively less attention given to psychological contract maintenance (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest, 1998a; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Breach is considered to be a cognitive comparison of what has been received and what was promised, creating an emotional response (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Researchers measure the level of breach as the difference between what is promised and received. Violation is the emotional response that can occur as a result of breach. Morrison and Robinson (1997) and Rousseau (1989) describe violations as being deeply distressing emotional experiences. Students emotional reactions to breach were described in terms of 'loss' and 'grief' in line with previous findings in employment settings (Robinson et al., 1994; Shore & Tetrick, 1994).

For students, breach incidents during the induction phase involved cognitive comparisons of current and past events, expectations were not immediately met, and adjustment had not had time to occur. By comparison, breach events that took place later in the student experience were identified through intuitive, emotional responses. These feelings associated with violation tended to have a more profound influence on students and match descriptions of violation in employment settings. Student S2 described feelings of 'betrayal' and 'loss' whilst Student S7 described a 'sense of injustice' at not getting a work placement (Chapter 4). These descriptors resemble the definitions of psychological contract violation (Rousseau, 1989, p. 129).

Where students have started with inaccurate information (Chapter 5.2.1), then we could regard their early experiences of university as potentially in breach of the anticipated contract. However, the day-to-day activity supports the maintenance role. As students gain experience of adjusting and adapting, they also learn how to be proactive in avoiding breaches. An important finding was that students invested time and energy maintaining a positive psychological

contract. For example, Participant S4 (T1) articulated her frustration with limited contact time *“I thought there’d be more lectures. There’re only two terms of lectures which is which I think is a little bit rubbish considering that we’re paying loads of money.”* In the final year she reflected on this experience *“Looking back it was ...well helpful as I had to work out how to manage my time. This has set me up nicely for doing a Masters.”* Examples of psychological contract maintenance were more prevalent in the data than examples of breach, highlighting this is important to consider. Whilst less dramatic, it is part of the everyday experience.

As students’ progress through university and gain experience, they learn to value the less tangible areas of their experience. Informal contact with lecturers and relationship with peers forms a key part of their experience. Students learn to cope with things not being quite as expected. Initial expectations appear to be adapted and adjusted and new expectations developed. Over time, comparisons are made with peers rather than with the past, and the high school experience becomes less relevant. Contracts develop from being mainly transactional to include relational exchanges. Socio-emotional, personal and value-based exchanges in addition to economic exchanges typify relational contracts and include being treated as an equal by the lecturer and feeling valued (Rousseau, 1990). As with employees, relational contracts are broader and more amorphous and experienced subjectively (Conway & Briner, 2005).

In this study, students described feelings of loss, betrayal and sadness. Resolving these strong feelings was not possible using the usual mechanisms. Rather than a quantifiable shortfall in provision, there was a more intangible sense of loss. This finding has important implications for managing violation. Emotional reactions may need more than additional information to repair.

For those with violation experiences, there was a strong emotional response, but rather than leading to outward reactions, students typically internalised negative feelings. Other studies have identified a variety of negative responses in job attitudes and behaviours, such as reduced job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and citizenship behaviours and workplace deviance (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). This study

found that the students internalised their emotions but did not change their behaviour. Employees withdrawing their labour has a negative impact for the organisation, but students would lose out if they disengaged.

While workplace breach studies are typically event focused and inevitably deal with a short time-frame, in this study it became clear that feelings of violation lasted long after the event. However, rather than being passive recipients of a poor deal, or challenging it directly, students took action to mitigate an actual or anticipated breach. This appears to be an adaptive response to avoid strong negative feelings associate with breach and violation. Strategies that were used included adjusting their interpretation of what was happening, seeking social support and finding alternative explanations that reduced feelings of disappointment. Other studies have identified similar adaptive coping mechanism used by students (Reeve, Shumaker, Yearwood, Crowell, & Riley, 2013; Robotham, 2008).

The findings from this study suggests that formal promises early in the exchange relationship were more likely to be breached than later information. One explanation for this is that cognitive comparisons were easier to make when comparing items that had a concrete conceptualisation. Later promises were more implicit and offered by the staff in a more fluid manner. Opportunities to access further support from lecturers who have an 'open door policy' for example are presented as an option student might choose if that fits their needs. Promises made in this style were open to interpretation and offered scope for adjustments.

One of the key theoretical issues for psychological contract theory is around the concept of 'breach' or the breaking of a promise. What constitutes a 'promise' is debated within the literature (Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 2001). It is difficult to establish what constitutes keeping or breaking a promise and uncertainty remains whether there is a difference between breach and unmet expectations.

Conway and Briner (2005, p. 65) note that the consequences of violation are not fully understood. This study sees violation being internalised, which has the potential to lead to ongoing distress. Three students at the end of the data collection period described how their strong emotional reactions about not

getting a work placement and a negative interaction with a lecturer (e.g. see Internal Coping Strategies, Section 4.4.2) had remained with them over the three-year period. In this case, the interviews, talking about breach incidents, brought the negative feelings associated with the original incident to the surface. To ascertain what other events or activities are likely to cause a resurgence of feelings of violation, more in-depth research is needed.

Breach events in this study were identified as an everyday occurrence. An important finding was that these events provide opportunities to develop coping and adaptive skills. Learning to cope with minor breaches should support individuals to cope with more major events, but where and how requires further research. Coping with violation may benefit from strategies including 'sensemaking' (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011) and exploring 'unmet expectations' (Turnley & Feldman, 2000).

6.2.3 Change Over Time

Psychological contracts are known to evolve over time as employee and organisational expectations change (Levinson et al., 1962), so it was not surprising that the student's psychological contracts changed as they became familiar with what was on offer at the university. Students learnt about more implicit exchange items that were available and shifted their focus from transactional to relational exchanges. Early reference to the formal documentation, the Student Charter, disappeared as expectations and promises were co-developed with staff.

The longitudinal nature of this study allowed these changes in the psychological contract to be observed, something that a more focused study would miss. The use of different engagement styles over time was also noted. Students were more passive during the induction period but became more proactive over time, changing their style and strategies during interactions (Section 4.4.2). A positive example was provided by Student S10 who described putting in 'face time' with the lecturer to engage him in dialogue around employability options. Student S10 turned up to lectures looking smart and being attentive and asked questions at the end of the lecture. The lecturer reciprocated by providing

additional information and advice on employability. This exchange took place without being formally agreed but generated a positive outcome for both parties.

6.2.4 The Role of Implicit and Explicit Offers

There is some understanding that the reaction to breach of promises is mediated by whether an offer was implicit or explicit. Explicit deals are thought likely to carry more weight when breached than promises that are conveyed implicitly (Turnley & Feldman, 1998).

The current study suggests that making this division between explicit and implicit offers is not helpful. Promises are subject to individual interpretation and even the most explicit promise may be forgotten. The Student Charter provides an example of an explicit deal, but students could not recall having seen it.

Remembering explicit promises depends on the context in which the person is describing them. For example, a student at the end of their degree who has secured employment is less likely to be worried about not securing a work placement than a student who has not secured employment.

Robinson and Rousseau (1994, p. 246) noted that implicit promises arise through “*interpretations of patterns of past exchange, vicarious learning (e.g. witnessing other employees experiences) as well as through various factors that each party may take for granted (e.g. good faith or fairness)*”. Student patterns of exchange were mediated by student-student interactions. Online interaction, particularly via Facebook and face-to-face observations led to the development of implicit understandings amongst students. The influence of peers and of social media are additional players in the student environment. This provides avenues for discussion, and the testing of ideas and expectations that may help to resolve issues.

6.2.5 Managing Expectations and Promises

These study results accord with Rousseau’s (1989) ideas and emphasis on the promissory nature of the psychological contract and the belief people hold that promises have been made and expectations are in place. Exploring

expectations and promises from the student perspective suggests that there is little value in distinguishing between these two concepts when attempting to manage understanding. Both expectations and promises evolved over time, with a breach of either resulting in similar feelings of violation, or the development of maintenance strategies.

The promise of a work placement was made verbally on several occasions and described in the Student Contract. The offer was made on preview days and during induction and subsequently repeated on several occasions. Although the message was conveyed explicitly and unequivocally, Student S7 checked her understanding with others as she felt unsure about what she had been promised. This sensemaking activity was noted in other situations and indicates that additional checks are needed to understand what is going on. Students often referred to peers when trying to make sense of information. For example, students decided not to attend lectures after speaking to other students. Explicit promises, including those made in writing, are subject to another layer of activity before being assimilated, which is similar to sensemaking activity which has received attention for influencing the psychological contract (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011).

Similarly, expectations that were implicit were subject to revision after being tried and tested. For example, students held an expectation that lecturers were there for them. More often than not this expectation was maintained as students received responses to emails and saw the lecturer in class or seminars. When a lecturer was not available, this initial expectation was revised to accommodate the new information. The original expectation was updated to one that lecturers are available subject to other demands on their time.

Both Student S2 and Student S7 experienced strong emotional reactions that remained with them throughout their university careers. Whether students hold an expectation or a promise, the impact of failing to have this fulfilled is similar. This suggests the divide between implicit and explicit promises in terms of the students' subjective experience view is not clear. Whilst explicit promises may be made, they are subject to information processing activities that distort and bias what is remembered (Ross, 1979; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977).

6.3 Implications for Practice

The findings from this study have implications for student support practice and for future research.

6.3.1 Academic and Professional Services Staff

Messages for academic and professional services staff will reinforce some well-known points and highlight others. In summary:

- It is important to recognise that the student experience is a complex, dynamic and multifaceted process. Our understanding of the student experience is likely to be partial. Each student journey has unique aspects.
- Various factors influence and shape the student experience, including staff behaviours and social media.
- Breaches of the psychological contract are not always visible to others. The reality of experiencing breach violations for the participants in this study was that they held onto to negative emotions and feelings of distress.
- Students frame expectations retrospectively. Expectations are based on biased and limited information. Examples of students using strategies to reframe their expectations were noted in this study.
- Lecturers have a crucial role to play in the student experience. The findings demonstrate how they act as subtle influencers and shape interactions. This study identified that maintenance activities take place all the time. HEIs might consider how they formally recognise this type of activity alongside other demands on the time of lecturer.
- Students can shape their own experiences and create positive outcomes. This study showed how students used strategies that helped them to engage and negotiate positive outcomes. Supporting students to become more resilient and developing additional coping strategies will support them to influence their psychological contract.

6.3.2 Students

- Students should be aware of their potential to influence and shape the outcomes of their degree positively and otherwise. Students already have a range of strategies that they can use to influence their psychological contracts, but these are innate. Making the process more explicit will be of benefit to the student, staff and HEI.
- Students should expect to challenge processes, procedures and people when they feel that their HEI has not met their expectations, and to have access to resources that will facilitate a resolution. This would include additional information from reliable sources and opportunities for discussion and resolution at an early stage.
- Experiencing challenges and negative interactions are a part of the student and employment experience. Formally acknowledging that difficulties exist and helping students to recognise that they can overcome obstacles is part of the university experience and will normalise these experiences. Knowing that strong negative emotional reactions may be experienced should signal the need to be proactive about seeking further support to achieve resolution.
- When something is not going to plan active dialogue is helpful. Whilst written information was available in handbooks and online, this is not usually where student's first look for clarification. The process of discussion can resolve issues, but staff and students need advice and information reiterated about reliable sources of information.

