



The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education

John Hodgson

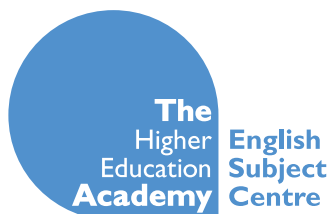
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The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education

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The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education

A report for the English Subject Centre by John Hodgson

January, 2010

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Introduction

Early in 2009, the English Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy commissioned a focus group study on the experience of studying English in UK higher education. Its purpose was to enrich both the Subject Centre's and the discipline community's understanding of the ways in which students are currently experiencing English programmes at undergraduate level. The method proposed was to run focus groups of undergraduate English students in six urban locations; these discussions, each of which would take between an hour and 90 minutes, would be recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Four main themes were proposed for the focus groups. It was anticipated that the first of these, *The Experience of Male Students*, would be addressed as a single topic within male only groups. Men comprise about 25% of undergraduate English students (Gawthroppe and Martin 2003) and the focus would be on their experience of studying what is frequently characterised as a “feminine” or “feminised” subject (Knights 2008). The second theme, *Reading Habits*, would address lecturers’ concern about the extent of students’ knowledge, including the breadth of their reading, their capacity for close analysis, and their understanding of theoretical approaches to literature (Gawthroppe and Martin 2003). The third theme, *Assessment and Feedback*, would address the aspect of university study about which, according to the National Student Survey (HEFCE 2009), students continue to be least satisfied. It was suggested that a fourth theme, *Progression*, would be studied implicitly rather than raised directly in the focus groups, but was important in gauging students’ sense of the meaning of their studies.

A number of institutions were identified as possible locations for the study, including Russell Group members and newer universities with a range of institutional histories. The Subject Centre and researcher wrote separately to the head of the English department in three older (“pre-92”) universities and in three newer (“post-92”) universities. The purposes of the study were explained and both institutions and their students were assured confidentiality. When provisional agreement from a head of department had been gained, the researcher forwarded a letter for circulation to students, inviting them to contact him directly if they wished to take part. The letter explained the project to the students and offered them an incentive of a £15 Amazon token.

In most cases, the students received this invitation towards the end of the spring term. Replies were received from an average of twelve students in each institution. As the researcher intended to run two focus groups in each university, little selection was required, although the requirement to form a number of male-only groups proved problematic. Interviews were planned for early in the summer term - although, for reasons explained below, some interviews did not take place until later in the year.

The process of setting up the interviews suggested something of the culture and preoccupations of English departments in UK higher education. The three older (pre-92) universities who were approached readily agreed to participate. A room was easily found for the interviews, and willing student respondents were quickly contacted. On the day of the interviews, the researcher had the opportunity to meet, and (in most cases) to lunch, with members of the English department, who expressed their support for the project and interest in its outcomes.

Making arrangements with the post-92 universities was more difficult. One institution simply failed to respond to the request, despite a follow-up message

addressed to the tutor in charge of the student experience! Another head of department was keen to help but inhibited by institutional procedures (the study had to be approved at a meeting attended by the faculty dean, who was abroad) which resulted in considerable delay and difficulty in finding students as the end of term approached. A third head of department expressed concern about the confidentiality of the data, about how it would be used, and about its possible effect upon student recruitment. Limitations were placed on the numbers of students who could be contacted, and the study was not widely publicised. This again led to far fewer students' coming forward than in the older institutions.

As it had not been possible to work with one of the original institutions proposed, the researcher contacted a smaller university college that readily agreed to take part. However, because of the time of year, it was possible to interview only two students from this institution.

Selecting male only groups proved much more difficult than had been expected. Given the overall female/male ratio of English students in higher education, it should have been anticipated that far fewer male than female students would present themselves as participants in the focus groups. This difficulty was exacerbated by the circumstances explained above and the increasing unavailability of students as the summer term progressed. A further problem was that one of the students selected (on the basis of her "masculine" name) for an all-male group turned out to be female. Because of these all these complications, it was possible to interview only one all-male group, which comprised two students from an older university.

The researcher was initially dismayed by these difficulties and advised the English Subject Centre that he would not adequately fulfil this particular aspect of the brief. However, on consideration, it was decided to address gender issues in the mixed and all-female groups also. The consequent analysis of the gendering of the subject, as described in the words of these participants, has proved a fruitful approach to understanding the experience of contemporary students of university English.

In the event, ten sessions took place, involving thirty-five students in all. There were two focus groups from each of the pre-92 universities, and one focus group from each of two post-92 institutions. The third post-92 institution supplied two mature students who were interviewed on different occasions. At the start of each session, students were asked to complete a consent form and to give some factual information about their educational experience immediately preceding university: the type of school or college they had attended, and the subjects they had studied for A level or other qualifications. They were also asked to write a short paragraph about why they had chosen to take English at university.

During each session, the researcher used a cue sheet to guide the conversation, while allowing the students to develop topics naturally. The cue sheet was based upon the themes and questions proposed by the English Subject Centre, and structured the conversation in terms of the students' experience of change. For example, they were asked about their personal reading during their pre-university years and while at university; their expectations of reading for their university course; the differences between their course reading before and at university; their previous knowledge of literary and cultural theory, and their present feelings about theoretical and critical reading. Questions about their current experience included the balance between primary and secondary reading; reading modalities, e.g. print or online; coping strategies; and so on.

It soon became clear that it was impossible to discuss any one of the themes without involving the others: for example, much reading was done in preparation for writing and assessment, and gendered perspectives on all these processes of study gradually emerged. Thus, the conversations did not all follow the same sequence, and some highlighted some aspects of the students' experience more than others.

Each of these sessions was transcribed, and the researcher then made a detailed analysis in terms of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) adaptation of Halliday's (1978) three metafunctions of language. The conversations were seen in terms of their interpersonal function (constructing relationships between the participants, including the researcher), their ideational function (conveying information), and their textual or discursive formation (revealing ideology). For reasons of space, the analyses focus explicitly on the second and third of these, leaving much of the relationship texture implicit.

The researcher is grateful for the co-operation and help of colleagues and students in the universities visited. The project benefited from the ready support of Jane Gawthrop of the English Subject Centre, Kate Brooks of the UWE Faculty of Creative Arts, and Christine Taylor, whose fast and accurate transcription was much appreciated. It was helpful to discuss parts of the work with members of the NATE Post-16 and HE Committee: Ann Harris's detailed comments and suggestions on a late draft were especially valuable.

The accounts of the focus groups presented below are followed by analyses of the implications for each of the four themes of the study. The final section offers summary comment and recommendations. It is hoped that the words of the students, as reported and discussed below, will assist colleagues to develop university English in ways that will enhance the experience of tutors¹ and students alike.

¹ Students in the study used both "tutor" and "lecturer" to define a university teacher. Except where quoting or referring to the words of students, the researcher has preferred the former term.

The focus groups

Longbourn University - Group 1

Alan and Mark were studying at Longbourn, a pre-92 university. Alan was in the second year of his degree course in English: he came from Portsmouth, and had studied English, History and Biology at A level in a boys' Grammar School. Mark was also in the second year, and had studied English, French and Classics at A level in a mixed sixth form college in his home city of London. As this was the first single-sex group that the researcher had interviewed, he began by asking the students about the experience of being male and studying a subject that was generally taken by far more females than males.

Alan said that his experience of an all boys' grammar school had affected his approach to the subject. One of the books he particularly remembered reading during his A level course was *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, which, he said, was "a male dominated book". Coming to university, he said, was "a little bit of a culture shock": "not the mixed aspect but the feminine reading of texts all the time and a far less direct approach to the issues that are raised in the text." He had been surprised that feminist readings highlighted "what people like in the texts and what they don't like in the texts rather than directly going for the thematic issues". Mark said that his A level class consisted mainly of girls and that there were a number of female tutors; so coming to university "was sort of what I expected". He added: "I'd been sort of told that English is a sort of an effeminate subject to take. So I've always been fighting with that and it hasn't really affected me."

Picking up the concept of effeminacy, the researcher asked Alan whether there had been any sense at his boys' school that English was a "soft" subject. "Not at all," he answered: "I suppose that's mainly down to the teaching staff. We had a couple of male teachers who were particularly good and, I don't know, they had that whole air about them of being one of the gang." He saw the main practice of the subject as "writing essays": "It didn't really come into my head as to whether it was feminine or not." Mark said that, since he'd been at university, he'd been "much more aware of the greater ratio of girls", and added: "I do find in my seminars that they sort of move towards feminine readings and interpretations." He felt that a lot of the options available are "quite feminine ones like Twentieth Century Women's Poetry" and that he had "changed a bit" since reading English.

Alan said that there were "quite a few similarities between the school in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*" and his own school. He conceded: "Mine was an East End grammar; it wasn't exactly Rugby," but he experienced a similar masculine ethos between the boys and the teachers. "There was a lot of the boisterousness, I guess, and ... my teacher ... was very direct and forward in his

approach to teaching about the book.” Alan described the teacher’s no-nonsense pedagogic approach: “He would have a discussion with us about it in the first half of the lesson and then hand out a sheet of bullet points enumerating what we had already discussed because he had directed us towards those conclusions anyway. So we just digested all of this and then regurgitated it come the exams.” He compared this pedagogic regime with that at university: “It’s a far more open floor for discussion and you are not really told any definitive answers. I suppose that in itself is quite a feminine approach.”

