‘THERE’S JUST SOMETHING ABOUT THE PLACE’ – AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS’ RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR UNIVERSITY.

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

The University of Huddersfield

March 2015

Copyright statement

Abstract

This research has been undertaken in response to the recent changes to the Higher Education environment driven by the UK government. In particular the increased competitiveness caused by the removal of the Student Number Control and the demand for universities to provide more, and specific, factual information for students (ie the Key Information Set) which can be compared across different institutions.

The focus on quantitative measurement appears to leave a gap in the information that is provided for potential students. Currently information does not address the intangible elements of the student experience, what the ‘something about the place’ is that leads them to develop a sense of attachment or belonging. The research is therefore undertaken from a qualitative perspective in order to try to explore this.

The research assumes that some feeling of attachment or belonging is important to students’ university experience. If current students are able to describe this it is possible that this new information could be used to inform marketing communications with potential students. This will allow those responsible for higher education marketing and student recruitment to demonstrate to potential students how they will be able to fit in to a university environment and develop a feeling of attachment/belonging.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has been employed to draw themes from individual conversations with students, and a follow up focus group. The literature review has developed as the research has progressed. It began with consideration of studies on student engagement, then brand communities, from a marketing perspective. This direction was led by the researcher’s prior knowledge and experience. However, the brand community literature did not appear to address the missing insight which had been established from the review of current information and the pilot conversation. This gap, and aspects of the brand community literature then led to a review of the literature around place attachment. It is here that links have been found to the experiences the students have described.

The research concludes that there are themes around which future marketing communications can be based to address the current gap in information available to potential students – and that these can usefully be guided by theories of place attachment.

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Word count: 51,012

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor John Thompson, for his guidance and wisdom, and also his calmness which has meant a great deal in every supervision session. Also, the students who generously shared their experiences with me, my colleagues on the DBA programme and the course leader Dr Annie Yeadon-Lee who helped me on this journey of discovery. And last, but definitely not least, my partner Alex Dixon for his patience and support.

1 Chapter one – An overview of the research

Introduction

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration; it therefore seeks to inform professional practice in addition to making an original contribution to knowledge. The introductory chapter explains how the researcher's professional practice shaped the development of the research. The research aim and objectives are established, and the journey through decisions around the research design is also outlined. The chapter concludes by setting out the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Rationale for the research

This research seeks to gain a greater understanding of what elements of their university experience lead full-time, home, undergraduate students to develop a sense of belonging/attachment to their university. It sets out to explore what students themselves describe as making a contribution to this process. It does not analyse how their experiences influence or are influenced by their academic progress. The findings of the research will be used to inform marketing communications to potential students. This intention is based on the assumption that current and potential students are likely to judge similar elements of their experience (or future experience) to be important in respect of the development of sense of belonging or attachment. Current students have been used as the sample for this research as gaining such feedback from prospective students would almost certainly rely on asking for opinions from students who had only visited the university campus once, for an open day. While this would successfully capture initial impressions, it could not give a sense of the elements that contribute to the development of a relationship. From a review of the literature it appears that this has not been a topic for research and there is a gap in knowledge regarding this aspect of students' experiences. The researcher is the Director of Marketing and Communications at an English university. As such she has a professional interest in gaining a greater understanding of how students describe the development of their relationships with their university.

The imperative for this research results from the new pressures faced by universities in respect of the recruitment of full-time, home, undergraduate students (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter two). In response to these new challenges the researcher commissioned, in her role as Director, an audit of all marketing activity at her institution (Huddersfield, 2013b) to ensure that no elements of appropriate marketing activity were being overlooked. The audit, undertaken by external consultants, did not identify any significant areas for action. This clean bill of health still left the Director faced with the challenge of how to gain an understanding of a recurring comment – fed back by students (and indeed staff) that 'there's just something about the place' that leads them to choose to study (or work) there. This often reported feeling has previously been accepted as a positive comment on the institution, but research has not been undertaken in order to understand how it develops, such that this insight could be employed in marketing communications to promote the institution.

Successful student recruitment is not simply about attracting students, it is about attracting the right students onto the right course, so that they stay and successfully complete their studies. This goal demands that the marketing messages the university transmits must be accurate reflections of the actual environment students will experience once they commence their studies (Jevons, 2006). There is little point in attracting students with false promises, who will then not stay, thus wasting their time, and using up a university place that a more suitable student would have been able to benefit from. Such misrepresentation also has the potential to stimulate negative word of mouth publicity which can be damaging to future student recruitment initiatives.

The student recruitment process, and the messaging that supports it is therefore perceived to be far too important to be left to chance. Activities designed to increase student recruitment require careful planning, monitoring and evaluation so that success is not achieved simply by chance – this demands conscious competence from the organisation (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) - see 2.5 below.

At the outset of the research, the researcher assumed that students might experience a sense of attachment or belonging to a university community (or a smaller subset of this community). However, there was deliberately no attempt to define the terms attachment or belonging during the fieldwork. In line with the phenomenological approach adopted (see Chapter four) the terms were simply used as they would be in 'common parlance' in order to allow the students to discuss their own views, rather than being guided by the researcher's definitions (Bevan, 2014).

A conceptual model of the research is presented at Figure 1 below:

Figure 1 A Conceptual Model of the Research

DRIVER FOR THE RESEARCH – CHANGES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET

Discussed in Chapter two

Objective criteria regarding elements of students' university experience are **known**, measured and promoted.

(HEFCE, 2014a, 2014b; Sodexo, 2014; UCAS, 2013b; Unite, 2014; Youthsight, 2014)

(ie placed within a positivist ontology, see Chapter four).

Possible approaches:

- Studies of student engagement,
- Branding, brand communities,
- Place attachment, with regard to relationships and feelings, linking to motivations and expectations.

(explored in Chapter three).

GAP IN CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

Elements of their experience which students themselves describe as important in building a sense of attachment/belonging (outside their academic achievement) are **not known** and therefore cannot be promoted.

(addressed through an interpretivist ontology, see Chapter four).

Gap in knowledge explored through an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of the experiences that students described to the researcher in an unstructured conversation and follow up focus group.

(Chapters five and six).

GAP IN CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

University marketing communications to potential students

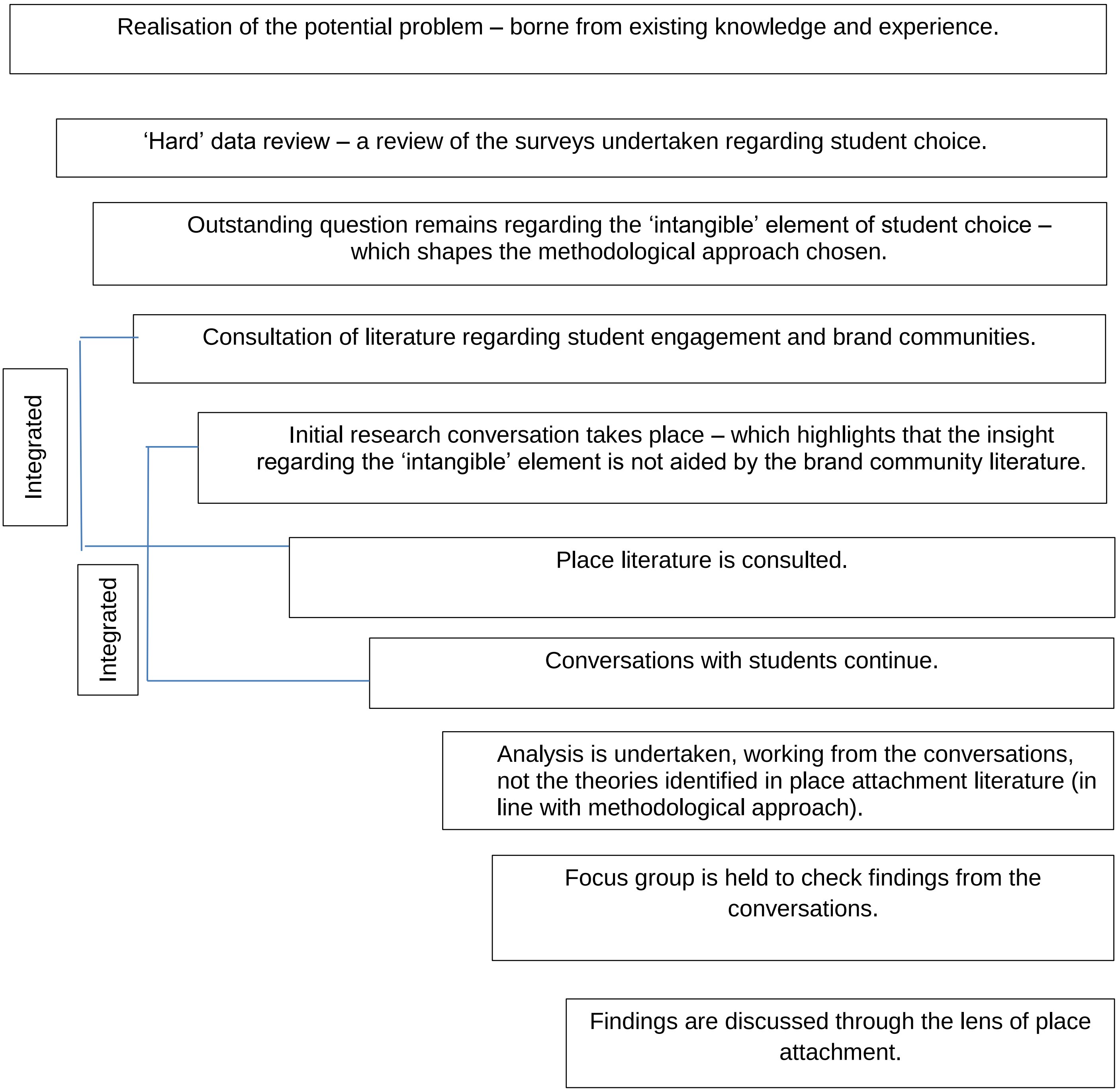
Previously informed by objective criteria and designed to disseminate these – but not able to convey how students themselves have experienced their relationship with the university at a personal level.

Now possible to address both objective criteria and Elements of their experience which students themselves describe as important in building a sense of attachment/belonging (outside their academic achievement) due to findings of the research – see Chapter seven.

1.2 The research journey

The conceptual model of the research illustrates the framework of the research. The progress of the research can also be represented as a journey, which is set out below.

Figure 2 The research journey



1.3 Exploring what is already known

Student engagement is a term attracting considerable attention within the higher education (HE) sector. With this in mind the literature review initially considered research into students' engagement with their institutions (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Wardley, Belanger, & Leonard, 2013). This avenue did not prove to be helpful (see 3.1). The issue of branding in HE was also explored (see 3.3), as this has been an area of marketing that has been adopted by many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the recent past. In line with this it was felt that studies of consumers' relationships might inform how students' relationships with their university are formed (Dawes & Brown, 2005). Therefore the literature review also considers work on the development and maintenance of brand communities (Algesheimer, Dholokia, & Hermann, 2005; Cova & Pace, 2006; Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) to see if this offers insight into how students experience their relationship with their university (see 3.4). Brand communities are defined as groups of consumers who engage with a brand (Fournier, 1998), who, may, to some extent, become fans of the brand, and who may engage in recommending it to other consumers. The consideration of brand communities led to an exploration of research into attachment to communities, or 'place attachment' (see 3.7). Theories of place attachment seek to understand how human beings form attachments to different locations, and make differentiations between our experiences of spaces and places (Altman & Low, 1992; Lewicka, 2011; Relph, 1976).

1.4 The process of choosing a university (the student journey)

The findings of this research with current students will be used to inform marketing communications with potential students as they choose which university they would like to study at. In order to demonstrate the length and complexity of their decision making journey, this section outlines the process that potential students move through as they make their university choices. This process is known as the student journey. The terminology is widely used among marketing practitioners, for example – a recent presentation given at a regular meeting of university

Marketing Directors, by a private company demonstrating the market research services it can offer, was entitled “Revisions and Decisions: The Student Journey” (SMRS, 2014).

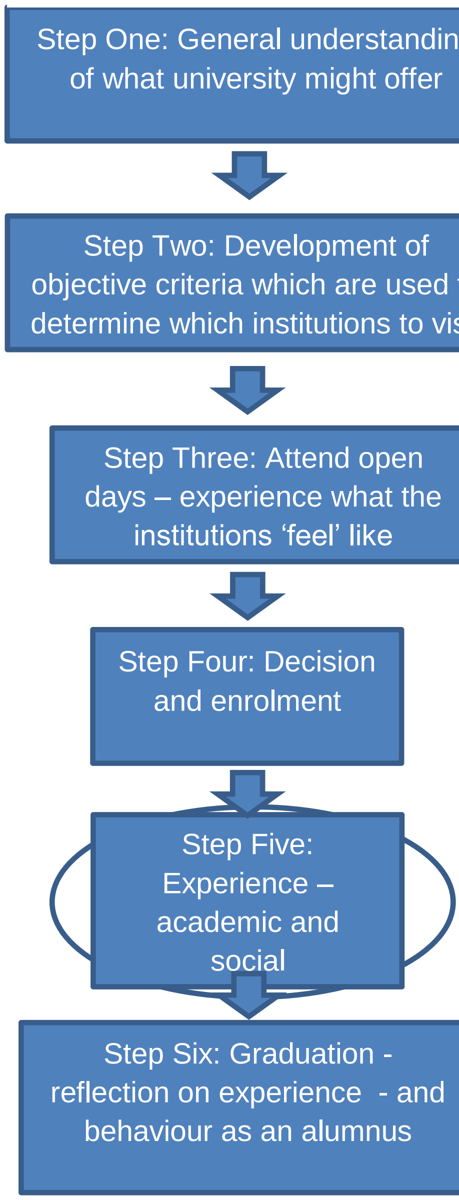
Choosing a university is often a long journey for potential students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Moogan, 2011). Recruitment activities are driven by the cycle established by The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), see Appendix A. The process begins around 18 months before a student will enrol at his or her chosen university and there is a wealth of advice and information available for consultation. The journey students move through can be illustrated as in Figure 3 below.

This journey takes place within the boundaries set by UCAS and the universities. There is a regulated cycle of activity, with absolute deadlines regarding receipt of applications and set dates by which decisions must be made, by both students and universities. Students who miss these dates will have to wait for the next UCAS cycle to begin before they can attempt to secure their place.

1.4.1 Step One: General understanding of what university might offer

Students who are considering, or who are being encouraged to consider, higher education will have their own pre-conceived ideas of what the experience will be like, and what it can offer them for their future career. Their decision making process can be influenced by a myriad of sources. In line with social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1977) they are likely to absorb the opinions of groups of influencers around them, including parents, carers, teachers, careers advisers, their siblings, their peers. In addition they may consult other sources of information (Moogan, 2011) such as league tables, directories, and social and traditional media reports. At the early stages of considering different universities the students’ decision making will be influenced by motivations that may or may not be clear to them. These elements will include things that they are learning from those who advise them, and will also be influenced by their own determination to succeed, introducing the themes of expectancy (Vroom, 1964) and motivation (McClelland, 1961).

Figure 3 The Student Journey



(Huddersfield, 2014)

1.4.2 Step Two: Development of objective criteria which are used to determine which institutions to visit

As a result of these influences and expectations potential students develop an idea of the group of institutions they might choose between, and will be motivated to achieve the necessary qualifications to gain entry to them (Huddersfield, 2013a; UCAS, 2013b). As time progresses and the UCAS recruitment cycle commences, the students begin a more defined decision making process, usually with more structured guidance from advisers such as teachers and parents, and through contact with the liaison teams from various universities (Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). During this phase, in which definite choices are beginning to be made, it is well known that there are a number of objective criteria that students, and their advisers, use to make choices between institutions (Moogan, 2011). These declared objective criteria in respect of decision making, for undergraduates, are monitored through numerous quantitative surveys which institutions can access annually. These surveys demonstrate that the most influential criteria have remained consistent over a long period. These are: ‘course offer’, ‘location’ and ‘institutional reputation’ (Huddersfield, 2013a; UCAS, 2013b). We can categorise these as ‘hard’ facts upon which part of the students’ decision making is based.

1.4.3 Step Three: Attend open days – experience what the institutions ‘feel’ like

As the UCAS cycle progresses, many students move on to visit the institutions that meet their objective criteria, and attend open days, visit days or interviews. It is during these visits that students are able to speak to course tutors and gain details of the course content and academic demands of programmes. In addition the visits provide an opportunity to gain a ‘sense of the place’ and determine whether they would like to spend the next three years in this environment. From her professional experience the researcher believes that these visits are key moments when potential students become aware of, and influenced by, the ‘soft’ elements of what a university has to offer. Based on their reactions to both the academic offering (the ‘hard’ facts), and the environment (the ‘soft’ elements), the students accept, or reject offers of places. That is to say, they decide if the institution can meet their needs. This is a complex area, students are not simply making a decision based on academic criteria, but the issue of whether they would ***like*** to be at the institution also figures in their decision making. It is an intangible element of the process. It complements the facts and measurements that can be consulted regarding academic quality and graduate achievement. This is the element of the decision making process that seems to be unexplored in both academic research, and practitioner research. Most universities employ student ambassadors to help offer a picture of what student life is like at their institution. While they are given free rein to talk to potential students and their parents, they are trained and given guidance about key issues to cover (see 1.9 below). It appears to the researcher, based on her professional experience, that this guidance is generated by marketing and recruitment staff's assumptions about what is important – not based on the students' own, unscripted, descriptions of their experiences.

1.4.4 Step Four: Decision and enrolment

Having considered their options, students will select their first and second choice institutions (known as 'firm' and 'insurance' respectively). After receipt of their examination results, assuming all goes well, students will have their place confirmed by their first choice institution. If not, they will be accepted by their insurance choice, or released into the clearing system (this offers unplaced students a chance of finding a university which will accept them).

1.4.5 Step Five: Experience – academic and social

On arrival at their chosen university, students then begin to experience the academic and social life of the institution, to form academic and social relationships with and within it. If they enjoy their studies and social experience then they are likely to act as advocates of the university, telling friends and family about the experience (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Leigh & Thompson, 2012). If they have an unhappy experience, whether socially or academically, this will, of course, also be shared.

It is therefore important for those marketing a university that they are able to deliver information to potential students which reflects the experience they can expect when they arrive at the institution. This will help to avoid any chance of them having unrealistic expectations – which might lead to the student feeling disappointed with their choice.

1.4.6 Step Six: Graduation - reflection on experience - and behaviour as an alumnus

After students have graduated, many universities make great efforts to keep in touch in order to harness their power as ambassadors, and hopefully in the longer term, as benefactors for future generations of students. Alumni, or former students, are seen as 'valuable' for these reasons, and those who have developed a sense of belonging or attachment are assumed to be the most 'valuable' (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2006).

1.5 Higher Education in the UK

While opinions are divided regarding the merits of describing higher education as a 'market', or viewing education as a 'product' that institutions provide to 'customers' (see 2.3 below), for the purposes of this study student recruitment activities are discussed as taking place within an environment where professional and ethical marketing practice is judged have a valid and useful role to play (Jevons, 2006; Levitt, 1980). The HE market can be characterised as comprising of two types of institution: 'selecting institutions' and 'recruiting institutions'. 'Selecting institutions' are those where the number of applications for each place is such that tutors can simply select from the field of potential students (Brown, Varley, & Pal, 2009). In terms of student recruitment these institutions are those that choose which students to admit, usually the 'old' universities (Naudé & Ivy, 1999).

‘Recruiting institutions’ take a different approach. Here marketing is much more widely accepted as being a necessary function (Chapleo, 2010), and increasingly it forms a part of the strategic planning process. ‘Recruiting’ HEIs work to ‘sell’ the benefits of higher education in general to potential students through work with schools and colleges, and to demonstrate the benefits of their own institutions in particular. In contrast to the selecting institutions that choose which students to admit, these institutions work to encourage students to make them their first choice. The balance of power is rather different. This makes very different demands on the institutions who seek to recruit. They tend to be much more engaged in marketing activity (Chapleo, 2010). This will often involve activities in schools and colleges to raise awareness of HE, and to help students prepare UCAS application forms. This is generally welcomed, however, teachers do not appreciate blatant ‘sales’ activities from university staff, and those undertaking taking such an approach are unlikely to be invited back into a school or college for future HE preparation sessions. Therefore, those in Schools and Colleges Liaison teams tread the line between general HE advice and explaining the benefits of their own institutions with great caution. The Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA) demands, in its code of practice, that its members : “Offer information, advice and guidance effectively and with integrity to assist potential applicants in making informed choices of course and institution; (HELOA, 2014, p. 11).”

As the HE market becomes more competitive it is likely to drive recruiting universities to further attempts to differentiate themselves. In general this is most often attempted by implementing branding activity, to make particular institutions’ identities and offerings clearer to potential students, and to academic staff who might be considering joining the university, hence the review of literature regarding branding and brand communities undertaken later (see 3.3 and 3.4). Those universities with a strong, established reputation might be judged to have a strong reputation or brand identity (Chapleo, 2010). In practical terms this translates to the ability to select the students they wish to accept. On the other hand, those without this reputation tend usually fall into the category of recruiting institutions and are more likely to seek to build their brand identity (Chapleo, 2010). In such institutions, proactive student recruitment activity tends to be focussed on widening participation initiatives to encourage applications from students from state schools, in response to government pressure to diversify the student population.

In the university sector, building a brand identity often begins by establishing a mission and vision that can be translated into marketing messaging in order to communicate with students and other stakeholders. The drawback here, for marketing practitioners, is that in general, one university's mission statement has tended to look very much another's (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The way in which institutions carry out their marketing activity can, however, contribute to a sense of differentiation (Levitt, 1980), this is one of the key challenges for those conducting professional marketing activity within the HE sector.

1.6 Research aim and objectives

The aim of the research is to gain a greater understanding of the elements current students describe as having contributed to them developing a sense of attachment or belonging through their university experience, outside their academic progress. It is assumed that this new knowledge can be employed to inform marketing communications with potential students.

Within this aim there are several objectives:

- To identify and clarify the gap in knowledge with regard to what might enhance the recruitment of home, full-time undergraduate students to UK Higher Education institutions in the light of the changing HE environment.
- To gain current students' own descriptions of their experiences, undirected by the researcher.
- To clarify what affects the students' relationships, or sense of attachment, through exploring existing literature.

- To discuss how the findings of this research can allow HEIs to move towards becoming consciously competent (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) with regard to the content of messages for potential students, by highlighting aspects of current students' experiences within their marketing communications.

1.7 Research design

The focus for the research, which differentiates it from the majority of other published material, is that it treats the students as the experts in the research process. They have been invited to describe the phenomenon in their own words, rather than in response to questions about particular areas of the experience suggested to them by the researcher. It is hoped that this will ensure that none of the researcher's pre-conceived ideas influence the research findings. This focus shaped the research design, and led to the decision to undertake this exploration through a qualitative approach. This approach was judged to be the most appropriate methodology by which to address the gap in knowledge that was identified. Specifically, the research adopts a phenomenological approach (Cecil, 2012; Welton, 1999), as it aims to explore the essence of the students' social relationship with the university, this is detailed further in Chapter four. Fieldwork was carried out with students drawn from the university's pool of student ambassadors, the rationale for this is detailed in 1.9.2 below.

1.8 Assumptions on which the research is based

As a marketing professional in higher education, the researcher approached this research with a set of assumptions about what students might raise in their descriptions of their relationship with their university. These assumptions are based on her previous professional experience and contact with current and potential students over a number of years. In line with the research approach taken, these were set aside during the conversations with the students (in

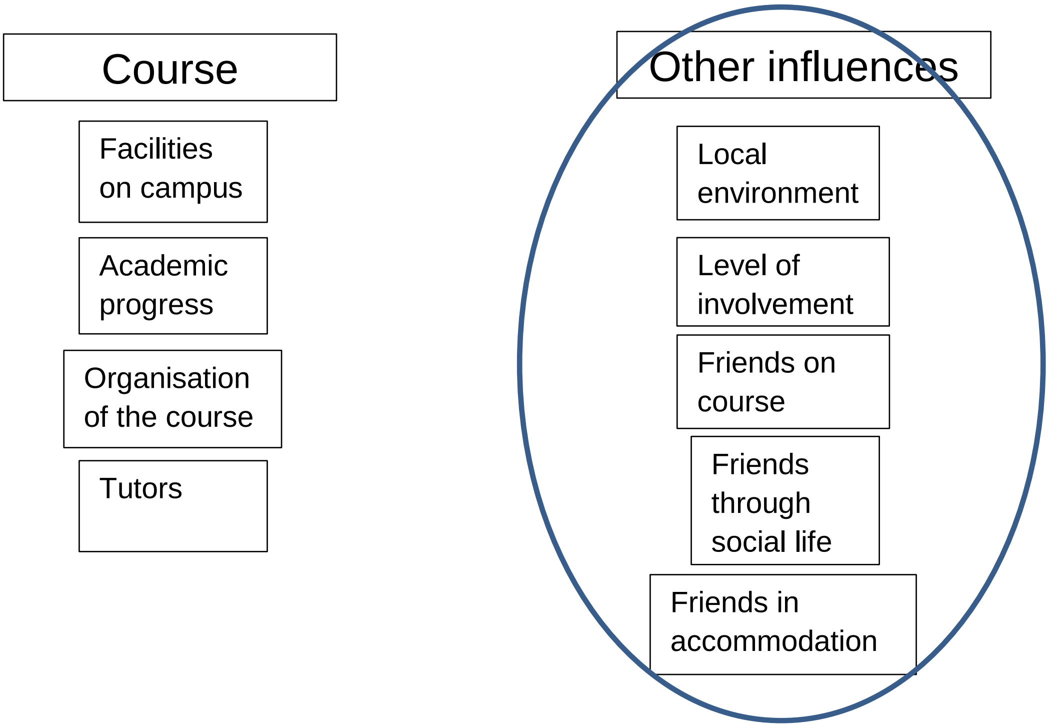
Phenomenological terms, see 4.4.3 below, these were ‘bracketed’ and did not influence the guide used in the conversations with the students).

The elements that the researcher expected to play a role in students’ relationships with their university are:

> **Elements based round the course**: facilities, tutors, their academic progress, the organisation of the course (these elements are all measured through the NSS survey (HEFCE, 2014b)).
>
> **Other influences** – students’ social life can centre around different aspects of their university experience. Social groups can be formed based on friends in student halls, as well as, or instead of those on a student’s course. If a student continues to live at home it is possible that they may not feel as much a part of university life as those who are in halls, and they may maintain much stronger links with existing friends than those who move away from home are able to.

For clarity the figure below outlines the elements the researcher expected the students to mention as influences on how they experience their relationship with the university. The column marked with an oval lists those elements which do not currently appear to be considered within the objective criteria that students are able to consult.

Figure 4 Assumed elements in students' relationships with their university



This figure is revisited in the findings section below, to show which of the researcher's prior assumptions regarding 'other influences' are borne out by the findings of the research and what new influences are identified.

1.9 Development of the research design

1.9.1 Netnography

As outlined above, the aim of the research is to gain an understanding of what elements of their experiences lead students to develop a relationship with their university. The researcher's wish to explore individual's perspectives led to the choice of a qualitative approach, which is explored in Chapter four below. Initially, the researcher intended to draw a sample of students from those engaged in conversations about the university on a widely available social media site, using this involvement as an indication of attachment or belonging to the university. The planned approach was to use netnographic techniques (Kozinets, 1998; Kozinets, 2002, 2006b; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010) to investigate how the students have developed a relationship with their university. Beginning to work through the logistics of this it soon became clear that this was impractical. It would involve seeking permission from the third party organisation who ran the forum, and, if that was granted, either engaging in subterfuge, ie posing as a potential student in the forum, or announcing the researcher's presence in the forum, and thereby changing the dynamic of the conversations. While it might be thought that potential students discussing their university choices in a public forum do not have expectations of privacy, it cannot be assumed. While the quotation below illustrates this concern in terms of communities within which self-help support is being provided and sought, it also serves to warn any researcher to proceed with caution regarding online data collection:

> When the messages posted to Internet communities are subjected to analysis, there is the possibility of causing psychological harm to the author of the note. A feeling of having been violated can occur. If the results are published in such a way that the members of a virtual community can identify their community as the one evaluated without their knowledge, psychological harm to individual members of that group can be expected. The sense of violation possible is proportional to the expectation of privacy that group members had prior to learning they were studied (King, 1996, p. 120).

In light of this the possibility of establishing a sample drawn from students who are signed up to a particular social media account, in this instance the university's Twitter account, was explored. The proposal was to use membership of this group as a proxy for being engaged in the university community, or having developed a relationship with the university. The proposed approach remained a netnographic one, with the aim of approaching the individual students and asking them to take part in the research, thus avoiding the issues of subterfuge raised above. This avenue raised a series of new queries, for example – would merely following the Twitter account really indicate a relationship with the university? Would being sufficiently engaged to re-tweet messages be a stronger measure? In fact, looking in detail at the corporate twitter account it became clear that while the university had many followers (16,108 at 03.01.14), and while numbers of these appeared to be current students, there were also many followers who were clearly corporate entities. Further examination of the account revealed that very few of the messages are retweeted by anyone other than people who were recognisably staff, or corporate accounts. Students did not appear to engage with the accounts in this way.