6.3.3 Universities

Student Charters serve as useful sources of information. It is, however, important to recognise that all contracts are potentially psychological in that they are open to interpretation, subject to information processing biases and not always referred to. It is generally understood that a Student Charter is a living document, updated as the institution and its processes evolve to meet student and staff needs.

In the study institution, each School has a version of the Student Charter explicitly tailored to the activities the students encounter, and it is a standing item for discussion on School and Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees. However, unless the students interviewed for this study had been elected representatives, this 'visibility' is very unlikely to have had any impact.

Both students and lecturers operate within fluid boundaries and engagement activities provide opportunities to negotiate and create mutually agreeable outcomes. This study offers insights into real partnership working which can be considered here as situation specific examples given the small scale of this study, but which can be assumed to exist generally across HEIs.

Managing disappointment carefully is important, so that all parties can feel as satisfied as possible with the outcome. Where expectations are based on inaccurate information, disappointment is likely. Being aware of the details in promotional and other materials, careful attention to timely updating and not exaggerating opportunities are all vital in managing the experience. Students use a variety of sources of information, including peers, and social media. Providing opportunities for active engagement that promotes dialogue can create solutions. At such times it may help to have information in a variety of formats and timing is important. On arrival, students are making comparisons between their prior sixth form and college experiences, so clarifying and reinforcing differences is very important. It is the key moment to reframe the expectations of new students.

Whilst explicit expectations can be clarified, the more implicit understanding remains unspoken. Certain earlier, pre-entry events figure in contract formation e.g. preview days. Some of the promises made led to disappointment. It is clearly important that material and conversations in these settings are realistic and honest. Where promotional materials contain inaccurate information, individual interpretations may lead to the development of psychological contracts that are individual, subjective and never delivered. The lack of a correct shared understanding means that some individuals will probably experience breach. HEIs should consider how they deal with the impact of breach.

Knowing who or what students perceive as exchange partners in their university relationships, and understanding the exchange terms, should equip universities with the necessary tools to manage student expectations and coordinate the delivery of services (Knapp & Masterson, 2017).

6.3.4 Student Charter

The Student Charter sought to outline what students could expect from university and what the university could expect in return. It was seen as a document that could be used to manage expectations and define the terms and conditions of the exchange relationship (Student Charter Group, 2011).

This study highlighted a number of problems in relation to the Student Charter. Firstly, lecturers experienced significant difficulties in creating the Student Charter and articulated a reluctance to dictate the exchange relationship. Further exploration of this point highlighted the importance of *working within fluid boundaries*, creating solutions that fitted the context. The Charter is not a fixed legal concept, but a set of fluid guidelines. As such, it is not surprising that perceptions of what is offered by the HEI can be interpreted in different ways by the students and the staff.

Although some students were aware of the Charter, they did not refer to it when seeking clarification or further information. This mirrors what happens in organisations where employees seldom look at their contract of employment after signing it (Atkinson, 2007; Robinson, 1996). Critical incidents are thought to prompt employees to review their contracts, but the current study found no support for this finding suggesting that the Student Contract has less relevance than the employment contract.

Students could not recall having seen the Student Charter at the end of the data collection period. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) found that students were not aware of Student Charters and recommended that “*Institutions and sector agencies should consider the purpose, role and effectiveness of Student Charters*” (p. 18).

Student Charters do not appear to have been successful in achieving their stated aims and objectives. This study provides insights into the reasons behind these difficulties. The conceptualisation of expectations in this study highlight that they are difficult to manage (Chapter 5.2.1). Defining the less tangible aspects of the student experience are complex and often only realised through experience (Chapter 5.3.3). Capturing the exchange relationship in a document is complicated as it is less than straightforward.

6.4 Summary

The substantive theory (Chapter 5) outlined the key features of the student psychological contract. Comparing the research outcomes to the psychological contract literature provided an opportunity to highlight the contribution made. Insights into the process of formation, maintenance and breach and the role of implicit and explicit offers were provided. Different engagement styles used by students were confirmed and highlights a topic that could be considered in employment settings. Promises and expectations were perceived as being similar, contributing useful insights into the debate on this topic (Chapter 2.4.1). The insights gained offer support for using the psychological contract to explore the student experience.

7 The efficacy of psychological contracts to explore the student experience

7.1 Introduction

Having created a substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5.6) and then explored its value in relation to the literature (Chapter 6), the fourth research aim:

Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of understanding the student experience

will now be discussed through examination of the author's reflection on the study process, ethical issues and a critical evaluation process.

The first section offers reflections on the various phases of the study. Then ethical issues are raised to make explicit that the research captures participants responses while being unaware of the existence of the contract, and in some cases the Student Charter. Aspects of the psychological contract are held implicitly in the "*eye of the beholder*" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). Recognising that people have expectations which are not explicitly articulated, the research adopted an interpretivist approach, using participants words but my understanding to explore the concept with the ethical issues placed at the forefront of the process. Thirdly, the achievement of the four research objectives are evaluated using the criteria proposed by Charmaz (2006) for grounded theory work. She sets a standard of "*interpretive sufficiency*" checked by systematically assessing four conditions - credibility, originality, resonance and the usefulness of the study.

7.2 Study Reflections

Although Charmaz's evaluation process (Chapter 6) has validated the general approach, this particular application is inevitably limited because it involved a small number of students from a single HEI in one-time frame, but in testing whether the psychological contract is useful, it has established some interesting ground-level information. Theories generated using constructivist grounded theory tend to be plausible accounts rather than theories that can claim any objective status (Charmaz, 2006). In summary, we see that the psychological

contract offers an alternative and innovative way to capture and conceptualise the lived experience of students, as compared with its original use with employees.

7.2.1 Comparison with the standard quantitative approach

The student psychological contract offers additional insights into the student experience that are not necessarily captured by the National Student Survey. Table 7.1 captures some of these differences through a comparison with the NSS, which is the principle approach used in the UK. Further levels of detail that can be captured include:

- Notions of co-construction - the student experience can be seen as something that is co-constructed and subtly influenced by both students and lecturers. Students developed a range of strategies and techniques that enabled them to become more active in the exchange process (Chapter 4.4.3). Internal coping mechanisms used by students included refocusing priorities in the event of disappointment.
- The findings illustrated that students sometimes behaved in a way that was congruent with being a 'consumerist student' e.g. expecting an email explanation from a lecturer, rather than referring to the course handbook (Chapter 5.3.3). Expectations of delivery, timeliness and attention were sometimes at odds with teaching that promotes independent learning and self-resourcefulness.
- Selective promotion and attention included the active promotion of key messages that leads to attention being placed selectively on certain topics. For example, emphasis was placed on the provision of eBooks which was described as representing value-for-money. Input from lecturers had not been promoted in the same way and was not referred to in this way (Chapter 5.2.1.2).
- Everyday events make up the student experience. There is support for the idea that psychological contract can be maintained rather than breached by developing coping strategies and learning how to influence outcomes (Chapter 5.5.3).

- Key events can reduce attention on negative past events. An informal end of term outing with the lecturer (Chapter 4.3.1) eclipsed earlier incidents of breach and created a positive appraisal of experiences.
- Students internalised negative emotional reactions as a result of experiencing breach violation. Talking about the original incident caused negative feelings to surface. Atkinson, Matthews, Henderson & Spitzmueller (2018) describe a 'breach spiral', with prior perceptions of breach increasing the likelihood of subsequent perceptions of breach. Further research is needed to confirm ways to identify and support students who have experienced breach violation.
- The longitudinal approach shows students developing strategies that allow them to influence outcomes (Chapter 4.4.3), which may be a fruitful area for further research

NSS	Student Psychological Contract
Single point in time survey.	Issues may be explored over time.
End of programme survey.	May be used at any stage.
Cannot confirm causal relationships.	Identifies cause and effect relationships thus highlighting opportunities for interventions at any stage.
Nationally agreed set questions which restricts what is explored.	Data is based on first-hand descriptions. Students can decide what is important in terms of their experiences. The analysis can be closely tailored to the circumstances.
Concept of what contributes to scoring 'overall satisfaction' is unclear.	Students descriptions explain their experiences which provides insights into what they consider influential including events that cause dissatisfaction.
Limited number of questions which restricts topics that can be explored.	Flexibility available to explore any aspect of experience at any scale.

Surveys thousands of students simultaneously, efficient and relatively inexpensive.	Very expensive to implement, captures local detail, time consuming to analyse.
Enables regular inter- and intra-institutional comparisons.	Comparison between HEIs would be difficult and impossibly resource-heavy.

Table 7.1 Comparing the main approaches of the NSS and the Psychological Contract as used in this study.

Guest's (1998b) paper titled "*Is the Psychological Contract Worth Taking Seriously?*" highlights conceptual and empirical problems with the psychological contract and its key concepts. His suggestions for adopting a new approach to exploring the topic has been addressed in this study using an inductive approach which provided fresh insights. The lack of definition has resulted in researchers exploring a variety of topics that may or may not form part of the psychological contract (Chapter 2.4.1). This was addressed in the current study by using key concepts and debates to guide but not constrain exploration (Chapter 2.4.4). For example, 'expectations' were considered in a broad and inclusive manner during initial coding, resulting in 860 words and phrases being coded during the initial coding exercise. Constant comparison of categories over time highlighting that expectations were updated in the light of further information (Appendix D1). This provided a wide spectrum for interpretation, allowing a new understanding of student expectations to emerge.

7.2.2 Broad-based or focused implementation?

Whilst the use of the psychological contract as a sensitising concept facilitated interesting insights, it was challenging to apply. The lack of an agreed definition (Conway & Briner, 2005; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Marks, 2001; Millward & Brewerton, 2000) has resulted in researchers investigating different topics (Chapter 2. 4.1). In keeping with the grounded theory approach, theory is generated from the data itself rather through logical deduction from past studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Prior knowledge and unanswered questions about the psychological contract proved helpful in this aim. For example, considering the question 'what do we know about how the psychological contract changes over

time' ensured that this was considered, whilst avoiding a deductive comparison. Writing memos provided opportunities to pause and reflect on data collection and analysis, which was helpful in deliberating whether my analysis was in keeping with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Appendix D2).