Speaking of poetry, Alan said that he “personally really, really, dislike[d]” the work of Carol Ann Duffy, whom he had read as part of his GCSE English course. He felt that his dislike was “probably very highly influenced by the fact that I went to an all boys’ grammar”. He commented on a poem about the birth of Duffy’s first child: “To me it just seems like she extraordinarily wrapped up in her own emotions and senses rather than anybody else’s.” However, he appreciated the work of a female teacher, an actress, who “was very capable in expressing the way it would have been performed, and the way that actors would have behaved and things like that”. This teacher “could sympathize with the characters far more than we could” and highlighted a dimension of study neglected by the male teachers, who “were more wrapped up in the twists and turns and the outcomes of the plots rather than the characters themselves”.

At this point, Mark said that the discussion had made him become aware of the significance of gender in the university pedagogy and curriculum. He realised on reflection that all his university tutors were female, and that in a recent class discussion there had been fifteen girls and only one other boy. He added: “I’d say the texts we’re reading are quite feminine-centric and so it would be natural that there are quite a lot of female and feminine interpretations.” He felt that this context was not very different from his previous learning context and, possibly because of this, “the options that I am interested in are mostly the female related ones.”

Alan, on the other hand, remembered “numerous incidents” where he had brought a “different perspective” to the discussion. He recalled a moment when he had wanted to highlight for discussion a chapter with philosophical content (“a group of old men discussing Zionism”) in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Several of the seminar group rejected this choice “because it wasn’t about the main issues at hand ... Victorian females in society, class, identity”. Mark agreed: “We always get the feminist reading.” Alan concluded, paradoxically expressing a feminist viewpoint: “I guess that is because it’s been masculine readings ever since day one.”

Alan found the difference in culture between his school and university most marked in the difference in contact hours. “It was quite a strict grammar

school so we had to be in early like nine and finish at four, so we always had a really busy week." At university, Alan said: "We have so few contact hours and lectures and I've found so many of my friends end up missing them anyway." He said he felt guilty whenever he missed a class, which he occasionally did when he had not been able to manage the "prodigious amount of reading" the course required. "This week for instance I had a week to read four books of *Paradise Lost* and I didn't, [so] I didn't go to my seminar." Alan observed that the "vibe" of seminars was different at university: "There is no pat on the back, like saying you've done well." At university, unlike school, he claimed, one gains praise only for essay writing: "Since it is all essay based, that's the only way we are assessed." He felt this was one reason why students "may be less enthusiastic to make such big contributions or preparation in seminars". Anticipating a comment made frequently in the following interviews, he added: "Sometimes it can be quite difficult if you're the only one contributing."

Mark agreed that he sometimes missed seminars because of pressure of essay writing: "It takes over so much of your time and it is the only thing that really matters on the course. That is all you are assessed on." Given the assessment regime, he asserted: "It seems to make sense to put all your effort into your essays and not on the seminars."

Alan described the change in his essay writing practice. At A level, he would "literally read a book", making notes of his thoughts and copying out quotations. He would rely "on everything clicking into place as I was writing the essay". Now he was much more aware of the need consciously to construct an argument: "It has to be quite obvious you've thought it through; that the structure is precise." Mark's practice had changed similarly. At A level, his class had written weekly essays, "so you wouldn't really have that much time to kind of think about things ... We'd be talking about a text in class and then you'd type in a two thousand word essay. For me it would be a stream of consciousness hoping that it flows." He would "tick boxes" by including contextual material "just to demonstrate knowledge". At university, by contrast: "Essay practices like citing, that was a big shock for me. I didn't have to do that at my old college. I didn't deal with half as much criticism." Alan summed up the difference in essay writing in these terms: "There is no sense [at university] that you have to be ticking boxes and stuff. You just want a good argument and so your whole essay could be structured around one point."

Alan felt this practice was more liberating. "We get recommended criticism but sometimes I've just searched in the library for whatever books that sound closely related to my subject. Then I'll just be reading through and making notes of a critics' ideas and then sort of pooling them all together and trying to make my own." The difficulty was in striking a balance "between creating new ideas and also having critics to back it up, but not relying on someone else's argument too much. I think that comes with planning and preparing". He felt

that proper application to study was essential for success, although everyone on his course had "the capacity to get a First in an essay". Asked what the qualities of a first class essay were, Alan referred to a critical commentary on a passage from Chaucer that his tutor had shown his class. "I thought that it got what it got because it expressed something you can't really teach. It was only two thousand words ... but it found things almost out of nothing. [...] It felt like a very tight and coherent structure." Alan repeated his sense of an unteachable quality in very good work: "I mean you can push people in the right direction but they have got to come up with that on their own."

Despite their sense of the unteachable quality of first class work, the students felt that the marks gained for an essay would depend on the expectations of the tutor, and that it was wise to shape their work accordingly. Alan said that he had made a mistake by choosing "quite random sources" for an essay written for a particular tutor who was "so strict and pedantic". Mark agreed that when he was writing essays he "always had in mind who was marking it". He felt that some tutors were "more set in their ways than others". Alan suggested that, contrary to what one might expect, "the younger the tutor the harsher the marking, it seems to me". This seemed to arise "almost out of a sense of competition with your ideas". The quality of feedback, Alan said, "really is dependent on the tutor."

Alan insisted, however, on the importance of student initiative in contacting tutors: "It is very important for a first year [student] to understand that university is more of a dialogue rather than a monologue." The student has to approach the tutor. "In essays if you do badly they won't necessarily say you should come and see me. It's only if you want to go and see them." The system is fine, he felt, "as long as the student isn't reticent. They have to get their voice heard. Otherwise you get nothing." Alan said that, when he had approached a tutor, he had not usually gained much help, as essays in his department were marked anonymously (in the interests of fairness). The tutors therefore found it "quite difficult to tell you anything about" an individual essay. Alan said that the anonymous marking system compounded the difficulty created by the relatively small number of essays written at university. At A level he had built up a rapport with his tutor, who "would know your style very well and be able to tell you what to improve." Now, "because we have barely two essays a term for one tutor it is a lot more difficult getting feedback." The time taken was also a problem: "By the time we get the essays back (I understand it takes a long time) we are probably already starting or thinking about our next essay, so it's quite hard to ... use all the advice they give you in the next." Mark agreed: "I'd look at the mark and read what they had to say about it but I haven't sourced out the tutor to have a little discussion about it. I've been focused on the next essay. Turnover is the core I guess."

The students' recommendation to the English department, then, was to "encourage the dialogue". Alan said that he didn't "really have a relationship at all" with his personal tutor. He felt that students should be encouraged to speak to their tutors before writing an essay so to gain a better idea of appropriate resources. Mark insisted: "That's how you learn best when you're actually talking to somebody about it." Seminars, however, did not always offer the opportunity for discussion that was needed. In the first year, said Alan, there had been "a lot of awkward silences and we wouldn't feel comfortable really getting into a heated discussion or debate". When there are twenty people in the class, said Mark, "it's really hard to get the conversation or discussion going." The best discussions had been in small groups with just him and one or two other people and the tutor. In larger classes, he said, all the discussion will be between the tutor and one or two students and it was very difficult to speak directly to another student.

Mark and Alan applied themselves to their studies in an environment where the conceptual agenda was more feminist than Alan, at least, had expected, but where a degree of assertiveness was needed to relate to the tutors and to benefit from the course. The most important thing was to produce good essays: turnover, said Mark, was "the core".

Longbourn University - group 2

Four female students made up the second group at Longbourn. Caitlin was in the second year of a joint honours course in Drama and English. She had taken A levels in English, Art and Mathematics at an FE college. She said that she enjoyed studying English as a way to learn about culture and society through the ages.

Jessica was in the third year of an honours degree in English; she had studied A levels in English Literature, History and Economics at an independent girls' school. She had decided to study English because she enjoyed reading literature and had always been successful at writing essays.

Françoise was in the second year of her honours degree course in English. Having been educated at a mixed bilingual lycée in France, she had taken the French Baccalaureate with a British international option, studying French Literature, English Literature, History, Geography, German, Italian and Philosophy. She said that her experience of French education had led her to pursue a degree that would link the study of English to History and philosophy.

Siân was in the first year of honours English. She had studied A levels in English Literature, English Language, Classical Civilisation, History and Music at a mixed independent school. She had chosen for her degree the subject in which

she had the most interest: she felt comfortable writing essays and reading extensively.