Numerous closed groups exist which are used by students to communicate with each other. However, the marketing department, representing the university as a corporate body, does not have access to these. As in the first approach outlined above, effective engagement in these social spaces would involve deception, which is not acceptable. Any communication, with current or potential students, undertaken by the university's marketing department must be undertaken in a transparent manner. Therefore engagement would have to be in corporately owned spaces, or public spaces that students are happy to engage within, not through deception/hiding in private social media environments.

1.9.2 Sampling

The drawbacks to these options left the researcher unable to pursue a netnographic approach to the research, or to establish a sample from an online community. Reflecting on how to identify a group of students who might feel attachment to the university, the researcher consulted colleagues who suggested that those students who took on the role of student ambassadors were likely to be engaged with their institutions. This led the researcher to approach her own university's team of student ambassadors to ask for volunteers. The ambassadors work with the student recruitment team to help with recruitment activities, to give personal picture of what it is like to study at the University, illustrated by their own experiences. They are trained, and employed as temporary members of staff to help with recruitment activities (as well as undertaking other roles, for example offering new students support during induction). While the payment students receive is undoubtedly a factor in them taking on this role, it is unlikely that a student who was not engaged with the university would undertake the training, or wish to carry out these duties. It is recognised throughout the sector that potential students trust information from current students far more than 'marketing speak' about the attributes of individual universities, and therefore most universities employ student ambassadors. This decision led to the abandonment of the netnographic technique, and the adoption of a phenomenological approach which would facilitate the wish to gain the students' own views (Bevan, 2014) without the need for deceit.

Throughout the research a concern to respect the input of the students who took part in the conversations has occupied the researcher and this guided the research design choice detailed above. While the topic is not a controversial one, and there was no expectation that the conversations would lead to discussions which might cause distress, anonymity was guaranteed to those who took part. In delivering this guarantee the ethics of the process have occupied the researcher's attention, with a determination that this cannot simply be treated as a 'tick box exercise' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013) but must inform the research design, conduct of the researcher, her engagement with the students giving their time, experience, and expertise in this area; and in the writing up of the findings.

1.10 Impact of the research

The research is shaped by the view that higher education is not a simple product or service that can be packaged and presented to potential students. Also, that the increasing concentration on presenting facts and figures, led by the changes in regulation in the sector around what information must be provided, is missing out an important part of how students have made their decisions (see Chapter two). The researcher believes that the findings of this thesis will take steps towards redressing that balance. Its impact will be to contribute to a greater understanding of how students describe their relationship with their university. This will assist the institution in moving towards gaining conscious competence (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) with regard to the students' descriptions. Being consciously competent about something means that an organisation, or a person is not only 'good' at doing something, but they know what it is that makes them 'good' at it. This contrasts to being unconsciously competent, where competence is achieved by chance. Gaining conscious competence about this issue will enable the institution to provide extra information to students, assisting them – with all their dreams and ambitions to fulfil - to make the right choice for them. Employing marketing techniques to promote HE provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education – and to make the routes to achieving this clear – it remains the potential students' choice whether they take that step, here and now, or return to it in the future, or perhaps never. In undertaking this research the researcher has had to focus with more attention than ever before on the conflicting attitudes there are as to whether the marketing of higher education is a 'good', or a 'bad' thing. While remaining in the former camp (as explored at 2.3 below) the researcher's understanding of this issue is much enhanced by the work undertaken for this thesis. The impact of the research in terms of its contribution to professional practice and knowledge is returned to in sections 7.9 and 7.10.

1.11 Structure of the document

Chapter one has provided an overview of the research, its rationale, and ends by introducing its original contribution to knowledge and professional practice. Chapter two provides the context for the need to gain an understanding of how to influence student recruitment, and outlines changes in the HE sector and continues to discuss the contribution to professional practice that the research seeks to provide. Chapter three is a literature review covering the research around student engagement, communities, and brand communities, and place attachment consulted by the researcher. This chapter highlights the gap in knowledge that this thesis seeks to address. Chapter four discusses why a phenomenological approach was adopted. Chapter five outlines the method employed for the research, provides details of how the sample was chosen, and how the conversations were undertaken. Chapter six analyses the content of the conversations with the students.

Chapter seven discusses the themes identified through the theoretical lens of place attachment and briefly explores links to motivation theories (Maslow, 1943; McClelland, 1961). Suggestions for future research are discussed, and the limitations of the research are considered. Finally the chapter provides a summary of the contributions the research makes in terms of professional practice and knowledge.

2 Chapter two – Higher Education in the UK – a context for the research

Introduction

This chapter describes the environment that those undertaking marketing activity to promote HEIs are operating in. It also provides further background regarding what is known in respect of how students choose their university, and the missing elements of information around this. It outlines the most recent changes in government policy in terms of funding for HE, and the impact of these changes on the recruitment of home full-time undergraduate students. It does not consider the issues around profile raising, or reputation management, or recruiting international or European Union students, nor does it consider mature or part-time students.

The following areas are addressed:

- Funding for Higher Education in England
- The Higher Education environment
- Marketing Higher Education – good or evil?
- Key aspects of Higher Education Marketing
- The need to be consciously competent

A commitment to developing new knowledge, and scholarship are the key tenets of a university, but in the current economic and funding climate it could be argued that a successful, sustainable business model is required to ensure that resources are available to enable research and scholarship to continue.

This research has been undertaken from the perspective of a marketing professional who believes, that by adopting elements of business practice, such as professional financial, human resources and marketing techniques, a higher education institution should be able to continue to meet its research and scholarly ambitions in the increasingly marketised environment that exists today

(Saunders, 2013). In terms of professional marketing practice this research is based on the premise that a university can usefully be viewed as “a marketing institution that offers a broad range of products and services to an equally broad range of consumers through many outlets and service providers under the auspices of its brand” (McAlexander et al., 2006, p. 108). The current need for this professional business approach in the UK can be traced to changes in the Government’s approach to funding Higher Education - which are outlined below. Consensus around this view point has not been reached in the HE sector, and a selection of the types of discussion around the issue is detailed at 2.3 below.

2.1 Funding for Higher Education in England

In 2010 Lord Browne of Madingley published “An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance” (Browne et al., 2010). The review has had far reaching consequences for both students and HEIs as it has led to reforms in student fees, student finance, and how government funding is distributed to HEIs.

The main principles within the report (relating to funding for full-time home undergraduates) were:

- More investment should be available for Higher Education
- Student choice should be increased
- Everyone who has the potential should be able to benefit from Higher Education
- No one should have to pay until they start work
- When payments are made they should be affordable (Browne et al., 2010, pp. 4-5).

Prior to this review, students made a contribution to their tuition fee (£3,465 before September 2012) and the remaining costs for tuition were paid to institutions in England by the government’s Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through what was known as the teaching grant. Institutions also receive other funding for research, business engagement, and capital investment from the Funding Council. However, for many institutions the teaching grant formed a significant proportion of their income.

Following the Browne Review the model for funding the costs of teaching in Higher Education was changed, with students now paying what the government believes is the full cost of tuition, which it has capped at a sum of £9,000 per annum. The teaching grant issued to HEIs has been reduced to reflect this change.

Further complexity, and regulation, is added to these changes in that institutions are only permitted to charge the full £9,000 if they have an approved 'access agreement' in place. This agreement, which must be authorised by the Office for Fair Access, provides details of the institutions' commitment to ensuring that all those who can benefit from higher education study have the opportunity to do so. If such an agreement is not in place HEIs are restricted to being able to charge full-time home undergraduate students no more than £6,000 per year.

Students are not required to pay their tuition fees in advance of their studies, nor while they are at university. The repayment of the loan commences when a graduate's salary reaches a level of £21,000 per annum. The payments are deducted from graduates' salaries, in the same way that tax and national insurance payments are collected.

2.1.1 Changes in the regulations regarding student recruitment

It is the "student choice should be increased" principle that drives this research. It appears that there is no currently existing academic research which might be able to assist in providing answers regarding the 'something about the place' that current students and visitors to campus experience. However, anecdotally this is reported as an important influence on students' choice of institution. Therefore, gaining a greater understanding of what this phenomenon is should enable marketers to provide greater information to potential students, which in turn will aid student choice.

The government has made two significant changes in its oversight of the HE market in order to address the issue of student choice. First, the removal of the student number control and second, a requirement to provide increased levels of specified, factual, information about the courses on offer. The Browne review stated that:

> No HEI can grow in the current system to respond to student demand. Many prospective students do not get adequate advice or information to help them choose a course of study. Our proposals will put students at the heart of the system. Popular HEIs will be able to expand to meet student demand. Students will be better informed about the range of options available to them. Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education (Browne et al., 2010, p. 4).

The changes to information that the Government required all institutions to make available to students followed research commissioned by HEFCE (Oakleigh & Staffordshire, 2010) and resulted in the creation of the Key Information Set (KIS), designed to enable students to make informed choices about where to study (HEFCE, 2011).

While the requirement to provide extra information has had a significant impact on the work of marketing departments, the first change is the most far-reaching for the sector – the government has relaxed its controls regarding the numbers of students that can be recruited by any one institution.

Prior to this change, each HEI in England was allocated a set number of students that it could recruit each year (known as the Student Number Control, or SNC). HEFCE controlled this tightly, allowing a small margin of error in the number of students arriving at institutions each year (either positive or negative), known as the tolerance band. Within this band no funding penalties applied, ie there was no effect on the level of teaching grant received by the institution. Lord Browne proposed that this control be removed, and this change has begun, through the government allowing institutions to recruit as many students with high grades as they wish to. A much reduced SNC target remains at present and will be completely removed for university entry in September

2015. At present there is no indication that there will be any alteration to the maximum fee chargeable.

2.2 The higher education environment

Though the purpose of Universities might often be considered solely in terms of the contribution their researchers make to exploring and resolving global challenges, and their ability to educate undergraduate and postgraduate students, in fact the world of UK higher education is also a large and complex market. The sector turnover was £29,143,869,000 in 2012/13 (Universities UK, 2014). This represents 1.9% of UK GDP (which was £1,532,431,000,000 for 12/13) (Office for National Statistics, 2014). A key part of this market, and the one subject to the government interventions outlined above, is undergraduate student recruitment.

2.2.1 Undergraduate student recruitment

The scale of undergraduate student recruitment may be surprising to those outside higher education marketing. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website, there are 370 institutions offering approximately 37,000 degree courses in England (UCAS, 2014a). In 2013, 495,600 applicants were placed into HE via UCAS, which UCAS states, in its End of Cycle Report (UCAS, 2013a), is the highest number recorded. In that year 677,400 applicants entered the UCAS system (up 3.6% on the previous year).

The government changes to funding for Higher Education outlined above have led to a greater focus on the need to secure undergraduate student recruitment, particularly among those institutions who actively recruit students (Furey, Springer, & Parsons, 2014). There is an increased focus on how institutions present themselves to potential students, activity that is usually led by the institution’s marketing departments. This is not without controversy, see section 2.3 below.   It is as a response to these changes that the need for this research arose, in an attempt to identify any gaps within the plans of those responsible for the marketing of HE which might restrict their ability to respond to the new demands. While the focus is on one particular group of students in one university, it is assumed that the research findings will have relevance to other groups of students both within that university, and across other institutions, to assist those HE marketing staff who are exploring this area.

2.2.2 Objective criteria available to aid student decision making

The government's commitment to ensuring students have greater information on which to base their choice of university has led to an increase in the 'hard' facts and figures HEIs must publish. This focus had begun before the Browne review took place, with the National Student Survey (NSS), which was introduced in 2005. The NSS is a survey commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and is administered by an independent market research agency. Its main purpose is stated to be:

> ... to help prospective students, their families and advisors to make study choices. Participating institutions and students' unions (associations or guilds) also use the data to improve the student learning experience. The data are publically available on **Unistats** and institutions and students' unions have access to more detailed results via a dedicated Results Website (HEFCE, 2014b).

The survey covers topics including: 'the teaching on my course', 'assessment and feedback', 'academic support', 'organisation and management', 'learning resources', 'personal development' and 'overall satisfaction'. Final year students are asked to consider several statements under each heading and, using a 5 point scale, ranging from 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree', to tick which option most describes their experience. The results are then translated into percentage scores, and published annually – with institutions' performance being used in various league tables as well as in the newly introduced Key Information Set (KIS).

In addition to the NSS information, and as a response to the Browne review, the KIS was launched by HEFCE, in September 2012:

> The Key Information Set, or KIS, comprises the items of information which students have said they find most useful when making choices about which course to study. Some of the items are measures of student satisfaction from the National Student Survey (NSS), which is completed by more than 220,000 mainly final year students in the UK each year. Some of the items are from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) which surveys students who gained a qualification from a university or college, six months after they left. The DLHE survey asks whether they are employed, studying, both or, neither (HEFCE, 2014a).

There is a requirement that every HEI publishes KIS data on its website, with links through to the KIS web page where comparisons with other institutions offering similar courses can easily be made by students.

In addition to these measurements there are many surveys published each year which gather student attitudes to their higher education experience. There are numerous world and national rankings of universities which students might consult. The UK newspaper league tables tend to take a selection of the data on which institutions must report to HEFCE, and compile rankings based on their own weighting of different elements of the data. Data includes items such as degree classifications (ie student success), employment rates, students' grades on entry to the institution, retention rates, the performance of research staff, and the amount the institution spends on various items such as IT and facilities. To give an example of the level of activity in this area a small selection of the reports that cross the desk of the researcher is listed here:

- UCAS – Highlights from applicant surveys conducted in 2012 (published in 2013) (UCAS, 2013b)
- Youthsight Fact File 2013/14 (Youthsight, 2014)
- UK Review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory Study and Literature Review (Diamond et al., 2014)
- Students Matter: The UNITE STUDENTS Student Experience Survey 2014 (Unite, 2014)

- The Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey 2014 (Sodexo, 2014)
- The THE Student Experience Survey 2014 (THE, 2014)
- The Higher Education Academy: Engagement for enhancement (Buckley, 2013)

This avalanche of quantitative data reinforces the need to listen to the students' own descriptions of their experience.

2.3 Marketing Higher Education – good or evil?

Prior to introducing a discussion of the differing opinions regarding the benefits, or otherwise, of professional marketing approach within higher education institutions, a definition of marketing may be useful.

Initially marketing focussed on the need for organisations to increase sales of their products to their customers – based around a model known as the four Ps (product, price, promotion and place) (McCarthy, 1960). Marketing's subsequent application within the service sector prompted a revision of the model to add three additional 'Ps' (physical evidence, participants and process) (Booms & Bitner, 1981) – the addition of these three for those working in the service sector is said to highlight them (though it could be argued that they are encompassed in the traditional four Ps) (Bitner, 1990).

The 7 Ps model highlights the concerns of those working in education marketing more strongly than the original model. However the additions to the model are probably not enough to remove the concerns that many in academia would raise if asked their opinion on any potential benefits that marketing might bring to the sector, see below. In explaining the role marketing might play in education, the following definition is given:

> *Marketing* is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives. Marketing involves designing the institution's offering to meet the target markets' needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service these markets (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 6).

Such language is unlikely to reassure those who may also have been exposed to traditional definitions of marketing such as:

> Marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering, and exchanging products of value with others (Kotler, 1991, p. 4).

Additionally, of course, as individuals most of us have experienced the 'hard sell' tactics of what is commonly accepted to be 'marketing' in several areas of our own lives, however unfair marketers may feel this judgement is:

> In general, marketing has a bad press. Phrases like 'marketing gimmicks', 'marketing ploys' and 'marketing tricks' abound. The result is that marketing is condemned by association. Yet this is unfair because the essence of marketing is value not trickery (Jobber, 2007, p. 4).

Despite the 'bad reputation' of the discipline, there has been a move to introduce marketing techniques into higher education, particularly to aid the recruitment of students as universities become more business focussed (Bunzel, 2007). There has also been a trend to professionalise the marketing functions within those UK HEIs that actively seek to recruit new students (Chapleo, 2010), or who have ambitions to increase the number of overseas students who join their institutions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010). A new 7Ps model (Ivy, 2008) has also been proposed, in which the Ps are: people, promotion, price, programme, prominence, prospectus and premiums (though the researcher would contest these might actually be 6 Ps as there is little difference to be seen between the promotion and prospectus categories in this model).

When judged to be part of the unnecessary and undesirable commercialisation of education, the move to introduce marketing techniques to Higher Education in order to recruit students is viewed with distaste in some academic circles (Bowden & Wood, 2011; Durkin & McKenna, 2011). Within this any move to regard students as customers is contentious (Gibbs, 2011; Saunders, 2013) and its relevance is questioned (Nedbalová, Greenacre, & Schulz, 2014; Saunders, 2014). The topic tends to open up a debate about the purpose of education (Carlson & Fleisher, 2002), whether it is a 'means for future hope and imagination' or something based on 'the goal of employment, the world of work and a focus on economic value designed for the benefit of others rather than the individual' (Gibbs, 2011, p. 205). This concern goes beyond issues of undergraduate student recruitment and assessment, and to the heart of research activity too. Recent changes to the UK Research Assessment Exercise – which was renamed the Research Excellence Framework for its 2014 incarnation – have also been viewed as an attack on academic freedom (Gruber, 2014).

The debate around this issue is considerable, and one that can provoke great emotion among academic colleagues in higher education. Many have reacted against what is seen as interference with academic judgement, prompted by what is described as the commodification of higher education, as it has been opened up to a mass market (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). There is also deep concern about the outcomes of using student feedback to judge the quality of a course or tutor (Svensson & Wood, 2007). Opponents of this approach argue that students lack the deep knowledge needed to be able make such judgements, and that their ratings could result in popular tutors being rated more highly than rigorous ones (Driscoll & Wicks, 1998; Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2001). However, there can be no doubt that the world around higher education is changing, as evidenced by the actions of the UK Government in respect of funding. In light of these new pressures institutions may need to adapt in order to be successful (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Greenberg, 2004; Gruber, Reppel, & Voss, 2010) and some have publicly acknowledged that they must operate in the business world. For example, Professor

Steve Smith, the Vice-Chancellor at Exeter University has said, regarding the varied experience of those who serve on his university council: "Let's be honest, although we aren't just a business, we are a business, and I need help with some of the big commercial issues. The scrutiny of people with a business background is incredibly helpful" (Fazackerley, 2014). Those who would argue the opposite are vocal too – Thomas Docherty in a piece in the Times Higher Education magazine in 2014 argues that:

> Modernisation and reform are predicated on the belief that everything can and must be managed: faculty, students, research, learning, debate, teaching, even experience itself. The possibilities for participation in democratic change are denied, because everything, including dissent, is managed and circumscribed to keep existing authority in power. Institutionally, it's called "change management". We are perilously close to a position where the unquestioned power of management is declaring war on the academic community, the university, itself … (Docherty, 2014).

Despite the continuing debate about the merits, or otherwise, of introducing a business orientation to the world of higher education, there is not a completely hostile attitude towards marketing in academia. There is some support for employing appropriate, ethical, marketing techniques in the changing world that higher education must operate in (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009; Greenberg, 2004). Academic authors have, for example, looked beyond the assumption that adopting a marketing perspective means that 'the customer is always right', which would destroy the relationship between academic and student, and consider that a more sophisticated view might be helpful. In this view students are seen as partners in the education process, having responsibility for their part in the relationship (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Eagle & Brennan, 2007). Others have recognised that marketing's aim is to support an organisation or institution in achieving its objectives (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Scott, 1999) and that delivering a good service to students could be helpful (Rolfe, 2002). Research into HE marketing has explored a range of issues such as: the influence of organisational image on student decision making (Pampaloni, 2010); proposing that universities can be viewed as brands (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2005); looking at the need to employ formal methods of integrating marketing communications in order to strengthen the brand

(Edmiston-Strasser, 2009); and considering how branding can support student recruitment (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Chapleo, Duran, & Diaz, 2011; Sevier, 1994, 2001) and differentiation (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). There has also been recognition that emotion has a part to play in potential students' decision making (Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010; Durkin & McKenna, 2011) and attempts to model student loyalty (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001).

It is not within the remit of this research to enter the debate about encroachments on academic integrity, though it is, in the researcher's view, important that any marketer working in higher education is aware of it. This is because the debate will have an impact on academic colleagues' reactions to, and support (or lack of it) for any marketing work in the sector, hence its brief inclusion here. As this thesis is being submitted as part of a DBA programme, with its findings impacting upon professional practice, the researcher would like to state the definition of marketing within which she personally operates in her role in higher education. This aligns most closely to what Kotler and Keller (2006) define as 'holistic marketing':

> The **holistic marketing** concept is based on the development, design, and implementation of marketing programs, processes and activities that recognizes their breadth and interdependencies. Holistic marketing recognizes that "everything matters" with marketing – and that a broad, integrated perspective is often necessary (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 17).

Within this, the marketing department in an HEI needs to work with colleagues across the university to ensure that all its activities contribute to the institution's strategic aims. With regard to the area of activity that is the concern of this research - marketing focussed on undergraduate student recruitment is a process through which honest and transparent communication should take place with potential students about the opportunities that the institution can offer them. The means through which this communication takes place can include: printed material, such as prospectuses and leaflets; online information through the website and social media channels; face to face communication via visits to open days or school and college visits; and through marketers undertaking work to establish, or reinforce, awareness of the reputation, or brand of the institution.

2.4 Two key aspects of HE marketing

2.4.1 Relationship marketing

The marketing of HE takes its place within the discipline of 'services marketing' (Furey et al., 2014; Gruber et al., 2010). A key element within services marketing is the strategy of 'relationship marketing ' (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010) - defined as 'establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges' (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Such relational exchanges are important for services marketing as:

> The consumer or user perceives the service production process as part of service consumption and not only the outcome of a process as in traditional consumer packaged goods marketing. Thus, service consumption and production have interfaces that always are critical to the consumer's perception of the service and to his or her long-term purchasing behavior (Gronroos, 2004, p. 100).

It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss services marketing in great detail but relationship marketing's application to services marketing is an area explored in great depth by a number of researchers (Andersen, 2001, 2005; Berry, 1995; Gronroos, 2004; Gummesson, 1998; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). While there are significant differences between marketing relationships in terms of services or products, and the practicalities of marketing higher education, several concerns are similar. For example there are important parallels with the description of relationship marketing's goal in which "…the development of customer-supplier relationships may be described as a set of cumulative phases during which the trustworthiness of suppliers and buyers is tested and mutual norms governing exchange activities are developed" (Andersen, 2001, p. 168). The purpose of forming such relationships is to ensure customers are retained, and go on to make repeat purchases, rather than being lost to the company. While university students are not in the position of making repeat purchases (unless they choose to continue their studies by beginning postgraduate study), the parallel lies in the fact that it is important that they form a relationship with their institution. This relationship is both academic and social, and students choosing a university endeavour to find somewhere where they can fit in and achieve their goals. In effect they become part of a consumer community (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). In terms of relationship marketing "… consumer communities contribute to the thinking behind relationship marketing by ensuring the consumer is involved and can obtain meaning from the conversation that takes place within the community" (Szmigin et al., 2005, p. 484). This element of relationship marketing, combined with the researcher's professional experience, led to the exploration of communities and brand communities in the literature review (see 3.2 and 3.4). Alongside debates about the merits of in marketing in HE, there is one particular added difficulty for those marketing higher education. Universities are usually fairly large organisations, with very large numbers of staff. There is a feeling, certainly among academic staff, that they work 'at' the university, rather than 'for' it (Chapleo, 2007). This increases the difficulty involved in encouraging all staff to gather behind a brand message, or to adopt a 'market orientation' (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010).

However, the concerns of those marketing the benefits of HE to potential university students who are making choices between higher education institutions could be seen to mirror those attempting to develop relationship marketing in other contexts. Based on this premise there may then be benefit in considering a marketing model outlined for conceptualising relationship marketing which centres around three elements – 'communication task', 'communication type' and 'communication tactics' (see below).

To interpret this model in a higher education context the pre-relationship phase can be compared to the stage when students are gathering information about different institutions, taking the first few steps along the student journey; next during the negotiation phase they are visiting institutions, comparing them; and then in the relationship development phase they are at university, undertaking their studies. In the second and third phases of this relationship development communication needs to be a two-way process if possible, with students able to comment on their experience and probe for extra information that is relevant to them as individuals. Universities' marketing techniques facilitate this through open days, visits of staff to schools and colleges, and online forums where students can engage with current students and or staff.

Figure 5 Communications with students

	Pre-relationship phase	Negotiation phase	Relationship development phase
COMMUNICATION TASK	AWARENESS	PERSUASION	COMMITMENT
COMMUNICATION TYPE	S → B	S ↔ B	S ↔ B
COMMUNICATION TACTICS	Mass media Reputation Management Referrals	Influence tactics	Part-time marketeering Episodal communication

S = supplier (or university) B = buyer (or potential student)

Adapted from (Andersen, 2001, p. 172).

It is the appropriate content of the messaging at each of these phases that this thesis seeks to inform. While there are many arguments for and against, as outlined above, this research is based on the underlying assumption that marketing does have a role to play in the university sector (McAlexander et al., 2005) and that by employing marketing techniques the brand or image of a university can be nurtured and developed. This assumption is in part based on a very simply stated aim of corporate brand management (an important part of relationship marketing) – that it “aims to establish a favourable disposition towards the organisation by its various stakeholders” (Gylling & Lindberg-Repo, 2006, p. 257). In this way marketing communications to potential undergraduate students should become better able to address the concerns, and hopes, that students have during their decision making process (McAlexander et al., 2005). Improvements would be measured by both increased recruitment, and retention of students. However, such marketing messaging will not exist in a vacuum, and there is another key element of the marketing mix that plays a role in student recruitment, that of word of mouth recommendation.

2.4.2 Word of Mouth recommendation (WOM)

The researcher's experience suggests that students who develop a positive relationship with their university are likely to become advocates for the institution. Such advocacy could have a positive impact on student recruitment, or at worst a neutral one. At the other extreme, those students who do not have a positive experience, and who talk about this to their peers could damage the university's reputation and act to discourage potential students (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Leigh & Thompson, 2012; Moogan, 2011). Understanding, and protecting the elements of the student experience that lead to positive relationships being formed, can therefore be judged to be important in terms of word of mouth reputation, in addition to highlighting key elements to include in marketing communications for student recruitment campaigns.

Within Higher Education marketing it is already widely recognised that recommendation of an institution by its current or former students is extremely powerful in terms of increasing student recruitment. Quantitative survey instruments designed to measure student satisfaction, such as the *International Student Barometer* (ISB, 2013), include a question asking how likely students are to recommend their university. By becoming aware of the key elements in how students develop relationships with their university, and helping to nurture these, it is assumed that positive word of mouth (WOM) recommendation will increase.

While the potential of WOM has been recognised by marketers working in all types of organisations for many years it is an area of considerable complexity. Different consumers and groups will respond in different ways, and will be more or less open to accepting recommendations, and may or may not be part of networks within which such behaviour occurs (Brooks Jr, 1957). Explorations of how such networks are constructed, and how those within them behave, reinforce this complexity, demonstrating that it is difficult to know the extent or reach of networks (Johnson Brown & Reingen, 1987). Studies do not seem to have not addressed the elements, or essence of the products that cause such recommendation to take place, they have focussed on the mechanisms involved in the networks that allow this to happen (Granovetter, 1973). With relevance to the services sector, within which higher education marketing fits, word of mouth recommendation could play a particularly strong role. Obtaining information from someone who has experience of the service, namely a current or former student, may give prospective students more confidence in the decision they are taking (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Leigh & Thompson, 2012). The word of mouth recommendation provided by someone who has experienced the 'service' over an extended period of time, who has built a relationship with the provider, is likely to take a different form to that based around a more transactional relationship (Berry, 2000; Lindberg-Repo & Gronroos, 1999) and will offer greater depth of information because they have a greater experience of the service. Moreover, as those who work to strengthen brand engagement (see 3.3) would claim, an 'engaged' customer is "strategically positioned to spread the word in today's connected society" (Franzak, Makarem, & Jae, 2014).

Research regarding word of mouth recommendation which takes place through social networks, enabled by the world wide web and social media tools suggests that these new ways of communicating have overturned the traditional view that marketers should focus on influencing 'opinion leaders', as personal networks function in far more complex ways (Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007). This consideration of the power of the internet and social media to facilitate word of mouth recommendation (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014), and the fact that the target audience is very active in these arenas is something that cannot be ignored by any marketer in higher education. This led to the consideration of a research design in which the focus might be around how online communities connected to the university develop, and what sense of belonging they create for students. It was thought that this might be achieved by monitoring online conversations about the university in order to identify themes which related to the development of relationships with the institution. The outcomes of this activity might then enable the placement (or ‘seeding’ in marketing jargon) of helpful and relevant information into communities guided by the research findings. In this way it was hoped it would be possible to move beyond research which focusses on the measurement of engagement, or how networks operate (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004) and to consider the content of the conversations themselves. However, as detailed in 1.9 above, this route did not prove to be practical. However frustrating this initial set-back to research around a sense of belonging seemed, it was actually extremely opportune, as the findings of the conversations with students went on to suggest that they use the university’s corporate social media accounts in very particular ways. Had the research focussed only on this particular avenue the wider implications of theories of place attachment with regard to students’ sense of belonging might have been overlooked.