An alternative approach would be to focus on an in-depth investigation of a key feature of the psychological contract. In employment research this is usual, with the focus typically on experiences of 'breach' of the contract (Chapter 7.2.2). I was keen not to replicate this narrow focus (Chapter 2). Opting for a broad approach avoided this concern and provided additional insights into the dynamic and integrative nature of the psychological contract. The broad-based approach has the following additional merits:

1. One area is not privileged over another. This allowed attention to be given to the maintenance of the student psychological contract contributing to a relatively unexplored area as well as considering breach circumstances.
2. Exploring the psychological contract concept with students from a range of disciplines and over three years has shown how the concepts emerge, overlap and integrate. As previously noted, it was hard to create hard-line divisions between the three theoretical categories that emerged (Chapter 5.5), the boundaries were fuzzy. This integrated model offers insights into the student psychological contract as a process (Conway & Briner, 2009; Guest, 1998a).
3. The approach taken enabled the third research objective to be met - to formulate a conceptualisation of the student psychological contract. The conceptual categories that emerged were based on patterns in the data/behaviour from different time points and events, capturing the integrated nature of the grounded theory.
4. It acts as a prompt for further investigations. Future research can refine the substantive theory and allow formal theory to emerge (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The generic adoption of the concept avoids the research being criticised for not capturing the psychological contract in full (Conway & Briner, 2009, p. 120). Using the concept as a loose framework, rather than being constrained by it

enabled new insights to be captured, which adds support to the value of this approach.

7.2.3 Implementation issues

Careful consideration was given to the choice of methods based on methodological strengths and weaknesses identified in psychological contract research to date (Chapter 3 Section 3.4). In addition to the broad based approach (Chapter 3) this research used a longitudinal approach with a relatively unexplored sample (students in higher education) to address these limitations (Conway & Briner, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). Table 7.1 summaries the weaknesses recognised by previous researchers in their studies (column 1), which are mapped against the approaches taken in this study (columns 2) and outcomes achieved (column 3).

Prior Weaknesses	How this was addressed in the current study	Outcome
Focus on breach and contents.	Wide-ranging approach.	Identified the use of coping mechanisms, maintenance activity and students' role in managing the psychological contract.
Little known about the exchange process of the psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2009).	Research explored day-to-day events that captured detail and enabled changing conceptual understandings to be captured.	Dynamic nature of an individual's evolving ideas about the contract are captured.
Focus is mainly on the employee's perspective.	Lecturers views were captured in phase one before the student focus groups and interviews.	Highlighted what lecturers intended to offer, and the mismatch with what students understood.
One-off cross-sectional questionnaires focus on attitudes at a general level which fails to explore the experience and consequence of psychological	Longitudinal study, using focus groups and interviews covered three years. Potential to include a wide range of topics. Participants themselves can decide what is	Understanding of the evolving nature of student expectations. Day-to-day activities that contributed to the changes could be identified. Students included topics outside what is usually

contract and breach (Conway & Briner, 2005, p. 109).	relevant to include / exclude.	explored e.g. dissatisfaction.
Studies almost exclusively conducted in employment settings. Limits understanding of the concept as a within person process (Conway & Briner, 2005, p. 182).	Higher Education focus, with no pre-selection of students by circumstantial characteristics or discipline.	Further studies are needed but outcomes may have relevance for all HE students and could be applied with other groups of learners. Broadens understanding of the phenomena itself rather than it being seen as part of an employment relationship.

Table 7.1 Summary of pre-identified research gaps and their implementation in this study.

Overall this study has sought to explicitly consider weaknesses recognised elsewhere and although the whole study is of limited size, these considerations have added depth to the findings.

Reflecting on how to implement this study suggests that in the future it would be important to:

1. Use both focus groups and interviews, as both methods provided useful information. The focus groups provided a supportive environment for the initial discussions, generating free-flowing ideas, before the individual interviews provided further detail in later years.
2. Debrief students at the end of interviews by reflecting back what was said. Students in this study said that they enjoyed participating and found it helpful to reflect on and discuss their experiences. This provides an opportunity value them as participants and for students to understanding their own behaviours and values.
3. Triangulate reports from different individuals and develop themes that appear in a number of narratives in order to creating a balanced outcome.
4. Recognise that the process involves capturing student's retrospective accounts of their experience, which may have been distorted by memory

and later experiences. Expectations were sometimes formed retrospectively, and this may have impacted on descriptions provided. This is likely to be an issue in most studies, and one that the researcher needs to be cognisant of.

5. Explore the potential of different approaches to capture events as they happen. The interview dates were set by the researcher, rather than by the students. The interval between sampling was a year. Arguably some incidents may have been missed which were important at the time but resolved and forgotten by the interview date. An alternative diary-based recording approach where participants capture key events in the moment was considered but rejected because attrition rates were anticipated to be high and as being too demanding of participants. However, in different circumstances this approach should be evaluated.
6. Replicate this study at another university to explore whether the same themes would emerge. This may identify potential anomalies associated with the study university. Unfortunately, due to difficulties obtaining ethical approval, this work was not taken forward as part of the current study.

7.2.4 Sampling Issues

Student participants were self-selecting and those who remained with the study were on target to get 2.1 degrees or above. This arguably committed and conscientious cohort may have biased the outcomes because they were intrinsically more engaged and successful in their studies. A notable finding was the effort students invested in maintaining the psychological contract. Possibly, this study may be more accurately described as exploring the psychological contracts of students who are successful, resilient and tenacious. As an inductive study, the findings are not generalisable. Describing the cohort of students allows the reader to understand more about the current study and consider how far the results are applicable to other settings. These results potentially offer insights into how successful students maintain psychological contracts by using coping strategies and tactics and this may be an area worth exploring for all students.

Including lecturers for the first phase of the research provided useful information regarding their perspective. Few studies consider the views of both parties in the exchange relationship (Conway & Briner, 2005). The benefits of adopting this approach were identified and include acknowledgement that what is considered a high priority to one party may not be shared by the other. For example, Student Charters were important to lecturers yet seldom acknowledged by students. Lecturers provided insights into the nature of the exchange and engagement activities and highlighted their use of tactics to influence the other party.

7.2.5 Longitudinal Design

There is a consensus that the psychological contract is a dynamic construct although cross-sectional studies have restricted the exploration of the contract's dynamics. Few studies have adopted a longitudinal approach (for an exception see De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003; De Vos et al., 2005). The purpose of conducting longitudinal research here was to explore how the student psychological contract changes as students progress through their degree. In this study, for example, it highlighted how explicit information provided by the Student Charter was not independently referred to by students at the start and forgotten in later years.

The longitudinal time frame allowed the emergent understandings to develop and mature. Relational exchanges were shown to become more significant later in the university experience. Many understandings were implicit with explicit items and exchanges more prevalent in the induction phase. This information contributes to our understanding of the psychological contract and in this example indicates where efforts to provide and reinforce information should be placed. For example, reiterating contract information in later years, to remind or reinforce expectations.

7.2.6 Constructivism rather than positivism

This thesis examines the experiences of students using qualitative research underpinned by constructivist/interpretivist paradigms. This runs against the current preference for positivist approaches which parallel those in the natural

sciences, where the aim is to reflect on an objective reality which is described and measured by the detached observer (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Qualitative research is "*many things to many people*" (Denzin and Lincoln 1998 p.8), providing an ongoing critique of positivism and a commitment to a naturalistic and interpretive approach in social scientific research. Adopting a qualitative approach in this study has demonstrated that:

- Qualitative approaches can pose exploratory research questions that give value and rich responses, although this leads to analysis which takes considerable time. Analysis is not easily mechanised, nor is it capable of capturing data from thousands of participants simultaneously.
- The current trend in the exploration of the student experience is towards numerical outcomes, which may obscure the subtle nuanced experience of individuals and their HEIs. They can capture huge amounts of data, but that will only have value if it accurately and correctly captures experience
- Positivist studies have their role to play in research on the student experience. However, the emphasis on measurement, and quantification is directing research in this area and may be contributing to less consideration of psychological processes and the negative aspects of the student experience.

The NSS emphasis on empiricism rather than use of 'why' and 'how' questions carries the danger of failing to evolve our understanding of the student experience. Headline NSS statements that student satisfaction is declining, or student expectations continue to be unrealistic, need to be underpinned by robust evidence of the interventions that will improve the position (Barends, Rousseau, & Briner, 2014).

Qualitative research places interpretation in a pivotal and all-pervading role, arguing that no data remain unmediated and all are constructed and transformed to a greater or lesser degree through the research process (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Using qualitative approaches has provided findings that a quantitative approach would not have been able to capture, including the nuances of the exchange relationship, the

complexity of understanding expectations and the shaping and reshaping of the student psychological contracts through engagement.

7.2.7 Analysis of data

The process of analysis (Chapter 3.6) proved challenging. Coding all the scripts was time-consuming, emotionally draining and laborious but allowed me to immerse myself in the data. Converting line by line coding to categories, and categories to constructs proved to be a very slow process.

Reading journal articles and other theses gives the appearance that constructivist grounded theory is a relatively simple and straightforward activity. In practice, I found it challenging and confusing. Suddaby (2006, p. 640) comments "*The apparent simplicity of grounded theory research...creates the misperception that is easy.*" The practice of analysis included 'achieving saturation', 'constant comparison' and making 'intuitive leaps' which requires the use of tacit knowledge and experience of grounded theory methodology. In the absence of this experience, I relied on persistence and reflexivity whilst developing my knowledge of grounded theory. These complimentary activities maintained academic rigour throughout the process of creating the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Oscillating between checking my approach and remaining methodical whilst being creative was instrumental in constructing the grounded theory. This helped through the long process of coding and developing categories and themes that captured the activity in the data. Recognising that the constructivist grounded theory is *my* interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2008a) allowed me to embrace my subjective view point and recognise that my 'working theory' of the student psychological contract was the embodiment of this understanding. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2006, p. 10).

7.2.8 Constructivist Grounded Theory.

"Constructivism means seeking meanings – both respondents' meanings and researchers' meanings" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). The value in selecting the

constructivist grounded theory approach was that it allowed the student experience to be viewed through the lens of staff, students and of earlier ideas (Charmaz, 2006). The reality of the student's lived experience was captured through inductive analysis. The substantial theory that emerged acts as an exemplar and allows the reader to view the rich descriptions and novel interpretations that have emerged.

The experience and potential bias of the researcher is also an important consideration when evaluating the emerging outcomes. The researcher's role includes developing the framework for data collection and processing, and of course in selecting this methodology rather than, for example, using an inventory or questionnaire (Atieno, 2009). My interest in psychological contracts developed during my MSc in Occupational Psychology which included a research project exploring the psychological contracts of tutors working in a College of Further Education. This knowledge was helpful in setting up the project, when creating theoretical codes and recognising the subtleties of the relationship in the data (Glaser, 1978).

The initial literature review of the student experience and the psychological contract framed the study. Returning to review the literature in the later stages of data analysis, an option proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), allowed specific findings to be considered in relation to the literature. Staying away from the literature whilst the bulk of the analysis was completed ensured that the theory was grounded in the actual data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach was instrumental in the development of the final theoretical category, 'engagement' which is a departure from the literature on the psychological contract. Further support for this approach comes from McCallin (2003, p. 63) who cautions that *"the researcher may be sidetracked by received knowledge and interpretations that support taken-for-granted assumptions, which are not relevant in the new area of study."* Psychological contracts in higher education are unexplored and require approaches that allow similarities to be explored whilst recognising their uniqueness.