Asked to compare the experience of English Literature in the sixth form with that at university, the students commented on the extraordinary change in the amount and style of reading. "You read as many books in a week here as in a year at school," said Caitlin. They had expected to have to read more, but the amount of reading had been quite a shock, related as it was to a chronological approach to literature that required one or more primary texts and a number of secondary texts to be studied every week. Caitlin felt that the amount of reading required in English was greater than in any other subject. The importance of critical theory in HE study was another major shift from the students' pre-university experience. None of them felt that their pre-university studies had prepared them for the range and depth of critical reading required at university. Echoing students in other interviews, they recollected that, at A level, they had been told to include references to critical works in order to fulfil an assessment objective rather than as a fundamental mode of study. Jessica mentioned the reading list that she had been sent some months before coming up to university. This had named some 'essential' texts that she had duly read, and she had been disappointed that no mention had been made of these texts when she started her studies. She felt that it would have been supportive if the reading list had been used to create some sense of continuity from pre-university English.

Early in the discussion, Caitlin (in her third year of English) spoke eloquently about the isolation she experienced as a student. Days would spread out in which she had nothing to do but write an essay, with no ready opportunity to communicate with others. Because of the way the assessments were spread out, there would often be gaps of several weeks where there was nothing in particular to do; then a double essay deadline when two pieces had to be submitted on the same day. Assessment of the course was entirely based on essays, and all their essays counted towards their final grade. Jessica compared this system unfavourably with the experience of a friend at another pre-92 university who (she said) wrote an essay every two weeks which was read and returned by her tutor, so that a dialogue developed.

Jessica was in her third year. She said she had chosen Longbourn because of the community feeling she expected to find in a relatively small university department. When she had started, there had been a common room for English students, a facility which had subsequently disappeared. She and Françoise spoke of how this had been a good place to meet people and to share interests. (The head of department later told me that the discontinuation of the common room had been imposed by higher authority.) Jessica said that only in her third year had she met people who had been on the course during the years she had been at Longbourn, and with whom she found a lot in common: "It seems such a shame I didn't meet them in the first year."

Françoise, who had been brought up in France, said that she decided to take a degree in English to prove that she was truly bi-lingual. Her pre-university experience had been different from that of the other students but she concurred with them that the emphasis on critical reading had been a shock. Each assigned essay was a major project because it involved so much reading and planning - reading the primary texts, and the secondary texts, making "loads of notes", and, in Caitlin's words, immersing oneself in the material until the idea emerged that would form the starting point for her argument. Essay writing, according to Caitlin, was "the only thing that really counts", and each essay was worth a significant proportion of the marks of the course. Caitlin and Jessica felt it was wrong that all the assessment was based on essays that had to be written in this isolated manner. They compared the assessment weightings of English to other courses taken by their friends where a greater number of tasks were undertaken and each task counted for only a small amount of the assessment. Françoise countered that the high stakes regime made them go into depth and research their essays thoroughly in a way they might not otherwise do. But the students recounted several tales of students who had suffered from anxiety and depression brought on, they claimed, by the work regime - in some cases the students concerned had left the course. What these students said chimed interestingly with what Alan and Mark had said in the morning about the nature of the course. These male students gave the discourse an arguably masculine turn when suggesting, as Alan did, that all the facilities and staff were in place but students had to go and access them - "They're not going to come to you."

Caitlin had been unsure whether to take her degree in English or Maths, and, while glad she had chosen English, she longed for a regime where an answer would be accepted as correct by all specialists in the discipline, without the obvious subjectivity and variety of English tutors' views. The other students concurred in a view that marking standards were variable and unpredictable. Jessica claimed that some tutors liked one kind of writing, others another, and that she would try to vary her style accordingly. Some tutors, she claimed, liked essays to be heavily reliant on secondary material, while others preferred the student's voice to be more sharply heard. Caitlin gave an example of an instance where tutors' advice on essay structure had been contradictory. She had discussed with one tutor ways of structuring an essay comparing two texts. Her tutor had suggested dealing with each text at a time, as any other method would be confusing for both writer and reader; whereas the tutor who assessed the essay had criticised her for not interweaving the commentary.

The most positive difference the students noticed between their pre-university studies and their university work was the importance of ideas. "What matters here is ideas - not just proving that you can do things," said Caitlin. The lack of formal requirements - assessment objectives to be fulfilled - had made several of the students feel confused and uncertain in their first months of the

course. Caitlin said that she had spent much of her first year trying to work out what she was expected to do, a feeling which Siân (currently taking her first year) recognised. The students felt that the course offered a space where brilliant, innovative thinking was encouraged and valued, but that they also had to try to work out what their tutors wanted. The values of the course were not explicit; they had to be discovered through an apprenticeship that might last well into the second year and beyond. Jessica described how she had used JSTOR (an online academic resource) in order to research an essay on medieval literature, and had based part of her argument on a text that was outside her tutor's New Historicist paradigm. "I suppose it was a silly thing to do," she said, adopting a tactical view that she needed to accommodate her writing to her tutor's academic position.

The researcher asked the students how they perceived the assessment process, suggesting that, as their final grades were based entirely on their coursework essays, marking of these must be both formative and summative. Jessica disagreed: she felt the process was essentially summative. Comments tended to be short, and the system of anonymous marking meant that tutors usually did not have a strong recollection of the essays they had read; they were often willing to give feedback, but this was of limited value. "They don't seem to know what to say," said Caitlin. Quality, it seemed, was indefinable; academics knew it when they saw it, but they did not seem to know how to help students achieve it.

In any case, the girls concluded, there was little point in interrogating the assessment process, or in making an excessive effort to do exceptionally well. "Nearly everyone gets a 2.i.," they claimed, and a student who managed to raise her average mark by several points was still much more likely to gain 69 than 70, and thus do apparently no better than her former self who gained 61 or 62.

Noting that the girls had been critical of the course, the researcher asked them what was the best thing about it. Caitlin spoke eloquently of the pleasure of feeling truly educated through reading English Literature at university. "Everything influences a text, so when reading literature you get to understand so much - about history, society: it's about life really." What, the researcher asked, was the one change they would make, if they had the power, to improve students' experience? Siân, still in her first year, agreed with the others' view that the English course and culture should be more sociable, but emphasised the importance of more work. She wanted to do more writing and to have feedback on this; to have more of a feeling of regular work.

Netherfield University - Group 1

The first focus group at Netherfield, a pre-92 university, had been planned as a single-sex discussion on the male experience – but one of the students turned out to be female. For this reason, the researcher encouraged the students to discuss the other themes.

Robert was in the second year of a degree course in English Literature. He had studied A levels in English Literature, History, Geography and Economics in a boys' secondary school. English had been his favourite subject at school and he thought an English degree would be useful "in terms of the various skills and disciplines it teaches". He hoped to have a career in the media, preferably as a film critic, and he wrote regularly for the student newspaper.

Luke was in his first year of his English degree course. He had studied A levels in English Literature, Art, Classical Civilisation, and Theatre Studies at a mixed independent school. He said that his parents had instilled a love of books in him, and his English teachers at school had made certain authors (such as Shakespeare) "particularly exciting and interesting". He was interested in a career in theatre, and was "heavily involved" in the drama society.

Chris was in the third year of a joint Literature and Language course. She had attended a mixed secondary school where she had taken A levels in Drama, English, Media Studies and French. She enjoyed writing and was very interested in magazine journalism; she wrote for several magazines outside the university. She had intended to take a Journalism degree, but, after several work placements, she had been advised that English Literature would be regarded as a more worthwhile academic subject for a potential journalist.

According to Luke, the A level syllabus was "very much ticking boxes". He gave a striking account of the way in which the assessment objectives were introduced to the students. "At the start of the course we were given a sheet with five assessment objectives on it. We were told this exam or module would test you on particular assessment objectives. This one will test you on these: textual analysis, context, opinions and ideas, etcetera. [...] Your essay would have to be focused on one of those, or two of those. You'd have to get something of all five of them into every essay to get the higher marks." He described the effect of assessment objectives on teaching and learning at A level: "You could write the same essay for every time (obviously writing on a different text) but you could pick out the same kind of things and just make sure you've got this assessment objective and that assessment objective and then they give you a good mark." He found this "quite frustrating": "You might have a really interesting idea that you'd have to cut short because you'd have to get in assessment objective 4a." He preferred university, where "you can do your own thing. Provided it's within certain guidelines, you can do your own thing a lot." Chris said that, despite the pressure of work, she enjoyed the university regime of "reading a book a week". "It's much better obviously than doing A level because A level was so confined."

Luke said that the most obvious difference between his sixth form and university course was the much-reduced contact time. He linked this to an expectation of independent, rather than guided, reading. Chris agreed: "There is quite a big jump from school, when you have got that whole term just to do one book, and you're thrown into university and suddenly it's like ten, twelve books a term." Robert felt: "When you're at school you get spoon fed, quite a lot, to be honest. Here you don't get that - sometimes maybe in seminars, but not anywhere near the same degree." Chris made a point echoed by many other interviewees in comparing the teaching and tutorial time for English compared to other subjects: "Compared to other people, it's not that much, but obviously (because you are doing English) people expect you to read a lot more independently and by yourself." The students accepted that a great deal of their work would be independent and solitary, but that university staff were willing to help - as far as was practicable. Robert said: "Generally, I don't have a problem seeing people if I want to, but it can get frustrating during exam periods especially. Trying to get office hours and they are all booked up and you really need to talk, and they can't respond to emails straight away." Luke had "become used to working by myself so I find it easier to do it that way ... I probably don't speak to the tutors as much as I could." The three students appeared to feel there was a safety net of tutorial assistance (personal or by email) that could be accessed if necessary, although staff were stretched, especially at examination times.