2.5 The need to be consciously competent

The concept of a sense of belonging or attachment has been recognised as a valuable tool in alumni relations and development work where institutions try to maintain contact with former students, often with fund raising activities in mind (McAlexander et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2006). A qualitative exploration of these concepts in respect of their role in marketing activities to support student recruitment activity does not appear to have been undertaken to date, and this research will make a contribution to knowledge in this area. Rather than continuing to rely on an intangible ‘something about the place’ which students experience and which hopefully leads to the development of a positive relationship with their university there is a need to gain greater understanding of the elements of the relationship. There is a danger that if senior staff within a university do not know what elements lead students to develop a relationship with their institution, these elements could be removed or altered, through re-organisation or re-focussing budgets or priorities, without anyone being aware of the potential impact of such changes (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011). As those working in branding know all too well, organisations have an image among their stakeholders and customers, whether or not they choose to manage it and shape it to their own wishes. There are very few organisations that would wish to leave this to chance. By gaining an understanding of how students experience their relationship with their university the institution should be better placed to ensure that future students continue to experience this so that they continue to act as ambassadors for the institution. Additionally, marketing messages to potential students can continue to give an attractive, and accurate, description of the individual university's offering. Elements of this can be utilised to help ensure that the university can differentiate itself from its competitors – something becoming increasingly necessary in the new 'market' conditions (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

The model of conscious competence (Figure 6), adapted to the field of strategic management (Thompson & Martin, 2005) from a model relating to personal competency (May & Kruger, 1998) demonstrates the different stages an organisation will pass through in order to become, and remain successful.

Figure 6 Model of conscious competence

1 Unconscious Incompetence (the organisation is failing to address the issues it should, but is unaware of its failures)	2 Conscious Incompetence (the organisation is aware that it is failing to address issues)
3 Unconscious Competence (the organisation is addressing relevant issues, but is unaware of what they are, its success is happening by chance)	4 Conscious Competence (the organisation is aware of relevant issues and why and how it should address them)

Adapted from Thompson and Martin, 2005.

This can be translated into a model by which to map marketing departments' approaches to student recruitment as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 Model of conscious competence in respect of full-time, home, undergraduate student recruitment in recruiting HEIs

1 Unconscious Incompetence The marketing department does not know why students are attracted to study at the university in terms of the 'something about the place' that attracts them, and has not thought to address this issue. It is unaware that this is an important issue.	2 Conscious Incompetence The marketing department understands that there is a potential value in communicating the intangible 'something about the place' that attracts students, but is unable to do so because it does not know what the 'something' is.
3 Unconscious competence The marketing department is effectively convincing students that it is a place where they can belong, but it does not know precisely what is reassuring students that this is the case, and it could be caught out by changes in students' attitudes, or to changes made internally which may affect the delivery of this 'something about the place'.	4 Conscious Competence The marketing department understands what it is about the place that makes students choose to study at the university, its marketing messages are backed up by the reality of the student experience – and it continues to monitor the market and the university's performance within it to make sure that this position is maintained.

This research addresses the gap between stage 3 and 4 – to allow institutions to become consciously competent with respect to the 'something about the place' that satisfies current students and attracts students to make it their first choice.

2.6 Additional background

While there are many interesting angles within studies of belonging, community, attachment, this research is undertaken with a practical focus – as befits DBA studies. It is therefore framed to some extent by the need to search for a greater understanding of students' social experiences that can be utilised within the current HE marketing environment. To this end, there is no purpose in seeking to identify individual student's personality traits and to formulate marketing campaigns designed to appeal to them – as there is no opportunity to test potential students for these traits in advance of issuing them with marketing material. Similarly, attempts to identify traits by mass measurement of students according to pre-existing scales would offer information that cannot be utilised in awareness raising activity. These might be useful techniques in terms of measuring how current students might behave and in predicting successful academic outcomes (as is done through assessments to establish preferred learning styles). However, this research is more exploratory in nature, and seeks to establish themes which can be communicated to an undifferentiated audience of school and college leavers, but in a far more informed fashion than has previously been achievable.

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the changing environment for UK HE, and given details of the size of the market in which it operates. It has also discussed the challenges which face professional marketing staff who work in this sector.

The model detailing organisations' needs to be consciously competent (Figure 7) offers a framework around which the gap in knowledge is clear from a professional perspective. The literature review which follows in Chapter three highlights this gap in knowledge from the perspective of the academic literature.

3 Chapter three - Literature review

Introduction

In order to establish the most suitable way to proceed to achieve the research aim of gaining a greater understanding of the elements current students describe as having contributed to them developing a sense of attachment or belonging through their university experience, outside their academic progress, it is necessary to understand what knowledge already exists. This will enable the research to contribute to that knowledge, by extending or adding to it. Therefore, the purpose of the literature review discussed in this chapter is to consider the core theoretical constructs of the thesis. It has also played a role in informing and aiding the development of the research design. An additional literature survey informs Chapter two regarding the context for this research, introducing the role of marketing in higher education, relationship marketing, WOM recommendation and the contribution to professional practice that the research brings.

The areas of research consulted in this review, as outlined in Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of the Research (see page 14), are as follows:

- Studies of student engagement,
- Branding, brand communities,
- Place attachment, with regard to relationships and feelings, linking to motivations and expectations.

3.1 Studies of student engagement

There is extensive literature regarding the student experience, which reveals that the accepted terminology in this field is ‘engagement’ (Trowler, 2010). Within this the focus is on how engagement links to students’ achievements, the retention of students on their programmes, and their satisfaction with their academic experience. Much of this work is based in quantitative research methods, seeking to construct, or test, models of engagement. Institutions can use these instruments to measure their success, or to enable them to direct their efforts into improving areas in which their outcomes are not as they would wish. They also provide measures which offer the ability to make comparisons between institutions and can be used by independent third parties in order to compile league tables (see 2.2.2).

There appears to be a lack of research which attempts to understand issues beyond this measurement activity. Published research does not appear to ask students as individuals for their views of the place at which they have chosen to study, or how they would describe their experience, which could then be used to inform marketing communications.   There have been some reactions against the focus on measurement, with calls to put the student at the centre of considerations regarding engagement. For example, work considering how students from non-traditional backgrounds can feel excluded from the academy does focus on students' views (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). However the focus remains on the academic experience, particularly how widening participation initiatives can fail if no there are no changes to address how university hierarchies fail to match the needs of this group of students (Magolda, 2000).

There is research on the topic of student engagement which might appear to cross the 'boundaries' into the marketing discipline (Wardley et al., 2013).   However, this still focuses on the impact of engagement upon academic outcomes rather than informing the marketing activities of universities. For example, it proposes that there is a relationship between student retention and 'brand fit', ie where the promises made in the marketing and promotion of an institution, its brand messages, or brand identity, are delivered. It argues that success in achieving this will ensure that students do not feel misled, will become committed to their institution and are therefore less likely to leave (Wardley et al., 2013). The focus of this particular quantitative approach is to measure differences in commitment between two different groups of students, those of traditional and non-traditional ages and it does not explore individuals' experiences of the institution in depth. It therefore does not offer any additional insight to the current research.

Other studies focus on the experiences of students in their first year – an important period of transition (Hoffman & Richmond, 2003; Krause & Coates, 2008) in terms of their engagement - but once again use quantitative approaches in search of recommendations on how to improve pedagogy which will in turn improve student engagement.

Research allowing students to raise issues they judge to be important, rather than those included on a pre-set questionnaire (Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2007), aims to develop a conceptual model. The aim is to use the model to highlight drivers of satisfaction among students (and those of dissatisfaction). This will allow institutions to address the key issues identified. While this research has the great merit of obtaining input from the students themselves, its focus is on teaching and learning and the services experienced. Its outcomes are translated into categories and numbers to inform the management of the student experience.

The question of students' relationships, with their tutors, and peers, is also explored, but again in relation to academic achievement (Gruber et al., 2010; Martin & Dowson, 2009).

A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of the current research, the issue is more fully explored in an overview of studies of student life (McInnis, 2004) and a more recent comprehensive review undertaken on behalf of the Higher Education Academy (Trowler, 2010). Research is shown to be focussing on improving pedagogical practice and clusters around investigations of 'academic engagement' with a university. It is often undertaken in support of work to improve student retention and outcomes. Two models of student engagement are identified the ‘market model’ and the ‘developmental model’ (The Higher Education Academy, 2010). The first concerns itself mainly with the consumer experience, and improving an institution’s market position. The second concerns itself with issues such as co-creation of knowledge, and the quality of learning, and the benefits of that learning for individuals and society.

The studies examined generally acknowledge that student engagement is achieved through a mixture of academic and social elements. Academic success can usually be judged to be a result of ‘fit’ with a course and its requirements in terms of study and achievement while the social experiences of students are more likely to be related to ‘fit’ within a social group or community (Kahu, 2013). It is the fit within social groups or communities that concern this thesis which therefore led to a consideration of belongingness or relationships which, within marketing literature, is often manifested in concerns to build and maintain consumers’ relationships with brands. For this reason the review of literature progressed to consider research regarding communities, and relationships within them - particularly in respect of how marketers approach this issue in terms of building brand communities. Other areas of academic research into communities, such as communities of practice, or studies of community from the discipline of sociology were not included in the review. This decision was taken as the research aim and objectives are centred around gaining knowledge that can be used to inform marketing activity. It is apparent that although there appears to be a gap regarding this in respect of higher education marketing with regard to student recruitment activities, studies exist in other settings, undertaken using a range of differing methodologies and focussed around engagement with consumer goods (see 3.4).

3.2 Relationships in terms of communities

Before beginning a discussion of research into brand communities an overview of the concept of community, in respect of marketing and brand research is provided. In this arena, the concept of community, which a review reveals to be one of great complexity, can be categorised into three key areas: Communities, sub-cultures of community, and tribes (see Table 1 below). The concepts, and their relevance to the aim of gaining an understanding of how students experience their relationship with their university, are discussed below.

Table 1 Communities, sub-cultures of community, and tribes

Community	(McMillan & Chavis, 1986)
Sub-cultures of consumption	(Schouten & McAlexander, 1995)
Tribes	(Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Maffesoli, 1996)

3.2.1 Community

Community is often defined as consisting of four elements (McMillan & Chavis, 1986):

- Membership (belonging)
- Influence (mattering)
- Reinforcement (integration and fulfilment of needs)
- Shared emotional commitment

In seeking to understand how students experience their relationship with the university the assumption was that each of these elements would become apparent during the research (see 7.1).

Research into how communities are formed links to work undertaken in respect of place attachment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), particularly regarding a wish to understand how neighbourhood communities form and are experienced. This provided an avenue for the literature review, which is explored at 3.7 below.

3.2.2 Sub-cultures of consumption

Much literature regarding how communities might be nurtured and developed, particularly in terms of achieving marketing goals, refers to work undertaken with the Harley Davison Owners club (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The stated aim of this research is to reverse the usual 'stereotyping' of a group through categories such as gender, age or socio-demographic markers, and to look at consumer behaviour without reference to these categories. The researchers claim that they have thereby identified and explored a 'sub-culture of consumption'. It is this reversal of the 'normal' approach that the current research is attempting to achieve, and the possibility of taking an ethnographic approach, similar to that outlined in this research was considered. However, while Schouten and McAlexander could 'become' Harley Davison Owners, live the life of an owner, and form bonds with the group (having made their researcher status clear from the outset and thus clearing a major ethical hurdle) the researcher could not masquerade as a full-time undergraduate student, of school leaving age.

3.2.3 Tribes

The notion of individuals becoming members of tribes, as differentiated from communities, is one introduced in several explorations of how marketers might develop and nurture brand communities. The concept is developed from the work of philosopher Michel Maffesoli, who defines tribes as fluid, and often transient, forming and dissolving rapidly (Maffesoli, 1996). Those who champion the differences between 'communities' and 'tribes' (Cova & Cova, 2002) argue that 'community' is a modernist term, based on rational bonds, while 'tribes' are not fixed by any such parameters and are characterised by 'shared emotion' and 'passion'. It is argued that this makes 'tribes' more ephemeral, and that they may not be linked to commercial issues (Goulding et al., 2013).

The concept of tribes is also widely referenced by researchers looking at online communities, (Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 1999; Kozinets, 2006a; Kozinets et al., 2010) who undertake qualitative studies of enagagement using ethnographic, or netnographic approaches. Tribes are also explored in offline settings (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

These three closely related areas of discussion around community, in the marketing literature, combined with the researcher's experience of undertaking marketing work related to branding led to a consideration of the literature around brand communities. Before addressing this, an overview of branding is given below.

3.3 Branding

Marketers are concerned to develop strong brands as the accepted wisdom is that this enables their organisations to build and maintain relationships with consumers (Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1999; Toma & Dubrow, 2005). This process is thought to guarantee customer loyalty, and therefore repeat purchase of products, or regular use of services.

Branding is often a tool used by marketers in attempts to differentiate an organisation's offering from that of its competitors. "To be effective, a brand identity needs to resonate with customers, differentiate the brand from competitors, and represent what the organization can and will do over time." (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 40). The outcome of having a positive brand identity, which customers engage with, is that less marketing activity is required to maintain awareness of the product (Keller, 1993), this is because the customers will already have developed awareness of the brand and all it stands for, and may therefore ignore information that is being transmitted about other brands (Leigh & Thompson, 2012) .

The desirability of branding in higher education is a matter of debate (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014), which should be of no surprise given the outline of the debates around the need for marketing in general in higher education given in Chapter two. In some institutions it appears that when branding is referred to as 'reputation building' it is more acceptable (Chapleo, 2011). Steps are being made towards exploring how branding, in both the narrow definition of changes to corporate visual identity (Idris & Whitfield, 2014), and branding more broadly, can help a university build its reputation (Furey et al., 2014). As a marketing professional the researcher would judge visual identity to be one small element of the overall branding of an institution. Research with marketing professionals in HE has indicated that there is some movement towards differentiating university brands based on the experiences students will have at an institution, termed 'experiential branding' (Chapleo, 2010). Though, in line with the sentiment that 'discretion is the better part of valour', the researcher, when undertaking a branding project, used the terminology 'positioning' which she felt linked more to reputational issues and would, therefore, be more acceptable to colleagues than the term 'branding'. Similarly, in a piece of research regarding international branding the authors keep the use of terminology associated with branding to a minimum:

> In some cases, opponents of the introduction of market forces in higher education believe that the business world morally contradicts the values of education and that educationalists ought to oppose any form of marketing in their institutions. In view of these arguments, this paper keeps the use of the terminology associated with branding (which is rapidly increasing in the business world) to a minimum (Goonawardana & Hemsley-Brown, 2007, pp. 942-943).

Students are found to exhibit 'corporate brand identification' in that they are proud of the reputation of their institution, (Balmer & Liao, 2007). Unfortunately the researchers do not give details of how the students describe their sense of identification, and it is difficult to gain an understanding of their experiences from this work. Reference is made to brand communities in respect of alumni development, which is discussed further at 3.5 below, but disappointingly this work offers no other insights to aid the current research.

One avenue of brand research focusses on the emotional aspects of consumers relationships with brands – 'brand love' (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). From this concern with relationships as experienced by individuals, the move to exploring brand communities which might support individuals to become part of a group of advocates of a product or service, can be seen as a valuable progression for marketers. This move can be linked to the established knowledge around human beings demonstrating a 'need to belong' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lavigne, Vallerand, & Crevier-Braud, 2011) to explain why brand communities might form, and how their members might benefit from belonging to such groups.

3.4 Brand communities

Interest in brand communities is often generated by marketers' desire to maximise the benefits to brand image that such engagement can bring about. The assumption that students' relationships with their universities might display similarities to people's feelings and experiences with regard to brand communities led to an exploration of studies in this area. The concept is explored to identify whether established models or frameworks for studying brand communities, particularly with regard to how they are experienced by their members, might have a relevance for students' relationships with their university. Models of brand community might then offer a perspective through which to interpret the students' experiences. While the review begins from marketing perspective of considering a community and particularly a community formed around a brand, or service – it also becomes apparent that place has an important role to play in the development of a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This led the review to broaden to include a literature search of academic research around place attachment.

The idea of a brand community appears to have first been addressed in the marketing discipline through an exploration of consumers' involvement in three different communities, centred on Ford Bronco, Macintosh and Saab, (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This work places the concept of brand community in a theoretical framework that it argues has credibility, while recognising that its ethnographic approach cannot offer generalizable outcomes in the way that a quantitative survey could have done. It concludes that marketers should move away from thinking of brand relationships in terms of 'consumer-brand dyads' and move to the 'consumer-brand-consumer' triad. It also suggests that brands are 'socially constructed', 'social objects'. The researchers point out that this provides opportunities for the marketer, as well as threats. For if a brand is 'owned' by its community, which is in one sense a very positive step, any changes the marketer wishes to make to the identity of the brand, which do not meet with community approval, can be destined for disaster. Those strongly engaged with the brand may react against the change, and campaign for the changes to be reversed. Its definition of community posits that community members demonstrate: 'consciousness of kind', 'shared rituals and traditions' and 'a sense of moral responsibility' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

While the development of brand communities historically occurred around luxury brands, a discussion of the process around a convenience product explores the slightly different approach that can be adopted in different brand contexts (Cova & Pace, 2006). Members of the Nutella online community are found to use the facility more as an opportunity to express their own personal links to the brand than to form relationships with others who engage with it. The behaviour of 'fans' of Nutella is examined using an online ethnographic approach (also known as netnography). Researchers undertaking netnographic studies observe and often (though not in this particular case) participate in online environments.

The Nutella research recommends that the company should seek to enable consumers to continue to express their own relationships with the brand, and accept the necessary lessening of control this gives them over the brand's interpretations. This is a daunting move for any organisation – but something that is accepted within the marketing profession as a necessary part of engagement in online discussions. In the researcher's own professional experience, debates have taken place about the danger of encouraging discussions online where unhappiness might be aired. However, accepting that such matters would be discussed somewhere in the online world, perhaps somewhere where it might take time for monitoring services to find them, it is usually felt that it is better to have them openly aired. This allows organisations to make a swift response, so they can clearly be seen to be responding in an honest and transparent fashion. In respect of the researcher's own professional practice this fits with the brand image the institution seeks to embody – that of open, transparent and honest communications with all of its stakeholders.

The approach to the Nutella case, and its findings, can be contrasted with a study of members of car clubs (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Here a quantitative approach is employed to test a hypothesized model of community identity and engagement among members of car 'fan' clubs. The research seeks to establish how brand owners should manage brand communities to ensure they provide positive support to their brands. The Nutella case focusses on the outcomes of the community's existence, rather than the experience of being part of the community and the elements that contribute to that.

The current research seeks to capture the impact of students' diverse personal experiences and circumstances. It is assumed that this will enable marketing professionals to translate this into marketing messages with personal relevance which should aid future undergraduate student recruitment. Such diversity is explored in a netnographic study of what happens when a mobile phone company supplies trial mobile phones to several different bloggers (Kozinets et al., 2010). The researchers find that the bloggers' own prior experiences, social networks and individual experiences of the phone at the time play significant roles in how they approach their individual reporting of the experience. This also affects how their very individual audiences receive and act upon the information. In fact, the brand marketing messages prove to be significantly altered by the personal experiences and stories that are told in these fora. The study (Kozinets et al., 2010) highlighted the possibility of a netnographic approach for the current research, as it allows personal experiences to be explored, however, as explained the introductory chapter (see 1.9.1), this was not possible due to practical and ethical considerations.

Research into consumers' relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998) seeks to establish measures of brand relationship quality. While this study has limited direct relevance for the current research, one key point it suggests is that 'consumers do not choose *brands* they choose *lives'.* This is an interesting concept and can be linked to a student's experience, when he or she moves away to university – at which point their university becomes part of them, and the rest of their life (McAlexander et al., 2005). It is a concept which also emerged through considering research on brand communities in education (McAlexander et al., 2005). It acted as a flag to the researcher, when developing the conversation guide, that perhaps 'community' might not be a label which students would recognise as one that described their relationship with the university – they are after all simply living their lives. They are part of a community of students, and a community at the university, by default, and therefore this might not be something that they reflect upon.

The possibility of building brand communities outside the world of consumer goods has received some attention as researchers explore whether, in the context of a relationship marketing strategy, such activity could assist charities seeking to engage donors (Hassay & Peloza, 2009).

3.5 Brand communities in Higher Education

Studies of brand community within Higher Education have focussed upon the impact of nurturing such a community in terms of alumni activity – particularly around future engagement with the organisation in terms of recommendation (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010), and donations to fundraising campaigns (McAlexander et al., 2006; Toma & Dubrow, 2005). A quantitative comparison of the difference in brand community integration between small and large education organisations argues that those interested in advancement activity (more generally known as fundraising in the UK) should find the brand community concept helpful (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). It does not offer any insights into how students or alumni experience their relationships with their institutions. Research exploring the impact of shared experiences among university students on brand community development reveals that the social aspects of their experience are important and that these are diverse (McAlexander et al., 2005). Other research into alumni behaviour makes a link between the former students' identification with the institution and their behaviour as alumni (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014).

3.6 Brand communities, the internet and social media

Many brands seek to establish consumer communities, which are based around their websites (Andersen, 2005). This is a tactic widely used in higher education marketing too – with password protected areas of sites being promoted to prospective students, with the promise of 'extra' information regarding the university, and what their experience there might be. Potential students are also invited to join Facebook groups, to follow universities on Twitter – all aimed at making them feel part of a university community, and therefore more likely to apply, accept the offer of a place, and to enrol at the start of the new academic year to begin their studies.

Studies around the development of brand communities online raise the issue that internet communities do not replace the need for face-to-face contact, but that they can serve to offer extra avenues for engagement in a community (Andersen, 2005). However, web-based communities are seen to present the same challenges as physical ones (Figallo, 1998). In considering online communities research suggests (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007) that there are two distinct patterns of behaviour regarding consumer's relationships with websites, one where someone seeks information, and one where a more emotional relationship develops.

The complexity of what internet or social media based channels can offer to marketers (Castronovo & Lei, 2012) and therefore, by implication to those who use them to gain information, is considerable. The reason for which users first approach any forum, ie for information, might transform into them becoming an engaged member of a virtual community, but this is not guaranteed (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). An analysis of members' behaviour in company online communities (Rood & Bruckman, 2009) discusses behaviour within two company communities, MINI cooper car owners and Campbell's Soup. The researchers conclude by identifying primary member activities as: "Discovering, Lurking, Learning, Sharing, and Socializing" (p. 21, ibid). How the students in the sample fit this analysis is discussed in the findings below (see 7.4).

Research into which social media tactics might best engage students is outside the remit of this research, which seeks instead to understand the most appropriate content for the communication, rather than the medium for those messages (see Figure 5), however once the content is established it would be sensible to take account of lessons learnt and strengthen the ability of university social media channels to facilitate word of mouth communications and enhance student recruitment activities (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009). Such work could also have benefits for institutions' alumni relations work.

3.7 The missing element - place

The missing elements in respect of the consumer brand community research that has been consulted and discussed here, are those of the location, buildings and facilities and the range of social situations that students experience during their time at university, the physical components of the community they have joined. These elements can be characterised as being part of the experience of being a student at a university, the experience of the place. Awareness of this gap led to a review of the literature concerned with place attachment. Such a connection is not confined to the current research, it is also apparent in existing research on community (Mannarini, Tartaglia, Fedi, & Greganti, 2006; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In research proposing a definition and theory regarding 'sense of community' the differentiation between 'territorial and geographical' (ie things related to the location) and 'relational' (ie things related to the people in the places and their relationships) communities is raised (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The researcher's professional experience suggests that this is likely to be the case for the students involved in the current research. An investigation into the link between neighbourhood, self-image and sense of community raises the complexity of establishing exact definitions in research in this area (Mannarini et al., 2006). The authors recognise that although they are attempting to ask people about their sense of community – each person's response could be referring to a different element of that community, and to one of their many different roles within it (Mannarini et al., 2006) . Recognition of this complexity, informed the methodology and method adopted for this research.

Connections between consumers' links with brands and place are present in studies of 'servicescapes' (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). The term 'servicescapes' is introduced in research into the 'impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees' (Bitner, 1992). Bitner identifies stimuli (which are physical and measurable) that can be controlled by an organisation to facilitate customers' purchasing decisions. The issue of how customers respond to other stimuli is raised in Bitner's original research, but not explored. More recent research in this area takes this idea forward and argues that the people encountered in the physical surroundings, both other customers and employees, also have an influence on the customer experience (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Linking to the idea that choosing to come to university is something that affects your life (Fournier, 1998), in perhaps a broader sense than affiliation to a brand community, it seems likely that this wider view could have relevance to students' experiences at university.

The literature around place makes a distinction between 'space' and 'place' – space being measurable, or capable of being catalogued (Tuan, 1969) – perhaps linking more closely to Bitner's original measurable stimuli (Bitner, 1992). Place on the other hand place is characterized by 'instability, mobility and continuous creativity' (Cristoforetti, Gennai, & Rodeschini, 2011). It is said that space becomes a place when it involves "… a concentration of our intentions, our attitudes, purposes and experience" (Relph, 1976, p. 43). This could have relevance for the interpretation of the students' experiences, if their descriptions of their experiences demonstrate that they consider the university to be a **place**, rather than simply a physical space.

The importance of this issue is explained by Relph (1976), and this work is referred to in the majority of discussions on place attachment. He establishes four themes regarding place: first the relationship between space and place – here he refers to the range of place experiences and concepts that exist. Second the different elements and intensities of experience, he argues that there can be profound links between people and the places they inhabit. Third is the issue of the identity of places, and people's identity with them and fourth the ways in which our sense of a place and attitude towards it can be seen from the making of places. While students are not involved in place making in the sense of choosing buildings, or making decisions around planning, they experience the place that has been created for them, and bring their own experiences and expectations to their university (their place).

Within place literature there is consideration of whether place itself continues to be important as more and more relationships are formed in cyberspace, and physical community locations may become less important (Gustafson, 2001). This is a theme which links back to the issues raised in discussions around the formation of tribes which are transitory, rather than long-established, stable communities (Cova & Cova, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996), see 3.2.3 above.

In research looking at the experiences of elderly people (Cristoforetti et al., 2011; Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992) their previous place attachments are explored. These prior experiences are shown to influence the place attachment they feel in their mature years. The range of the subjects' experiences – in that different things were, or remain important, for each of them, demonstrates the highly individual nature of place attachment (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992). The importance of continuing to develop place attachment is discussed in research into how widows develop coping strategies to deal with their loss (Cristoforetti et al., 2011). Disruptions to people's place attachment are also the topic of research (Brown & Perkins, 1992) which demonstrates that in order to take one's place in society there is a need for projecting both an individual identity and one which acts as part of the community. The research suggests that both aspects of identity are needed in different amounts at different times. So, for students who may be leaving home for the first time in order to attend university this could become a stressful and disruptive occurrence, rather than one which provides new opportunities.

Studies of place are often differentiated into three themes: 'place attachment', 'place identity' and 'sense of place' (Gustafson, 2001). However, the issue of which theoretical approach is the most appropriate seems to continue in the discipline (Lewicka, 2011; Morgan, 2010). The quantity of debate might be explained by the comment that place attachment is something that is easy to understand, but extremely hard to define (Morgan, 2010). This does not seem to have moved on since it was described in 2003 as a "theoretical quagmire" (Pretty, Chipuer, & Branston, 2003, p. 274). There also appears to be disagreement (Morgan, 2010) about what is referred to in the literature as the 'spatial level' (ie home, neighbourhood, town, county, country, wider region) at which place attachments are formed (Bonnes, Mannetti, Secchiaroli, & Tanucci, 1990; Gustafson, 2001; Hernandez, Hidalgo, ME, & Hess, 2007; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 1992). The review undertaken here has not taken the approach of categorising the work that has been consulted into these themes as they overlap and appear to be the concern of those researchers who are working to establish theoretical frameworks for their discipline. In the context of this DBA thesis the researcher is attempting to add to knowledge that can be applied to the field of marketing communications, through reference to place attachment, rather than to add to theoretical discussions of place attachment. The majority of the literature consulted has tended to consider people's relationships with residential space, or their neighbourhood (Manzo, 2003) and the implications of this for issues such as urban planning (Proshansky, 1978; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). However, as this review will demonstrate, the researcher believes there are helpful parallels that can aid an understanding of the experiences that students' describe. Studies which consider the effect that places have on how people experience their lives are believed to have the greatest relevance to the current research and these provide the focus for the review. This is based on the view that place is "… understood less as a physical location than a deeply affective characterization crystallized from an individual's emotions, experience and cultural background" (Cochrane, 1987, p. 10).

There is a view that place attachment cannot be judged as a single phenomenon but should be viewed as a series of related phenomena (Low & Altman, 1992). This is further illustrated in a presentation of place attachment studies from a range of avenues, not just those based around planning or environmental issues (topics include home as a workplace in the lives of women; how attachment to place affects the elderly; and place attachment in terms of attachments to collections of objects) (Altman & Low, 1992). Locating such different approaches gave the researcher confidence that this discipline could be helpful in explorations of students' experiences at university despite these concerns seeming to be unconnected to the challenges of issues such as urban planning.