Another important reason for returning to the literature after completing the bulk of the data analysis was to avoid what Glaser (1998, p. 68) described as being *"awed out by the work of others, which potentially undermines their sense of self-worth and competence in the realm of theory development."* Glaser's

traditional grounded theory was not fully adopted but the sentiments of his comments were helpful in deciding when to return to the literature. The literature was therefore used to explore specific themes, which allowed the findings of the study to be contextualised (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the impact of prior knowledge, which allowed me to embrace my understanding of the psychological contract and incorporate this into the study. Making these assumptions explicit throughout the process allows others to evaluate my interpretation.

Constructivist grounded theory is an approach not a method, but further clarity would help to define what constructivist grounded theory is for researchers who are new to it. Choosing codes and raising codes to categories required dedication and persistence and reflexivity (Chapter 3.5.9). This thesis perhaps fails to convey the work involved in this analysis that took place over a period of six years. The data set comprised of 55 transcripts from focus groups and interviews collected over five time points. This complex data set proved challenging to analyse but provided rich descriptions. The broad scope of the study and multiple participants creates a dataset that is arguably more difficult to interpret than comments from a small group of actors involved in a workplace dispute (breach) analysis.

Using constructivist grounded theory to explore the psychological contract facilitates insights that questionnaires cannot provide. Rousseau et al. (2018) ask “*Do negative reactions cease immediately when the employee moves from repair to maintenance, or do they linger for some time?*” (p. 1). Two student participants (Participants S7 and Participant S2) in this study held onto strong emotional reactions long after a breach of their psychological contract (Chapter 6.3.3). This finding is indicative of the additional insights obtained through observing the psychological contract over time and supports the call for adopting a temporal lens (e.g. Rousseau et al., 2018; Shipp & Cole, 2015).

Both parties in the exchange relationship were involved in this research, which addresses the tendency to focus solely on the perspective of one party. For a future study it would be helpful to work with both staff and students through the three years, so that the perceptions of both sets of actors could be evaluated.

7.3 Ethical Issues

The ethics for this study focuses on two main areas, participant selection and engagement with the process, and the final presentation of data.

It is important that the participants have experience of the phenomena under investigation. Staff recruitment was promoted through others, and included staff involved in developing the Student Charter. The staff participants were then asked to assist in student recruitment which enabled recruitment from a broad spectrum of courses (Chapter 3.5.4).

It was vital that lecturers promoting the study did not influence students to give biased answers. The researcher's contact with lecturers may have raised concerns that I was colluding to share information from interviews with them. The consent process ensured that students were told, orally and in writing that their information would be treated as confidential and that they were free to withdraw at any time and reminded of this each time they took part (see Information for Participant Appendix C2, C6, C10). The detailed and confidential nature of some of the information that student participants shared confirmed that they understood this.

Knowledge and truth are seen as being created by social interaction and the findings created by the researcher and the participants during the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Participants data was used as the basis for my analytic interpretation. In keeping with the constructivist grounded theory approach, participants voice was placed centre stage, but the analytic insights were my interpretations (Charmaz, 2008b). Member-checking involves sharing the findings with participants in order to enhance trustworthiness or develop properties of categories (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Sharing my findings with participants was considered to facilitate the co-constructing of theory but three issues stopped me. Firstly, psychological contracts are held implicitly and therefore participants are not fully aware of their psychological contract. Making participants aware potentially changes their psychological contract. Instead of checking my interpretations with students at each stage, events were explored over the time using constant comparison. This was particularly useful when exploring what happened to the students' perceptions

of the Student Charters, showing that explicit information can be forgotten. Secondly, consideration was given to burdening the participants unnecessarily (Potrata, 2010). Participants had graduated before the completion of analysis and involving them would have placed demands on their time. Graduates retrospective interpretation of their student psychological contract would be influenced by other factors (Chapter 6.2.1). Throughout the analysis, participants' words were presented alongside the interpretation, allowing the reader to evaluate the interpretation offered (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Papers presenting grounded theory analyses are inevitably offering an interpretation rendering of the data (Urquhart, 2012). The difficulty in writing this thesis is in part due to the need to rationalise the account from a data analysis process that is "*messy*" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638), and where the themes that emerge are fuzzy, overlapping categories. The grounded theory approach was agreed to be challenging (Chapter 7.2.7). Analytical procedures often lack precise operational definition as exemplified by advice to use constant comparison between codes and categories to life codes to categories (Hoare, Mills, & Francis, 2012). Thorne (2000) notes the language used accentuates a sense of "*mystery and magic*" and offers an example of claims that the conceptual categories "*emerged from the data...almost as if they left the raw data out overnight and awoke to find that the data analysis fairies had organised the data into a coherent new structure that explained everything!*" (p. 68).

It was important in this study to be as transparent as possible. This was achieved by reporting what students said and providing examples of showing how this contributed to the development of codes and categories (Chapter 4).

7.4 Evaluating the Research Process

Qualitative research approaches attract criticism for lacking the scientific rigour and credibility associated with more data driven traditionally accepted quantitative methods. Mays and Pope (1995) classified these criticisms into three areas. Firstly, the use of anecdotes, personal impressions are subject to researcher bias; secondly, the research lack reproducibility and the results

unique to the researcher which means that another researcher may come to a different conclusion; and finally, qualitative research lacks generalisability (p. 109). Qualitative approaches tend to produce large amounts of detailed data about a small number of settings which cannot be generalised.

Positivists question the trustworthiness of qualitative approaches as the validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same way in naturalistic work (Shenton, 2004). Validity in a quantitative study is defined as the extent to which a concept is accurately measured. The measurement tool needs to measure what it claims to measure. Reliability is concerned with the accuracy of the measurement and needs to be consistent over time. These measures can be tested by exploring stability over time to ensure consistent results are achieved. Inter-rater reliability can be used to assess the level of agreement between two observers. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument using their skills to access then analyse data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Qualitative approaches are less concerned with validity, (accurate measurement), and reliability (consistency of measurement) but seek to develop a theory that is grounded in the data.

Qualitative research confirms the quality of the findings with reference to the rigour or integrity used to conduct the study. This includes justification of the methods used, transparency in the analytical procedures and presentation of findings using a reflexive approach throughout to ensure the credibility of the findings. This section describes the formalised and rigorous evaluation criterion developed for grounded theory work by Chamaz (2006). She uses four criteria: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness to assess the value of a grounded theory study (pp. 337-338), arguing that these criteria meet "*interpretive sufficiency*."

7.4.1 Credibility

Credibility is concerned with whether the results of the study are plausible in terms of the familiarity and presentation of data, the process of analysis and the evidence for the claims made. Credibility refers to the entire research process, not just data collection.

Charmaz (2006) provides six criteria to judge credibility which are dealt with below in turn:

1. Does the research present intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?
2. Are the range, number and depth of the data gathered sufficient?
3. Were categories systematically compared?
4. Do the categories cover a range of empirical settings?
5. Does the data gathered link rationally to the data analysis and subsequent arguments which emerge?
6. Has sufficient evidence been provided in the study to enable a detached reader to concur with the findings of the study?

The study meets these criteria as follows:

1. *Does the research present intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?*
Familiarity with the data was achieved by conducting focus groups and interviews with participants over a three-year period. Following the same students through their three years of study gave consistency and reworking the analysis each year as more data emerged provided familiarity. Using open ended prompts in the interviews and focus groups allowed participants to introduce topics that they considered relevant. The detailed accounts captured a nuanced understanding of these diverse student experiences at the university.
2. *Are the range, number and depth of the data gathered sufficient?*
All researchers would like to have more case examples and greater data. In this study students were recruited from a wide range of courses (Chapter 3.5.4) allowing a diverse range of experiences to be accessed and included in the study. Forty-six interviews and seven focus groups were conducted in total. Eleven students were followed through all three years of study allowing a unique exploration of how their perception of the student psychological contract changed over time.

3. *Were categories systematically compared?* Carrying out systematic comparisons over time and between individuals provided further insights and formed an important component of data analysis (Chapter 3.6.3). Conducting a series of interviews across three years allowed both prospective and retrospective accounts to be explored. This systematic approach allowed changing student expectations to emerge indicating that expectations are in a constant state of flux (Chapter 4.2.1). The data (Chapter 4) provides examples of participants words and of the codes developed through the analysis. These codes were developed into theoretical categories, which were systematically checked and revised as each new set of data was collected (Chapter 4). Memos (e.g. Figure 4.1 and 4.5) provide insights into the interpretation of the data and codes used to create the theoretical categories.

Once the categories were developed, a substantive grounded theory was constructed (Chapter 4), which was compared to key features of the psychological contract (Chapter 5). This provided the opportunity to show how the current findings differ from the expectations that are indicated by the literature. Credibility was maintained in this study by providing a transparent account of each of the analytical methods (Chapter 3).

4. *Do the categories cover a range of empirical settings?* The specific nature of this study led to the data collection from one HE institution but reached out to capture data from lecturers and students in a range of departments, so that results were not biased by a focus on a particular discipline group. Following the students across three years was important to capture the change for these students, rather than sampling from students in all years at the same time. Strenuous efforts were made to extend the study to a second HEI which finally proved unsuccessful (Chapter 3.5.3). If more resources had been available, following a suite of students across a number of years would have made a stronger study.

5. *Does the data gathered link rationally to the data analysis and subsequent arguments which emerge?* This study was planned to be

deliberative, collecting data systematically and consistently. Data collection and its analysis followed a consistent iterative process. The annual cycle of data collection provided ample time for careful analysis developing the links between the words and phrases used by the participants. Interpretation and the development of the substantive grounded theory followed in a step by step manner (Chapter 3.6). Memos provided insights into the process of interpretation offering greater transparency around this activity (e.g. Figures 3.1 and 4.1).

6. *Has sufficient evidence been provided in the study to enable a detached reader to concur with the findings of the study?* This is a difficult question for the researcher to judge, it requires the thoughts of the detached reader. In presenting the thesis consideration was given to making the student and staff voices, the evidence, as clear as possible to justify the development of codes. Chapter 4 deliberately focuses on the empirical data, so that it stands alone from the interpretation presented in chapters 5 and 6. Creating a distinction in Chapter 5 where in expectations (Chapter 5.2) and exchange (Chapter 5.3) findings are compared to the literature on student psychological contracts whereas in Chapter 5.4 coping mechanism are explored. The first section evolved the working model which was then positioned against what is known about the psychological contract. This Chapter is wholly focused on establishing the validity of the whole study.