Robert felt that part of the difference in the learning and teaching culture was caused by the different sense of their vocation experienced by school and university teachers. "Your [school] teacher was under pressure to get a certain amount of passes." At university, on the other hand, the tutors did not assume the same responsibility for student grades. Robert took a kind of reverse consumerist view where the responsibility was placed on the buyer rather than the seller: "You've paid your money - if you don't do the work that's your problem."

Luke felt that the bigger culture shock of moving to university from A level was not the low contact time but the small amount of writing expected. He claimed that, when studying for A level: "Usually I'd have two or three essays to write a week; whereas now it's six assessments at the end of the semester." He had expected "loads of writing". He admitted that he had attended one seminar-taught course where some writing was set every week, but it would be "very short, a piece of commentary on a short piece of text". Chris said that she did no writing for any of her Literature modules apart from the assessed essay, "and some of them don't even have an option for an assessed essay." She wished for "more compulsory writing, because I feel like I'd get more out of it". The notable exception to this low expectation of writing output was the creative writing element of her English Language course, "where we hand in pieces every week or email pieces to each of the group members." She said

that she wrote every week while at university, but “more for outside, for hobbies and whatnot”. She admitted that the tutors encouraged students to hand in “unassessed” essays, “and I do now in my third year, but I didn’t really in my first and second years, because I was a bit lazy.” The “unassessed” essays did not count towards the final assessment: “You just think, it doesn’t really matter.” But she saw the point of the formative assessment of such work: “[The tutors] do annotate them and tell you what you are doing wrong and what you are doing right.”

Luke suspected that the criteria for the assessment of essays were different in HE than they had been at A level. In the first year of his English course, he had handed in an essay which he thought was good “because I’d ticked more boxes” – repeating his earlier phrase to describe A level essay writing. “I’d covered a broader, a bigger context, and a bit of analysis and a bit of this and a bit of that.” However, this work gained a lower mark than one in which he had “been more focused”. He concluded: “They’re looking for an argument [in HE] which is something that I like ... There is more of a focus on coming up with your own ideas about the text rather than just stating the obvious, which A level felt like.”

The students agreed that critical theory affected the university approach to texts, and to writing about texts, but that they had received little preparation for this at school. Luke had had a teacher who “taught us about the theory and the critical approaches ... it was just sort of him sharing what he knew with us, but it didn’t, it wasn’t necessary for the qualification”. Chris said: “It’s so different to what you do at A level ... when [at university] you have to reference critics and even read up on theories.”

The students all agreed that they had had more time during their A level studies to indulge in personal reading. Chris “did a lot more personal reading when I was in A level, than I do now. I think that is just because of the sheer volume of books that we have to read for the course”. Luke had complemented his A level studies by reading Victorian novels and other classics. “I’m very interested in drama, so I like plays from Shakespeare to ... Caryl Churchill.” He felt his A level course in Classical Civilisation had “complemented English well”. Robert had read a good deal of science fiction as a child, and his A level work had introduced him to “the Gothic stuff like *Dracula*, ... *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, that sort of stuff”. At university, he had been able to connect his liking of sci-fi and the Gothic with his module choice. The other students agreed that the range of modules available in the second and third year of their course gave them the opportunity “to choose a lot more of what you like”, as Chris put it. She added: “The books that I’m reading for this module, all my modules this year and last year [are a] pleasure because I obviously chose the modules that I wanted to do.”

What did the students think English studies were really for? Robert suggested it was "about the sort of skills you learn from it. Debating, analytical skills - that sort of thing." Luke gave a broader justification in terms of cultural insight: "I think English is so broad because it links to history, philosophy, all these sorts of things ... the literature that people read and people write reflects the time it was written and the ideas around at that time." Chris agreed: "It's the concepts you gain from reading and studying novels and texts."

Asked how they would improve the experience of students of English, the students all asked for more contact hours, though not only with staff: in Chris's words, "I do miss seminar groups and just hearing other people's opinions." Robert again brought in a consumerist viewpoint that would be echoed by other students: "We're in about six hours a week. We pay the same as students in other subjects who are in for twenty or thirty hours a week." Luke said that, as a first year student, he still enjoyed three seminars a week. "With those going away next year I think I'll probably miss the chance to debate things and argue with other people over things rather than arguing with critics in [my] head."

Netherfield University - Group 2

Six students, all female, comprised the second Netherfield group. All six were taking BA honours courses in English Literature, which one (Alison) combined with German.

Pauline was at the first year of her English Literature degree. She had studied English Literature, English Language, Media Studies and General Studies at A level in a mixed sixth form college. At school, she had originally planned to take a degree in Creative Writing, to prepare for which she had studied A level English. She had, she said "fallen in love" with the subject and had decided to take it for her degree.

Alison was in her first year of a joint honours degree in English and German. She had studied A levels in English Literature, German and Theatre Studies at a mixed sixth form college. She had decided to study English at university because she enjoyed the subject and she wanted to gain a degree.

Lydia was in the second year of her degree. She had studied A levels in Art, English Literature and Welsh at a mixed sixth form attached to a secondary school. She had chosen to study English Literature at university as she had been successful in this at school.

The remaining three students were all in the third year of their English Literature degree courses. Martine had studied A levels in English Language

and Literature (a combined course), History, Chemistry and Biology at a mixed further education college. She had chosen English as her degree subject because she enjoyed it and she was considering becoming a primary school teacher.

Holly had studied A level English Literature, History and Religious Studies in a mixed secondary school. She had chosen English because she thought the subject would give her several career options.

Rebecca had studied Maths, Geography, English Literature and English Language at A level in a mixed secondary school. She had always enjoyed English and so it seemed "the natural choice" for her degree. She also thought that English degree would link with her interest in other arts and would develop analytical skills.

The students' comments about progression from school to university echoed those of the first group. Compared to GCSE, A level courses involved more discussion and a required (in Holly's words) "a bit more of your own thought", but the difference between A level and university was much greater. "At A level you could spend a long time completely dissecting a book," said Martine. "All of a sudden, you get to uni and you have one lecture on a book and then you have to work it out for yourself." Some students had been encouraged to read secondary texts during A level, but, according to Holly, this was "for the sake of point scoring ... to tick that box" - another reference to the focus on assessment objectives. Lydia commented favourably on the wider reading required by the final "synoptic" module of her A level course, "which was quite useful for coming to university." The module used a theme of war. "I think I read about fifty different texts for that module until I kind of lost faith in humanity and I was forced to read other stuff."

The students agreed that their A level English course had left them plenty of time to read "very different stuff" in their own time: Harry Potter and "chick lit" were mentioned. However, some had moved outwards from their set texts: having studied *Brave New World* and *1984*, Pauline "got quite into dystopian future novels like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Oryx and Crake*". She had chosen the Netherfield course because it offered opportunities for reading the kinds of modern texts she liked. Martine had similarly moved on from war literature and "a really unhealthy obsession with Hamlet": "I started reading like Victorian stuff like *Dorian Gray* and I was reading *Mrs Dalloway*, *A Clockwork Orange*, some Kurt Vonnegut [...] Then I got like some Sadie Smith to distract from all the War novels, a bit of lightness." Confronted by what she regarded as poor A level teaching, Lydia "started consuming literature at a rate of knots really. I read loads of Austen's and went through the whole Narnia series. All of Tolkien's. I was book mad. I worked in a book shop so ..." Rebecca had a strong sense of self-education. She had deliberately read texts which she thought would be useful for university: "I had a James Joyce and all

of these from Shakespeare. Just things that I thought would come in handy for background knowledge." Her project of the reading self still continued: I guess I'll carry on with that when I finish uni, as well. It's not finished." Martine felt that her university studies had given her an appetite for more: "Having studied [modernist texts], I've got a massive list of things I want to read after university."

Overall, these students did not find the amount of reading required at university the most difficult aspect of transition. "It's much more complex than that," said Martine. "It's more trying to understand ... what they are looking for and even what you should be reading around the subject." Reading was an aspect of this uncertainty: "You get given this big reading list at the start of the term. I'm used to being in school and you're telling me go and read this specific book. I can't do all this huge long list. It's the big unknowns like that. Trying to guess what you should be doing a lot of the time." She had decided that the procedure worked by trial and error: "Our course is such that you do a set of essays and then you do another set of essays. You can apply what you've learnt the first term to the second term and just do it again once you've worked out how it works." "But," commented Holly, "trying to work out how it works is quite a long, difficult process."

"Trying to find the balance between including critics in your essays and close textual analysis," was Lydia's view of the difficulty. "In my first year I really stuffed up on trying to put in too many critics in all my essays and that really didn't go down very well." She had solved the problem by a partial regression. "So now I've reverted straight back to almost A level - just really close textual analysis, which seems to be (especially with English because say you never went to any of the lectures and you just focused on the texts) basically all they want you to do although there is a lot of extra reading as well." She felt that "trying to figure out what you are supposed to be doing" was easier than she had at first thought because of the availability of the staff: "They actively encourage you to go and make appointments. I didn't really expect that."