Within the place attachment literature there is also debate as to whether there is a difference in attachment to everyday places and 'special places' (Gustafson, 2001). In a review of 40 years of place attachment research it is proposed that there are important, or 'meaningful' places (Lewicka, 2011) that are the objects of the strongest attachments. These are characterised as those "… which have the potential of combining both, security and challenge, stability and novelty; 'refuge' and ‘prospect’ …” (Lewicka, 2011, p. 211). Within this definition a student’s university experience could certainly be judged to have the potential to create strong attachments.

In qualitative research undertaken with residents of Western Sweden, respondents provide information about places where they live, and places they judge to be important (Gustafson, 2001). As an additional element a written question asks each respondent to rank their attachment to particular ‘spatial levels’ ranging from their village at one extreme, to Europe at the other. From this a model is developed – which is claimed to be relevant for all places, whether meaningful or not. It proposes three poles around which place attachment is focussed, those of ‘self, others and environment’ which might be useful in future research which seeks to map meanings of specific places for different groups of people. Groupings by gender, or socio-economic categories are suggested as examples (Gustafson, 2001). The difficulty with this approach - from the current researcher’s ontological perspective (which is a constructionist view that reality is “developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2011, p. 42), rather than though objective categories or criteria (this is discussed more fully in Chapter 4) - is in the relevance of such groupings. This combined with professional experience suggests that such categorisation is not helpful, and masks much greater complexity. This mirrors the concerns of the researchers studying members of the Harley Davison motorcycle groups who wished to move beyond such categorisation and look at groupings with reference to consumer behaviour instead (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Differences between ‘place attachment’ and ‘place identity’ are the subject of debate, as discussed above (Hernandez et al., 2007; Li, Frieze, Nokes-Malach, & Cheong, 2013; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). The difference can be broadly summarised in that ‘attachment’ is generally categorised as bonding with a place, while ‘identity’ refers to the feeling that the place is part of oneself and is linked to theories of self-identity (Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). From this viewpoint, ‘place’ is not simply somewhere one becomes attached to, it plays a role in an individual’s development (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). This has significance for those are exploring the relationship of humans in and with different locations – as they consider reactions that may be caused through decisions regarding urban planning, or regeneration plans for example.

With regarding to issues around urban planning, there has tended to be a somewhat binary divide in that people consider rural communities to be friendly and supportive, while city communities are characterised by inhabitants who do not make connections with each other (Proshansky, 1978). Research in both communities proves that neither is necessarily the case, and both type of experiences can be found in both environments. It is possible that perceptions of what life as a student is like also suffer from stereotyping (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). This could influence students’ expectations as they begin their university life, it could also influence the expectations and reactions of people they will meet in their new life. Such issues around place identity are discussed in research exploring how ethnic consumers assess their place identity. While the research focuses on consumer settings (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007), this could potentially be a very important factor for students who are concerned about fitting in to university life – or, from another angle, seeking a university that will be in sympathy with their own self-identity (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). The possibility of stereotyping is certainly a danger for those who are responsible for the marketing of higher education, who may bring their own assumptions and prior experiences to bear on decisions, which may or may not reflect those of current students. This is another reason why this research has been designed to establish what students are experiencing by asking the students themselves to describe it.

An additional complexity is the issue that many of these assumptions, about a place and one’s relationship with it, develop without the individual being aware of them. One is simply aware of being comfortable in a particular kind of place – without analysing why (Proshansky et al., 1983). Thus students arriving at university are likely to have expectations that they are unaware of and, depending on their own history and prior experiences, these expectations are likely to be varied (Proshansky, 1978; Stedman, 2002). Research looking at how emotional relationships with places are formed (Manzo, 2003), proposes that people do actively shape their environment. The research gives the example of people forced to move and make a new home due to racial discrimination. A similar theme can be found in research into sense of place carried out in rural Australian towns (Pretty et al., 2003), which contends that "… a person is not 'placed' in an environment, but rather actively constructs a position in that environment" (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 284). This suggests that a student arriving at university who is not satisfied with the place may well take steps to make it more to their liking. It is also likely that if they cannot make such alterations themselves they may be unhappy – and may wish they had chosen another university. Such reactions are outlined in a study which considers people's relationships with places from a transactional view:

> In evaluating the quality of a place, individuals judge how well the place facilitates their goals and activities. This is particularly true of those goals and activities that are most important to them (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981, p. 459).

When describing what he terms the 'place ballet' needed to regenerate physical places, in which attachment plays a role, Seamon (1979) says, "Users who feel attachment will instinctively care for place. They feel a stake in it; the place is an extension of their own selves" (Seamon, 1979, p. 150). Such approaches link back to the explorations of possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988).

In a paper exploring what makes a place 'home', place identification is described as "...socially mediated, selective, and complex ..." (Cuba & Hummon, 1993, p. 127). This quantitative study of how residents in Cape Cod in the US develop a sense of home states that it is not just the qualities of a place itself that affect how people experience it, but that place identity is shaped by "...

people’s interpretations of place, their experiences with place, and the demographic characteristics they bring to place” (Cuba & Hummon, 1993, p. 126). This approach suggests that place identity is not static, and it will vary for different individuals – therefore a marketer hoping to develop a place brand is likely to fail (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). It is argued that all that could result from such an attempt is promotional activity to try to portray a static identity, which of course will not reflect the varying experiences of different individuals. The researchers propose that any attempt to build a brand identity for a place must involve those who have an interest in the place and take into account all of their views (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). This, once again, supports the decision to approach the question of how students experience their university life by speaking to the students themselves, not asking them pre-determined questions.

The strength of people’s identity with place should not be underestimated. Research looking at how land-use conflicts can be approached (Wester-Herber, 2004) discusses how humans interact with their environment in ways that are important to their identity – so changes can have a significant impact – and will prompt strong reactions. This stresses that ‘rational’ approaches and providing facts relating to changes are unlikely to change opinions which have been formed from more emotionally based experiences.

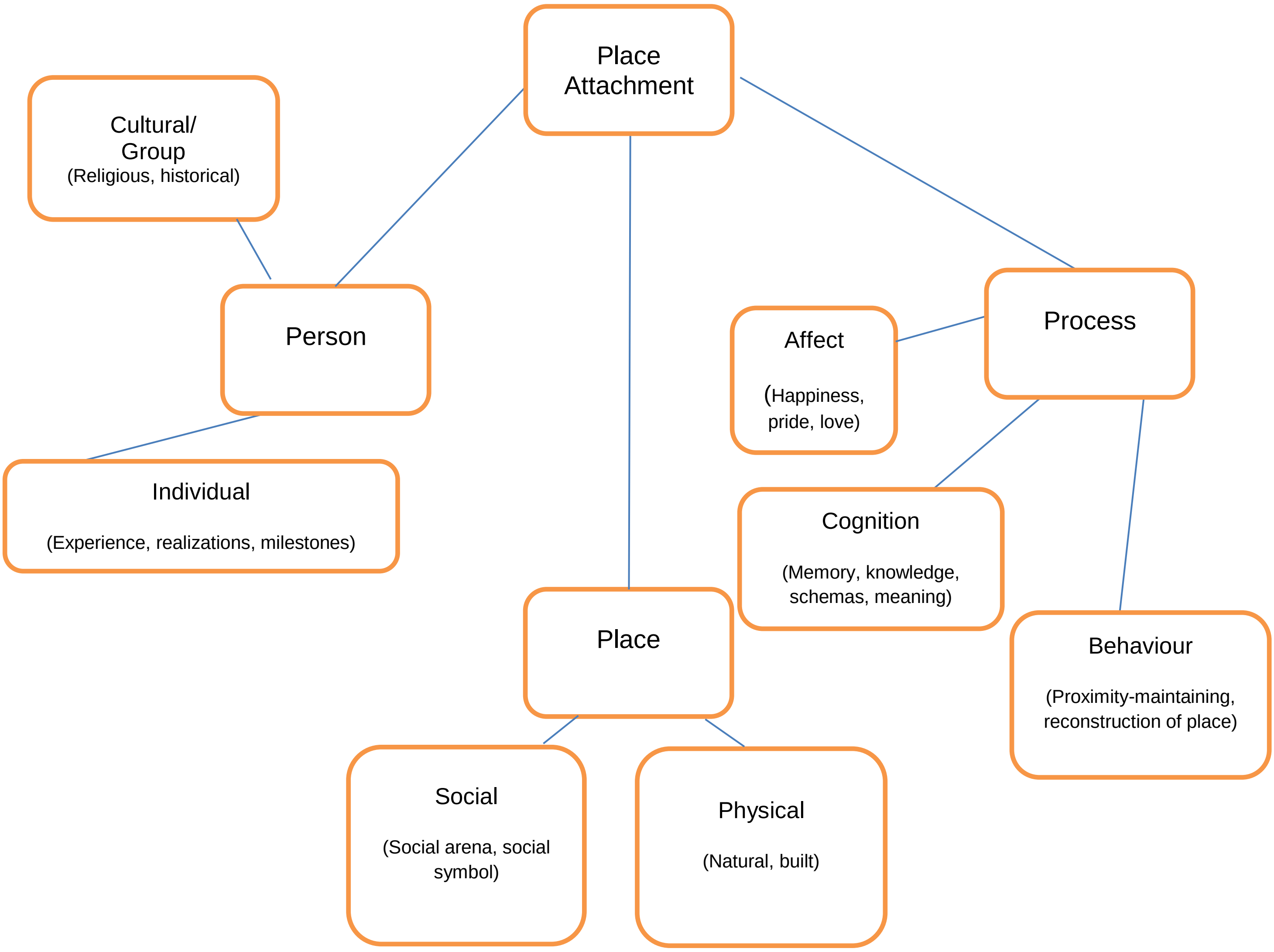
Studies into how people experience places include a quantitative investigation into how inhabitants of Rome experience their environment. Here the experience of the city is found to be based around home, the neighbourhood or the city – or a combination of these elements, and this varies “… according to the inhabitants’ different characteristics” (Bonnes et al., 1990, p. 63). That is to say an individual’s experience in a place is driven by the individual; it will not necessarily mirror the experience of any other person.

There is one particular element of place research which adds complexity to steps that marketers in higher education might consider in order to facilitate the development of place attachment or identification. This relates to the influence of the length time someone has spent in a place. Several researchers view this as an important element in attachment or place identity (Hay, 1998; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Knez, 2005; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). For a place such as a university this could be a challenge, as most students probably considered their choices for a period of around 18 months and are only at the institution for three years. Therefore activity designed to develop feelings of attachment, or the potential for it, may need to operate in very much shorter timescales to those discussed in other explorations of how place attachment develops.

3.7.1 A model of place attachment

A conceptual model of different aspects of place attachment brings the elements of place attachment that have been explored in the literature review together. Here various definitions are synthesised into a "three dimensional, person-process-place organizing framework" (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The model (see Figure 8) provides a helpful summary of the issues raised: that attachment forms through the person, the person's relationship with the place (its social and physical offer), and their behaviours and expectations.

Figure 8 Tripartite Model of Place Attachment



The tripartite model of place attachment, (Scannell & Gifford, 2010)

3.8 University place attachment

There are studies of place attachment with regard to students' experience at university, but as with studies of student engagement, this is an area that usually focuses around engagement and academic success (Pittman & Richmond, 2008), retention (in terms of how a sense of belonging positively affects this) (Hoffman & Richmond, 2003) or with regard to homesickness (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010). Studies also consider place attachment at university with regard to well-being issues, from a perspective concerned with measuring these factors in order to make comparisons between students in different countries (Bogdan, Rioux, & Negovan, 2012). Additionally, as students are often leaving home and beginning a new adult life, the impact of this transition on them is explored as a possible indicator of young people's relationships with places (Cicognani, Menezes, & Nata, 2011). As in more general studies of place attachment, social relations are judged to be important in forming attachments to places (Chow & Healey, 2008; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010). A study considering students' transition from home to university (Chow & Healey, 2008) suggests that "… the occurrence (and extent) of social relationships were important in the attachment process" (Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 371). The variables identified as impacting upon place attachment include: "… place significance, the occurrence (and extent) of social relationships, sense of dislocation, continuity across time and situation and proximity to home" (Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 370). This research specifically addresses the transition from home to university, focussing on "the key themes of place attachment, identity and the transition process" (Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 365) through semi structured interviews which are presumed to have guided the respondents to consider issues influenced by reference to their proximity to home.

In a piece of quantitative research into homesickness and the role of place attachment among university students (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010) two factors are identified as indicating attachment to students' new place of residence. These centre around emotions and social experiences – "… positive feelings and emotions associated with the residential experience…" (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010, p. 346) and "… the role experiences in the new location (e.g., new activities and people to know, leisure, cultural stimulation) lent to growth toward adulthood and independence" (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010, p. 346). These explorations of attachment can be seen to link to the idea that a place may be "... a medium or milieu which embeds and is a repository of a variety of life experiences, is central to those experiences, and is inseparable from them" (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 10). There is also a possible parallel in an exploration of consumer behaviour relating to possession and the 'extended self' (Belk, 1988). Here the extended self is summarised as consisting of “…body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, and those persons, places and things to which one feels attached” (Belk, 1988, p. 141).

In considering the impact of place attachment on success in academic studies (Li et al., 2013) the point is made that those students who do feel a sense of attachment or belonging are more likely to value their institution. This finding is related to students’ achievement, but it does of course have relevance for those responsible for marketing HEIs, in that those who value their university are more likely to speak highly of it, or to recommend it. This can be related back to the discussion of word of mouth recommendation, and its value (see 2.4.2).

3.9 Motivation to succeed

It is probable that a student’s sense of attachment to their university will also be related to their motivation to succeed, as this is part of each individual’s identity and, as outlined above this plays a role in place attachment (Relph, 1976). Accepting the assumption that each student will have his or her own individual motivations for coming to university to study, and these will influence their expectations of the experience, it is helpful to consider Maslow’s theory of motivation (Maslow, 1943). Different levels of needs, and how humans progress between them are considered:

> Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives (Maslow, 1943, p. 370).

Human needs are categorised as: “physiological; safety; belongingness and love; esteem; and self-actualization” (Maslow, 1943, p. 394). They are viewed as arranging themselves in a hierarchy, in the order shown here. However, it is argued that humans can move on to attempt to satisfy the next need in the hierarchy before a lower one is completely satisfied. The needs that humans are seeking to satisfy become the focus of one's 'conscious life' "since gratified needs are not active motivators" (Maslow, 1943, p. 395).

Examinations of human motivation also mirror this concern with the individual's experience:

> We must certainly grant at once that human motivation rarely actualizes itself in behaviour except in relation to the situation and to other people. Any theory of motivation must of course take account of this fact by including the role of cultural determination in both the environment and the organism itself (Maslow, 1970, p. 10).

The consideration of motivations, and human behaviour if needs are met, links to the literature concerning why individuals form attachments to places, that is to say, the functions place attachment fulfil for us as human beings (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). It is argued that having a sense of attachment allows an individual to feel safe and secure in his or her environment. John Bowlby (1907-1990), the renowned thinker on the subject of attachment states that "… attachment behaviour is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 129). Bowlby is most famous for his work exploring the bond between mothers and their children, which he argues is at the base of attachment. However he also recognises that other attachments form: "During adolescence and adult life a measure of attachment behaviour is commonly directed not only towards persons outside the family but also towards groups and institutions other than the family" (Bowlby, 1997, p. 207). It could be argued that if an individual is safe and secure as a result of place attachment this allows them to pursue, and attain their goals, so place attachment is a valuable thing for humans to develop. It is also argued that attachment provides continuity for individuals: "… individuals are more often attached to environments that they feel match their personal values, and thus seem to appropriately represent them…" (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 6).

Building on Maslow's work, three motivators have been identified - achievement, affiliation and power (McClelland, 1961). For each of us these will be experienced in different measures. The place in which we live and work will provide the physical and social environment in which we endeavour to meet these needs. These elements of motivation and attachment suggest that it is likely to be important for students' sense of place attachment that their university environment to provides them with the security to grow and achieve their goals.

However, this is a dynamic issue – place attachment can change in light of differences in place, person and the period of the person's life (Proshansky et al., 1983). Therefore attachment looked back on from the future could look very different to the actual experience of it. This makes it important to state that the research design set out to achieve a picture of how the students' relationships developed based on their own current understanding of that – and in taking a phenomenological approach the research is only able to capture the here and now of the students' descriptions. The issue of attachment reflected upon later is something that universities seek to maximise through their work to maintain contact with alumni (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2006). Those working in alumni relations tend to define this as 'affinity' (McAlexander, Koenig, & DuFault, 2014) rather than attachment. It is in this arena that research has established that the "… relationships formed within the academic community share the essential elements of the 'brand communities' that have proven to be valuable to both community members and marketers ..." (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, p. 69). Those working in alumni relations hope that affinity starts to develop very early in the student's experience at university (McAlexander et al., 2014).

It is recognised that marketing a place is a complex thing – more complex than marketing a product (Warnaby & Medway, 2013). This picks up the view that a place is a multi-faceted phenomenon, as explored in place attachment literature (Low & Altman, 1992; Relph, 1976; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Such complexity, suggest the authors of a paper describing attempts to undertake place marketing in the city of Manchester following the riots there, should prompt marketers to act in a way that could be described as 'bottom up' in contrast to trying to transpose traditional marketing approaches or existing knowledge into this arena (Warnaby & Medway, 2013).

3.10 Development of the conversation guide

The review of literature confirmed that the research planned would make a new contribution to knowledge in the area of students' relationships with their universities. The review also served to guide the research methodology, introducing the strengths of a phenomenological approach to meet the research aim and objectives. Due to the selection of this approach, there was no attempt to draw up set questions for the conversations with the students. The literature review, in conjunction with the researcher's professional marketing experience, served to shape a conversation guide which was used to ask the students to reflect on the development of their relationship with their university, not to provide explicit avenues for exploration.

The introduction to the conversations explained to the students that the researcher was seeking to understand their personal experiences, their descriptions of what it felt like to belong, or to feel attached to the university. Providing the explanation in these terms resulted from findings of the literature review combined with the researcher's experience in professional practice. In addition it reflected the research design in that it simply gave a structure to the conversations and focus group, it did not guide their content. This left the students free to discuss whichever parts of their experience they wished to.

The aim of the research is to gain a greater understanding of how individual students describe their relationship with their university with one objective being to move towards achieving conscious competence (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) regarding communicating with potential students. Therefore, the conversation guide also included a prompt to pick up what the students felt could be done differently by the university in order to foster a greater sense of attachment or belonging. Once again, in line with what had been found during the literature review, there was no attempt to offer specific categories of things that might be addressed.

One specific point was included in the conversation guide, which lies outside this undirected approach. This was driven by the literature review around how brand communities are formed, namely the issue of the use of social media and its role in developing a sense of attachment (Brown et al., 2007; Cova & Pace, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004; Hayes et al., 2009; Kozinets, 1999). This was not a straightforward element of any of the conversations that formed part of the research and will be discussed further in Chapter seven, below.

4 Chapter four - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter details the methodological approach adopted. It begins with a brief explanation of research terminology, in order to demonstrate how and why this approach was chosen. It then endeavours to provide an introduction to phenomenology, and phenomenological approaches in academic research.

4.1 An overview of the research

All academic research is framed within a researcher's understanding of the nature of the world, and how knowledge is created within that world - that is to say, his or her ontological and epistemological position. It is important to place any research in terms of these positions, as it will provide context for the decisions around the research questions that are approached and the methods employed to answer them (Crotty, 2011).

4.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is "The science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence" (Oxford English Dictionary). It can also be described as our "views about the nature of reality" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2011, p. 331), or as in the figure above 'what's out there to know'. Ontological positions can be simplistically divided into two camps: 'objectivism' and 'constructivism'. Objectivism "asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 21). While constructivism "asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22). So our opposing positions argue that either, reality exists as separate from human action in it, or, that reality is shaped by human action, and can be continually changed by it.

4.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is defined as "The theory of knowledge and understanding, esp. with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion" (Oxford English Dictionary). Or, more simply, our "views about the most appropriate ways of enquiring into the nature of the world" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011, p. 328). In common with ontological positions, epistemological stances can be categorised into two distinct camps. At one extreme is a view that there are absolute truths in the world, and that these can be objectively tested, measured and analysed, that research can provide absolute answers that can be replicated in other situations. This is termed 'objectivism' – "...that meaning and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness" (Crotty, 2011, p. 8). At the opposite extreme is 'constructionism' - the view that "... meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 2011, p. 43).

In terms of this research, within the social sciences, a constructivist ontology has been employed, and the exploration of the gap in knowledge in this area is undertaken from a social constructionist epistemology. It is believed that this allows the most effective methods to be employed to address the gap in knowledge which is identified in the conceptual model of the research, given in Figure 1 (p.14). Social constructionism holds that the social scientist is working to look at 'social reality' which has been interpreted by the individuals who are living in the world, based on their own history and experiences: "... there has been general agreement to the effect that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 16). It could also be argued that even those who espouse a view based in objectivism cannot really claim to be 'detached' from their research, as their own views will have been formed based on their history, and a researcher working within an interpretivist paradigm would almost certainly advance that view (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4.1.3 Research paradigm

Having considered ontology and epistemology, there is also the question of the choice between possible research paradigms in which to situate research. Once again research paradigms can be categorised as splitting into opposite positions - ‘positivism’ and ‘interpretivism’. A positivist approach believes that the truth can be established, and it will seek to find that truth, often through experiments, by testing hypotheses. Positivist research is generally carried out through quantitative methods – concerned with measurement, which generate statistical outputs. As such its results can be replicated by another researcher conducting the same experiment in a different location at a different time, with a different group of people or objects. This type of research could be characterised as the sort of research undertaken in scientific or engineering laboratories, where tests can take place under controlled conditions and where the variables that might play a role in the outcomes of the research can be manipulated by the researcher. In summary, “The philosophical assumptions guiding positivist research include an objective view of reality, which the research seeks to measure and explain” (Bahl & Milne, 1996, p. 198).

In contrast, ‘interpretivism’ has very different concerns, “It is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17). It does not seek one truth that can be applied to all settings. Interpretivist researchers will tend to make use of qualitative research methods, such as focus groups (where a small group of participants discusses a certain issue or topic), semi-structured questionnaires (where individuals can alter the progress and content of the interview), observing individuals, and recording those observations, or by reviews of existing texts or images. Such approaches are designed to gain greater understanding of an issue, not to offer a universally applicable explanation of a problem.

As this research focuses on ‘grasping the subjective meaning’ of the students’ experiences, an interpretivist approach seems most fitting in order to achieve the aim and objectives. This approach allows a reshaping of the initial thoughts regarding the literature consulted to develop a useful understanding of the students' descriptions. This resulted in a journey from consultation of literature regarding student engagement to brand communities, and then into considerations of place attachment, as detailed in the literature review, see Chapter three.

Interpretivism offers a range of academic research approaches. The current research is based within the phenomenological tradition, as this is drawn from "… a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them …" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 18). A brief outline of phenomenology and its history is given below.

4.2 Phenomenology

There is no intention to provide a discussion or critique of the original thought of philosophers who advance the discipline of phenomenology within this thesis. The researcher's concern is simply to provide a context for the decision to site the research within this methodological approach. Therefore it is the movement's application to the approach adopted for this research that is demonstrated here. A brief explanation of the overarching philosophy is given rather than a discussion based around the philosophers' original texts. This is followed with more detailed reference to the writings of those who offer advice and guidance on social sciences research.

Phenomenology is defined as:

> A method or procedure, originally developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), which involves the setting aside of presuppositions about a phenomenon as an empirical object and about the mental acts concerned with experiencing it, in order to achieve an intuition of its pure essence; the characteristic theories underlying or resulting from the use of such a method. In more recent use: any of various philosophical methods or theories (often influenced by the work of Husserl and his followers) which emphasize the importance of analysing the structure of conscious subjective experience (Oxford English Dictionary).

4.3 The concerns of phenomenology

Clues to the concerns of phenomenology can be found, unsurprisingly, in its title.

> The term "phenomenology" is a compound of the Greek words *phainomenon* and *logos*. It signifies the activity of giving an account, giving a *logos*, of various phenomena, of the various ways in which things can appear (Sokolowski, 2008, p. 13).

Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, sought to move away from the Cartesian philosophical tradition which separates the world into subject and object. He recognised that phenomena do exist. This can be explained as follows:

> It is not the case, as the Cartesian tradition would have us believe, that "being a picture" or "being a perceived object" or "being a symbol" is only in the mind. They are ways in which things can be. The way things appear is part of the being of things; things appear as they are, and they are as they appear. Things do not just exist; they also manifest themselves as what they are (Sokolowski, 2008, p. 14).

Conducting the research within this world view allows the importance of the *experiences* of the students, as they themselves describe them, to be captured. Phenomenology posits that particular experiences do not simply occur in the mind in isolation from the rest of one's experiences or hopes. Therefore we can assume that the students' prior experiences, and future expectations, will have a significant influence on how they will behave both towards others and in response to objects and opportunities. However, the students (in common with most individuals) would not necessarily reflect on this as they go about their everyday lives. Phenomenologists argue that this can be illustrated by describing the difference between the 'natural attitude' and the 'phenomenological attitude'. In the 'natural attitude' we experience our world, we are part of it and the things that occur in it. We can do this from many perspectives, both directly experiencing things, or simply 'knowing' what they might be like (for example our imagining of places we have not yet visited). However, adopting a 'phenomenological attitude' requires very different behaviour. It requires us to reflect on everything that we experience in the 'natural attitude'. "When we move into the phenomenological attitude, we become something like observers of the passing scene, or like spectators at a game" (Sokolowski, 2008, p. 48).

4.4 Phenomenological terms

Phenomenological analysis utilises a series of terms, some of which are confusing in that they appear to be words we are familiar with, but which are being used in particular ways when employed by phenomenologists. Those that have relevance to the research undertaken are described below.

4.4.1 Intentionality

Intentionality is a key concept within phenomenology. It is not related to the everyday use of the word, but describes how every reaction or experience that we have is a reaction to something or an experience of something. This concept is reported as being introduced to Husserl by his teacher, Franz Brentano.

> Any of our experiences as they appear within our stream of thought, Brentano held, are necessarily referred to the object experienced. There is no such thing as thought, fear, fantasy, remembrance as such; every though is thought *of,* every fear is fear *of,* every remembrance is remembrance *of* the object that is thought, feared, remembered (Schutz, 1971, p. 103).

This understanding is central to the research approach adopted, that our experiences are socially constructed and do not exist in objective isolation.

4.4.2 Eidectic

Husserl wished phenomenology to be an eidectical science, "… dealing not with existence but with essence (Wesen)" (Schutz, 1971, p. 113). This concept can be explained by the example of asking us to consider an infinite number of different cubes. They can vary in colour, materials, size and so on – but all will have certain features that are common to everything that is a cube, ie their essence (Sokolowski, 2008). Its importance to the research undertaken here is that it is the common features of the student's experiences, the essence of them, that the research seeks to understand.

4.4.3 Phenomenological reduction or epoché

To be able to move into the 'phenomenological attitude', as introduced above, it is necessary to undertake what is termed a 'phenomenological reduction' or epoché. The researcher must suspend the knowledge he or she has of an event, an object or an activity – so that it cannot influence how we interpret what is seen or heard. This is sometimes also described as 'bracketing'. Taking this step allows researchers to gain an understanding of the essence of the phenomena under consideration. While Husserl believed this to be achievable, the existentialists, in common with Heidegger, did not (see 4.5 below). They believed that "…our way of existing must be seen in its historical and cultural context and understood with due regard to the role of language – it must be interpreted and not just described" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 27). Led by the debate around phenomenological reduction, the researcher endeavoured to suspend any prior assumptions, to avoid knowingly directing the students along particular routes during the fieldwork. The researcher also put aside her own experiences of choosing a university, her professional marketing 'jargon', and her knowledge of the procedures in place at the university, and listened to what the students had to say. This ensured that the conversations were led by the students as far as possible.

From a professional practice perspective, the exercise of putting aside jargon and knowledge of procedures of the university is a tactic that the researcher employs regularly in her everyday role. This is vital in order to prepare marketing materials that are relevant, and comprehensible, for audiences who do not know the detail of how a university operates. However, with regard to the conduct of the current research – and in line with a social constructionist world view, it is accepted that it is pragmatically impossible to achieve a state in which prior knowledge is *completely* suspended. All that can be guaranteed is that the researcher remained alert to the danger of taking a lead in the conversations and always sought to treat the students as the experts.

4.4.4 Lifeworld

During the explanation of the choices made between ontological and epistemological positions, the difference between positions which hold that things within the world are objective and can be measured, and those that hold that things are subjective and therefore measurement may not be appropriate, was described. As has been outlined, this research takes the second position. Phenomenology's view of the lifeworld brings this dichotomy into sharp focus. It goes further than to accept that different techniques are appropriate to different branches of science, ie leaving objective measurement to the natural sciences and more interpretive approaches to the social sciences:

> It attempts to show that the exact, mathematical sciences take their origin from the lived world. They are founded on the life world. The exact sciences are a transformation of the experience we directly have of things in the world; they push this experience to a much higher level of identification, and correlatively they transform the objects we experience into idealized mathematical objects. It may seem that the exact sciences are discovering a new and different world, but what they are really doing, according to phenomenology, is subjecting the ordinary world to a new method (Sokolowski, 2008, p. 147).