7.4.2 Originality

The “originality” of the study can be judged using the four questions proposed by Charmaz (2006):

1. Do the categories present fresh insights?
2. Is there: *“a new conceptual rendering of the data?”* (p. 182)
3. What is: *“the social and theoretical relevance of this work?”* (p. 182)
4. To what extent will the grounded theory: *“challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts and practices?”* (p. 182).

These were addressed in the current study as follows:

1. *Do the categories present fresh insights?* Fresh insights into the student experience are presented in the substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5.5). The use of the psychological contract to frame the student experience prompted a new way of exploring the concept. Exploring concepts through this created novel interpretations and new insights.

Exploration of the exchange process highlighted the bi-directional nature of exchange providing useful insights into a relatively unexplored aspect of the psychological contract. A summary of the insights are provided in more detail in the Discussion of Findings (Chapter 5.1 Table 5.1).

2. *Is there: “a new conceptual rendering of the data?”* The substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5.5, Figure 5.5) represents a new conceptual framework of the student experience. The student experience is described as fluid, dynamic and influenced by expectations, exchange and engagement.
3. *What is: “the social and theoretical relevance of this work?”* The findings contribute towards our understanding of the psychological contract. The contribution made includes identifying the contents of the psychological contract, the bi-directional nature of the exchange and the use of strategies to influence the other party. The retrospective formation of expectations is a novel interpretation. Engagement is a new theoretical category that has not been described in the literature. This conceptualisation adds new insights into the relationship between internal coping resources and how this influences the interaction between lecturers and students (Chapter 5.4) The social relevance of this work has implications for practice which are set out in detail later in this chapter (Chapter 6.3).
4. *To what extent will the grounded theory: “challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts and practices?”* The substantive grounded theory summarises the complexities of the student experience. This has implications for exploring the student experience and supports the use of qualitative approaches. The relationship between students and HEIs is

considered and a new approach to student engagement providing evidence of a partnership in practise (Chapter 7.3.2).

Charmaz (2006) states that the worth of a grounded theory can be judged by the analytical insights made within a substantive area. New ideas can be considered significant if they further thinking, research and practice. The methods used challenge and extend current thinking about how the psychological contract is investigated. Adopting a qualitative, longitudinal approach with a new population has provided useful findings and sets the scene for further research using these methods.

7.4.3 Resonance

Resonance refers to an assessment of the breadth and depth of the data, whether the categories are “saturated and thus represent the: “fullness of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182). She asks:

1. To what extent do the categories present: *“the fullness of the studied experience?”*
2. Have you: *“revealed...taken for granted meanings?”*
3. To what extent have links been made between: “larger collectivities or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicate?”
4. *“Does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances? Does your analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds?”*

Exploring resonance under these headings:

1. *To what extent do the categories present: “the fullness of the studied experience?”* The categories present the student experience that emerged from first-hand accounts. This use of semi-structure interviews provided flexibility and allowed participants to contribute information that they considered relevant. This approach offered rich descriptions that evolved into theoretical categories. Contrasting the depth and fullness of

these findings against the NSS results demonstrates the success of this approach.

2. *Have you: “revealed...taken for granted meanings?”* A number of “*taken for granted meanings*” were revealed including meeting expectations to improve satisfaction (Chapter 2.3.4), A richer conceptualisation of these terms has been provided. Expectations are described as being ambiguous and updated when further information is available.

3. *To what extent have links been made between: “larger collectivities or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicate?”*. The institutional and student links were identified and tested through comparison with the statements in the Student Charter. This allowed the explicit offer from the university and its departments to be compared against the reported individual student experiences. The study identified the challenges of conveying the university’s offer in writing, the many interpretations that can be made and the importance for staff of flexibility to negotiate a positive outcome through discussion and re-interpretation with students. Part of the issue is that the lived reality of university study is very different from proper high school experience. The student’s backgrounds colour their expectations and influence their expectations.

4. *“Does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances? Does your analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds?”* The grounded theory was not shared with participants in this study because the students had graduated before the completion of the analysis. This is a flaw in the structure of the study which was dictated by its longitudinal nature. The findings were shared with audiences at two international conferences (Appendix E) and feedback indicated that the model resonated with conference participants. Feedback also indicated positive support for using the psychological contract to explore the student experience.

7.4.4 Usefulness

The fourth criteria of usefulness is concerned with whether or not the theoretical findings are useful for people in their everyday lives. In this case usefulness considers how far this study can impact on the experience of undergraduate students at the university. Charmaz (2006) offers four questions to consider whether the study has “usefulness.” These are:

1. The extent to which the analyses may be applied in people’s “everyday worlds.”
2. Does the study’s theoretical categories capture: “generic processes?” Have these generic processes have been analysed for “tacit implications?”
3. Does the analysis identify the need for additional research in other “substantive areas?”
4. How do the study findings build upon existing knowledge?

The current study fits each criterion as follows:

1. *The extent to which the analyses may be applied in people’s “everyday worlds.”* Interactions between lecturers and students, email exchanges and engagement with the social model were shown as being influential in the formation and maintenance of the student psychological contract. The potential for this approach to resonate with staff was clear. Their comments on flexibility, and opportunity to intervene to help to reframe student expectations at the earliest possible opportunity, indicate that an awareness of student expectations can impact on “everyday” activities.
2. *Does the study’s theoretical categories capture: “generic processes?” Have these generic processes have been analysed for “tacit implications?”* Generic processes identified are summarised by the theoretical categories of exchange and engagement. This offers an explanation of how items and other less tangible things are exchanged and how processes are shaped by both parties as they interact. The “tacit implications” of these processes are the mutual formation of outcomes by both parties.

3. *Does the analysis identify the need for additional research in other “substantive areas?”* The students involved in this study were self-selecting. Additional research could usefully be targeted at students who may lack resilience and coping strategies and from specific sub-groups, for example those with learning needs, international, mature and those with medical needs. This study has shown the efficacy of using the psychological contract outside of employment relationship. Although the sample size is very limited, the findings support its continued use as a mean of exploring the student experience in higher education.

4. *How do the study findings build upon existing knowledge?* This study has built upon knowledge from two primary areas; the psychological contract and the student experience. These were discussed in detail in Chapter 2, setting the scene and rationale for the study. Adopting the psychological contract to explore the student experience has provided a rich picture of the student experience, perceptions and expectations from a specific time period in higher education. This work has the potential to enrich our understanding of both areas, but clearly needs to be expanded to test the model in other HEIs. While this research involved university students, it is equally applicable with adults in college-based education.

In summary, adopting the Chamaz (2006) lens to assess the value of a grounded theory study through examining credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness in turn, has captured evidence and examples that substantiate the ideas emerging from the data, the first three aims for the thesis. Setting up the project to enable data collection in a rigorous and longitudinal manner has enabled delivery of the fourth aim:

Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of understanding the student experience

7.5 Summary

This study has shown that the student psychological contract offers a conceptualisation of the student experience that is complex, multi-dimensional and constantly evolving. Reflecting on the process, the ethical considerations and the evaluation process has provided the basis for adopting this approach elsewhere. In summary:

- This study offers insights into explicit and implicit elements of the psychological contract.
- The student psychological contract formation is influenced by prior experiences notably school sixth form. The information early in psychological contract formation focuses on more tangible items. This finding offers insights into psychological contract formation, a relatively unexplored topic within the psychological contract literature.
- Student expectations are ambiguous, constantly evolving and changing.
- Relationships are bi-directional i.e. students influence lecturers as much as vice-versa. The research considers that the employment psychological contract is uni-directional.
- Psychological contract maintenance is actioned by both parties. Students and lecturers negotiate and influence outcomes through the activity of engagement.
- Research has considered breach as the norm for research studies. This study identifies maintenance activities that preserve and evolve the psychological contract between students and staff.
- Applying the psychological contract concept to students has provided an indication of the value of this approach for groups other than employees.

This research has explored these concepts in more depth than that afforded by using questionnaires. In addition, the process of engagement highlights how psychological contracts are shaped within a specific context. Collectively, these findings suggest key areas for further exploration which are captured in Chapter 8.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

The overarching aim of the research was to test whether the psychological contract could act as an appropriate sensitising concept to take a fresh look at aspects of the student experience. The psychological contract was seen as potentially appropriate because it provides a framework to measure transactional relationships. The offer which university education makes to each student is transactional, with the contract articulated through the Student Charters established in each UK university. The student experience is complex, dynamic and multidimensional, and arguably not well-captured by the standard quantitative measures. This exploratory study adopted a grounded theory approach to allow the ideas to be shaped as data emerged over a number of years to create new understandings of the student experience.

This thesis has outlined the research journey used to explore and address my research aims. The literature (Chapter 2.3.3) confirmed that our understanding of the student experience has been framed using analysis of the questionnaires, and the NSS in the UK, which are developed within a broadly positivist framework. 'Meeting expectations' has become the dominant discourse and driver for development (Chapter 1.3), whereas understanding expectations and realising where opportunities to challenge and refocus expectations should be a useful student management tool.

Student Charters were introduced as a means of managing expectations, increasing student satisfaction, signposting students to other information, providing information that allows prospective student to make informed choices and acting as a communication tool (Gaffney-Rhys & Jones, 2010). There is an absence of information confirming the success or otherwise it has had.

This exploratory study adopted a novel inductive approach, using data that was collected over a three-year period as the sample student group moved from first to final year of their undergraduate study. This continuity of sampling, albeit from a very small group in single institution, enabled a substantive grounded theory of the student psychological contract to be developed (Chapter 5.4). The

efficacy of using the psychological contract as a means of understanding the student experience was assessed (Chapter 7). Study reflections and ethical considerations were considered before evaluating the achievements of the study aims using the criteria proposed by Charmaz (2006) (Chapter 7.2, 7.3).

This chapter will consider the achievement of the study aims, reflect on learning from the research process, identify the contribution of findings to new and existing knowledge and acknowledge limitations of adopting a constructivist grounded theory. In the light of findings from this study, proposals are made for taking forward current debates and future research.

The specific objectives are summarised as follows.

- 1) To explore and document key features of the student psychological contract at the exemplar university (Chapter 4 and 5).
- 2) To monitor how the student psychological contract changed over time (Chapter 4 and 5).
- 3) To formulate a conceptualisation of the student psychological contract (Chapter 5).
- 4) Explore the efficacy of using psychological contracts as a means of exploring the student experience (Chapter 7).

8.2 Achievement of Study Objectives

The longitudinal nature of the study provided the opportunity to consider how the student psychological contract was established and changed over time. The key features of the student psychological contract that emerged were documented (Chapter 5) in six categories (Table 5.1). These categories were grouped together to create three theoretical findings; expectations, exchange and engagement which provided the conceptualisation of the student psychological contract (Chapter 5.5, Figure 5.1).

In the formation stage, student activities included comparing university induction experiences with high school experience, and selectively attending to information about the tangible exchange items including books, contract hours and input from personal tutors. Psychological contract 'breaches' were identified

as a result of students making cognitive comparisons between their current and past experiences and noting a shortfall. Incidents of 'breach violation', the emotional impact of breach activity were described. These findings are similar to experiences of breach in organisations, although in this case, the students internalised their emotions rather than withdrawing their labour. They were not challenging the university side of the contract and seeking resolution as would be seen in the workplace.