The English department had a policy of running general seminars for first year students. "I found the seminars useful in the first year," said Lydia. "I think it would have been a nightmare otherwise." Martine agreed: "The seminars are a great help." She described the tutor's way of reaching out to the students: "He would say: 'Come and see me if you have any problems about ... you know, if you're worried about writing the essays. I'll have a look at your work and see if I can help.'" She felt this was "really helpful - just to point you in the right direction to see what you need to be doing".

The students understood that the general seminars did not continue after the first year because, as Martine put it, "people are doing so many different modules in the second year." Nevertheless, they outlined the benefits of seminars. "I was really, really nervous about having crazy ideas about texts,"

said Holly, "but once you get into a seminar situation you ... bounce ideas off other people your own age ... And not being rejected helps to build confidence as well." Alison found that the seminars helped her to understand tutors' expectations. "It's not that I didn't understand necessarily what the lecturers were talking about, but I didn't understand where I was supposed to go with that - the direction."

The students explained that, in the second year, their choice of module might be influenced by the teaching method. "If you picked cleverly," explained Holly, "you could either pick all seminars or all lectures if you wanted." Other criteria, said Martine, included "how they are assessed - whether it's by exam or by essay: most people like a balance, but some people prefer one or the other exclusively". Another issue was the types of texts studied: "I've done three novel modules this term," said Holly. "It's been a nightmare." She advised Pauline (a first year student): "Do plays and poetry and just a couple of novel modules."

The students said that they had done more writing in their previous courses than they did at university. This was not only in terms of the numbers of essays written, but also in terms of word length: "I used to regularly write 2,500 word essays on *Hamlet* or whatever," said Holly, "which you just couldn't do here." However, A level essays were much more directed. The thesis was usually provided: "You'd have a question and it would lead to what your argument was and you just had to argue ... the question." Now, said Lydia: "It will just be like a quote or a comment and 'discuss', and you have to come up with an argument." Alison felt that she would have liked more guidance on essay technique. "When I came to uni, it's like a whole other league! - and what I thought was all right I had to learn to do all over again."

Some of the students had been helped by the tutors' encouraging them to write practice essays that were not assessed towards their final grade: "It was a lot of work at the time but definitely helped to get everything up to scratch," said Rebecca. Pauline agreed that such essays were "really useful for the feedback on essay structure and, you know, the amount of research needed and stuff". "They were marked by our seminar tutors and they gave us feedback and we went to see them about our essay technique," said Rebecca. The essays weren't "a waste of time", in her view, because they were on similar topics to the assessed essays: "Not the same essay as such, but we could use out research for the real essay. It was very useful." Holly had also taken advantage of practice essays to "keep her hand in" after the "huge summer break": "You can go quite a few months without writing anything, which I find quite difficult."

The researcher asked the students whether they thought that (as they had volunteered for the focus group) they were unusually able or committed; they all seemed well read and to have taken advantage of the English department's

offer of practice essays. Rebecca agreed this might be the case, but she pointed out that the practice essays had been compulsory in the first year, and that the tutors had strongly encouraged them to do them. Pauline emphasised that the tutors engaged with the process - they would mark the essays and give feedback. The students agreed that commitment to study amongst their peers varied widely. They described the shortcuts they knew people took, such as reading the minimal number of primary texts required to complete course work, or skimming through critical books to find appropriate quotations. "If there's four novels," said Lydia, "you can only read two or three. The same with plays - if there are six plays, then I'd read half of them." Overall, however, these students practised a higher or more inclusive strategy than the minimal reading: "The last few lectures (on one of the modules I am doing at the moment) have been on novels that I know I'm not writing about for my course work, but I've been to them anyway," said Lydia. "Most of what the lecturer is saying about one novel you can apply to anything." Martine agreed: "Yes, it's often worth going just for the odd point they might make. This might be useful for when you do your essays, and suddenly something might click into place." Moreover, the lecturers might "give little clues" about an exam: "Sometimes they'll say: 'A question like that might come up in the exam.'"

The researcher asked whether the amount of critical theory the students had to study had been daunting. Lydia's reply suggested that the tutors were aware of some difference between their practice and that of lecturers elsewhere. "From what they've said, other unis might make you read more critics but we want you to engage with one really minute [feature], like one word [...] and then write a whole point and whole paragraph on that." She felt that the tutors were interested in students' interpretations: "They want you to read a little bit [of secondary reading] but ... they want you more to focus on your own opinions." Rebecca said that the emphasis on critical theory varied greatly between the lecturers. "Some lecturers ... want lots of background reading to know that you've looked at other people's views. Whereas in others, *Literature into Film* for example (I'm doing that) ... [they] just want to see how we can analyse the text and the material ourselves." Martine pointed out that certain modules required more critical reading than others: "Some aims of the module are: 'How can you analyse this within this context or this theory?' or something like that. Whereas some are aimed at just really dissecting the one novel, or the work of a poet."

The discussion continued to rehearse a range of positions from "having your own opinions" to "relying completely on critics". Lydia insisted: "You've still got to base it on the text though. The whole way though it always has to come from the text." Rebecca suggested that she was unusual in her approach: "I do quite a bit of critical theory as I'm going along ... to supplement the lectures and give me a bit of a context for what we are doing."

The question: "What is English for?" produced a range of responses from the students. Alison had been persuaded, somewhat against her will, to apply for university ("It made [the school's] statistics look good") and had struggled to settle in to study after her gap year. Now, however, she saw her degree as "teaching me a set of skills in terms of essay writing, my command over language and so on through the medium of English". Holly scorned this argument: "They [the tutors] go on and on about transferable skills." Rebecca had chosen English because she enjoyed the subject and wasn't sure what she wanted to do after university. She felt that Humanities students "have more free time to see friends and do other things". She was now going to "focus" and take a postgraduate course in speech therapy. Rebecca too had chosen the subject because she knew she would "enjoy the three years". She was going on to do a master's degree at the University of Sussex and hoped to find a career where she could use her qualifications, "hopefully in publishing or journalism or something".

Holly felt that studying English "keeps a part of the culture alive". Martine liked "the way it encompasses a lot of things", and cited *The Grapes of Wrath* as an example of "an amazing novel in its own right that also teaches you so many other kind of historical and social implications". Holly liked the interdisciplinary aspect of some of the courses: "I've learnt about art and history and film. I'm doing one of my essays now on comics and graphic novels - things I wouldn't otherwise have learnt about if I hadn't done English."

As this group consisted entirely of females, the researcher asked whether the gender balance of English students had affected their studies in any way. Martine felt: "I think it would be nice if there were more boys on the course ... It changes the atmosphere a bit [and gives] different perspectives." "The girls do tend to agree quite a lot," said Holly, and added that she felt sorry for lone boys in the class: "There's load of girls and they're all coming from the same approach and they all enjoy the book and then you have a bloke, they'll just say what is this all about? They throw a different light on it." Lydia said that, being one of the gender majority, she "had never considered [the issue] in my way before". It seemed natural for girls to take English, but she was surprised when she met a female student of Maths or Chemistry. "I've thought, How could they do that?" "The only observation I've made," interposed Rebecca, "is that, even though there aren't that many guys that do English, the ones that do it are very good at it and do come up with these insightful comments." She claimed that "a lot of boys on our course are actually gay", and that the heterosexuals were "very good and relaxed" about being in a class with a majority of girls. Holly agreed: "They are always laid back in the chair; girls are talking all lesson and they'll just throw something in at the end. Where did that come from?" "It's so annoying," said Rebecca: "They're so casual about it." Holly suggested that these able, confident boys were the result of a kind of affirmative action: they had "probably come from a mixed class where the teacher has specifically singled them out as a boy who is really good at English

and encouraged them". Rebecca admired such boys who went "against the grain" in choosing to study English. "Maybe we [women] don't have to make any sacrifices or go against the grain to do it."

Lydia said that, if she met a student from a subject such as Engineering, and told him she was taking English Literature, "they sort of seem to laugh at you as if you're obviously stupid." She wasn't sure whether her gender influenced the other student's reaction, and whether her own anxious response was "a female thing". She thought the other student's reaction was partly envy at the comparatively undemanding time commitment of an English degree. "Because they [engineers] are in at 9 a.m. every day of the week, and we have six hours' lectures a week, they all just think we're lazy and a bit dim." Talking to such a student, she felt "a bit of a cliché, a bit like a girl who's gone to university to do English and is talking about all these things and pretentious ideas and discoveries".