This view could be seen to be confirmed in that paradigm shifts do occur in the natural sciences – and that the foundations of accepted knowledge in this field do have to be rebuilt from time to time (Popper, 1975).

4.4.5 Noema and noesis

Husserl defines the act of experiencing something, or what we might describe as perceiving something in 'layman's' terms, as having two elements: the act of perceiving is described as 'noesis' or 'cogitare', and the perceived as 'noema' or 'cogitatum' (Schutz, 1971, p. 107) . To explain further, the *noema* is the intentional object, the thing we perceive and experience. *Noesis* is the process of experiencing this thing. This division is helpful within the aim of the research, as it is the process of experiencing things that it seeks to explore. In summary, it can be said that the noema is the experience of being at the university, and it is the noesis that the conversations with students seeks to understand. From the fieldwork undertaken with the students it appears that they have not previously reflected on either the noema or the noesis of their relationship with the university. The research asks them to think about what the relationship (the noema) is, and how they experience it (the noesis). The researcher then moves beyond this to interpret what has been described in order to draw themes from it.

4.5 Variations in phenomenological approaches

Husserl's work was further developed by his fellow philosophers, including Heidegger (1889-1976), Sartre (1905-1980) and Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). While Husserl argued for a transcendental phenomenology, through which man could go outside experience, to 'view the world from above', they developed a more existential view, that is to say, they felt phenomenology offers the opportunity to focus on existence, or 'our experience of the world as it is lived by us' (Langdridge, 2007).

It is Heideggerian phenomenology that has the greatest influence on the academic research path that is followed here. Heidegger is renowned for introducing the term 'Dasein'. He uses the term:

> … instead of man (person or subject) in order to allow us to look with fresh eyes at what it means to exist, a uniquely human problem, and also to emphasize a number of features of existence that may be obscured when using a term such as 'man', 'person' or 'subject' (Langdridge, 2007).

Within this, a key feature is 'temporality' – that is to say, the fact that our present is always made up and influenced by our past experiences and is also affected by our future plans and hopes (Langdridge, 2007).

Heidegger argues that our being always takes place in time, we are always moving in time, and that 'being' is the capacity to look at your own existence and to be confused by it (Cecil, 2012). This is an important element in the current research. The transcripts of the conversations with the students, and the subsequent analysis of the themes identified within them clearly reflect this sense of 'moving in time'. During the conversations they make it clear that through their experiences at university they are preparing for their future, and are clear about how their engagement and relationships contribute to this too.

4.6 Academic research approaches from a phenomenological perspective

The phenomenological approach, as outlined above, is concerned with the experiences of people in their everyday worlds (Bevan, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). These are the concerns of the social sciences (though within this discipline there are, of course, those who have a different ontological and epistemological perspective and concern themselves with measurement and testing of hypotheses). However, given the concerns of phenomenology it is no surprise that academic research which is undertaken from this perspective is often interpretive in nature, and undertaken from a social constructionist perspective. It tends to look at things in terms of interpersonal experiences, and to encourage reflection (Becker, 1992). In considering experiences, phenomenologists do not distinguish between the subjective and objective: "… this is revealed by the fact that the description of experience shows it always to be experience *of* something" (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991, p. 2). This refers back to 'intentionality' as outlined above (4.4.1). It is said that:

> The social, or human sciences turn to questions, in a phenomenological sense, which can be called questions about the origin, development, structure and sedimentation of belief contexts as they impinge on human action (Ihde, 1986, p. 143).

Examples of phenomenological studies can be found in areas such as education, health, and place research. Additionally, explorations of phenomenological approaches are often concerned with exploring issues relating to place attachment. This links to Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world (see 4.5 above) in that experiences are considered from the perspective of both their physical location and a consideration of the nature of the experience (Manzo, 2005, p. 75). Both these aspects were present in the students' descriptions of their experiences.

Academics employing phenomenological research methods can be divided into two main camps. Those who take a descriptive phenomenological approach, and those who follow an interpretive path. The descriptive approach is led by Giorgi, and the Duquesne school of phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). It differs from the interpretive approach in that it tends to utilise the technique of 'maximum variation sampling' in order to sample as wide a demographic as possible. This has the result that "… it should become possible (in the analytic stage) to ascertain those aspects of the experience that are invariant across perception (the essence(s) of the phenomenon) and those that vary across perception" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 58). In contrast the interpretive approach is more likely to use a purposive sample, as such studies are idiographic and are not attempting to generalise. "The aim is to recruit a sample of people such that the researcher can make claims about these people and their particular shared experience" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 58). The approaches share the goal of understanding meaning, but the descriptive approach is concerned with identifying a 'unified meaning' which can be described precisely, while the interpretive approach considers that meaning is unique and cannot be described – so interpretation is vital (Rapport, 2005). An interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2004; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003) was adopted as each student's description was valued as being equally important in this exploratory research.

In line with the journey through the research framework, and ontological and epistemological approaches, it is acknowledged that both the researcher and the participants play a role in the outcomes of the research: "The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Additionally the findings of the research are presented with cognisance of the fact that for both the researcher and the students who took part in the fieldwork, the 'now' that is being talked about, and interpreted by all the parties involved, is the sum of their past and present, and their future hopes (Leonard, 1994).

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the steps through the academic research framework that have been taken to undertake the research in what is judged to be the most appropriate manner. The ontological, epistemological and research paradigm decisions led to an interpretivist approach being chosen, and within this paradigm, a phenomenological approach in particular. This can be characterised as seeking to understand the 'essence' of an experience. It allows a study of individual's lived experience – it does not "… offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (Van Manen, 1992, p. 9). In this it matched the approach to the research, as it serves to facilitate an understanding of the views of people who experience the phenomenon, not to measure or quantify it. It also means that the researcher's initial assumptions, that this phenomenon might be related to theories of brand community, did not cut off an alternative, and ultimately more useful discipline, that of place attachment. It is from place attachment literature that a quote encapsulates the approach, that of consulting the 'people who have given the place meaning':

> Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning (Tuan, 1969, p. 213).

5 Chapter 5 - Method

Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, the choices made during the research design led to a qualitative, phenomenological approach being chosen in order to address the research aim and objectives. Here, the term qualitative is defined not simply as a general term for non-quantitative methods, but as an alternative, and valid research approach (Hakim, 2000). It is judged to be the most suitable method by which to approach the research as it is:

> … concerned with individuals' own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour. It offers richly descriptive reports of individuals' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, view and feelings, the meanings and interpretations given to events and things, as well as their behaviour (Hakim, 2000, p 34).

It offers the advantage of helping to address complex issues rather than to "establish unambiguous cause and effect relationships between single variables" (Gummesson, 2005, p. 312).

A qualitative approach can be particularly useful for research in the marketing discipline, as it is exploratory in nature (Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012) and concerns itself with the experiences of individuals.

5.1 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In carrying out fieldwork, providing a structure for the conversations and also in the analysis of the students' descriptions, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach is used (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach allows an increased understanding of individual students' experiences, as they themselves describe them. The approach does not attempt to measure experiences, or to establish antecedents. The research aim, and its subsequent design can be characterized as requiring an approach that is "…inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researchers' experience in collecting and analyzing the data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 19), this matches the characteristic features of IPA, which is said to be "idiographic, inductive, and interrogative" (Smith, 2004).

5.1.1 Idiographic

An idiographic approach focuses on the individual's experience of the phenomenon being explored:

> The *idiographic* approach studies the individual (person, place, event, setting, etc) as a unique case. The focus is on the interplay of factors that might be quite specific to the individual. Even though two individuals might share some aspects in common, these will inevitably be materially affected by other differences between them (Gibbs, 2010, p. 5).

5.1.2 Inductive

The research design dictates that an inductive approach is suitable to achieve its aim and objectives, as it does not seek to prove, or disprove hypotheses but seeks a greater understanding of the students' experiences. IPA is characterised by this approach, in which researchers:

> ... do not attempt to verify or negate specific hypotheses established on the basis of the extant literature; rather they construct broader research questions which lead to the collection of expansive data (Smith, 2004, p. 43).

5.1.3 Interrogative

The example cited to explain this characteristic of IPA (Smith, 2004) refers to its place in the field of psychology. It can equally apply to other disciplines in that it describes its interrogative nature as being demonstrated by the results of its analysis not standing alone, but that they are "subsequently discussed in relation to the extant psychological literature" (Smith, 2004, pp. 44-45). This has relevance for the current research in that its findings are discussed in relation to the extant literature regarding theories of place attachment.

5.2 Template analysis

An alternative form of analysis, the Template Analysis approach (King, 2004; King & Horrocks, 2010) was considered for this research, but not adopted. A Template Analysis approach is often undertaken by utilising analysis based on pre-selected codes, perhaps drawn from an interview guide. This did not align with the research concern to understand each individual's descriptions, and only then to look for themes. In contrast, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach seeks to allow researchers to express an experience "…in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). While it is stressed (Smith, 2004) that there are no hard and fast rules to follow when undertaking IPA, the analysis approach described below is in line with the general guidance outlined as it allowed the coding process to be based on the data itself rather than the literature (Furey et al., 2014).

5.3 Ethics and protection of participants' anonymity

The research design received approval from the university's Business School's ethics committee before fieldwork began. The university's pool of student ambassadors was invited to take part in the research. Those who agreed to take part were contacted to arrange convenient times. Throughout the conversations with students, during the focus group, and the analysis, the researcher has ensured that there is no possibility of individuals being identified. To the best of her knowledge and expectations there could be no physical or psychological harm caused to anyone who has taken part in the research. The concern to ensure that ethical considerations were borne in mind throughout can also be demonstrated through the shaping of the research design, outlined in the introductory chapter (1.9.1). Options which when explored revealed a need for questionable, deceptive behaviour on the part of the researcher, were not progressed. Brief documents were issued to each student explaining the research – this consisted of an information sheet, shown at Appendix B and a consent form, shown at Appendix C.

In order to ensure anonymity, quotes from participants which are included in the research report are referenced only by the conversation number, rather than the gender, course or year of study of the student. The focus group findings are reported by quoting simply from student I, II or III. The data gathered have been grouped and interpreted under emerging themes, rather than by 'type' of student. The conversations and the focus group were audio recorded with the permission of participants. None seemed at all concerned about the recording, which was carried out on the researcher's phone (occasionally with the student's assistance). The students' names and email addresses are cross referenced to the conversation numbers in one document which is held on the university's secure servers and will be destroyed 6 months after completion of this doctoral study. All participants were offered a copy of the thesis (seven of the thirteen who took part said they would be interested to receive a copy).

5.4 The sample

In line with the IPA approach chosen, a purposive sampling method was employed. This ensured that all participants had experience of the phenomenon being explored, in this sense they represent a perspective rather than a population (Smith et al., 2009). The assumption made was that those students who choose to act as student ambassadors would be most likely to have developed a relationship with their university. Therefore the member of staff who oversees the training and management of the student ambassadors was approached and asked for assistance. An email invitation was sent, on behalf of the researcher, to see if student ambassadors would like to take part in the research (see Appendix D) and all those who responded were invited to take part. The researcher had not previously met any of the student ambassadors who took part in the research. A further email invitation was sent to invite those who had taken part in the first stage of field work to join a focus group (see Appendix F).

As outlined in 1.9.2 above, student ambassadors are recruited by universities to assist with student recruitment activities. They work at events such as open days, and post-application visit days, offering a student's perspective on the university, rather than an 'official' one. The great benefit for potential students, and their parents, who are visiting an institution is that they can speak to the ambassadors and ask questions that they might not feel comfortable addressing to a member of staff. Student ambassadors are generally paid for their time, and receive training regarding key points about their university.

Thirteen students took part in the research - one pilot and twelve subsequent conversations were held - eight of the students were female and five male. While interviewing a greater number of students could result in extra data, it was felt that no additional insight would be gained from an increased number of conversations. This was confirmed through a focus group, held around ten months after the initial fieldwork had taken place (three of the original students were available to take part in this discussion) when no new themes were identified. Mature students were not included in the sample (ie those over twenty-one years of age) though one student had taken a break before coming to university and was slightly older than traditional school or college leavers. The courses being studied ranged across disciplines and included: social sciences, science, engineering, arts, business and humanities.

Table 2 Details of Sample

Subject	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Social Sciences	X		X
Science		X	
Engineering		X	
Humanities	X	X	XX
Arts		X	
Business	X X		X

The students were from first years to final years, and included one who had recently begun Master's studies having just completed an undergraduate programme at the same university. This provided a useful cross section of students, but was not engineered. It reinforces the diversity of the ambassadors who work for the university; they come from courses in all areas, and from every year of study (see Table 2 above).

5.5 The role of the researcher

The issue of the researcher's role in the research is often a concern in qualitative research, and there is debate about whether it is possible for them to be a neutral force as they carry out any study. Phenomenological approaches endeavour to address this through use of the phenomenological reduction, or epoché (see 4.4.3), though those following an existential path would argue that this is not possible (Langdridge, 2007, p. 25). More general guidance on qualitative methods mirrors this sentiment and holds that: "The researcher as a person becomes an important part of any research situation in qualitative research" (Flick, 2007, p. 28). This of course links back to the themes explored in Chapter four, if our world view is that reality is socially constructed, then the researcher cannot undertake research without having some influence on the people taking part in the research, and thus the outcomes of it. Therefore: "When collecting data, researchers need to think about their roles and the way they affect the research process" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011, p. 166). Just as in quantitative surveys administered by interviewers, there is the possibility that the students in the sample might react to the researcher's characteristics, both those that are directly observable, such as gender, age and so on, and those "that are not directly observable" (Schaeffer, Dykema, & Maynard, 2010, p. 439). This potential issue was addressed in the introduction to the conversations, and the focus group, when each student was thanked for helping a fellow student, in the hope that this would help frame the conversation as being between two equal parties, rather than a definitely older and possibly more 'powerful' researcher asking students questions. This is in line with advice to interviewers on how to reduce the impact of any desire to give the 'correct' answer. This is described as "social desirability bias (the tendency to present oneself in a favourable light)" (Tourangeau & Bradburn, 2010, p. 317). To avoid such effects researchers are advised to:

> …frame questions in less threatening manners, train interviewers to be nonjudgmental in asking items and responding to answers, and use modes that reduce self-presentation bias (Smith, 2010, p. 743).

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the very act of asking students to reflect on their experience may have altered their perceptions of their relationships with the university. Also, despite the best of intentions, the researcher remains a human being who, in common with all others in a constructionist view of the world will have "…their own understandings, their own convictions, their own conceptual orientations; they, too, are members of a particular culture at a specific historical moment" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 8). Additionally, in recording and interpreting the conversations held with students within this document, there has been an alteration of the form in which the conversations took place. This has been described in terms of work by ethnographers (Geertz, 1993) as follows:

> The ethnographer "inscribes" social discourse; *he writes it down.* In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted (Geertz, 1993, p. 19).

It should be remembered therefore that the descriptions provided by the students reflected their individual experiences at a certain point in time. The focus group, which took place around ten months after the initial conversations demonstrated no significant differences in their descriptions. However, if asked to reflect on this at a much later date, perhaps after leaving the university, their recollections might be different – altered perhaps by their own new and different experiences.

5.6 Data collection

Data collection followed qualitative methods. In line with an interpretivist approach, the researcher adopted the position of 'traveller' (Kvale, 2009) during the fieldwork. This means that the researcher encouraged participants to tell their own stories, as opposed to adopting a 'data miner' approach, 'digging out' hidden information (Kvale, 2009). In-depth conversations, with individuals, were chosen as the initial method of data collection, followed up by a small focus group around ten months after the initial interviews. This was because each student was consulted as an expert in respect of his or her own experiences so face to face conversations allowed the researcher to concentrate on them as an individual. The step of bringing the students together after some time had elapsed allowed the researcher to establish whether the themes mentioned had changed over time.

5.7 The conversations

The researcher's interactions with the students in this research are described as conversations, rather than interviews. This terminology has been adopted in order to reinforce that the process of gathering data, was as far as possible (with the provisos outlined in 5.5 above), undertaken through a conversation in which the students are the experts, rather than the students being interviewed by an 'expert' researcher. In conducting the conversations with students, as guided by the IPA approach, the researcher aimed to encourage the students to talk with as little prompting as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The conversation with each individual student was approached in a way which, it was hoped, would facilitate a structured monologue. While a conversation guide was developed (see Appendix E), it was exactly that, simply a guide, to provide a simple structure for the conversations. It did not influence the elements within the topics that the students chose to cover. At no point did the conversations turn into interviews, or question and answer sessions.

Each conversation (except one) began with the researcher thanking the student for their help with her research. This proved to be an extremely effective ice-breaker, particularly with the students in their final year who were beginning work on their own dissertations. The one instance where this did not occur was during the first conversation following the pilot when the researcher talked through the paperwork around the research before beginning the conversation. This formality meant that it then took several minutes before the student appeared to become comfortable with the conversation. From this point onwards the formalities and paperwork were discussed at the end of each conversation (and were prefaced by the explanation that they as fellow students would soon be – or already had been – issuing such paperwork in respect of their own research). This faux pas provided a useful reference point for the researcher in that it offered reassurance that she was able to judge when a student was or was not comfortable with the conversation, having seen when a student clearly was not comfortable. All students were asked if they were happy for the conversation to be recorded, to avoid the need for copious note taking, and all agreed without hesitation. The recordings were made on the researcher's mobile phone which was simply placed on the desk between the student and the researcher and then ignored by both parties.

The topics in the conversation guide were:

- Have you ever felt attached to a club/society/organisation?
- Do you feel you belong at/are attached to the university? What has led you to feel like this? What are your experiences of belonging?
- Did you visit on an open day, what were your feelings then?
- How do you use social media in your studies/university social life?
- How would you feel if someone criticised your university?
- Can you put the sense of belonging you feel into words, can you describe it? How would you describe it to a friend?
- Is there anything the university should be doing to help foster a sense of belonging or attachment?

These were not raised in any particular order, and in fact in most cases were covered by the students in conversation about how they felt about being at the university without any intervention.

A brief summary of each conversation, to demonstrate the key issues raised, is given at the start of Chapter six, and simply indicates the broad subject area the student is part of. These summaries have been included to provide a sense of each individual conversation (in line with the idiographic approach).

The conversations took place in the researcher's office at the university. The office is neither large nor imposing, and is not personalised as it is used as a meeting space by all members of the department. All the students seemed completely at ease in the environment.

As has been outlined, the research seeks to explore the individual student's experiences, by asking them to describe these in a conversation with the researcher. It is therefore clear that the 'experts' in this situation are the students themselves, rather than the researcher, who as discussed, endeavoured to ensure that her own professional experience and knowledge did not influence the flow of the conversations. In view of this, and the inductive nature of the qualitative approach, it was judged appropriate to alter the initial conversation guide in light of the first reactions to it – rather than persisting with offering a structure that was not considered helpful by the first students involved in the research.

5.7.1 Amending the conversation guide

Small changes to the conversation guide were made following the pilot interview. A theme about how the students imagined they would feel if they heard someone criticising the university was added. Additionally a reminder was included for the researcher to ask what the university might not be doing that could have a positive effect on the students' experience. In terms of the experience of the university, it appeared during most of the conversations that most students reflected on their initial impressions during an open day. Therefore as the conversation schedule progressed the researcher asked about open day impressions if the student did not volunteer this. Lastly, if a student struggled to think about how they might put their feelings regarding their experience into words the researcher, as a prompt, asked them how they might describe it to a friend. The fact that the research design allowed these changes to be made demonstrates the strength of the chosen inductive approach and its suitability for this particular research in that it emphasises the need to focus on what the particular individuals involved in the research are saying, rather than asking for their responses to pre-defined variables.

5.8 The focus group

Following analysis of the students' descriptions of their experiences, and the researcher's increasing understanding of the relevance of theories of place attachment it was felt appropriate to hold a follow up focus group. This provided an opportunity to check that the themes identified in the initial conversations remained significant to the students. All those who had taken part in the conversations were invited to take part. Five agreed, but on the day of the focus group only three attended. However, the discussion within this small group did serve to reinforce the themes raised in the previous conversations, and to expand one particular theme considerably. The invitation to the focus group, and the introduction made by the researcher are given at Appendix F. The researcher's office is not large enough to host a focus group so it was held in the Students' Union offices. This location was chosen rather than a classroom to provide a more relaxed setting. The discussion was recorded, with the permission of those attending.

5.9 Transcription

All transcription was undertaken by the researcher, as it was felt to be an important part of the process of understanding the students' perspective. Had this been a much larger study this may have been logistically impossible, but it was judged to be appropriate within a research design which sought to gain a greater understanding of how a purposive sample of students experience things. Undertaking the transcription personally, and as soon as possible after each conversation, allowed the researcher to immediately reflect on what each student had raised. This also facilitated alterations to the conversation guide before the next conversation was undertaken, though this was not required after the first couple of conversations, due to the unstructured nature of the guide. In order to document the conversations in their 'new' written format rather than retaining an exact representation of the words spoken (Creswell, 2013) some filler words such as 'you know', 'like' and 'I think' were removed during transcription before documents were sent to the students for checking. This was judged to be an appropriate intervention as there was no intention to conduct discourse analysis of the conversations. Discourse analysis requires a detailed analysis of every element of the conversation, including silences, intonation and so on (Langdridge, 2007). Such an approach is built upon the view of "… language as a mediator of social means, whereby its active use serves to unify the internal and external world…" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011, p. 182) and these concerns lie beyond the current research. All transcripts were emailed to the students within a day or two of the conversation asking them to notify the researcher of any amendments they would like to have made. None of the students made any changes to a transcript.

A reflective log was kept which allowed the researcher to record immediate strong impressions from each conversation. This was useful when compiling the brief description of each conversation as it served as a reminder of the researcher's first interpretation of each student's description. This might otherwise have been lost in the work to draw together themes from the conversations. The log therefore played an important role in allowing an idiographic focus to be included in the discussion of the findings. No coding was undertaken until the final interview had been completed, in order to maintain the researcher's commitment to neutrality, as discussed above.

The focus group was also transcribed by the researcher. Coding was undertaken in exactly the same manner as for the conversations, see section 5.10 below.

5.10 Data analysis

While some qualitative researchers involve participants in commenting on the transcripts as part of the analysis this approach was not taken as it is felt that the students had already contributed what they wished to by agreeing to take part in the research (King & Horrocks, 2010).

As the researcher wished to remain 'close to' the thoughts and experiences of the students the analysis was undertaken without the aid of computer software packages. Had there been a larger team working on the research, and had there been any intention of being able to provide quantitative data regarding the content of the conversations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2011, p. 186) this approach would not have been practical. However in this instance, personal transcription by the researcher suited the ethos of the research being undertaken, ie that experts (the students) were sharing their knowledge with an individual researcher. Each transcript was re-read twice before any analysis began, and the recording was re-played to ensure that the tone of voice of each student was fresh in the researcher's mind. After this, coding began. Coding was undertaken by noting, in the margins of a printed copy of each conversation, striking themes or issues that were raised. There was no attempt to organise the themes from the conversations into over-arching concepts until each conversation had been considered in its own right.

Following the initial steps outlined above, the process of looking for common themes began. In order to achieve this, the 'concept cards' technique developed from grounded theory approaches (Prasad, 1993) was utilised. The concept cards are created by grouping themes (and the relevant quotes to illustrate these themes) into documents, or concept cards, which are then given an overarching title (or concept name). This technique was selected as the research did not set out to count codes (Creswell, 2013, p. 185) and it fitted with the general guidance on conducting interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

While the coding of the focus group took place after concepts had been identified, the same approach was taken. If new concepts had emerged they would have prompted the researcher to re-visit the original conversation transcripts to check whether any topics had been overlooked. This was not necessary as no new concepts emerged from the focus group.

5.11 Quality and reliability

As discussed in Chapter four above, qualitative research methods are usually employed by researchers with a particular ontological, and epistemological view. In view of the differences, between this approach and that of those operating in line with a positivist ontology, it is unsurprising that concerns regarding the quality and reliability of the findings of research vary between the two camps. However, for research to be considered trustworthy, and capable of making a contribution to academic knowledge, it must conform to standards established within its own ontological and epistemological framework. Thus, while there are different approaches to qualitative research, there are also recognised characteristics that help those consulting the findings of such research to be confident that the research has been carried out in an appropriate manner, and that its findings can be relied upon (Creswell, 2013; Ezzy, 2002; Flick, 2007; Yardley, 2000).

These judgements must be made with cognisance of the boundaries within which qualitative research is undertaken. In order to demonstrate how the research findings detailed in this thesis fit within these boundaries it is helpful to revisit the concerns of qualitative research which were first outlined in Chapter four, above. This summary of the shared concerns of qualitative research practitioners is drawn from what are described as "... those concerns that have traditionally animated qualitative research" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). In the list that follows each is linked to the conduct of the research.

- Scepticism:

  Qualitative research is based on the premise that "… conventional appraisals, especially systematic quantitative assessments, fail to appreciate the nuances of the social world" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 11). It is this awareness of a lack of understanding of how the students themselves experience their relationships with their university which led the researcher to adopt a qualitative approach. This has been undertaken in order to widen and deepen the knowledge of this phenomenon, prompted by the increasing number of quantitative surveys measuring different aspects of researcher-defined elements of their experiences.

- Close scrutiny:

  Qualitative research involves a focus on the detail of the phenomenon being studied. This often involves direct contact with those who are experiencing the phenomenon. This enables the researcher to document the experience itself, as observed by them, or, as described by those they speak to. This approach does not look to survey large numbers in order to gain measurements, and it does not seek to gain findings that can be generalised. These concerns led to the choice of IPA as a method of data collection and analysis, as it allows a focus on individuals who have experience of the phenomenon being researched, and it is an idiographic approach – within which findings from each individual in the sample are equally important.

- Searching for the qualities of social life:

  Qualitative research actively seeks to offer descriptions of social behaviour, based on the premise that "… we must have a good, clear picture of the qualities of the world before we can attempt to explain it, let alone predict or modify it" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 11). There is no doubt that a model which allows marketing departments to accurately predict the 'best' messaging for potential students would be extremely useful – however, this thesis argues that a qualitative approach, to establish how students themselves describe the phenomenon of their relationships is a necessary step, before such a predictive model could begin to be developed (though this might not be achievable given the personal and intangible nature of the students' descriptions).

- Focus on process:

  Qualitative research is conducted from a viewpoint that accepts that our social life is continually being constructed by each of us, influenced by our own past, present and future plans, and by the actions of those around us. That is to say it is "… distinguished by a commitment to studying social life in process, as it unfolds" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 12). While different qualitative approaches study this from different perspectives, this remains a fundamental tenet of all of them. It is the lack of this understanding of how individual students' experiences at university unfold, and the impact that it has on them as individuals, that led to the work undertaken in this thesis.

- Appreciation of subjectivity:

  The roots of qualitative research are, as has been seen in Chapter four, based in an understanding that social life is by its nature subjective. The phenomenological technique of 'bracketing' offers researchers an approach by which they can endeavour to remove their own subjectivity from their investigations, though there are those, following the view of Heidegger, who would feel this is actually unachievable (see 4.4.3). The research which is presented in this thesis has been undertaken in sympathy with this stance, that is to say the researcher has endeavoured to avoid influencing outcomes or conversations with those involved, but accepts that by the very fact of asking students to describe their experiences she may have altered the way in which they think about them.

- Tolerance for complexity:

  Qualitative approaches accept that, due to the complexities of the human subjects that are most often the subject of research in this discipline, outcomes will often be complex, and un-generalisable. This is not a failing on the part of the research, but almost to be expected: "... qualitative inquiry accommodates and pursues the problematic finding or the unanticipated occurrence" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 13). Such approaches allow individual experiences to be explored and to be accepted as being equally valid as those that are experienced by perhaps a greater number of those involved in any particular sample.

It is therefore argued that a 'good quality' piece of qualitative research should be judged by those measures accepted within the discipline of qualitative research, not by criteria drawn from a quantitative perspective. A concern for achieving this quality was present throughout the research, from its design through to the selection of the sample, the researcher's engagement with the student in the sample and of course during data analysis and the presentation of findings. The research endeavours to take an approach that can be recognised as undertaking 'good quality' qualitative research that is 'methodologically rigorous' (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

Within the boundaries of those elements that define qualitative research, as outlined above, the over-riding concerns for this research were to achieve the following goals: "Sensitivity to context", "Commitment and rigour", "Transparency and coherence" and "Impact and importance" (Yardley, 2000). The commentary which follows demonstrates how these goals have been addressed.

Sensitivity to context – is demonstrated here through the work undertaken to review the relevant literature, maintaining an awareness of ethical issues throughout the fieldwork and writing up of results. Importantly also, respecting the expertise of those who took part in the research. This is driven by the researcher's awareness of the lack of similar work, and indeed her frustration as a marketing practitioner, that such information has not been available.

Commitment and rigour – undertaking research so closely related to the researcher's professional role means that it has been part of much reflective consideration throughout the span of the research, and has continued to influence her professional practice as it has progressed. The research forms part of the requirements of a DBA programme and as such must meet the academic standards required. Additionally its future impact will help shape marketing work undertaken at the university, and impact on the researcher's professional reputation.