As in the business context there are explicit and implicit contents of the psychological contract, with the students focusing on items and explicit promises in the induction (first year of study) phase. Examples in the following two years included more implicit exchanges. For example, information in course handbooks about contact hours, were important in the early phase whilst personal interactions with lecturers were important later on.

The research showed there are challenges in distinguishing between expectations and promises, the fuzzy boundary here is in different places for different people. The students were shown to be processing the explicit and implicit information in similar ways, suggesting that taking research time to try to distinguish between the two is not fruitful.

8.3 Contribution

The findings from this study make three important contributions to a deeper / broader understanding of the student experience

1. Student Psychological Contract

The first contribution is a substantive grounded theory that presents the student psychological contract which comprises of three theoretical categories: expectations, exchange and engagement. An important finding was that each theoretical category changed and evolved over time and this brought about changes in the other categories creating a dynamic system. The student psychological contract is ephemeral and transient, and our understanding of it is partial. We focus on features of the psychological contract that are more prominent. Asking students about expectations, for example, gives us a snapshot of their understanding but this fails to capture the more implicit

features and hidden processes that contribute to the student psychological contract.

Findings highlighted that events and activities outside of the traditional concept of the student experience were included (Chapter 4.3.1). Events that led to dissatisfaction - or breach – confirmed that these were also a part of the student experience. The inductive nature of the study and the use of semi-structured interviews allowed students to decide what was relevant.

Breach occurred when students did not receive what they were promised including work placements and positive interaction with a lecturer. Some breach events led to feelings of 'violation' which remained with students long after the breach event. Talking about breach events during the interviews caused student participants to experience strong negative emotions (Chapter 4.4.2).

Psychological contract maintenance was observed through the study. Students actively sought to maintain a positive psychological contract. Additional information updated and revised their understanding ensuring that a more accurate psychological contract was available. Students also maintained a positive psychological contract through engagement activities which allowed them to influence and shape the outcome. Students influenced lecturers in subtle ways including the example provided by Participant S10 who put in '*face time*' to gain extra input and advice from his lecturer.

Collectively, these findings offer a broader conceptualisation of the student experience and support the use of interpretative approaches. The nature of the student experience is varied and individual and require methodological approaches that can capture this type of information (Chapter 3.2).

2. Contribution to Knowledge About Psychological Contract

The substantive theory makes a small contribution to what is known about the psychological contract and addresses key debates identified in the literature review (Chapter 2.4.4).

Contents included in the transaction e.g. fees in exchange for e-books and contact time and relational activity including informal contact with lecturers.

Formation and Maintenance is influenced by prior expectations and regularly updated with information that enables the psychological contract to remain relevant and current. Additional information prompts recognition of an inaccurate psychological contract.

Changes over time included transactional exchanges in the induction phase being superseded by relational exchanges. Students develop coping resources and mechanisms that allowed them to play a more proactive part in avoiding breach.

In this study the '**other party**' consisted of lecturers and professional services staff who were considered as representing the organisation. Information from a variety of sources informed the development and maintenance of the student psychological contract and was therefore influential. Students were not seen to be taking a discriminating approach to selection of information sources, resulting in unreliable sources (e.g. Facebook), being used instead of reliable sources such as module and course handbooks and the Student Charter.

The methods used in this study addressed weaknesses identified in prior research and contributed to delivering novel findings. Interviews and focus groups captured these experiences in ways that questionnaires cannot. Participants remarked they found it helpful to talk about and reflect on their experiences including those that led to negative feelings.

3. Managing Expectations

The Student Charter was not used or referred to by student participants. Reviewing this finding through the psychological contracts lens suggests that whilst not mentioned explicitly students may hold an implicit understanding of the spirit and ethos of its contents. Whilst students did not name the Student Charter, they described some of its contents. Students indicated that they knew what to do if they wanted to make a complaint, described the length of time required for getting assignments back and being given advance notice if a lecturer was cancelled.

Rather than managing expectations which are vague and fluid (Chapter 5.2), alternative approaches need to be considered. Explicit information contributes

to understanding but daily events are also important in shaping expectations. Students engaged and influenced outcomes in a way that indicates partnership working, albeit in a subtler manner than is described in the literature. Crucially, this supports calls for engaging students as partners and offers insights into how this partnership works in action. Ongoing exchanges and interactions influence expectations by providing opportunities for students to gain additional information and test their understanding. These insights offer practical advice and address institutional concerns about ways to engage students.

8.4 Limitations

This study has made an important contribution, but limitations are acknowledged.

Charmaz (2006) acknowledges that the substantive grounded theory process will be judged by other scholars as an integral part of the final product. Theories generated using constructivist grounded theory tend to be plausible accounts rather than theories that can claim any objective status (Charmaz, 2006). The usefulness of the methods will be judged by the quality of the theory developed. The methods were described in (Chapter 3.5) and the substantive grounded theory was evaluated to ensure that the criteria for grounded theory have been met using credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness (Chapter 7.4).

Consistent with the constructivist grounded theory method, the developed substantive theory is specific to the study sample from which it was developed. This small-scale study was completed in a specific cultural and educational context: a single university at a time when higher fees were introduced. The experiences of the participants should be understood as operating within this context. A wide demographic of students were included in the study as a deliberate strategy to ensure variation in the developed theory. Seven focus groups comprising of 32 students from a variety of courses were conducted. Fifteen students then took part in individual interviews, thirteen in year two and eleven in the final year.

The grounded theory is presented for further development in other contexts and may allow for transferability and further development. Other researchers using

different methodologies in such contexts may come to different interpretations and conclusion. The reader of this thesis may interpret the results in different ways. This is consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach.

In addition to the theoretical categories of expectations and exchange related closely to prior studies on the psychological contract (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Rousseau, 2004). An additional category of engagement was a departure from the literature and was developed in response to the influence that students had in shaping and developing their own psychological contracts. This new category was guided by data rather than the substantive research or pre-existing theories.

Whilst the language of expectations and exchange has been used in the psychological contract literature the interpretation of them for this project was driven by the data. Returning to the literature after completing the bulk of analysis allowed these results to be compared and contextualised (Chapter 5.3 – 5.4).

Overall though, the expense of this type of study will always act as a constraint. It requires conversations with individuals at a broad enough scale to provide detailed insights. The data collection and analysis in the first instance would be local to an HEI, the opportunity to scale up for cross institutional comparisons seems to be unlikely. It does, however, provide an approach that might be very beneficial in putting a detailed lens on specific sub-groups with particular needs and characteristics.

8.5 Recommendations for further research

This study has shown how the student psychological contract influences and shapes the student experience, and as such warrants further investigation. The challenge here is to see that positivist quantitative studies provide limited understanding and are not necessarily the methods most appropriate to investigating this people-oriented phenomenon.

This was an exploratory study taking a novel approach to understanding the student experience. There are many projects that could follow on from this

work, but the following eight areas have potential value in the short and longer term.

1. More research is needed to understand the complex nature of how the student psychological contract forms, develops and is maintained. This thesis does not provide the scope to elevate the very specific, substantive theory to a formal theory that would be generalisable across wider areas, such as different universities. The evidence from this study offers some initial insights into this topic.
2. The approach here of following one cohort of students across three years of study has shown the transient nature of expectations and their evolution and management, both prospective and retrospective accounts were explored. Retrospective accounts may be distorted by memory or other influences. This aspect needs much more attention using methods that capture this phenomenon when it happens e.g. diary studies (Conway & Briner, 2002).
3. The results showed students coped well when their psychological contract was breached: rather than complain, they adjusted their behaviour, approach and expectations. Further research is needed to explore this reaction. as there were no outward signs that students held these negative feelings. Widening the sample to include students who drop out of university may offer insights into the behavioural outcomes of breach. Additional research is needed to explore approaches that can facilitate resolution. This may have value as HEIs seek to better manage students with various mental health conditions. Research in this area might benefit from collaboration with experienced university counselling staff, psychologists and student services specialists. Drawing on the emerging literature on resilience and coping (e.g. Milne, Creedy, & West, 2016; Smith & Yang, 2017) also warrants consideration in remediation actions.
4. Although some students were aware of the Charter, they did not refer to it when seeking clarification or further information. While this mirrors

what happens in organisations where employees seldom look at their contract of employment after signing it (Atkinson, 2007; Robinson, 1996), these results suggest that the Student Contract has less relevance than the employment contract, and is effectively invisible. It may be more visible in other institutions and have more impact, but the evidence here suggests there is work to be done on exploring why it is invisible and where and how it can be moved to the forefront of people's thinking.

5. The work with the lecturers highlighted the difficulties inherent in creating the Student Charter and articulated their reluctance to dictate the exchange relationship. They wanted the opportunity for fluid boundaries and dynamic responses as positions change. In this sense, the Charter does not have the fixed legal status of an employment context, so it is not surprising that measurement against Charter guidelines is tricky. There is an interesting set of local-scale studies to be undertaken to track the implicit and explicit perceptions and expectations of staff and students in a single programme or department to capture variability. At this scale, the results should help the staff and students to revise their Charters and pinpoint the times when messages can be reiterated.
6. The difficulties in managing the student experience were apparent. Providing explicit information and offering support are helpful but more information is needed around hidden process that occur. One example of this from the current study is that students did not differentiate information from different sources. Further studies could explore these information sources and processing activities.
7. Students coped with cognitive breaches and further studies could explore how these strategies could be adapted to support individuals to cope with more emotional events. Exploring how, where and what support would be appropriate requires further research.
8. Students in this study were in the 18-22-year-old bracket, typical of their cohort, but perhaps more inexperienced than participants in employment studies. It would be interesting to know if the student's tendency to

internalise and not challenge is mirrored by young people in various workplace settings. Using the methodology adopted for the current study is recommended in order to consider the subtler aspects of their experience.

In summary, more work needs to be done to understand the student experience to provide an evidence base upon which interventions can be designed. The approach adopted here compliment and extends understandings acquired through large scale quantitative studies.

8.6 Closing Paragraphs

The need to compete in a global economy and a consumerist ethos is likely to maintain the focus on enhancing the student experience. The student psychological contract offers insights into the complexities of meeting expectations and delivering on promises but also recognises the everyday experiences that contribute to the student experience. This framework provides information about the role that students play during engagement which provides multiple opportunities to shape and refine the student experience.

The student experience is changing, and it is important to use research-based knowledge to inform best practice. The findings from this study have contributed novel and thought-provoking information indicating that the student psychological has a role to play in the endeavour.

The psychological contract raises a number of questions, but the current study exemplifies what the concept has to offer.