Moving on to discuss experience of assessment, the students spoke first of the Creative Writing modules. According to Martine, only two or three students in each semester of the course would gain first-class marks. "Everyone else will get 65, despite all the feedback they been given and all the changes they've made." She questioned whether Creative Writing was a suitable module to include within an English degree, "because it's bringing people's marks down." Lydia agreed: she had taken Creative Writing for two terms "and it has dragged my whole average down". She liked the amount of feedback given in Creative Writing - "you get feedback every week with the group"; but "you make all those changes and then you don't get a very good mark". She had decided not to take the course in her third year, "because in the third year it is worth twice as much: it's got more weight in the degree." Although she had enjoyed Creative Writing in the second year, she declared: "I'm not prepared to risk it."

It was also difficult, the students felt, to understand the criteria for critical essays, but Holly suggested: "It comes down to ideas ... there's only so much you can perfect in terms of essay technique". Her best marks had been a surprise: "It was simply down to the originality of my argument that I wasn't really aware of." Lydia felt that examinations were unsuitable for assessment in English, although she had gained her best mark that year in an exam. "It comes down to how you are on the day, and it can end up just destroying everything." Rebecca preferred some exam assessments, "just to take the pressure off essays - you could have six essays all due on the same day." Martine had deliberately picked two examination modules for her third year because she had heard that examiners were more lenient than essay tutors, "because you're under pressure."

Lydia was sceptical about the validity of assessment. She had gained a B grade at A level English and had been discouraged from applying to Netherfield; but she had succeeded in her university choice and had now gained a first-class

mark for one of her modules. The students agreed that they had all progressed a long way beyond A level, although Alison said that, now she had understood what she was meant to do at university, her marks were no longer improving.

Rebecca mentioned a newsletter that the English department had started to produce. She thought this was a good development, "because I did feel so lost for the whole of my first year." She had wanted somebody "to actually explain what we were meant to be doing, in more concrete terms". Alison agreed. "It would be so useful to have a summary lecture at the beginning, so you know what direction you're meant to be heading and where you're aiming for, as opposed to floating along and hoping you'll have an epiphany or something." A joint honours student, she had drifted in the first few weeks, not knowing whether she was supposed to contact her English tutors or wait to hear from them. Rebecca said that a lack of structure led to much waste of time. "You have one hour in the day and that's it - you can easily fill up the day with other bits and bobs, go to Tesco's and the day's gone." She felt that: "If you're in the place for the day, like college or school, you achieve so much more." She appreciated that school and college had been too structured for her to learn independence, but: "University is so lax; you don't even have to go to the lectures. There's no want to know whether you're there or not." Some of the other students agreed about the lack of structure. Holly found the cancellation of lectures and seminars (without rescheduling) particularly annoying, in view of the "ridiculously low number of contact hours". She felt that learning together "brings you together as a year, as a course - like the medics, who have eight hours a day or whatever". Pauline contrasted the lecture hall of 200 students: "In the first week, everyone was friendly and introducing ... Now you just sit down next to someone and ignore them."

The students discussed the third year dissertation, which was optional at Netherfield. Martine said that many students had commented that it involved much more reading and work than another 20 credit module, and that they would be more inclined to take this option if it were a 30 credit module. Holly agreed, but she was still glad to have chosen to write a dissertation and to have achieved this. The students agreed that making the right choice of course was sometimes difficult. Martine had wanted to do a joint honours degree but had been discouraged: according to her, "[the tutors] prefer you to stay with the home school." Alison had found the first term of her joint honours course in German and English stressful. She had expected to have a personal tutor for both German and English, but had been told her personal tutor would be a German lecturer. She felt this was discriminatory and that, as she wasn't "completely English", she didn't have the benefit of an English tutor. Pauline related that in the last few days she had been told to go to see her personal tutor about her option choices, and thought this strange as she had never met him. When she tried to make contact, she found that the personal tutors for her course had been changed. "I was never told this," she said, "and neither was anyone [else]." Lydia, however, had made the effort to change her tutor

because "her field of expertise was completely not what I wanted to do". This had "worked out a lot better, because he is involved in the kinds of literature that I want to look at".

The other students replied to this rapidly, overlapping their words. Martine had only just heard that it was possible to change one's tutor. Holly said: "There are a lot of little things you don't know when you start and you pick up." "It wouldn't have even crossed my mind," said Rebecca. Lydia repeated that she would "definitely recommend changing" if it were possible to find a tutor "you particularly click with", but she thought - she wasn't certain - that "you can only do it once".

Holly felt that the personal tutor system seemed arbitrary, a matter of form: "Here's a complete stranger, who's supposed to write your reference at the end." She felt it would be more helpful if the personal tutor were also the student's seminar tutor in their second or third year. "They get to know you more and it would be much more appropriate and helpful for everyone."

This long discussion conveyed aspects of female students' experience of studying English that will be more fully discussed below, especially in the section on gender and university English.

Pemberley University - Group 1

Tessa was in the first year of her English course at Pemberley, a pre-92 university. She had attended a mixed secondary school where she had studied English Literature, English Language and History. She told me before the interview started that she chose to do English because she liked reading and writing, particularly creative writing. She enjoyed analysing things and constructing arguments. She thought History was not creative enough as a subject choice and she didn't think she could cope with being a lawyer.

Carrie-Ann was in the first year of university English. She had taken A levels in a secondary school sixth form including English Literature, History, Drama, Critical Thinking and General Studies. She had also passed with merit AEA English Literature and had taken English Language as an AS level course. She always knew that she wanted to study English. Apart from her love for the subject, she felt that it would enable her to follow a variety of careers including publishing, editing, journalism or teaching. If she had the courage, she said, she would be a writer.

Polly was in her second year of university English. She had studied in a mixed FE college and taken A level courses in English Literature, Philosophy, Film Studies, Government and Politics.

Seamus was in his first year of university English. He had studied the International Baccalaureate at a Further Education college where he had taken higher qualifications in English, History and Anthropology, and standard qualifications in French, Maths and Environmental Systems. He chose English because it was a subject in which he felt he could do well and which would not restrict his choice of future employment.

Isabel was in her second year of university English. She had studied English in a mixed sixth form where she had taken A levels in English Literature, French, and Biology. She decided to study English because she had "pretty much always wanted to!"

Justine was taking English and philosophy at university and was in her first year. She had attended a single-sex secondary school where she had studied A level Chemistry, English, and Art. She chose English because she had always enjoyed the subject and she felt confident when it. It was a broadly useful degree, she thought, which suited her as she had yet to decide on a career.

Seamus opened the discussion by explaining that he had taken the International Baccalaureate course, which had involved a wide range of world literature. He had expected university to be a lot more difficult than IB English, and that he would be surrounded by "more intelligent people". Both of these expectations had been realised, but he had not found the work "particularly difficult here either".

Tessa had been expecting a lot more "in-depth analysis" than at A level. She echoed other students in feeling that "a lot of A level was just kind of ticking boxes and that kind of thing". She had been looking forward to "being able to think outside the box a bit more" but she had found that, because of the time constraints involved in studying a book every week, she had not really gone into much more depth: "It seems quite rushed."

Justine commented on the difference between A level, where "you have three books for the entire year", and university, where "we read a book a week". She was unclear as to whether "we are supposed to take the kind of skills we learned at A level and apply them on a weekly basis". She felt oppressed by the amount of free time she had: "I feel like we're on a sentence." It was, she felt, daunting "having a course which is literally as hard as you want it to be". She didn't feel she was failing, but she wasn't working as hard as she had during her A levels. In a way she liked not being told what to do, but she also found the lack of structure "nerve wracking".

Polly, now at the end of her second year, said that she had been doing the bare minimum and getting "just a mark I am happy with". Now, she said, she realised: "It's not really about what you should do. It's not like an A level."

There are no things to hit. You can put in as much effort as you want." She said she had resolved to make more effort: "I could get better if I did try."

During her A level years, said Tessa, she had "had lots of time to do personal reading". Her family environment had supported her: she had read "lots of classics" and also "more modern acclaimed books like *The Life of Pi* and basically whatever book my mum gave me to read". Carrie-Ann, on the other hand, said that she had always felt "too guilty" to read outside the course. At A level, she did "ridiculous amounts of wider reading about war literature". During the summer before starting university, she had "started working my way through the Penguin Classics series, trying to get direction". Now she was "really conscious about trying to completely understand the books that we are reading". Isabel, like Carrie-Ann, had decided "to read all these classics" after her A levels, "because I was worried that I'd get an interview." At university, she had no time to read anything outside the course. She claimed to be a slow reader: in her second year, she had taken a module on Victorian novels. "They are quite long, so I had to start a few weeks in advance." Studying Chemistry had absorbed much of Justine's time in the sixth form, "so I didn't do any external reading at all." Similarly, at university: "the weekly books are enough and I feel if I read anything I should be rereading those." She would do "external reading" when writing an essay: "Then I'd be quite specific about what I read."

Most of the students did a good deal of reading on screen. Tessa used Google to browse academic sources. Polly also enjoyed "random internetting", and most of the students concurred with Carrie-Ann when she said that her computer was "pretty much always on". Even when she was reading an academic text, she would "use messaging to keep in contact with people back home". Personal and university e-mail took a lot of Seamus's attention; otherwise, most of his internet and print reading was academic, but he would "flick through trashy magazines" and sometimes read a newspaper.