Transparency and coherence – the goal of undertaking this research is that the description of the gap in knowledge, the journey to gaining extra knowledge about the phenomenon, and the fit between the theory being explored and the methods used has created a coherent representation of how a group of students describe their experiences. The researcher's aim is that the interpretations suggested are clear enough for readers to be able to agree, or disagree with them.

Impact and importance – the research has enriched the researcher's understanding of the students' experiences. It is hoped that the model employed to map these experiences will provide a practical framework for use in future marketing work. However, in line with the qualitative approach adopted it must be emphasised that every individual student will experience things slightly differently, based on their own history and prior experiences.

5.12 Chapter summary

In this chapter the method employed to gather data required for this research has been described. The approach taken, that of interpretive phenomenological analysis, has been introduced, and the way in which this has been used in these particular research circumstances has been explained. Through clarity about the methods employed, and how transcription of the conversations was undertaken, the fieldwork undertaken has been shown to have been approached in a way that meets ethical considerations, and is in line with best practice for qualitative methods. Chapter six provides analysis of the data that were collected.

6 Chapter six - Analysis

Introduction

In this chapter the analysis and interpretation of the conversations and the focus group held with the students in the sample is presented. Where appropriate the students' descriptions have been grouped into categories which represent the researcher's interpretation of the themes they raised. In line with the qualitative research approach taken there has been no attempt to count the number of occurrences of a particular opinion or statement, or measure the strength of feelings. The research focus is on exploring "…the many differences and varieties of a phenomenon…" (Kvale, 2009, p. 12). Therefore each student's views have been judged as equally important as the others. If something is raised by only one student it is still included in the discussion below.

The analysis and interpretation of the conversations and focus group are presented without reference to existing research. These links are discussed in the following chapter. An alternative method of reporting the students' descriptions would have been to present each theme alongside a discussion of how it relates to existing research in the same chapter (Smith et al., 2009). This alternative method was not chosen as the researcher wished to focus first on the students' descriptions, in order to emphasise the role that the students have played – that is to say that the students themselves are the experts on this topic. Therefore, it is felt to be appropriate to allow their descriptions to take 'centre stage' for this important part of the thesis. Additionally, the students' experiences are complex things, from which themes cannot necessarily be described in isolation. Therefore, Chapter seven discusses which elements, and combinations of elements, from the students' experiences relate to existing academic research.

6.1 Overview

It immediately became clear, during the fieldwork, that individual students attribute their relationship with the university, their feelings of attachment or sense of belonging, to different areas of their experiences. Each student began describing their relationship in relation to a different aspect of their experience. For example some talked first about their friends (whether in halls, on their course or through social activities); their course; the campus; the town; or the experience that university provided them with (this is illustrated in the outline of each conversation, given below).

During the fieldwork, the students were asked to attempt to put their feelings of belonging into words, to describe what belonging feels like. While they could talk about the experience of being at the university, and what they liked, or didn't like about it, in the main they were unable to describe exactly what had caused them to develop the feelings they described. This reinforced the researcher's original premise that there are intangible factors at play, that there is 'just something about the place' that is not currently put into words. The analysis below explores how the students described their experiences of belonging at the university, how they talked about the different aspects listed above and includes the words they used when they endeavoured to describe their feelings. By grouping the themes together the researcher has begun a process of interpretation, however, links to existing research and theories are not undertaken until Chapter seven, as discussed above.

Before the range of themes raised by the students is outlined, and in line with an idiographic approach (Smith, 2004), a brief outline of how each student initially approached the description of their own sense of belonging is given below. The range of descriptions in this first step of analysis clearly illustrates the variety of the students' experiences.

Pilot conversation

This student felt attachment very strongly, and had a clear example of how they had felt attachment in other circumstances too. The reference point for feeling a sense of attachment was through involvement in sports, both in terms of the current attachment to the university, and as an example of the situation in which they had felt attachment previously. The student employed quite an emotional vocabulary to explain their feelings. Passion was mentioned. During this conversation students' reactions when they hear criticism of their university was introduced (something that was subsequently added into the conversation guide). For this student such criticism 'almost hurt'. The student used Facebook all the time to make social arrangements (and for course arrangements too). This engagement with social media was described in terms of being just something that everyone does, part of everyday behaviour.

Conversation one

This student did not describe having felt attached elsewhere. They referenced the surrounding environment as well as the university itself. This conversation focussed around the importance of feeling comfortable and feeling at home. The student was involved through course first and foremost and liked having the freedom to make their own decisions. A positive in forming an attachment to the university was that it is a small place which they felt means that students can be known and recognised, rather than anonymous. The student felt that the course was very supportive, and was structured in a way that each student offered support for peers in different years too. This formed an important part of their sense of attachment to the institution.

Conversation two

This volunteer was a mature student (ie an adult returner to education). As the research is concerned with the experiences of full-time home undergraduates who have recently progressed from school or college this student's input was not included in the analysis.

Conversation three

This student's sense of belonging was formed through social activities, not the course itself, though these were not sporting societies. The social clubs have provided opportunities to take part in things the student didn't ever think they would experience. They also mentioned feeling at home at the university.   The issue of feeling pride and excitement in what the student was being able to experience through the social clubs was raised. The student had visited the university before making the decision to come and had judged it to be a 'nice place to be' (referring to both the town centre and the university itself). However, the student arrived at university knowing that only they could make it work, and so very deliberately got on with meeting people to make sure that it did work for them.

Conversation four

This student's previous (and continuing) sense of belonging is to their home town – where their family is - and was illustrated by them giving the example of supporting their local football team. Their sense of belonging to the university is focussed on their course, and due to the fact that the university provides them with access to expensive equipment. Friends have been formed around both course and accommodation. They had not had a particularly good experience of sports/social clubs. This student had a definite sense that university is what you make of it: "Because you could go to the best university in the world but learn nothing if you didn't put anything into it, or you could go to the worst and take the most out of it."

Conversation five

This student put their sense of belonging down to the geographical location of the university. Because it is close to town centre they felt that students can become integrated and involved with life in the town. The student feels a strong connection to the town itself. "... I think there is something to be said for people of a certain place acting a certain way and people from xxxx are just genuinely friendly and I think that's it."

This student was one of the few who could put their feeling about the university into words, and described the university as ‘accepting, warm and interesting’.

Conversation six

This student had initially retained an attachment to the sports clubs and friends from home as they didn’t move away to attend university. This had recently changed as they had taken a deliberate decision to get more involved in university life.   The student mentioned a sense of pride at both their studies, and at being part of the university. It was university life itself - the privilege of being a student that this student particularly valued. They valued being part of the place and having the right to be on campus and use the library. Although the student lived close to the university they had never dared come on to campus before enrolling as a student.

Conversation seven

This student’s attachment manifested itself in a sense of pride at being at the university. Their sense of belonging was linked to both the university and to their course. They did not have an example of where they had felt belonging before. The student raised a negative view of social media, where people boast about how much work they are doing which can be disheartening/worrying.

Conversation eight

The student felt that their attachment to the university was due to it seeming ‘homely’ and ‘friendly’. This meant that the student felt ‘comfortable’. The size of the town and the university and their location together were what created this sense for them.   They also felt attachment to their course, friends and flatmates. They felt part of the community at the university and explained this by giving the example that they if they were lost they felt they could ask fellow students for help, despite not actually knowing them.

Conversation nine

The student said that they had felt they belonged at the university as soon as they came for a visit, in contrast to others that they visited. “I didn’t want to move to like a big city or anything like that so I think the town rather than a city sort of atmosphere helped but, yes I don’t know what it is about it.” They were very happy with their course. Interestingly, they had not been happy in student accommodation, but that didn’t put them off the town itself or the course. This student raised the fact that social media can have negative effects – that people behave differently in cyberspace than they do in person (they gave the example that people can be friendly on-line but then go on to ignore someone in person).

Conversation ten

This student had not found university to be what they had expected and said it was “a lot quieter than I wanted it to be”. The student was living at home and commuting in. They initially said that they did not feel a sense of belonging to anything other than the physical buildings – and in fact they said that their reason for choosing the university was down to the newness of the building they would be based in, and the fact that it was part of the main campus, not separate from it. As the conversation went on the student did describe how they do feel a small sense of attachment to the university, and explained that in their prior experience attachments form rather slowly, so taking time to feel attached to the university was not unusual in terms of them personally.

Conversation eleven

This student's sense of belonging comes from the people they have met while at university. And all the "stuff that surrounds the course". The student demonstrated a very clear sense of enjoyment in the choices they had made, and their love of the subjects they had chosen to study. The subjects were the key focus for this student, and formed a strong part of their future plans.

Conversation twelve

This student focussed on how being at university allowed them to gain a sense of independence. They felt that being away from home allows you to be yourself and take part in lots of new and different activities. They also considered it to be important that they could feel comfortable at the institution. The student liked the fact that they felt that students at the university can feel themselves to be part of the place rather than just a number.

Conversation thirteen

This student had had a difficult start to their time at university in that they didn't initially feel happy. This had changed once they made friends in halls, so that was where their attachment started and now they feel that the town itself feels comfortable, that it feels student centred. The student explained that at first, when they didn't like their course, the thing that kept them at the university was their friends. If friendships hadn't been formed then it was quite likely that they would have dropped out. The majority of this conversation focussed around the student's feelings for the town and how it compares favourably with other places they have experience of.

6.2 Concepts

The themes raised by the students during the fieldwork have been grouped into the following overarching concepts: network and infrastructure; behaviours, and feelings:

Network and infrastructure

- Location – the town
- Experience of the campus

Behaviours

- Determination to succeed
- It's what you make it

Feelings

- 'It's part of me' or 'I'm part of it'
- Emotions
- It feels homely/It is my home

Interestingly, at first sight most of these concepts refer to things that a university has little control over, except the experience of the campus itself. As the concepts are explored during this chapter, brief reference will be made with regard to the possible implications they may have for universities' marketing activity. This approach has been taken as the thesis is in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a DBA qualification and seeks to influence professional practice. The issue of whether any of the points can be measured, and therefore monitored, will also be considered (that is to say, whether the phenomena are tangible or intangible).

6.3 Network and infrastructure

6.3.1 Location, the town

The town within which the university is located was a factor for several students, both in their choice of where to come to study, and in the feelings of attachment that they developed once they arrived.

> Really 90% of it in my mind is you're moving to a new place, it's just like if you move there for a new job, or for whatever reasons, you've got to think about the place (Conversation 5, page 12).

This student also felt that the connection between the institution and the town it is located in was very important:

> xxxx for example going back to where my brother goes to school, you'll have a city with its own culture and its own thing and then the university as a completely separate entity, like you go to uni but the uni will not extend its reach and it won't integrate with things that are going on in the city whereas xxxx always does (Conversation 5, page 13).

One student felt that the type of town in which the university is located might influence the type of student who chose to attend:

> …because xxxx isn't as big as somewhere like xxxx or xxxx so maybe you get more students coming here who actually want to do the course rather than come here because the nightlife's really good (Conversation 7, pp.17-18).

The location of the university, in a 'small' town was cited as the cause of a lack of attachment by two students. One who had gone on to become attached to the university, through the course and through friends, and one who was still waiting for this to happen, but who had developed an attachment to elements of the university's campus.

> I thought it would be more busier, it's a town for starters and it's a lot quieter here, it's a bit of a ghost town to be honest, a lot quieter than I wanted it to be (Conversation 10, pp.3-4).

> I was going to drop out at one point towards the beginning because I really wasn't enjoying being in xxxx and I think because it is so small it can be quite isolating sometimes like - you're in the middle of no-where and there's just fields and there's not a lot to do and I just felt like I need to go somewhere more busy (Conversation 13, page 4).

In the focus group the students did not judge the town itself as important to their experience, other than to mention that students are very visible:

> Student I: and we've got town and even when you walk into town you know the students are there and you know whether it's at the top of town or just in xxxx there's always going to be students everywhere (Focus group: page 27).

Implications for marketing actions: Aside from a strategic decision to relocate a university there is little that an institution can do regarding the physical of the location of its campus. However, there are initiatives that can be introduced to compensate for the 'failings' of a small town such as organising social events, and working collaboratively with the institution's Students' Union and/or key partners in the local area. There is of course an opposite and equal danger in any such action, as some students may have chosen an institution precisely because it is located in such an environment.

6.3.2 Experience of the campus

The physical elements of the campus were mentioned by several students. The size of the campus, and its layout (at the university the students attend, everything is within one campus, students do not have to travel between campuses, or cross main roads to get from one building to another) seemed to play a role in their feelings of attachment. "I like the idea that the buildings are all close together, because I like here because of that" (Conversation 4, page 14). It was also felt important that the campus offered everything that was needed:

> But the other thing I like about the university itself is it's a campus university and it's all in one place other universities are quite spread out over towns and cities whereas this one you're at the uni, you're in the uni environment everything you need is here so if you go from class to class you're going to be in the same 5 minute radius (Conversation 13, page 10).

One student described how they had felt on a visit to campus, before they began their studies: "… the whole campus as a whole seemed a lot more homely, more friendly, than, because it's a bit of a smaller campus,…" (Conversation 8, page 1). This feeling was shared by another who described an experience at open days at larger universities:

> … the bigger universities like xxxx and I think - you know how they say in a crowd, that's when you feel the loneliest - and I just felt I was a bit of an ant and there were so many people … (Conversation 1, page 3).

This had led the student to choose what they classed as a smaller university, where they didn't feel just part of the crowd:

> I think that here because it's so small you see the same familiar faces, like even in the library if you come at a certain time every day you get to know the security staff as well and it's like 'oh hello' (Conversation 1, page 3).

This wish not to be lost in a crowd was echoed in another conversation, where the student had again made a choice based on university size:

> I think it's because, again I think it's more to do with the size because I came from a small, a 200 person Sixth Form before and I didn't want to go to a huge, huge university because I'd just feel like I was insignificant (Conversation 8, page 6).

This seemed to link to other students' feelings that the atmosphere on campus was 'friendly':

> it it's just more friendly, everybody's really friendly you know you'll just walk around, I think walking round and then seeing people that you know there's always somebody - you can't walk through uni and not know anybody and I think that's really nice, people are welcoming, and they'll just smile at you as you're walking past or, whereas I think in a lot of places you don't get that (Pilot, pp 4-5).

During the focus group discussion this theme was raised by the students and discussed at length. The topics of friendliness and the campus being in one location were raised as they had been in several of the conversations. However a new angle on this was introduced, and that was that the types of buildings on campus were seen as reflecting the 'type' of university the institution is.

> Student II: it might mirror though in some way the diversity that we have here, whereas the traditional unis you go to you might make an assumption of its targetting a particular –
>
> Student I: yes that's what I was thinking …
>
> Student II: - whereas here I don't feel it targets any specific audience, you know whereas in families there's like the traditional middle class or working or, I don't think this campus does that" (Focus group, page 5).

> Student II: It's not traditional. I loved the sense of tradition at universities, that's how I pictured it in my head growing up, traditional ...
>
> ... when it actually came to seeing them all I much preferred the buildings and how they were put together and how they represented something that was modern, progressive, diverse and trying to accommodate for the different ethnicities and that became important to me when I was selecting a university, it wasn't the traditional side (Focus group, pp 17-18).

During the conversations the researcher asked students whether they had attended an open day at the university, when they had not raised this themselves. She asked what their reactions had been to that experience (but did not prompt them to consider any particular aspect of the visit). This led to two different types of responses, with some students focussing on the course and the academics they met, with others focussing on the facilities that they saw. These answers related to the way in which the students articulated their attachment to the university now that they have joined the university. For example, a student who wasn't feeling very attached to the overall university experience described attachment to the academic school, and it was the building in which that school is housed that had influenced their choice to attend:

> I saw the xxx school and I was just like, wow this is nice because it was so big and open and new building and just looked really good and it felt good, I think I'm more attached to the xxx school than anything else, that's the best thing about it… (Conversation 10, page 22).

Another felt that attachment developed from the access to facilities they used as a student, and the issue of swipe access card:

> …because with me being a xxxx student, the equipment is quite expensive and things, so the university allows me to use the xxxx xxxx and their equipment, … (Conversation 4, page 2).

and:

> …the fact that the university has it, [swipe card entry] makes you feel, although it can be a pain at times…, it can make you feel more part of it because you have that card… (Conversation 4, page 14).

Implications for marketing actions: The upkeep of a campus, the type of buildings, the use of space and the facilities provided are all within universities' control. This is one area where it should be possible to introduce quantitative measures to judge changes that might introduce tangible differences to the student experience. Given the discussion in the Focus Group regarding the campus buildings offering a representation of the 'type' of institution that the university might be, future estates developments, and the choice of imagery in marketing material should be reflected on carefully to consider their impact on corporate image.

6.4 Behaviours

6.4.1 Determination to succeed

While many of the issues raised by students during the conversations were things that the researcher had experienced before, the strength of their determination to succeed, and their realisation that this was up to them was striking. "…in the first year I made sure I did well. Learnt what I needed to and I plan to continue that this year …" (Conversation 3, page 7). A student who had not initially been feeling part of the university described the deliberate steps taken to change that:

> …by the time second year came round I thought right I've got to turn this round now, because I've got two more years and if I don't I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life so I had to make that choice and it was really difficult at first to push myself out there and make new friends and applying for ambassador jobs when I was terrified of even doing a campus tour you know but that was just the choice I made because I'm paying for this, literally

> paying for this with money and with time so I have to make the most of it at the end of the day and it's paid off more than I can explain really (Conversation 9, page 13).

Being given the space in which to be independent is an important issue for some students, for example:

> I think there's that many people and different things, you can attach yourself on to others or make your own, at uni you've got the opportunity to go and if you see something you think should be done you've got the opportunity to do it, so I think it really does push again that broad independence scale again coming in at uni (Conversation 12, page 8).

The issue of location can also play a role in this – with a university needing to be just far enough away, but perhaps not too far:

> I wanted to move away I could like be independent I knew if I'd gone to university in xxxx, like the college was next door so I could live at home get the bus or drive in and I didn't feel like I'd have a real university experience living so close to home. I can travel back, it's only an hour and a half, it's not that bad, but I'm still far enough away to be independent on my own, which is something I quite like (Conversation 13, page 5).

Implications for marketing actions: Transmitting messages which appeal to students' sense of determination is likely to be attractive to those who share this attitude. The challenge will be gaining an awareness of how this is best communicated – as it is once again likely to be a deeply personal issue. While this is an intangible element one aspect of success might be quantifiable – in terms of graduate outcomes - though this area was not raised by the students during the conversations.

6.4.2 It's what you make it

In addition to a determination to succeed and a focus on the independence gained through university life another theme came through several of the conversations, which has been grouped under the phrase 'it's what you make it'. The students were clear that it is their responsibility to fit in socially:

> … but I think it's up to yourself, if you tell yourself 'I don't belong' no one will actually invite you, you have to take your own approach and take your own stance and put yourself out there, no one will ever come up to you and say 'do you want to do this', 'do you want to do that', you have to be confident and put yourself out there that's what I think, that's what I've learnt growing up (Conversation 1, page 6).

Making the most of the time in studying was also raised:

> … it's what you make of it, if you try hard then you'll probably get the most out of it. Because you could go the best university in the world but learn nothing if you didn't put anything into it, or you could go to the worst and take the most out of it (Conversation 4, page 8).

Also, the recognition of their own particular circumstances, and what they needed to do to succeed, whether around studying:

> I thought I'm going to be so lazy and out of tune that I need to hit these lessons hard so I went in guns a blazing just because I knew that a year out might turn me into a potato and I might not want to do work again, … (Conversation 5, pp 18-19).

Or around making new friends: "Well I knew coming here I was going to be on my own unless I went out there" (Conversation 3, page 11). This theme also came through in the Focus group discussion:

> Student II: the first week, I mean I wasn't as close to my housemates at xxx, they were, well flat mates, I wasn't, we talked and got on but I wasn't particularly that close to them. But we all did very different things as well so there was little in common but I just, the first week I thought I don't know if I like it and I was just tempted just to go back home to xxxx, pay like maintenance and just travel and I thought no, xxxx, just put that aside and you've got to just embrace it, you know there's lots more, there's your course mates, there's societies there's and I just put that all to the side and I just threw myself in, but I do think there's that's down to the person (Focus group, page 12).

> Student II: you know just go and do it, but once you've done the first one, that's the hardest step and I just say that to students I say just do that one thing and everything else will be a breeze (Focus group, page 14).

> Student I: ...I would say ignore that shy side of you, go out and embrace everything and I think that's what really important when you go to uni, you have to embrace everything, you

> have to talk to everyone and that's how you meet people whether it's on a night out or whether it's just outside lectures or whatever, but that's the way you get to know people.
>
> Student III: you've got to explore (Focus Group, page 15).

Implications for marketing actions: This concept demonstrates the students' individual commitment to fitting in socially. As for the concepts grouped under 'Feelings' below, in order to capture this HE marketing teams could undertake more exploration with current students to understand how best to communicate the type of opportunities that exist for individuals.

6.5 Feelings

6.5.1 'It's part of me', or 'I'm part of it'

During the pilot conversation the student taking part expressed emotions about being at their university, describing the passion they felt. The student had heard a comedian mocking the university and had felt hurt. They described their feelings about the university as:

> it's a place it's not only like where you learn it's just its part of your life for three years and it will be part of your life, well for the rest of your life really … (Pilot conversation, page 6).

Another student was angered by people they heard criticising the university:

> …and it does kind of annoy me when people just sort of fob off xxxx university, it does make me quite angry because I feel like the university is part of myself now because I've been here for such a long time and I feel criticising the university you're criticising me through association really (Conversation 13, page 12).

In a more positive experience, excited by the university's success another student said: "I was like, for my whole life I'm going to telling people that [about the success], and 'go to xxxx'" (Conversation 9, page 4). Another student described their attachment to the university by the way in which they would describe their status to someone else:

> If someone said to me what do you do I'd say I'm a student at the university of xxxx rather than say I live at xxxx because I'm at uni. I kind of put myself into that category of being a student here (Conversation 4, page 8).

This feeling of being part of something can also provide a sense of security:

> For me it feels like I'm part of a little, well not a little, but a community. Well because you may not know people, but if they go to the university I kind of feel like, if I'm lost I could be like 'oh you go to xxxx, so do I, would you be able to tell me where this is? (Conversation 8, page 11).

Implications for marketing actions: This is an area which is intensely personal and often intangible. So much is dependent upon the individual student that it would be difficult to establish measurements which could usefully monitor the types of issues that have been raised here. However, it is just this type of sentiment that alumni societies endeavour to develop and maintain, so the possibility of linking alumni engagement activity with current students could be explored. This might be achieved by making current students more aware of opportunities and benefits that are available to them as alumni. This could stimulate the students' future active engagement with the alumni society once they are graduates, which brings potential benefits around offering work placements, word of mouth recommendation, and potentially becoming a future donor.

6.5.2 Emotions

Often students used emotions to describe their sense of attachment to the university. Pride was an element raised during the conversations, pride both in themselves and in their institution:

> There is an element of pride yes, and what we do is exciting in my eyes, probably not to other people, but yes, it's emotional, but in a good way (Conversation 3, page 2).

> I'd say I'm proud to be studying, I'm proud to be expanding my intellect. I don't know if it would be any different at a different university. I think I have a much bigger attachment to this university to the one in xxxx. Xxxx the experience I enjoyed for the people rather than the studying experience but I've always considered this to be my university (Conversation 6, page 6).

A feeling of pride was raised during the Focus Group discussion too, but this was based on the student's role in the Students' Union rather than the University directly:

> Student I: I think being part of the SU I'm proud of the students. Whereas before I was part of the student body I guess I didn't feel a sense of pride, like I loved being in the university but now being where I am and that I represent the students and that I'm constantly fighting for the students and for the good of the students I feel proud of the students, if a student team wins or a student achieves something I feel that sense of pride now and it makes me happy to see things going on and to see students putting on events (Focus group, page 8).

Feelings about the university experience were also expressed as 'loving' the place, from the very first day. This seems to link to the idea of the institution treating its students as individuals, which had been linked to its size in *Experience of the campus* above.

> I came here the first day and I just loved the whole place. I loved the staff, I loved the feel, it was organised, the whole event, the day was structured, whereas you go to other universities and you do feel more of a number rather than you are the voice, I definitely got that feeling, whereas here, I think you were valued, each and everyone of us … (Conversation 12, page 2).

This was also expressed as a sense of security: "…secure, I would say you're secure … you've got people here supporting you…" (Conversation 12, page 11).

Passion for the university was something that one of the students said they tried to transmit to visitors they met during open days, above and beyond what they recognised as the 'positive attitude' expected of an ambassador:

> I feel passionate, I suppose, especially on open days and things like that when you are putting across, yes, you are supposed to have a sort of positive attitude but like you're trying to portray how passionate you are about the university and how much you love it and the atmosphere, that you have around… (Pilot conversation, page 4).

Strong feelings were also expressed by a student who felt anger if someone criticised the institution: "It is a real emotion for me when someone says something nasty about the university" (Conversation 13, page 13).

Several students mentioned strong feelings connected to their course:

> I feel really part of my course, as in xxxx, I think that's because I enjoy it and when you enjoy something you want to get involved (Conversation 1, page 6).
>
> I really enjoy the course because, it's xxxx and that's what I love so it's I'm attached to it in that aspect… (Conversation 8, page 4).
>
> I absolutely adore my course and because it's quite small, I think there's only about 50 people in my year and while I'm not friends with all of them we all get on, we all know each other's names and things like that, so I think that helps massively, (Conversation 9, page 3).

In the focus group discussion the idea of the need to be part of a 'small' cluster or group of people was raised. The function of belonging to a small group, in which friends are made, was important, though the 'cluster' might form around course, social activity, or a part-time job:

> Student I: I suppose that's what defines the reason you're at uni though doesn't it, again like, sort of putting together this cluster of people who have got a common interest" (Focus group, page 21).

> Student I:"xxxx's a massive course and it's only when you get a module you know where you've got 10-12 people on the actual module that you get that sense of community and you get that real passion and you get that real drive behind it whereas when it's in a big lecture theatre you don't have that, you know 300 people on xxxx you don't have that sense of community. So when you say you go into a room and that is your room and you can get into there because you're part of that department and that's your interest along with all these other people who've got similar interests (Focus group, page 22).

Implications for marketing actions: This concept is a very personal one, and is influenced by the individual's expectations and prior experiences. These personal feelings fall into the intangible category, one that it is difficult for a university to measure and act upon. However, there is scope for those marketing institutions to focus on the benefits of joining different small groups of students in promotional material that is produced. Additionally to create content that demonstrates how students do fit in and are not alone. It might be helpful to particularly target this around courses where there are larger numbers of students. Linking to alumni opportunities could be implemented here too as outlined above. In addition, a close relationship with the Students' Union can be very important to how institutions portray themselves to students and potential students. Being able to work together on issues rather than being in conflict can help focus on the student experience.

6.5.3 'It is my home' and 'It feels homely'

Initially the students' comments regarding a sense of home were grouped into one concept card. On further reflection on the comments it seemed that these were in fact two different aspects to this concept. The first - 'it is my home' - groups together comments in which students suggest that the university, or the town in which is it located, has now **become** their home, that they have begun a new phase of their life, and have moved on from their previous home base. Going to university is recognised as a rite of passage into adulthood for many students. This was acknowledged during some of the conversations. For example: "… after three years I class this as my home" (Conversation 9, page 2). The student said:

> xxxx is my home. I'm not sure if it's because it's the first place I've ever made my own home on my own if that makes sense? As an adult, but I enjoy the fact that it's mine, and not my mum's or my dad's or my brother's you know, it's my place and I think that's really made that attachment for me a little bit … (Conversation 9, pp 2-3).

This move to having a new home was also related to friendships formed: "I feel like this is where I feel most at home because of so many friends I have here" (Conversation 13, page 1). It also linked to feelings of independence:

> Yes, so yes, I didn't really know much about xxxx, but it's really forged a nice group of friends, it's my community, it's my place where I'm independent for the first time, like moving away from home and stuff (Conversation 11, page 6).

While the Focus Group discussion did not revisit the idea of the university becoming home, the issue of independence was discussed:

> Student I: what xxxx does really well is like the balance between complete independence and you having that support network as well. So, you're independent because you've moved away from home – you're cooking for yourself and going shopping for yourself and doing all these really scary things, they're all these really huge things and then you've also got this sense of community that you do have, whether it's because you're part of a sports

> club or a student ambassador or just the sense of community that you get whether you're up at xxxx or in a flat, (Focus group, page 11).

The second aspect of this concept - 'it feels homely' covers comments which demonstrate that the experiences at university are like 'being at home', they reflect a lifestyle, a sense of being comfortable.   Here 'homely' is being used in its anglicised sense of meaning comfortable and welcoming, rather than the US usage of plain and unexciting.

The university was said to feel homely for different reasons, one student expressed this through their feeling that they could be themself, and didn't have to ask permission before doing things. The student said that:

> You don't always have to ask before you do something so I think, like little stuff like when you are in the library you don't have to ask to, you're allowed to self-check-out your own books, little stuff like that, and they have, I don't know, it's this feeling of like you belong so to speak and you don't have to constantly ask permission before you do everything. And I think knowing your way round really helps as well and it's a sort of feeling as though you can do what you want, you don't always have to come dressed up to university you can act at home really (Conversation 1, page 2).