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10 Appendices

Appendix A National Student Survey 2017 – Core Questionnaire

Scale:

Definitely agree
Mostly agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Mostly disagree
Definitely disagree
Not applicable

Questions:

The teaching on my course

1. Staff are good at explaining things.
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.
3. The course is intellectually stimulating.
4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

Learning opportunities

5. My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.
6. My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics.
7. My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.

Assessment and feedback

8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
9. Marking and assessment has been fair.
10. Feedback on my work has been timely.
11. I have received helpful comments on my work.

Academic support

- 12. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
- 13. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.
- 14. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.

Organisation and management

- 15. The course is well organised and running smoothly.
- 16. The timetable works efficiently for me.
- 17. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

Learning resources

- 18. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well.
- 19. The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.
- 20. I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.

Learning community

- 21. I feel part of a community of staff and students.
- 22. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.

Student voice

23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.

24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.

25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.

26. The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.

Overall satisfaction

27. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.

Appendix B Ethical Approval

Faculty of Science and Technology

Smeaton 009, Plymouth

To:	Ms Julie Osborn	From:	Paula Simson
cc:	Dr Rebecca Turner, Dr Alison Bacon		Secretary to Human Ethics Committee
Your Ref:		Our Ref:	scitech:\d:\human ethics:
Date:	16 March 2012	Phone Ext:	84503

Application for Ethical Approval

Thank you for submitting the ethical approval form and details concerning your project:

'Formation and development of student psychological contracts in Higher Education'

I am pleased to inform you that this has been approved.

Kind regards



Paula Simson

Appendix C Focus Group and Interview Paperwork

Appendix C.1 Semi- structured interview schedule

Introduction

Introduce researcher

Talk through Participation information sheet and Consent form

Clarify any queries on these forms

The Interview

Clarify the aims of the study

Talk through the procedure

Recording

Recorded interview – check the participant is happy to be recorded.

Reaffirm anonymity, confidentiality and that data stored securely

Reassure participant that the only material used will be anonymised. Quotes using identifying information will not be used

Invite further questions

Invite the participant to complete the consent form

Start recording

Ending and Debriefing

Remind participant of follow up action - lecturer to promote study to their students, students invited to follow up interviews. There is no obligation to participate.

Thank participant

**UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Name of Principal Investigator: Julie Osborn

Title of Research: Formation and development of student psychological contracts in Higher Education.

Aim of research

This research seeks to explore the perceptions and expectations that students have of higher education. Specifically, this research will explore how these expectations are formed and developed. Student Charters are likely to have an influence on student expectations and these will be considered in order to understand the role that they play in the development of student psychological contracts.

Description of procedure

One to one semi-structured interviews, which will last no longer than one-hour, will be used to explore the expectations that students and staff have of the student experience. Interviews will be audio recorded using a Dictaphone and brief notes taken. Student Charters will be used as a basis for this discussion and explored from the perspective of the different groups involved.

Description of risks

There are no risks associated with taking part in the research. Some participants may identify a need for further information and this will be available as a leaflet describing services provided by the University.

Benefits of proposed research

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the student experience and provide information that will identify how this can be enhanced.

Right to withdraw

You have the right to withdraw at any time. If the interview is in progress you can choose to withdraw without having to give any explanation. If you wish to withdraw your data once it has been collected, then you can contact the researcher who will comply with your request.

If you are dissatisfied with the way the research is conducted, please contact the principal investigator in the first instance: telephone number 07813 xxx xxx. If you feel the problem has not been resolved, please contact the secretary to the Faculty of Science and Technology Human Ethics Committee: Mrs Paula Simson 01752 584503.

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Human Ethics Committee Consent Form

LECTURER CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN PHONE OR FACE TO FACE
INTERVIEW

Name of Principal Investigator: Julie Osborn

Title of Research: Formation and development of student psychological contracts in higher education

Brief statement of purpose of work

This research will explore student expectations of higher education. What do students feel that they have been promised and what have they actually received? How do students know what is expected of them and what do they feel the university experience should offer?

Methods for Interviews

Interviews will last no longer than 40 minutes. The conversation will be recorded before being transcribed.

Interviewee consent

The objectives of this research have been explained to me. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any stage, and ask for my data to be destroyed if I wish.

I understand that my anonymity is guaranteed, unless I expressly state otherwise. My participation is voluntary.

Under these circumstances, I agree to participate in the research.

Name: Faculty/Dept

Signature: Date:

If you are dissatisfied with the way the research is conducted, please contact the principal investigator in the first instance: telephone number 07850 656 956. If you feel the problem has not been resolved please contact the secretary to the Plymouth Faculty of Science and Technology Human Ethics Committee: Mrs Paula Simson 01752 584503. This project has ethical approval from Plymouth University.

Appendix C.4 Lecturer Interview Prompt Sheet

1. Which faculty are you in and what do you teach? How long have you been a lecturer?
2. What do you think students get out of being at this university?
3. What contribution do lecturers make to the student experience?
4. I understand that you have been involved in developing the Student Charter. Could you tell me more about this?
 - Has being part of the group influenced how you work with students?
5. How do you anticipate the Student Charter will be used?
 - Can you see any pros or cons?
6. How do students develop their understanding of what is expected of them?
 - What do you expect from students?
7. How would you describe relationship between students and the university?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Invitation to First Year Students to take part in a Focus Group exploring their experiences of Higher Education

As part of my PhD, I am interested in finding out about student's experiences of higher education. I want to understand how these experiences are shaped and developed.

To do this I am inviting small groups (up to 6 students) to come along and take part in an informal discussion about their experiences at university.

If you are interested in taking part, please let me know by responding to this email. I will send you further information.

This research has received ethical approval from Plymouth University. Your input will contribute valuable information that will identify ways to improve the student experience.

Julie Osborn: Julie.osborn@plymouth.ac.uk

Mobile: 07860 XXX XXX

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Name of Principal Investigator: Julie Osborn

Title of Research: Formation and development of student psychological contracts in higher education

Aim of research

This research seeks to explore the perceptions and expectations that students have of higher education. Specifically, this research will explore how these expectations are formed and developed. Student Charters are likely to have an influence on student expectations and these will be considered to understand the role that they play in the development of student psychological contracts.

Description of procedure

Small group discussions will be facilitated by the researchers and used to explore the expectations that students and/or staff have of the student experience. Student Charters will be used as a basis for this discussion and explored from the perspective of the different groups involved.

Description of risks

There are no risks associated with taking part in the research. Some participants may identify a need for further information and this will be available as a leaflet describing services provided by the University.

Benefits of proposed research

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the student experience and provide information that will identify how this can be enhanced.

Right to withdraw

You have the right to withdraw at any time prior to the discussion group starting. Once the discussion has started you cannot withdraw but you can choose not to answer questions. You cannot make a request to withdraw your data once the discussion has started. Your contribution will be added to the group and it is therefore not possible to remove this without negative consequences for the group data.

If you are dissatisfied with the way the research is conducted, please contact the principal investigator in the first instance: telephone number *[PI tel. number here]*. If you feel the problem has not been resolved please contact the secretary to the Faculty of Science and Technology Human Ethics Committee: Mrs Paula Simson 01752 584503.

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
Human Ethics Committee Sample Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT / PRACTICAL STUDY

Name of Principal Investigator Julie Osborn

Title of Research Formation and development of student psychological contracts in higher education

Brief statement of purpose of work

Students entering Higher Education from 2012 onwards will pay higher tuition fees. Student Charters are being introduced in order to explain what students can expect from universities and what they are expected to do in return.

This research will explore these expectation and perceptions from both student and staff perspectives.

The objectives of this research have been explained to me.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any stage prior to the focus group starting, and ask for my data to be destroyed if I wish. Once the focus group has started, I can opt out of answering questions. Any contribution that I have made cannot be deleted as this will form part of the group data and as such cannot be removed without invalidating other participant's contributions.

I understand that my anonymity is guaranteed, unless I expressly state otherwise.

My participation is voluntary.

Under these circumstances, I agree to participate in the research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Introductions

Confirm confidentiality and ask participants to sign form.

Please introduce yourself and let us know what you did before coming to university.

Experience of university

1. Why did you decide to come to university?
 - Academic, non-academic
2. What information did you use to make a decision about which university to attend?
 - Preview days, friends?
3. What do you hope to get out of coming to university?
4. What is the role of lecturers?
 - Support, contact outside of lectures?
5. Higher fees were introduced when you started your course. What do you think you get in return for your fees?
6. How do you find out what you need to do?
 - Have you heard of or seen a Student Charter?
 - Can you say anything more about it?
7. Is university what you thought it would be?

Appendix C.9 Sample email inviting students to in follow up interview

Hello (Name)

I am contacting you as agreed at the end of the last interview to invite you to take part in a follow up interview for the next phase of the research.

The interviews will last **no longer than one hour** and will follow up on some of the topics we discussed previously and anything else that you think relevant.

If you would be willing to participate, please let me know by **responding to this email by (date)**. We can then arrange a mutually convenient time to meet.

Best wishes

Julie

Julie Osborn

Part-time PhD student

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Name of Principal Investigator: Julie Osborn

Title of Research: Formation and development of student psychological contracts in higher education

Aim of research

This research seeks to explore the perceptions and expectations that students have of higher education. Specifically, this research will explore how these expectations are formed and developed. Student Charters are likely to have an influence on student expectations and these will be considered to understand the role that they play in the development of student psychological contracts.

Description of procedure

One to one semi-structured interviews, which will last no longer than one-hour, will be used to explore the expectations that students and staff have of the student experience. Interviews will be audio recorded using a Dictaphone and brief notes taken. Student Charters will be used as a basis for this discussion and explored from the perspective of the different groups involved.

Description of risks

There are no risks associated with taking part in the research. Some participants may identify a need for further information and this will be available as a leaflet describing services provided by the University.

Benefits of proposed research

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the student experience and provide information that will identify how this can be enhanced.

Right to withdraw

You have the right to withdraw at any time. If the interview is in progress you can choose to withdraw without having to give any explanation. If you wish to withdraw your data once it has been collected, then you can contact the researcher who will comply with your request.

If you are dissatisfied with the way the research is conducted, please contact the principal investigator in the first instance: telephone number 07813 xxx xxx. If you feel the problem has not been resolved, please contact the secretary to the Faculty of Science and Technology Human Ethics Committee: Mrs Paula Simson 01752 584503.

Appendix C.11 Student Interviews Prompt Questions

1. What are you studying? What stage are you at with your studies and what are you planning to do next?

Prompt - work placement

2. What do you think you will get out of university?
3. You are part of the intake that are paying higher fees for the first time. What do you get in return for your fees?
4. What is your understanding of the role of lecturers?
5. How do you find out what's expected of you?

Prompt – Student Charter

6. Is university different to what you expected?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix D.1 Sample of Coding 'Expectations'

Table 10.1 includes examples of data and codes that contribute towards the theoretical category 'expectations'. The raw data (column a) is given an initial code (column b) and a focused code (column c) confirmed using additional examples through constant comparison.