In her first year, Polly had found critical theory "really difficult, because I hadn't done any before". Seamus said that at college he had learned "that we used to exploit black people - all this sort of thing" but that in the first semester at university he had learned "proper stuff" like formalism. This semester's material had been "lightweight", in his view: "We've had three weeks of feminism." Polly commented: "I think the feminism thing is probably because it was fashionable at the time." Seamus said that "proper" critical theory "makes [study] more fun, so you do better". Carrie-Ann said that she had tried to understand theory for her AEA examination in Literature: "I sat looking at the computer on Google books trying to pretend I was reading critical theory ... but I never actually read it." At university, she claimed, confronted with critical reading in their first lecture: "Everyone just sat there in horror." She now approached theory by trying to "break it down". She felt

that the concepts were not difficult: "It's just the phrasing they used to make it sound really heavy."

Tessa had done "a lot of writing" at A level English because she had taken courses in both Literature and Language. She had also done some creative writing. She found "the new essay writing" at university difficult: "I found it quite difficult to cope with all these structures that are expected of us ... the simple things like referencing." She felt that "[the lecturers] haven't really gone through it properly". Seamus had learned Harvard referencing at college and had to relearn the MLA system in university. At university, he was able to write things that are "a bit more proper, rather than just the same thing as everybody else in the class has written." He wished there were more opportunities for writing. Justine felt it was strange that "you only really have four essays a year". Most of her friends, she said, were science students: "They have, like, five essays a term and they feel they've got a lot more work than I do." Tessa felt that the difficulties she had encountered "would be made a lot simpler, if we were given a lot more non-assessed work". She suggested weekly assignments "which would help to focus what we should be looking at in the text that we study every week". Then, she suggested: "When we actually came to the essays that are being assessed ... we would have a kind of system in our mind for getting an essay done." She felt it was "really odd" that "the only essays that we get are assessed".

Seamus said that, in the first term, students had been encouraged every two weeks to post "two or three hundred words" on Web-CT, an online discussion forum. "I think what they were trying to do was to make us do more writing ... Everyone has to unlearn a lot following life at college and start writing properly." In his view, this had not been useful because "we just posted it and then nothing was said about it". Tessa said she had found the process "really irritating", because "people would wait until other people had made a contribution and then just copy and paste". Seamus said that he had liked being able to look at other people's work, but "as a whole it was a waste of time". Carrie-Ann said that students had been told they were expected to write messages on the Web-CT discussion forum, "so people would just write something for the sake of it." Seamus commented: "The problem is that people don't seem to be that into books ... so such a discussion wouldn't really interest them."

Carrie-Ann said that she preferred to discuss things "in real time with real people". She said that she often talked to her friends on the course about books and swapped books with them as part of the friendship. But she would not want more seminars. "They're forced ... at nine o'clock on a Thursday morning no one wants to say anything and we are all sat there with our coffees." Tessa said that her last seminar experience had been similar. "Nobody's into books, nobody seems to care. Everyone just sits there and the tutor is forced to ask obvious questions." She had wanted to talk about the

topic, but apparently nobody else did. "I'm not going to sit there nattering away to myself." Justine, however, felt that both the seminar groups she had participated in had been "absolutely fantastic ... we've got a really good tutor. People won't shut up". Carrie-Ann found her critical theory seminars engaging, "because people can actually have more opinions on a theory than on a text," but they were sometimes "repetitive and boring" because only a few people spoke "and it's the same argument no matter what topic we're doing ". One person would always say: "Oh, it's the corporation, capitalism is bad," and there was a male student "who's quite macho and loves it when feminism comes up." She liked being with the same people all the time because she got to know the group, "but at the same time it can be quite repetitive." Isabel suggested that seminars improved in the second year "because you've chosen what you're interested in ... people have read the book so they have more to say." She conceded: "Even if I haven't read the book, I've still read SparkNotes, so I'm a person who talks!"

The students discussed tutors' expectations of essay writing. At A level, said Polly, the work was formulaic: "You need to basically name drop in an essay." At university, "You could choose what takes you want to write on ... and what line of argument you want to pursue." At the same time, she claimed: "You have to cater for what the tutor likes." Some, she explained, "really like the contextual knowledge and want you to look [at a text] through critical theory," while others "much prefer you to stick to the close reading of the text". She concluded, rather ruefully: "So it's not really finding your own style anyway; it's still ticking boxes."

Tessa was disappointed that the mark she had been given for her last essay had not improved from her previous grade, although she had "tried really hard". She felt the tutors "could make it so much clearer what we have to discuss". Essay questions were often confusing, she found, because "they have massive quotes which aren't always really relevant to the question" and she wasn't clear whether these had to be discussed. Isabel said that she had got her best mark when she "completely ignored the quote and just answered the question". At A level, she claimed, "You could get a B grade by just writing about the quote," because discussing the quotation was central to the question. Tessa found Isabel's comment helpful: "Whereas here it's like, here is a quote but this is the question. You're right, that's the confusion."

Seamus claimed that, at college, essay-writing had been a matter of: "I'll tick the box, done, marked, I'm off." At university, he was "able to write with a bit of style ... rather than in a way a computer could have written." He claimed that, because he was in his first year, the mark wasn't important: "It's just about testing the water and pushing the boundaries." He had got "carried away" by his last essay: "I had a lot of fun in writing it and the tutor recognised that and said, 'Yes, well written, nice idea; you're wrong, but I'll give you a

2.1.' " Seamus appreciated his tutor's response: "I thought that was as good a criticism as you could get really."

Tessa returned to her theme of the difference between essay writing at A level and at university. At A level: "You had a lot of practice for your coursework and for your exam, and it was nice, the feeling you could just get used to the topic, you could experiment a bit." At university, by comparison: "We've only done one proper essay that hasn't been counted towards our first year mark." Even though "the first year doesn't count" in assessment terms: "It's still high pressure that every time we do an essay it matters." She regretted the loss of formative assessment: "It takes the way the fun of it when we could be experimenting a lot more." Isabel pointed out that Tessa would have a 1000 word formative essay at the beginning of her second year, but added: "I always get a higher mark in the formative essay than the actual one."

Seamus felt there was too short a period of time between the setting of an essay and the submission deadline. He wanted more time to reflect on the topic: "You could wait until you had a burning idea that you could write down and I think you would invariably get a better mark - you'd be excited by it." Isabel and Polly thought they had plenty of time - "particularly compared to A levels," said Polly - but Seamus insisted that he didn't mean "the amount of time it took to do all the preparation and the actual writing". He wanted "more time to think about it". He wanted essay-writing not to be a chore but "exciting" - he wanted to produce an essay that would be "interesting for someone to read".

Isabel compared the practice of essay writing to that of her Creative Writing module. "You buy a journal and every week to go to a Creative Writing seminar and they give you work to do." She had freedom to write what she wanted: "I'm in the middle of writing a screenplay, just because I want to write a screenplay." Her coursework would be assessed and she would take a week long "take-home examination" that would begin in two weeks' time. "You just get a week to write some poems."

Seamus said that it had never really occurred to him to question why he had chosen a subject studied by a minority of male students. He had been told at a university open day that there were five girls to every boy on the course; he had found this surprising, but it hadn't influenced his decision. It amused him, he said, that in his cultural criticism class "there's only one other boy and he's quite feminine". Carrie-Ann claimed: "I don't really think about [the gender proportion]," but added that the lack of boys on the course was a common conversation topic amongst the girls. She had "felt bad", she said, when one of her lecturers had said the previous day: "Let's be honest, if all the boys in the room left it wouldn't make much of a difference." She thought the lecturer had said this because the subject of the lecture was feminism, but she had felt: "We're all students. What does it matter if we are girls or boys?"

Seamus observed that there was "nobody male here to argue about books with". He would argue with friends back home or at his flat, "always playing around", but, at university: "I feel guilty about making a particularly passionate argument and people seem to get quite offended." He had been discussing with a female student whether the church in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* was presented positively or negatively: "I noticed she was going bright red and some of the girls on her side seemed quite angry with me." Carrie-Ann commented that "the subject matter is predominately feminine and does require very feminine ways of thinking", but felt that the argumentative method was "quite masculine": it required, she said, a "slight desensitising", as "you've got to cast aside your personal opinions and tried not to let them affect an argument or the way you see the book".

Polly said that the subject matter was not feminine in the sense that "we don't really talk about emotions in the books that we read". She added: "We are often told to stay objective ... the subject matter is more like themes." Carrie-Ann agreed: the focus of reading was "often about society and general themes such as race and religion - if we talk about a particular character it's in relation to one of those themes". The Victorian Studies seminar that Isabel was currently attending consisted entirely of female students, "possibly because a lot of the books are marriage plot novels." Seminar discussion, she said, was largely about gender and society in Victorian times. The researcher asked the students whether they were ever invited to undertake imaginative writing based on their literary studies, such as imagining that they were a minor character in a novel. "We never do that kind of thing," said Polly. "We never, we don't really do creative writing in that sense." Creative writing was the domain of a different module, which, according to Isabel, attracted a number of male students: "It's almost half and half ... in my [Creative Writing] seminar."