For the student this linked strongly to feeling independent, and feeling comfortable: "At home you're not told what to do and stuff so when you're given that sort of independence I think it makes you feel at home" (Conversation 1, page 2).

'Feeling homely' was also related to the size of the institution: "…the whole campus as a whole seemed a lot more homely, more friendly, than, because it's a bit of a smaller campus, …" (Conversation 8, page 1). The connection was also made due to friendships that had been formed: "I feel like this is where I feel most at home because of so many friends I have here…" (Conversation 13, page 1).

Implications for marketing actions: Feeling that a university offers a new home and a 'homely' environment will once again be influenced by students' very personal experiences. Though there will of course be some things that could destroy such a feeling for the majority of the group. In common with the other elements in the feelings section, these are an intangible elements of the experience, largely beyond a university's control at present. It is hoped that the findings of the research that has been undertaken will allow this to be further explored, and can be used to begin to fill this gap in universities' knowledge.

6.6 A delayed sense of belonging

Within the sample there were two students who raised the fact that they had not initially felt a sense of belonging to the university or the town. For them this feeling had developed more slowly than it had for others who took part in the research, though once it had they were very content with the institution and what it offered them. Interpreting how they described this to the researcher, it would appear that they had expectations of what their experience at university might be like, and this was not how things turned out to be. It was only after some time had passed, and they had made personal efforts to become engaged, that this situation changed.

A third student claimed still not to feel attachment, and expressed disappointment with the university. However the student told the researcher that they still tried to convince friends that it is a good place to be, and 'loved' elements of the campus. Additionally as the conversation progressed, it became clear that the student's experiences at university mirrored those of settling in to the sixth form – it took time for them to adjust to new experiences and opportunities.

The key issue for all three students seems to be that the initial experience of university had not lived up to their expectations. This contrasted with other conversations in which students were clear that they had arrived determined to strike out on their own, to make new friends and enjoy the experience, perhaps accepting that it might not be straightforward. Two of the three students who had not felt initial attachment had not moved away from home to study at university. It is possible that this contributed to their initial lack of attachment. Future research could usefully explore the differences between those who have and have not moved away from home to compare their experiences and how their relationship with their institution develops.

6.7 Other themes discussed during conversations

During the conversations the researcher asked the students about how they use social media and also how they might react to someone who criticised their university. The social media angle was included as this is a method of communication with students that the researcher wished to explore, given the information gained on brand communities and their development, during the literature review. The question of how students react to criticism of their university arose from the pilot conversation, during which the student mentioned this issue and their emotional reaction to it.

6.7.1 Use of social media

Following on from issues raised from the literature review, and the researcher's experience as a professional marketing practitioner, the topic of social media, and its contribution to a sense of community or belonging was included in the conversation guide. Where students did not raise this spontaneously the researcher prompted them to see whether they felt social media did play a role in their sense of belonging.

The students all engaged with social media however, most of them took this for granted, as a normal part of everyday life, rather than as a signal of becoming part of a particular community grouping.

> I think Facebook's quite a broad, it's a massive thing, isn't it, so everybody's part of Facebook (Pilot conversation, page 2).

Most used it to keep in touch with friends and also had course groups which they found useful:

> We use it just for checking when we are in because we are having problems with the online timetable (Conversation 4, page 4).

Using social media to support course work was usually, but not always, a positive experience, it was felt that that cliques can form:

> I actually almost find that detrimental, it almost creates that secondary school culture I find, and it's kind of cliquey (Conversation 9, page 5).

And it could also enhance feelings of being pressured to declare just how much work a student was doing, a kind of one-up-manship about the number of hours spent studying (Conversation 7, page 10).

However they did not, as had been established during the research design work, engage with the 'corporate' university social media accounts, tending to use them solely as a source of information, if at all. None described engagement with social media as a form of expressing attachment to the university, or as 'belonging' to the social media group: "I do use Facebook, yeah, but I don't feel a sense of I suppose belonging" (Pilot conversation, page 2). There was also a strong feeling that social media interactions were no replacement for real life contact:

> I think if social media didn't exist it would be much easier to just naturally bridge those gaps because there are people on my course who will talk to me on Facebook and then I'll come into the lecture and they'll ignore me, and I'm like, well why are you talking to me on Facebook if you're not going to talk to me in person? (Conversation 9, pp 5-6).

One student mentioned having used a social media account between term times, as they planned their return for the second year:

> Yes, this year before I moved into my new flat there was a page on Facebook, where, when they found out their room number, their flat number they filled in a sheet so you could see who you were living with and you could get to know them before you actually moved in with

> them. I was talking to two girls in my flat and although we're not close friends we are friends, but it was nice to know them instead of walking into a flat full of strangers (Conversation 4, pp 9-10).

Another also linked use of social media to accommodation issues as well as course related discussions:

> Yes we've got one for our course and there's also one for xxxx, on both them is people if they've got a problem will post it in there and normally it comes to a solution, like a community thing, and I think that's a sense of belonging as well, everyone coming together to help others on the course and maybe they're in similar situation (Conversation 3, page 5).

The issue of social media having both a positive and a negative implication for the students was also an interesting point – demonstrating it can be as challenging for someone to be part of the 'in-crowd' in a virtual world as it is in the physical one. It therefore adds an extra layer of complexity to relationship forming, but perhaps does not bring up new challenges. The same challenges seem to exist, just in an additional forum.

Implications for marketing actions: The students send a clear signal about how university marketing departments might seek to utilise social media, that is to say, they see this relationship based around the provision of information as and when they need it. This was signalled in the analysis of the levels of engagement with social media accounts that was undertaken as the research was designed (see 1.9.1).

6.7.2 Reactions to criticisms of the university

During the pilot conversation an issue was raised by the student around how it felt when someone, a comedian, had criticised the university. The student had said that "… it almost hurts you know like again because you feel a sense of belonging, you feel passionate about the university" (Pilot conversation, page 6). As this had aroused such a strong feeling in the student this topic was added to the conversation guide for subsequent conversations. Interestingly the students divided into two camps around this issue, with one group feeling emotions as the student in the pilot conversation had, including anger, feeling offended, or frustrated. More commonly however, students felt that everyone is entitled to an opinion, but that they would be interested to hear why someone felt the need to criticise the university, for example:

> I think everyone's entitled to an opinion, I'd be curious to know why because I don't think there's any reason for people to dislike this university (Conversation 6, pp 12-13).
>
> I'd completely respect their opinion because everyone's allowed their own opinion on somewhere and they might have a good reason for criticising it (Conversation 7, page 13).

Implications for marketing actions: That there was not a universal emotional reaction to this issue may offer insight into the levels of attachment, or the type of attachment that is being experienced by the students, they do not appear to be 'fanatically' connected to the university, that is to say, they are not exhibiting 'fan' like behaviour. This will have implications for how university marketing staff seek to develop a sense of belonging or attachment among students.

6.7.3 I can't describe it

Towards the end of each conversation the researcher asked the student if they could put their feelings of attachment, however they were experienced, into words. This proved extremely difficult. They had been able to describe what elements of the experience had led to their attachment, for example their friends on their course; in their accommodation; the social clubs they had joined but to actually describe the feeling was not generally possible.

> …everybody always says that there's such a lovely atmosphere, it's like an nice aura as soon as you come in, I don't know what it is but I think it's really nice *yeah* the atmosphere is really good (Pilot conversation, page 4)
>
> I don't particularly know why it made me feel like that, just visited and thought 'this is a nice place' (Conversation 4, page 14).
>
> What you're looking at here is almost an atmosphere or like a vibe so it's very hard to pinpoint (Conversation 5, page 7).

> There's definitely a buzz about it, there's a buzz about it and in some ways, you know like people go to London for the buzz, and the people around them, I think the university campus is a bit like that, you know people always going somewhere. And I see it like that (Conversation 6, page 15).

> I don't know, it's a warm fuzzy feeling (Conversation 9, page 3).

> Student I: I remember walking on campus and thinking this is the place where I want to be and I can't tell you why then, it is a long time ago now (Focus group, page 3).

> Student II: it's hard isn't it really (Focus group, page 3).

Even the student who didn't feel at home during her first few weeks at university could not describe what had caused her to change her opinion:

> I don't know how it happened but I do remember feeling that I really didn't like this place at first. But now I can't imagine going to university anywhere else … (Conversation 13, page 5).

It is interesting that the students who had not felt attached to the university (one of whom had now changed and was very happy) could not describe why not, the negative feeling was as difficult to define as the positive. The one thing that was expressed was that the place (the town in particular) had not lived up to their expectations – but what those were they could not particularly define. Just as there seems to be 'something about the place' for those who feel a sense of attachment, there was simply 'something missing' for those who did not.

Implications for marketing actions: the students' inability to put their feeling of belonging into words serves to reinforce the researcher's view that there is not an easy, tangible, measurable solution to fostering a sense of attachment. It is a challenging area, and the intangible nature of these reactions appears to validate the interpretive methodology that has been employed for this research in order to guide future HE marketing activity.

6.7.4 How can the university help students develop a feeling of belonging?

As a conclusion to each conversation the researcher asked students if they felt there was anything that the university should be doing that might help them and their fellow students feel a greater sense of belonging. In the main they did not, but there were some suggestions made. Interestingly, where there were suggestions, these are all practical things that can be addressed. This contrasts with the more intangible issues that are described as helping the students develop their sense of 'something about the place' that they feel comfortable with and which has led them to develop a sense of attachment or belonging.

With regard to the overall experience:

> I can't really think of anything because I think xxxx is so good in that they're always asking students' opinions, and I think you were also voted one of the best universities this year. And I think that's all down to student surveys isn't it, because we have such a say in everything that happens (Conversation one, p.7).

> I haven't seen anything that was obvious, off the top of my head thinking just now. Because every week there's something running for different areas, you know what's going on in society, what's important or like the international food festival has gone on, and everyday I've been down there there's been a new society putting their little shows on or, so they're invited, no one I don't feel isolated in anyway. I definitely think the university works hard at making everyone umbrella together, I don't feel it's divisions between people whatsoever, so thinking about it just now I can't think of anything. *That's great, because I wanted the top of mind, oh that really annoyed me or whatever,* no, I can't think of anything obvious that would need changing because I feel invited and I know everyone I speak to they feel the same so, nothing's coming (Conversation 13, pp 14-15 (researcher is in italics)).

The issue that whatever the university attempts to provide, it is ultimately the student who is responsible for his or her own experience was raised: "Yes, it has to be there for you to take it, but if it's not there then you can't take it" (Conversation 3, page 12).

One student reflected particularly on how the university might address the issue of communicating with students via social media.

> I think it's about right. And I think if you need specific information anyway you go and actively search for it. There are so many people in the university that you couldn't cover all the information anyway answering all the questions that people have. No I think there's sort of a happy medium (Pilot conversation, page 8).

During the focus group discussions this topic was returned to by the researcher. The students took a slightly different approach in the focus group, they discussed what they felt potential students might worry about before arriving at university. They all agreed that the thing that had worried them most was whether they would make new friends:

> Student III: that's the scariest thing before you come to uni though that like the thought of I'm not going to know anyone. I'm going to be on my own.
>
> Student II : yes that's the most common thing definitely (Focus group, page 29).

> Student III: Maybe that's why people like the uni when they get here because then they realise that it's not actually the case and there's loads of things to do (Focus group, page 29).

> Student II: I think that is something we definitely need, that social because we are social creatures, whether we isolate or we're quite introvert having someone is really important,... (Focus group, page 30).

Implications for marketing actions: The students' reactions to this, and what they chose to speak about first with regard to their own sense of belonging, serve to highlight a key point from the research. This is that students are a diverse set of individuals. They have come to university in order to take advantage of many different opportunities and to achieve their own individual goals. In addition, their experiences in their previous education institutions, and their life history, is likely to influence both what they expect from their experience, and how they respond to what is on offer (Lavigne et al., 2011).

6.8 Chapter summary

Matching the opportunities which might enable or encourage students to develop a sense of belonging or attachment, to the individuals who might take advantage of them, is a complex challenge. It is clear, from the conversations and the focus group, that some of these things are elements that a university may be able to influence, to a greater or lesser extent, while others are not. For example, while a programme of building new academic facilities, or refurbishing existing ones can change the spaces within which students carry out their studies, there is very little that the institution can do about its wider surroundings. It cannot easily change its position in the town, or the buildings and amenities available in that location (other than those on campus), nor can it control changes that take place in this environment. Issues such as students' perceptions of how safe the wider environment is, are also very difficult for institutions to influence. However, providing surroundings in which every student can gain a sense of attachment, and be enabled to reach his or her potential is something that institutions should be able to facilitate. The students in the sample all demonstrated a desire to achieve their best, and an expectation that they would be able to do so.

This chapter began by outlining the concepts that had been established from the conversations held with the students, grouped under three overarching concepts: Network and infrastructure, Behaviours and Feelings. The students' descriptions are largely to do with intangible areas that it will be difficult for HE marketers to capture, as summarised below.

Network and infrastructure

- Location – the town
    - This is a tangible concept, but much of the students' experience of the location will lie outside a university's control.
- Experience of the campus

    - A tangible concept, and one very much in a university's control

Behaviours

- Determination to succeed
- It's what you make it
    - These two concepts are intangible, and personal to the individual students. There may be elements which could contribute to the student's confidence in their ability to succeed which a university may be able to influence (such as its reputation or league table rankings around issues of academic achievement).

Feelings

- 'It's part of me' or 'I'm part of it'
- Emotions
- It is my home/it feels homely
    - All the concepts here are intangible, and the conversations demonstrate that these feelings are the result of each students' individual life stories and influenced by their future ambitions. The students demonstrated that individuals reach this point by moving along very different avenues. Identifying different influences on this, as this research seeks to do, could allow universities to develop ways of engaging with students to nurture and develop the different elements that contribute to this feeling.

This summary of the concepts raised, and the intangible nature of the majority of them, serves to highlight the need for a qualitative exploration of the students' sense of belonging, as described by them. It also demonstrates the complexity involved in this topic, and the wide range of considerations that must be engaged with in order for those responsible for HE marketing to be able to move towards gaining conscious competence (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) in this regard. The complexity involved does signal that it may not be possible to complete this move – but the importance of these issues to students means that any increase in universities' understanding of these issues can only be of benefit to both institutions and potential students.

7 Chapter seven - Discussion of findings

Introduction

This chapter discusses the experiences the students describe with regard to the development of their relationship with the university and highlights links with published academic research. It begins by demonstrating that theories of community and brand community, from the marketing and branding literature, do not seem to align with the students' descriptions of their experiences. Therefore the discussion considers how the discipline of place attachment provides a potentially helpful approach from which to view the students' experiences. There are, of course, limitations within any research, and those that, in the researcher's opinion, affect this piece of work, are discussed. The contribution of the research to knowledge and practice is presented and avenues for possible future research are also considered.

7.1 Communities and brand communities

The literature review undertaken to inform this research initially concentrated on student engagement, then, finding this did not offer insight into the issues being explored, the literature around community, from the perspective of marketing and branding, was consulted. This identified the widely accepted elements that form the notion of 'community':

- Membership (belonging)
- Influence (mattering)
- Reinforcement (integration and fulfilment of needs)
- Shared emotional commitment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)

In seeking to understand how students experience their relationship with the university the assumption was that each of these elements would be important to them, though this did not prove to be the case from their descriptions. If one seeks to link the students' descriptions to aspects said to define brand communities in particular - where three indicators are widely accepted as denoting community – 'consciousness of kind', 'shared rituals and traditions' and 'a sense of moral responsibility’ (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) - these are also absent. The students’ focus is on themselves as individuals, and their own goals and ambitions. Here it appears that their own development, their own needs, are of greater concern than that of developing a sense of community. Their descriptions do indicate that forming social connections is important to them, but they do not describe their concerns in the way outlined in studies of brand communities.

The findings of research with members of the Harley Davison Owners group (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) regarding brand communities, or sub-cultures of consumption, suggest that a sense of belonging to the subculture involves a wish to increase one’s own status within it, and includes the accumulation of particular possessions which reinforce membership. These were themes that the researcher was alert to during the current research, but with the exception of one student mentioning of the sense of pride associated with wearing a university hoody, this aspect does not appear.

> Yeah, well I suppose I walk round with the university emblem on so I’m proud to wear it. We actually only got these yesterday and when we got it all the girls were all saying how lovely it is to actually be able wear a hoody and to feel part of something to actually sort of show it off. I suppose that we’re part of xxxx xxxx at [the university] - just wearing it round, even when I’m at home I wear my university hoodies as well (Pilot conversation, page 6).

This finding may be explained by the simple fact that the students are part of a university community by default, because they have chosen to study there. It does not appear to be something that they reflect on, it is simply part of their experience at this particular point in their lives (Fournier, 1998).

There is research that suggests that a sense of community, based around a graduate’s former institution, can be nurtured. However, a study comparing the development of alumni affinity to the development of brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2014) does not appear to offer parallels to the experiences described by the group of students taking part in the current research. The students in the sample demonstrate very little reflection on the fact of being part of a university community. They dwell on how they experience the place itself. As has been documented their experiences are varied, and have a range of foci. Some talk first about their friends (whether in halls, on their course or through social activities); their course; the campus; the town; or the experience that university provides them with. The relationship with the university, is for the students, very much about what they themselves put in to it. They create their experience themselves through their own engagement – just as only they can complete their academic studies and must work for their individual academic success. Perhaps the most striking thing in the conversations with students is the sense of determination and commitment with regard to achieving their own successful outcomes that each one displays. This may of course be influenced by the nature of the sample chosen, as it is possible that only those students with a strong work orientation volunteer to be student ambassadors. However, it is precisely the students who do have a strong work orientation and a determination to succeed that higher education marketing professionals seek to encourage to apply to their institutions. To be able to shape marketing campaigns that will appeal to students who will, having enrolled at the university, wish to stay and successfully complete their course to the best of their ability will prove extremely helpful.

As outlined in the literature review, discussions of brand community also seem to lack a consideration of the issues of physical location, or place which the students raise during the conversations. This led to the review of literature around place attachment. In this literature many links to the experiences the students describe were identified, these are discussed below.

7.2 From brand community to place attachment

The literature review in Chapter three highlights the complexity in the discipline of place attachment. In linking this literature to the findings of the research it is therefore a helpful first step to revisit the key definitions of place attachment that are believed to have relevance to this thesis. As an overview:

> ... place attachment is an integrating concept that involves patterns of:
> - Attachments (affect, cognition, and practice)
> - Places that vary in scale, specificity, and tangibility
> - Different actors (individuals, groups and cultures)
> - Different social relationships (individuals, groups and cultures)
> - Temporal aspects (linear, cyclical) (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 8).

A further key consideration is that place attachment does not come about simply by virtue of an individual living in or visiting a place, but that it is "... a more energized, compelling, or vivid affectual state born of one's linking significant life events, key developmental themes, or identity processes with a particular environment" (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992, p. 142).

Looking at the students' descriptions of their experiences, their attachment seems to occur through a combination of factors. They describe these from their own individual perspectives. Not every factor is mentioned by each student. This in itself mirrors a recurring concern of the place attachment literature, that each individual experiences a place in her or her own way, based on previous experiences, and their motivations and expectations (Proshansky et al., 1983). Therefore no single aspect of the students' experience, or their individual life histories, can be examined in isolation from everything else that surrounds them (Manzo, 2005). This also fits with the phenomenological view outlined in Chapter four.

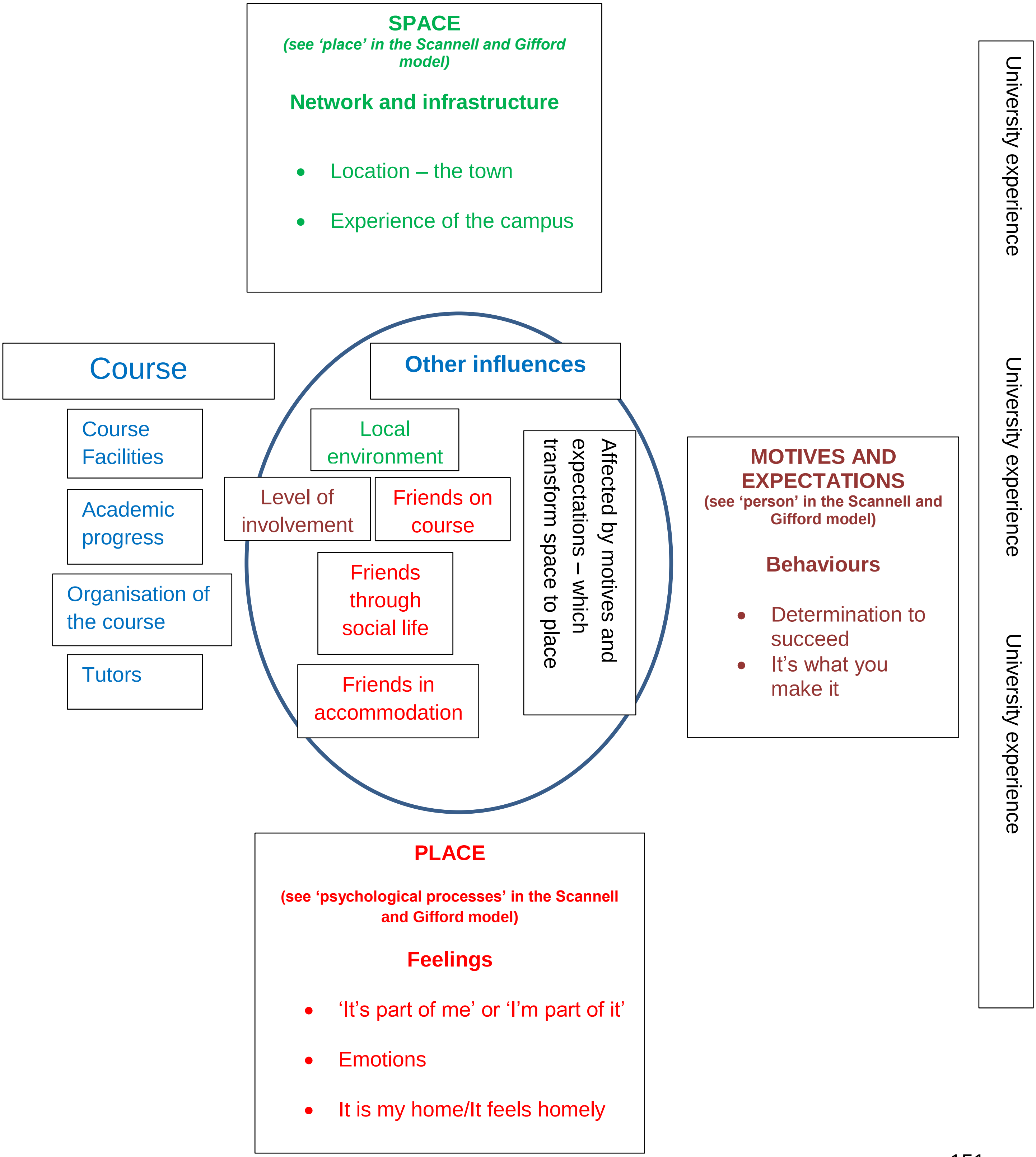
The students' descriptions of their experience of the university seem to match descriptions of why places are complex things, that is to say they are "… sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places" (Relph, 1976, p. 29). This is perhaps best demonstrated in terms of the variety of ways in which the students introduce their feelings of belonging at the university – as outlined in section 6.1. Each student begins their conversation through a different avenue including: their friends (whether in halls, on their course or through social activities); their course; the campus; the town; and the experience that university provides them with.

7.3 Developing a sense of place attachment

The themes identified in the literature review are now related to the themes drawn from the researcher's interpretation of the experiences the students describe. These are grouped into three areas, those of space, motive and expectations and place. It is proposed that students' engagement with the space connected to the university is influenced by their motives and expectations, and results in them experiencing their university life in a way that can be described as 'place attachment'. Each element of this experience is individual and important to the whole. An overview of this is presented in Figure 9 below. The elements of the student experience that the researcher expected to find are placed in the centre of the figure. All were mentioned by the students during the fieldwork. However, the complexity of how they are experienced, and their function in developing place attachment were not previously understood. It is in these findings that the research's original contribution to knowledge is based.

Figure 9 Expected elements of the student experience linked to elements of place attachment

The two columns 'course' and 'other influences' repeat those elements the researcher expected to feature in a student's description of their experience, first included in Figure 4 above. Those 'other influences' that were mentioned by the students are linked (by colour) to the theme of the place literature they relate to. Links to the 'Tripartite Model of Place Attachment' are also given (Scannell & Gifford, 2010)- see Figure 8.



7.3.1 Space

The place literature treats space as what comes before place, that is to say space makes up the measurable elements of location that exist before and after humans form an attachment to the space and therefore transform it into place (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1969). This distinction is present in the students' descriptions of the location of the university, and the campus itself. Such distinctions are often the focus of those with an interest in issues such as urban planning or changes in the use of areas of land (Proshansky, 1978; Proshansky et al., 1983; Wester-Herber, 2004).

Issues which have been interpreted as the themes of 'location' and 'the campus' are described by the students in ways that suggest that their impact on the student experience is capable of being measured. The literature on servicescapes seems to be relevant here (Bitner, 1992) as it explores the influence of the physical measurable environment. However more recent research is also moving to consider the influence of socialisation on people's behaviour (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011; Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). If we link issues of location and the campus to 'space' it seems that this may be a straightforward issue for marketers to communicate about. It is in the movement from space to place that greater mysteries seem to lie. For example, in moving from a sense of space to a sense of place the students seem to follow the ideas posited in an exploration of community attachment (Hummon, 1992) in that emotional components, and social relationships are important to attachment. It is through their experiences of socialisation and their emotional reactions that a sense of place develops – changing the university from simply a space in which they study, to a place in which they experience attachment.

7.3.2 Motives and expectations

There is a theme within place attachment research that it is through the behaviour of people themselves that place attachment is formed (Pretty et al., 2003). Also that as individuals we use our skills to operate in different environments (Proshansky et al., 1983). These ideas are clearly demonstrated in the findings of the current research – the students express their view that it is up to them, and only them, to ensure they make the most of their experience at university.

From a consideration of the variety of ways in which the students in the sample approach the question of belonging or attachment to the university, the assumption is made that each of them arrived at the institution with their own set of expectations about what university might offer them (Lavigne et al., 2011). Whether they judge that the university failed or succeeded in meeting these initial expectations appears to have had a considerable impact on how quickly their sense of belonging developed. Those who report that they were initially frustrated by their course, for example, developed their attachment through social engagement, through Students' Union clubs or societies, which in turn led back to greater engagement with their course:

> … I just went out to all the social fairs and stuff and I got involved with societies. And I think that's what makes me feel more belonging here, more than the actual course itself (Conversation 3, page 1).
>
> I didn't know anyone when I came here so I just did it like that, a couple in the society are actually on my course which sort of helps, but I definitely got to know them a lot more through the society (Conversation 3, page 2).

During the conversations the issue that the students had not known 'what to expect' was raised:

> ... the first day I came to xxxx was the day I moved into student halls and I came here because I was applying to universities, my dad had been to xxxx, and I was 'oh what's xxxx like' and he said 'yes it's alright' and I put that down and I got in and I was like, yes, I'll go there (Conversation 13, page 2).
>
> Yes definitely, I was really nervous before I came to my first year ... I think it was more the first reaction was more about making friends because you don't really want to be on your own. Because obviously most people will go to uni on their own rather than following a group of friends, although some people do (Conversation 4, page10).

That there can be changes in the status of a student's relationship with their institution is illustrated through the content of the conversations with students who had not initially felt attached, but then went on to develop such feelings. For example:

> I feel like a lot better, because you're telling people about how good the university is and whilst you're doing that you kind of realise how lucky you are to actually be here, how good it actually is, I just love talking to people (Conversation 10, page 23).
>
> ... and I made some friends and I just really wasn't feeling the xxxx vibe but after I'd been home for Christmas and I came back I realised that I had started to like xxxx and I did like being here, so I don't know whether that was something to do with xxxx or that I'd made friends here and I wanted to come back and see them, because it was like a little family in halls ... (Conversation 13, page 2).

As the relationship between students and their university is a dynamic one, this could change again in the future.

Referring back to theories of motivation (Maslow, 1943, 1970), from the conversations with the students it appears that none of them has concerns about how their basic needs are being met, nor about their safety. This security allows them to develop their sense of belonging, and to be actively making plans about their futures. They appear to be considering what they, as individuals, need to be doing to ensure that their esteem and self-actualization needs are met, both while at university, and into the future.

> ...by the time second year came round I thought right I've got to turn this round now, because I've got two more years and if I don't I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life so I had to make that choice and it was really difficult at first to push myself out there and make new friends and applying for ambassador jobs when I was terrified of even doing a campus tour you know but that was just the choice I made because I'm paying for this, literally paying for this with money and with time so I have to make the most of it at the end of the day and it's paid off more than I can explain really (Conversation 9, page13).