Selection from Transcripts	Initial Code	Focused Codes
<i>"The majority of staff have an 'open door' policy students can walk past and knock on the door and come in."</i> Lecturer P6 (T1).	Open door policy	Decoding information
<i>"We explained to parents this is just the university putting down in writing what already happens so everyone's aware."</i> Lecturer P6 (T1).	Putting down what happens so everyone's aware	Capturing information
<i>"We didn't want it to happen 'you've paid to come and do a degree, we are providing that degree to you as a shop almost' and we did not want that to happen. That's why we kept the words, when we got hold of it, I strongly went for it when we devised the template, to keep it very vague, very informal language, not written by a lawyer."</i> Lecturer P6 (T1).	Expectations – informal, not managed Template for Student Charter – indicates arrangement,	Informal Expectations
<i>"I feel a small sense of entitlement to an opportunity but at the same time if I miss a lecture that's my fault."</i> Focus Group C (T2).	Expect - Exchange attend lecturer / opportunity Relationship with HEI	Expect to contribute
<i>"Long life friendships. Some short-term friendships. Hangovers in the morning."</i> Focus Group A (T2).	Expect – friends, hangovers	Non-academic expectations
<i>"We straight away passed around a piece of paper to get every ones</i>	Not clear	Ambiguous expectations

<p><i>mobile number and actually between us, we are quite a small cohort as there is only 18 of us but we assumed that one of us might know what they are doing – and that does tend to be the case that someone knows and then we do keep in touch with one another – which room should I be in now and where is that? Are we really starting at 9 this morning? There is all that sort of stuff going on.”</i></p> <p>Focus Group A (T2).</p>	<p>Finding out what’s going on from peers e.g. which room.</p>	
<p><i>“I don’t think the lecturers tell you what’s expected apart from on essay guidelines, they sort of give you practice essays maybe and ones that have been done before to give you an idea of the standard that you should be doing, how to write them. But I guess they should do a bit more in that because I’m not actually sure of my peers, how they’re work is looking in comparison to mine.”</i></p> <p>Student P9 (T3).</p>	<p><i>I think</i></p> <p><i>I guess</i></p> <p><i>I’m not sure</i></p> <p><i>Lecturers don’t tell you what to expect</i></p>	<p>Not sure what to expect</p>
<p><i>“I think a lot of people do actually care quite a lot because a bog-standard degree isn’t going to get you very far as we have already been told multiple times. It’s all about the work experience and further degrees and all that.”</i></p> <p>Focus Group A (T2).</p>	<p>Expecting more than a degree</p> <p>Expecting to enhance employability</p>	<p>Expecting more</p> <p>Value-for-money</p>
<p><i>I was really surprised at the naivety of some of the students that they were saying ‘well I have paid 9K and I expect to be taught how to understand this’ and I always say no that’s not what this is about now and the 9K doesn’t buy you a pass,</i></p>	<p>Information from peers</p> <p>Expect to be taught</p> <p>Buying an opportunity</p>	

<i>it just buys you an opportunity.</i> Focus Group A (T2).		
<i>“It’s very much an understanding that you can’t come to us like just after the lesson kind of thing.”</i> Focus Group A (T2).	An <i>understanding</i> Role of lecturers	Implicit understanding
<i>“Yes, although the university is getting the same money now it is coming from student’s people feel as though they are actually paying for it. People are looking for more and they are noticing more what we are getting for that money.”</i> Student P2 (T3).	Looking for <i>more</i> Noticing more	Expecting more Value-for-Money
<i>“They should give as much as they expect.”</i> Student P3 (T3).	Expect – exchange give and get	Fair exchange
<i>I think because people are paying more they are putting in more effort. Before you used to go for the social aspect but now you’re going to do your degree</i> Student P6 (T3).	Expect – to put in effort	Expect to contribute
<i>“It’s never made clear to us that we should maybe read around the subject here or do some extra reading here etc.”</i> Focus Group A (T2).	Not clear what to expect. ‘Extra reading’ – who/how decided?	Ambiguous expectations
<i>“I thought there’d be more lectures. There’s only two terms of lectures which is which I think is a little bit rubbish considering that we’re paying loads of money.”</i> Student P4 (T1).	Expected – more lectures	Worse than expected
<i>“I expect lecturers to just, to just, to give me the notes I need and if possible that keeps us all interested and just being able to assist you in your time of need really. I don’t want them to be a teacher necessarily like secondary</i>	Expect – keep us interested, pass on knowledge, Expect – lecturer to be there in <i>time of need</i> .	Expectation of lecturers – be there

<p><i>school but someone to just pass on the knowledge in a way that will help you, will benefit you in the rest of it. I don't want lecturers that just read off lecture stands or anything like that.” Student S8 (T3).</i></p>		
<p><i>“I know some people in the first year of other courses and they get quite a lot of work and we haven't apparently and it steps up later on. All my other flatmates are doing completely different subjects to me and they are all just constantly working, they have loads more deadlines and loads of tests. I think they are preparing us for next year; you'll be disappointed as apparently next year is really tough! Yes, I know somebody who's doing [subject] in the year above us. Yes me too. He says it is a lot of work.” Focus Group A (T2).</i></p>	<p>Apparently .. expectation formation via info from friends.</p> <p>Comparing with others</p>	<p>Expectation formation based on information which may not be accurate.</p>
<p><i>“Yeah. Well everyone who does a placement year gets a decent job.” Student S1 (T3).</i></p>	<p>Expect – placement and employability</p>	<p>Expect placement and employability</p>
<p><i>“I think they are buying support from the university. I think that it's more than just a degree really. You've got everything around getting a degree. You've got help from the lecturers ... umm people want someone who is not just reading from the PowerPoint.” Student PS2 (T4).</i></p>	<p>Expect – support, everything around a degree, not just PP</p>	<p>Expecting everything and specifics</p>
<p><i>“This year, my only disappointment would be my one to one tutorial, because I have a tutor which still hasn't shown his face to me even though I know who he is and I know that the other half of my year, we get split in half, are being approached and having support if we need it.” Student S3 (T3).</i></p>	<p>Disappointment</p> <p>Expected – face-to-face introduction from tutor – not enough knowing who he is.</p> <p>Comparing to others</p>	<p>Worse than expected</p>

<p><i>“Year one didn’t match up [to expectations] because the preview day portrayed the course to be a lot more industry facing than it perhaps came across in the actual course because there was a lot of talk about meeting with industry contacts and stuff like that and that didn’t really occur at any point.”</i> Student P10 (T3).</p>	<p>Preview day Employability</p>	<p>Information used to form expectation</p>
<p><i>“We’re had a couple of lecturers say to us that they are not going to teach us it all. They’ve said we’ve only got an hour to teach us. We say but you’re our lecturer so what are you doing? But we do understand that in the second year we do need to learn for ourselves. It’s just that adjustments – it’s quite hard.”</i> Student P7 (T3).</p>	<p>What do lecturers do?</p>	<p>Finding out what’s going on</p>
<p><i>“I think that there is this sense of entitlement that you get with this money but I never ...because perhaps I have an understanding of these things are structured that 9 grand isn’t necessarily seen by the university in such an obvious way. I don’t feel because I’m paying 9 grand that I’m entitled to such and such but I could understand others having that view.”</i> Student P14 (T5).</p>	<p>Sense of entitlement Fees</p>	<p>Sensing/feeling expectation</p>
<p><i>“Students as customers because obviously they’re paying so much money to get on to courses and really what the students want is what they should get considering the amount of money they’re spending. But I don’t think it’s quite as cut and dry as that. I think there are still a lot of changes to be made in order to make courses really that worthwhile for this</i></p>	<p>Worthwhile</p>	<p>Value-for-money expectation</p>

<p><i>amount of money.” Student P10 (T5).</i></p>		
<p><i>Yes, I would say most of them feel like they’re available, I feel that most of them do reply quite quickly. For instance, we had to hand in an assignment this week, so I basically handed it in on Monday before the deadline and basically within about a day the module leader for the actual course had the coursework marked and handed it back to me the following Wednesday. Student P2 (T5).</i></p>	<p>Feel like they’re available. Quick turnaround</p>	<p>Pattern of expectation</p>

Table 10.1 Sample of Data and Codes used in Development of 'Expectation' Category

Appendix D.2 Memo Induction of Deduction

How do I avoid falling into the trap of generating theory using logical deduction from past studies? How do I balance the demands of using the psychological contract as a sensitising concept but avoid being constrained by it?

My prior knowledge is shaping what I'm doing and whilst I can embrace this subjectivity I need to avoid using deductive approaches. I'm not sure how much influence this has.

I've stopped reading about the psychological contract until I complete the data analysis to reduce the influence this has. I can't unlearn prior knowledge but keeping it in the background for now is helpful.

Listening to the audio recordings and re-reading the scripts is helping me to stay closely connected to the data. I'm persuaded by the accounts of three key witnesses (Participants S2, S7, S10) and listening to their audio recordings in one sitting has helped reaffirm that I am basing my thinking on the student voice.

Looking at examples of coding of *expectations* shows that these are mentioned in passing.

"I know for a fact the he just puts PowerPoint on and up reads word for word...this is not how I want to learn" Student Participant P2 (T4).

"I feel a small sense of entitlement to an opportunity but at the same time if I miss a lecture that's my fault." Focus Group C (T2).

"This was my first year away from home. You expect someone in that position to be there." Student P2 (T4).

"Part of the reason you choose this course is that our tutors had industry links and could set up work placements." Student S7 (T5).

“Degree. A job. Experience. A boyfriend. A lifelong partner.” Focus Group A (T2).

Are these promises, expectations or beliefs? Other descriptions might be wishful thinking or *“something coming my way”* (Student P4 T3). Students seem to develop their own interpretation of expectations based on various sources of information including friends, Facebook. Using the term in an all inclusive provides a useful way of exploring this topic in a way that fits the inductive approach of this study.

Appendix E Presentations at Conferences

Osborn, J., Kneale, P.E., and Turner, R. (2017) Student Psychological Contracts: An explanatory framework. Paper presented at Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference, Newport UK, 6-8 December 2017

<https://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2017/list.domain.asp?domainID=2> Retrieved 28 August 2018

Osborn, J., Kneale, P.E., Turner, R. and Bacon, A. (2015) An alternative approach to exploring the student experience using psychological contracts. Paper presented at Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference, Newport UK, 9-11 December 2015

<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2015/list.session.asp?sessionID=J> Retrieved 31 August 2018

Osborn, J., Kneale, P., Turner, R. and Bacon, A. (2014). Subtle Transformers: How academics shape and influence student expectations. Poster presented at the SRHE annual conference, 10-12th December 2014, Celtic Manor, Newport, UK.

Osborn, J., Kneale, P.E., Turner, R. and Bacon, A. (2012). Shaping student psychological contracts: what lecturers really have to say. Paper presented at Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference, Newport UK, 12-14 December 2012

<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2012/list.session.asp?sessionID=L> Retrieved 31 August 2018