Interestingly, and in support of the argument that humans move through this hierarchy of needs, the one student who had not yet developed a very strong sense of belonging talked less about their future plans than any of the other students in the sample.

The students' descriptions demonstrate that their experiences are contributing to their 'sense of self' (Cristoforetti et al., 2011). This is displayed both within the concept of 'it's part of me' and the ‘determination to succeed’ concept. For example from comments categorised under the concept ‘it’s part of me’;

> it’s a place it’s not only like where you learn it’s just its part of your life for three years and it will be part of your life, well for the rest of your life really … (Pilot conversation, page 6).

And from those categorised under the ‘determination to succeed’ concept:

> … it’s what you make of it, if you try hard then you’ll probably get the most out of it. Because you could go the best university in the world but learn nothing if you didn’t put anything into it, or you could go to the worst and take the most out of it (Conversation 4, page 8).

The students’ comments which demonstrate their determination to succeed also mirror the findings of existing research around people’s judgement of places:

> In evaluating the quality of a place, individuals judge how well the place facilitates their goals and activities. This is particularly true of those goals and activities that are most important to them (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981, p. 459).

The students raise this in terms such as: “…in the first year I made sure I did well. Learnt what I needed to and I plan to continue that this year …” (Conversation 3, page 7). This also appears when a student describes a deliberate change in their own attitude:

> …by the time second year came round I thought right I’ve got to turn this round now, because I’ve got two more years and if I don’t I’m going to regret it for the rest of my life so I had to make that choice … (Conversation 9, page13).

This also fits with place research (Pretty et al., 2003) which contends that people are not simply placed in an environment but will take steps to fit in.

The descriptions from the students, which have been grouped into these themes, seem to fit closely with the work on motivation by McClelland (1961) – that is to say that students will value an environment which allows them to achieve success.

7.3.3 Place

Place attachment is generally recognised as developing when people are in places that are meaningful (Lewicka, 2011). Therefore, for those who study place attachment it may be no surprise to learn that students seem to develop a sense of place attachment to their university, as this experience is usually such an important part of their life.

There is an element from place attachment theories around 'being at home' which is raised by several of the students. In the conversations this appears to be referred to in their sense of feeling that the university has become emotionally significant to them, that they feel they belong there (Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1979; Tuan, 1969). The university appears to be transformed into a place, not just a space (Tuan, 1969, p. 213). There is however also the issue, for those who feel a strong sense of attachment to another place, that the move to university could be disruptive (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010). Such an issue is described by one of the students in the sample, who remained attached to her friends at home and her home environment for much of her studies. Another had made the transition more quickly, despite travelling home each weekend to work. The issues of transition have previously been explored in research carried out into how first years settle into university (Chow & Healey, 2008).

This emotional significance does manifest itself as feeling at home for some of the students in the sample. Such a connection is linked to place identity (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Once again the emphasis is on the different things individuals bring to any experience (Bonnes et al., 1990). Such differences are demonstrated through the conversations with the students, who all experience their connection with the university from different starting points. There is another element to feeling at home, expressed by one student in particular – that at home you can do what you want (Sixsmith, 1986). The student felt there was a positive difference between university and school life – at school she had felt bound by rules, but at university this feeling was not part of her experience – and so she feels at home there because she feels she is in control.

As is clear in the range of issues each student talks about, a sense of place develops from a range of experiences. “Location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place” (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 274). Attachment to the place is the outcome of a complex set of experiences – it depends “… not only on the characteristics of the place, but also upon personality, needs, life course concerns, and one’s own interpretation of one’s life” (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992, p. 143). This is something that the analysis of the conversations demonstrates very clearly. It can also clearly be seen in the pen portraits which provide an overview of each conversation (see 6.1 above).

There can be negative effects from place attachment (Lewicka, 2005), if the attachment prevents an individual from embracing new opportunities. One student demonstrated this as they reflected on how they changed their behaviour to become more integrated in the university community – moving away from only being involved with the sports clubs that they had been involved with before beginning their studies, and engaging more with the university’s clubs.

> I think that’s what my main problem, like this year was the first year I wanted to join, because I’m from round here, so I’m part of clubs, I’m part of netball, tennis everything in the area and I work and everything so you know in first year I never got involved and then this year it’s been suddenly I want to find, I’ve started working at the SU now as well and I can hear about more things going on and I think ‘I want to do that’ and so I’ve started playing tennis with the university team and things like that.
>
> *[Researcher] So what made you shift into doing that from what you did in the first year, what do you think, is there anything?*
>
> I think I wanted to meet more people, that was one of the things because in first year we were just fresh out of college and a lot of people were still, I used to see my friends quite a lot and then now people have all gone in different directions, some people have had babies,

> and everyone's settling down so I thought meet more people and get a bigger friend base I think (Conversation 6, page 3).

Although emotions do feature in the students' conversations they do not exhibit 'undying affection' with regard to their institution. When asked to describe how they would feel if someone criticised the university most said that they would be interested to hear the reason for the criticism, and that everyone is entitled to their own opinion. This pragmatic approach was an interesting one – the idea of brand love and advocacy (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Wallace et al., 2014) does not appear to be being experienced by the majority of the students as they describe how their relationship with the university has developed.

The theme 'it's part of me' appears to fit with research into place identity. Researchers in this area hold that while 'attachment' can be seen to refer to bonds with a place, place identity occurs when someone feels that the place has become part of oneself (Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). This issue could be of great importance to those marketing HE, in that if an institution unintentionally sends signals to potential students that they may not fit in, the students will not choose to study there (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007).

7.4 Social media

In the current era, it would seem strange to consider the behaviour and opinions of young people without reference to social media, and the young people's use of this medium to communicate with their peers, or to gather information. In studies of brand communities in particular there are many discussions of engagement in online communities (Andersen, 2005; Brown et al., 2007; Figallo, 1998).

During the conversations the students' descriptions of their engagement with social media demonstrated a complex world. Interestingly they also raise the issue that engaging with social media brings extra concerns and complexities to their social lives, and is not always a positive experience. Most surprisingly, the issue of engaging with social media did not arise from the students themselves during the conversations when they were thinking about attachment and belonging. In the conversations they generally claimed that social media does not play a role in their sense of belonging to the university.

Research into how online communities function suggests that there are two distinct patterns of behaviour regarding consumer's relationships with a website, one where someone seeks information, and one where a more emotional relationship develops (Brown et al., 2007). Students in the sample for this study display only the former in connection with the university's website and social media channels. Interestingly although the students describe using the university's corporate social media accounts for information gathering, it is notable that only one student mentioned using these information sources before they arrived at university. One other student describes using it in order to establish links with people in a new accommodation site between the first and second year of their studies. This is to some extent validated by a piece published after joint market research by Communications Management and the Student Room which shows that the majority of prospective students they surveyed remained reliant on a university's website, open days or prospectus rather than social media channels, to gather information about the universities they were considering (Communications Management, 2013). The increasing levels of usage of social media tools may mean that this situation changes in the future, and universities will need to continue to evaluate how their social media accounts operate.

The uses of social media described by the students did mirror those outlined in work which looked at member behaviour in company online communities (Rood & Bruckman, 2009). These behaviours are: “Discovering, Lurking, Learning, Sharing, and Socializing” (p. 21, ibid). Analysis of the information that the students shared about their experiences suggests that each of these behaviours might be adopted by any of them at different times and in different circumstances, though it would be the role of further research to establish this beyond reasonable doubt. Within the boundaries of this research, each of the behaviours can be illustrated by examples from different conversations. For example one student had used social media in order to discover information about the institution before joining:

> ... I’ve used it like that maybe once, before I got here to ask for information and stuff. [Researcher: S*o you did it on line?*] Yes because it’s easier because everybody’s got iphones and stuff, so it’s easier to do that than ring up really (Conversation 8, pp.7-8).

Perhaps unsurprisingly learning and socializing are the students’ main reasons for engaging with social media channels connected to their life at university, through groups formed around their course, or around societies. In the main these channels also seem to be used for very practical purposes – for example:

> I do use Facebook, yeah, but I don’t feel a sense of I suppose belonging (Pilot Conversation, page 2).
>
> (This student tended to use social media to make arrangements with friends with regard to meeting times etc).
>
> Yes we’ve got one for our course and there’s also one for Storthes Hall, on both them is people if they’ve got a problem will post it in there and normally it comes to a solution, like a community thing, and I think that’s a sense of belonging as well, everyone coming together to help others on the course (Conversation 3, page 5).
>
> ... that’s the main way to socialise, if there’s any course work or anything we’ll just talk on there, it’s a lot easier, or What’sapp. Because we have a group and we have different groups for different societies and everyone on our course it’s a lot easier to communicate with everyone like if you’re not in you can ask them what’s going on or if you’re not sure about course work it’s a lot easier... (Conversation 10, pp. 18 – 19).

> ...like I don’t use it too much on a wider scale, I’ve got the students union on my news feed, but I don’t really pay that much attention. There’s loads of things like freshers fair, and you can click here and you can enter a competition, but I don’t really pay too much attention to things like that (Conversation 11, page 16).

Sharing information is also achieved using social media:

> …our course has a group where if anyone has a question someone would put a question in, and it's a closed group so only our year in there, and they'll put a question up and whoever is online at the moment will answer that question. It's just really helpful so you're not constantly having to nag your lecturers and they're not being asked the same question over and over again because somebody else on the course can answer that question (Conversation 1, page 5).

'Lurkers', in the context of online communities, are defined as "…passive members who are not logged-in or are guests who will become members at a later time" (Rood & Bruckman, 2009, p. 213). Those students who describe themselves as using social media to gather information as and when they required it rather than engaging with communities on line, seem to fit this definition most closely. It is this 'lurking' state that perhaps describes their engagement with the university's own social media channels. The students have not yet chosen to become part of the university's online community through active engagement with it, though they may monitor its content from time to time. This has significant implications for the university's use of social media with regard to student engagement and recruitment. Best practice in social media marketing strongly recommends the use of tactics to encourage engagement with those you wish to communicate with, rather than simply message transmission. However, this audience suggests that this level of engagement is not something they look for from the university corporate accounts. Further exploration of this element of marketing communications will need to be undertaken as social media continues to increase in influence.

7.5 A model of place attachment

A model which draws together theories of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), identifies three dimensions – those of person, psychological processes and place. As discussed in the literature review above, this model is proposed as a framework for future place attachment research within the HE marketing discipline and as a guide to shape future marketing communications. With regard to the current exploratory research, and as part of its original contribution to knowledge, the researcher's interpretation of the themes discussed by the students as they describe their experiences of developing a relationship has been mapped onto the model (see Table 3 below).

Within the tripartite model: Person encompasses those concepts initially grouped under 'behaviours'; Psychological processes encompasses those concepts initially grouped under 'feelings' and lastly Place encompasses those concepts initially grouped under 'network and infrastructure';

Table 3 Concepts relating to each element of the tripartite model of place attachment (the overarching concepts identified during analysis are shown in brackets):

Person (Behaviours)	**Psychological processes (Feelings)**	**Place (Network and infrastructure)**
It's what you make it Determination	It's part of me Emotions It feels homely/it is my home	Location Experience of the campus

Considering this in further detail, under Person (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), with its two sub divisions - "cultural/group' (religious, historical)" and "individual (experience, realizations, milestones)", the 'it's what you make it' and 'determination' concepts can be placed. The students' descriptions of their experiences demonstrate how they developed a sense of attachment to the university through experiencing a stable sense of self (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), an understanding of what they themselves need to achieve, and becoming members of groups (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) (whether connected to course, social life, or halls of residence).

Under Psychological processes there are three subdivisions in the tripartite model: (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) “affect (happiness, pride, love)”; “cognition (memory, knowledge, schemas, meaning)” and “behaviour (proximity-maintaining reconstruction of place).” The concepts established from the research that fit under this heading are: ‘it’s part of me’, ‘emotions’ and ‘it feels homely/it is my home’. Within each of these three concepts the students comments reflect an emotional attachment to the university, the ‘it’s part of me’ concept reflecting how the university would become part of their life story, and remain an influence on them into the future (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The ‘it feels homely’ concept picks up the students’ feelings that the university has acted as part of a new phase in their life, and that their experience is connected to the development of their sense of self (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Finally under Place in the tripartite model there are two subdivisions: “social (social arena, social symbol)” and “physical (natural, built).” The concepts drawn from the research analysis that fit this element of the model are: ‘location’ and ‘experience of the campus’. The geographic location, and the type of town within which the university is situated have a large impact on several students (some positive and some negative). Those experiences grouped under ‘experience of the campus’ demonstrate the issue noted by the tripartite model (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) in terms of providing amenities which support the students’ goals – this is particularly clearly expressed by the student who comments on their access to expensive equipment.

7.6 Credibility of the research

As has been discussed above, a matter of concern for qualitative research is to be able to demonstrate the credibility of its methods and results. Here it differs from research carried out from a positivist stance, where the term generally used is validity - measured through tests of statistical significance, or comparison with a control group (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Qualitative researchers seek to demonstrate that their research findings have credibility (Hair, Wolfinbarger

Celsi, Money, Samouel, & Page, 2011) so that their findings can be useful to those interested in the topic under consideration, often in order to provide information for further research and exploration (Huy, 2012). A first point in checking the credibility of the current research is to establish whether those elements that an experienced HE marketing practitioner expected to appear during the conversations did indeed appear. This prior knowledge had been bracketed out of the research conversations (see 4.4.3 above), so the researcher is confident that these elements were not introduced to the conversations as a result of interviewer bias.

The figure drawn up at the start of the research which proposes the elements the researcher thought likely to be important to students does include the elements that were mentioned by the students. Importantly, in research that seeks to establish a new contribution to knowledge by gaining a greater understanding of how students develop relationships with their university, additional knowledge has been gained from the students in the sample regarding the details of their experiences. This new knowledge is found within the differing levels of importance the students place on the various elements of their experiences. It is clear that no simple marketing message on a chosen topic can succeed in the face of such complexity.

Further confirmation that the research has credibility is demonstrated in that elements of the issues the students describe are reflected in previous research findings. This provides reassurance that the findings can be judged as credible in terms of their "…plausibility, their sturdiness, their "confirmability" …" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). If this is not the case we are "... left with interesting stories about what happened, of unknown truth and utility" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). The examples of previous research include work looking at how students handle the transition from home to university (Chow & Healey, 2008) which raises a similar range of issues to those in the current research. One element of their findings, that 'feeling at home' is important to students (Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 370), is mirrored in the current research - the sense of 'feeling at home' was important in several of the conversations. In addition the students emphasise the importance of their feelings and emotions as they built relationships at university. This issues are similar to the findings cited in research into homesickness and the role of place attachment among university students (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010) which are highlighted in the literature review above.

7.7 How the research aim and objectives have been met

The varying ways in which the students in the sample describe their sense of attachment to the university, and their reflections on what else the university might do in order to foster a sense of belonging for other students, demonstrate the complexity of this area. In drawing together conclusions from the findings it is timely to revisit the aim and objectives of the research.

The aim of the research is to gain a greater understanding of the elements current students describe as having contributed to them developing a sense of attachment or belonging through their university experience, outside their academic progress. It is proposed that this new knowledge can be employed to inform marketing communications with potential students.

Within this aim there are several objectives:

- To identify and clarify the gap in knowledge with regard to what might enhance the recruitment of home, full-time undergraduate students to UK Higher Education institutions in the light of the changing HE environment. This is set out in Chapter two.
- To gain current students' own descriptions of their experiences, undirected by the researcher. The research design is detailed in Chapters four and five, with the results presented in Chapter six.
- To clarify what affects the students' relationships, or sense of attachment, through exploring existing literature. This is undertaken in the literature in Chapter three, and the discussion of the findings in Chapter seven.

- To discuss how the findings of this research can allow HEIs to move towards becoming consciously competent (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) with regard to the content of messages for potential students, by highlighting aspects of current students' experiences within their marketing communications. This is addressed in the discussion of the findings in Chapter seven.

7.8 Limitations of the research

The limitations of the research that is presented here will be familiar to anyone undertaking qualitative research, and in many senses are borne from its strengths. The findings cannot be used to provide a definitive answer as to how students outside the sample consulted here experience their relationships with their university. It cannot provide a list of items, which if tested with students, can be predicted to be more or less important to them in order to develop a measurement scale by which we might predict belonging or attachment. However, as detailed in the research design, this was not part of what the research set out to do.

Data collection was limited to one purposive sample of students, drawn from a pool of student ambassadors. It cannot be claimed that they are representative of all students at the university, nor that a single university's students are representative of all students in higher education.

Additionally, as has been highlighted in the research, the students do not appear to be particularly reflective regarding their experiences. The conversations represent their response to being asked about a sense of belonging or attachment to the university at a particular point in their experience of it – this could very easily change due to, for example, a falling out with friends, bad grades on their course, an unfortunate experience in the town or any number of other possibilities. Their experiences at university could also be affected by family issues, such as the illness of a parent, a bereavement, or financial pressures.

Due to this lack of reflexivity on the part of the students, it could be argued that the research does address all the elements that might be influencing the students' relationships with their university. The researcher believes that this argument should be accepted, but would defend the current research by re-stating that the research's aim and objectives do not set out to provide a definitive statement of all the elements that influence students' experiences at university. The research aim is to gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon of the students' individual experiences, as described by the students themselves. The research does not ask the students for responses to pre-formulated questions and thereby shape the format of their answers. Most importantly it does not seek to provide an absolute, testable set of truths that can be generalised to all students.

While the research set out to consider the experiences of those who do feel that they have developed a relationship, a sense of attachment/belonging to their university, a future study could carry out similarly framed conversations with students who do not feel this. Identifying the sample for such research could be challenging – it could perhaps be drawn from those who chose to suspend or cease their studies, though they may not be willing to give further time to the institution concerned. This might highlight differences in expectations and motivations which could be useful in considerations of how to present an institution in future marketing communications. It is possible that such findings might also be of use beyond the higher education marketing perspective, ie to those studying issues around student retention, in order to assist in identifying where support might be targeted to prevent students dropping out of their studies.

7.9 Contribution to professional practice

The research undertaken with this purposive sample of students serves to highlight the complexities of their relationship with their university. The broad range of intangible factors which affect them is explored. The findings confirm that this is a complex issue and it is probable that no definitive solution could ever be established, which is in line with the interpretivist approach adopted for the research (see 4.1.3). Despite this, the general themes the research identifies provide a valuable addition to marketing professionals' knowledge of how students experience their university. It highlights areas where it is clear that details are not known, and demonstrates why it is unlikely that they will ever be known conclusively. This new awareness of the great complexity of these issues will ensure increasingly informed consideration is given to marketing communications. Communication messages must continue to be created by marketing staff who use their professional judgement, and also shaped by institutions' individual missions. This process can now be supported by the knowledge of the themes explored in this research, using theories of place attachment. Equally valuably, an awareness of how much remains unknowable has also been established. The research demonstrates that further exploration should enable those marketing HEIs to become partially consciously competent (Thompson & Martin, 2005) with regard to how students' develop a sense of belonging or attachment to their institutions. That is to say they can gain awareness some of the intangible factors that are important to students about their university, but gaining complete conscious competence is unlikely to be achievable.

The findings of the research propose that the tripartite model of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) offers a way of organising, and continuing to check, that marketing messages are appropriate, and helpful for potential students – that is to say it provides a useful practical framework within which the content of marketing communications can be planned in order to help potential students move from viewing the university as a 'space' to it becoming a 'place' to which they belong.

The complexity of this topic is demonstrated clearly in Chapter six which presents the analysis of the conversations with the students. Their descriptions are all very personal, and begin from different aspects of their experience. It appears that their university experience is somehow becoming part of their extended selves (Belk, 1988) and will influence their future experiences and ambitions. Those marketing HEIs must therefore remain alert to the possibility that by highlighting any one aspect of the student experience they may increase their success in attracting a certain group of students, however, they could equally easily put off another group. This can be illustrated by the vast range of behaviours and expectations that students exhibit - for example at one end of the scale there are students who do not visit institutions before choosing them:

> ... the first day I came to xxxx was the day I moved into student halls and I came here because I was applying to universities, my dad had been to xxxx, and I was 'oh what's xxxx like' and he said 'yes it's alright' and I put that down and I got in and I was like, yes, I'll go there (Conversation 13, page 2).

At the other end there are students who undertake very thorough research:

> ... everywhere we went we had the same routine, we'd go to the open day, we'd go into town, we'd go out for a meal, we'd stay in one of the Premier Inns because obviously it was way too far to drive, to go home, so I think staying over as well and seeing it at night and in the morning and I asked her to drive me round residential areas as well so I had a feel for the town as a whole rather than just the campus because there were other universities I went to and the campus was great but the night, in the night time the town was horrible or the city was really threatening and uncomfortable ... (Conversation 9, pp. 7-8).

The benefit of enabling place attachment to be developed is captured in comments regarding regeneration of physical places, where it is claimed that those who do feel attachment will care for a place (Seamon, 1979). This could be expanded to link a sense of place attachment with a propensity to talk about the university, and perhaps recommend it (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brooks Jr, 1957; Leigh & Thompson, 2012). In time this could also be valuable as students become alumni, and move to become advocates for their university (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010; McAlexander et al., 2014)

This approach should therefore assist in the marketing of what is a complex service - it allows marketers to seek to promote HE through "… shaping ideas of a service based on past experience and an expectation (or hope) of what will follow" (Furey et al., 2014, p. 101).

The findings of this research make a contribution to the development of marketing practice within higher education as this branch of marketing continues to develop a professional identity. In much the same way as the overall domain of marketing has been adapted to provide guidance for those working in relationship marketing, or social marketing – a 'thoughtful' and 'selective' application of marketing principles (Peattie & Peattie, 2003) could assist marketing staff in HE in counteracting some of the negative attitudes to their discipline.

7.10 Contribution to knowledge

While a thesis prepared for a DBA programme is required to have an impact on professional practice, as summarised in section 7.9, studies at a doctoral level also demand that an original contribution to knowledge is made. This research makes such a contribution by taking the first steps into a greater understanding of students' experiences, as they themselves describe them. It employs a phenomenological approach (see Chapter 4) in contrast to the concentration on the measurement of declared objective criteria that is more usually applied in order to gain the opinions of students (see Chapter 2). It also establishes that existing theories of student engagement and brand community do not illuminate the experiences described by students, despite the popularity of the marketing discipline of 'branding' within HE (see sections 3.3 and 3.5). While these are 'negative' findings, it is important that they are known. The 'positive' finding of the research is that theories of place attachment offer a useful academic framework within which practitioners can begin to shape communications, and researchers can conduct further explorations (see section 7.3).

The research also proposes a new application of the previously established model of 'conscious competence' (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005). It is used here to demonstrate how marketing teams might audit themselves to question their approach to areas for which they are responsible.

While there are many other avenues which can now be explored, using theories of place attachment as a framework it must be recognised that this remains a 'messy' and complex topic. It is probable that further research will be able to offer greater enlightenment, but never an absolute answer to the question of what enables students to develop a sense of belonging to their institution.

7.11 For further research

It would be helpful to conduct further explorations with students drawn from other groupings, such as mature students, part-time students and international students, to establish if and how models of place attachment are relevant for those groups. In view of finding that theories of place attachment offer insight into this area, rather than those of brand community it could also be interesting to understand if there are differences between those who leave home to come to university and those who do not. This was not considered during the research design when the brand community literature was assumed to hold the key to how students' relationships were experienced. In addition further marketing research will be required to test messaging developed as an outcome of the findings discussed here.

A further theme to explore is, how much students fix their expectations regarding intangible factors (however unconsciously) before they choose a university, and to what extent they remain open minded. Exploration of this issue would be a useful area for further research – to allow marketers to estimate how effective their revised communications might be able to be.

As any future research is designed it should be borne in mind that during the current research it became clear that the students had not reflected on whether they felt a sense of belonging or attachment to the university in advance of the conversations that they took part in. Despite those in the sample being ambassadors for the university, who talk about what it is like to study at the university to other potential students at events such as open days, they do not seem to have considered what contributes to the intangible elements of their experience.   In this respect they might be judged to have been unconsciously competent (May & Kruger, 1998; Thompson & Martin, 2005) in the decision making process regarding the intangible factors that they consider in selecting their university – just as the university has been unconsciously competent in attracting them.

7.12 Two final thoughts

In concluding this thesis, it seems appropriate to provide two quotations that sum up the complexities of the issue of place attachment. First from the academic literature on place attachment:

> Given the complexity of person-place bonding, many threads tie individuals to their important places. Some are stronger or more salient than others, several are twisted together and seem inseparable, and few are apparent to outside observers. The tapestry that describes the nature of one's relationship to a place is unique for each individual (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 5).

And second, to give the very last words to one of the students who enabled this thesis to be developed, who when asked to put their feelings about their attachment to the university into words thought carefully and said: "feelings are really tough!"

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – the UCAS cycle

(UCAS, 2014b)

8.2 Appendix B – Information sheet

Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study. As part of the requirements for my DBA qualification, I have to carry out a research study. The study is attempting to understand how students experience a sense of attachment to their University, or what a sense of belonging feels like to individual students.

What will the study involve? Taking part in the study involves a recorded interview lasting between 20 minutes and half an hour, and then reading through the transcript of the interview, and letting the researcher have any amendments or comments on the transcript.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because of your role as a student ambassador.

Do you have to take part? There is absolutely no compulsion to take part in the research project, it's entirely voluntary. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign two copies of a consent form (one for you to keep). After the interview you'll be sent a transcript of our conversation which you can check over and return (within a two week deadline). At that point you can ask to withdraw from the study, which would mean that the record of your interview would be deleted and no information you have given would be included in the research report.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give? The interview transcripts and recordings will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, they will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in my thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner and will then be on file in the University library. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. I will also be using the results to write an impact study and a paper which may be published in a journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part, and the proposed research has received approval from the Business School's Ethics Committee.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me on 01484 472982 or email j.c.grainger@hud.ac.uk

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form. Thank you.

8.3 Appendix C - Consent form

I……………………………………agree to participate in Jenny Grainger's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me and I have received a copy of the information sheet regarding the study.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Jenny Grainger to be recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data (the transcript of the interview) within two weeks of receipt of the transcript for checking, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity and that participants will only be referred to in terms of their gender, their year of study and their course.

I understand that anonymised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview □

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview □

Signed…………………………………… Date………………

8.4 Appendix D - Correspondence with students

Confirmation email

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my research into the sense of attachment people feel to the University of xxxx.

I will be talking to a small group of current students during my research, to explore their views on this, but no individuals will be identifiable in the written report – I will only detail gender and students' year of study in the notes I write up. If you agree I would like to record our conversation, as this means I can listen to you rather than taking notes at the time.

My research will be used as part of my studies, here at the University, towards a Doctor of Business Administration qualification and my findings may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences but no individuals involved could be identified as all information will be confidential. I would be very happy to send you a copy of the final report, though I will quite understand if you don't want to take me up on this offer!

I hope you are still happy to help with the research and look forward to meeting you on xxxx

Thank you email

Dear

Many thanks for talking to me on xxxx. I hope you enjoyed our meeting and that I didn't take up too much of your time.

I just wanted to confirm that I will now type up notes from our conversation and use those to help write my thesis for my Doctor of Business Administration. I will send you a copy of the notes so that you can confirm that I have done this accurately. I am very happy to send you a copy of final report when it is completed (please let me know if you would like me to send one on to you). As I explained when we met, I will be keeping the details of those who took part in the research confidential, and any comments that are included in the research will be anonymised – reported as being from a male or female in the first, second or third year of their studies, with no further detail.

Thanks again for taking the time to help me with this research.

Best wishes

8.5 Appendix E – Conversation Guide

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this research. I'm trying to understand how our students experience a sense of attachment to the University, if they do. I'm trying to understand how you would describe that, in your own words, and what it feels like. I've got a few general guiding questions, but I'd very much like to hear what you feel about it – is that OK?

(mention that the interview was being recorded)

Prompts to use if not covered by students

- Have you ever felt attached to a club/society/organisation?
- Do you feel you belong at/are attached to the university? What has led you to feel like this? What are your experiences of belonging?
- Did you visit on an open day, what were your feelings then?
- How do you use social media in your studies/university social life?
- How would you feel if someone criticised your university?
- Can you put the sense of belonging you feel into words, can you describe it? How would you describe it to a friend?
- Is there anything the university should be doing to help foster a sense of belonging or attachment?

Thanks, arranging to send transcript and issue paperwork.

8.6 Appendix F – Focus group

Invitation to take part in focus group

Dear ....

I know it seems like a long time ago that you kindly helped me with my research by talking to me about your experiences at the university. I'm getting near to the end of my research and my supervisor has suggested holding a focus group with the students who took part in interviews earlier last year. If you are free would you be happy to get together with me and some of the other students who I spoke to on Wednesday 28 January at 3pm for around an hour? If you can make it please email me back and I'll find a space where we can meet up.

Thanks very much indeed.

Jenny

Focus group opening comments

Thank you for coming.

When I spoke to you last year you all felt that there was something about xxxx, but it was difficult to articulate what that was, and I wondered if you would mind talking about it today, to see what you all think it is, and what led you to feel attached to the place, to see if it's any easy to put into words now than it was then?

(I'll record the session if that's OK).

Thank you.

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