Reflecting on her course, Carrie-Ann said that she appreciated having a lot of free time, as she had got involved with "a lot of different things in uni". Justine felt that she appreciated the opportunity to read so many books; without the course, she said, she would "lack the drive to read them". Seamus agreed that he was glad to be made to read things that he would otherwise never have read; and he was glad to have had an affirmation of his ability to write academic essays. Further, he appreciated the intelligence of his contemporaries: "There are still dunderheads on the course but the majority seem to be pretty darn smart."

Isabel said she had not really enjoyed her course until recently when she had started her Creative Writing module. She would have liked "more lectures or more structured things ... just a general idea of what you are working towards". Tessa suggested a weekly meeting with either a seminar tutor or a personal

tutor. She had been surprised by her personal tutor's telling her: "If you're good, I won't see you for the rest of the year."

These students had invested a good deal of expectation in their university studies: they had worked hard at A level and in their self-chosen further reading. Most of them were still in the first year, and spoke positively about university life, but there was some disappointment about the quantity of writing required, most of which was summatively assessed. Isabel spoke for at least some of the others when she said that she would have preferred more structure. They had mixed experiences of seminars, but they appreciated the companionship of intelligent and articulate contemporaries and the opportunities presented by their university education.

Pemberley University - Group 2

Naomi, Becky, and Lynda were in their first year at Pemberley. Becky and Lynda were taking single subject honours English Literature, while Naomi was also studying Classical Studies.

Naomi had attended a single-sex grammar school where she had taken A levels in English Literature and Language (a combined course), History, Classical Civilisation and Critical Thinking. She had chosen English because she enjoyed it and thought it a well respected academic discipline; she had always believed she would take a degree in English. Becky had taken A levels in Psychology, English, and Music in a mixed secondary school. She had chosen English at university because the work interested her and it had been her best subject at school. Lynda had studied the international baccalaureate in a Dutch international school, where she had taken courses in English, Dutch, History, Geography, Maths and Biology. She had chosen English as a degree subject because she loved to read.

Bela and Antonia were in their second year. Bela had studied A levels in Biology, French, Drama and English Literature in a single sex "semi-private independent school" where some of the classes had included boys. She had studied English at university because it is a "well thought of degree", is "all encompassing" (it covers, she thought, history, geography and sociology) and the English graduate has a wide variety of career prospects. Antonia had studied A levels in English Literature, History and Geography in a mixed secondary school and had chosen English at university because she enjoyed the subject.

Joy and Leslie were in their third year. Joy had studied A levels in English Literature, Geography and German in a mixed secondary school. She had chosen to study English at university because she enjoyed the subject at A level

and "had always had a personal interest in literature". Leslie had taken her A levels in English, History, Psychology and French in a mixed secondary school. As she had found A level English "very engaging", she had decided to study it at university.

Comparing their expectations of university English with their experience, three of the students said that they were (in Lynda's words) "surprised by the amount of free time that we get". Naomi "was expecting a lot more lectures in the first term", and Becky was surprised to have only two lectures a week: "one for each module, when other subjects are having loads and loads." Lynda said that she was getting used to the amount of non-contact time but that she had also been surprised by the amount of criticism and theory that had to be read as part of the English course. Antonia said that the course so far had been "a lot less work that she had expected" but that she was enjoying it. Leslie and Joy, the senior students, both expressed their pleasure at the range of work they could do in the third year. "By the time you get to the third year it becomes a lot more like what you expected," said Joy. "You begin to be able to specialise in what you want." Leslie agreed: "It was good to do a range of things. I didn't realise how much creative writing I could actually get to do as part of the English course."

Speaking about their pre-university reading, Bela and Antonia described how they had taken advantage of the relatively small amount of study required for their A level course to (in Antonia's words) "build up my repertoire of literature". Bela had been taking four A level subjects and also reading a book a week: "I was reading probably a lot more than I read now. I was trying to get through the Classics, so I got a list of the top 100 books and I tried to pick them off the list every single week." However, since coming to university, Antonia found that "because [Literature is] the course anyway, I find that when I get to the holidays I read chick lit and trash because it gives that release. You don't have to be taking everything in with those kinds of books."

Joy remembered her A level study of a few books over "a very, very long period of time"; in the evenings, she said, she had just read a book of her choice. At university she didn't have much time to read "what I would like", because "I feel guilty for not doing the reading for the course". She added: "Having said that, I spend a lot more time reading e-mails and going on Facebook - that's how the university community works." Leslie also said that she had not "picked up a book for pleasure in the last year and a half". The demands of the third year English course, particularly the "criticisms of the texts that you are studying - "you have the texts and then you have three other articles to get through as well" - meant that she didn't "pick up fun books any more". Becky, however, said that she still tried to fit in her own reading in addition to the demands of the course. Lynda claimed to do the same amount of reading as when at school but it was a different kind of reading - "criticism and that kind of thing". She "very rarely read a novel now for pleasure".

The students spoke about managing their reading. Becky said that, partly because of living in a shared room, she would make herself go to the library "if I need to get work done". Joy spoke about prioritising: "If I know there's stuff which is vital to my dissertation, I'll read that rather than reading stuff to my Gothic module." Antonia was finding the study load difficult at the moment because she was reading lengthy novels for a Victorian literature module and a play each week. "When an essay gets thrown into it, I prioritise the essay reading over course reading." Bela admitted that she tended to gravitate towards the subject she liked: "At the moment I'm really passionate about American literature so my Renaissance module is getting a little slack." Naomi said that she was currently reading novels and critical essays for her English course. "I always find a novel much more interesting than the critical essays, but then the critical essays take a lot more focus to read." Her solution was to read the novel in the first part of the week and then "in the second half the week I read the critical essays. This works quite well because my seminar after the critical essays is at the end of the week anyway."

The students' management of their reading was related to the management of their writing, the assessed outcome of their study. Lynda found: "The more free time you have, the easier it is to procrastinate, especially with an essay ... You just look up things on JSTOR and you don't actually start planning or doing anything concrete until the last minute." Leslie wished that essay-writing were "more staggered [...] We'll have 4000 words to write in four weeks when we've had nothing else to do the rest of the year." Joy agreed that similar or synchronous hand-in dates made prioritisation and management of time difficult: "I've got a 3000 word essay and a review as well due four days after my dissertation."

Lynda thought it was "very easy in English" to economise on time and effort because "we have so few essays to do". When faced with a particular essay or an examination, she would focus on one primary text "and then read a lot of secondary material and maybe not another primary text". This meant that she could not contribute to seminars on texts that she hadn't read, "but you have to make sacrifices somewhere." Antonia said that she would attend seminars even where she was unprepared, so as "not to miss out on the whole general picture of the course". She had tried to do a good deal of primary reading in the summer holiday and was frustrated that she found she had "forgotten a lot" when she came to discuss them. Naomi said that she tended to read the primary literature for English but not for Classics, where the texts were "very long and dense". It was much easier, she said, to do the secondary reading and read synopses of the primary literature. Becky and Lynda explained that they economised on time by not attending the films that were offered as part of the first year course. Becky did not feel that the films were an important part of the course - "they throw some films in which I'm not really interested in" - and both students agreed that they could find them online if necessary.

Bela said that she was writing very different essays in her second year at university than she had done at A level. "In sixth form there wasn't any critical influence on our writing at all ... whereas now you have to do so much background reading." The "critical framework", she thought, "is as important as if not more important than the novel or poem that you're working on." Joy said it had taken her a while to find a balance between her opinions "and how much you have to draw on other people". Echoing students in most of the other groups, Antonia said that A level was "a lot of ticking boxes". She gave examples: "Have you mentioned a critic? Have you put in a quotation? Have you done some language analysis?" Leslie said: "It's a lot harder to know what they want here." Bela was frustrated by the subjectivity of the marking: "I almost feel you have to work out what the particular tutors like, what they want to see in an essay." Antonia agreed, echoing Polly in the other Pemberley focus group: "I know at A level you have tick boxes, but here I almost feel you have to find the boxes to tick for different people." She would go to see a tutor in their office hour, who would "guide you towards they would like to see in your essay as opposed to what you would like to see in your essay". Her ironical inflection made the other students laugh. Lynda suggested an opposite view: she was developing her writing style by having to adapt for different tutors.

Joy felt that the feedback she received from tutors was often very detailed and helpful, but, in her second year, she had written only one assessed essay for each tutor. "It's nice getting feedback but, by the time you've received the feedback, you've moved on to the next tutor and they might be looking for different things." Leslie felt that students should write more than one essay for each tutor, even if each essay were worth fewer marks. Joy conceded that she had been set formative essays that were not assessed towards her final grade, "but they're often a completely different type of essay to the kind of essay we are assessed on." These essays would tend to consist of critical analyses of short passages rather than propositions for discussion. Leslie appreciated the system in the third year where she had written a 1000 word proposal for a 3000 word extended essay which had received tutorial comment before she had written the essay itself. "You can see what areas they liked, and what they didn't... so there is that sense of progression and being able to improve your work."

The students discussed seminars and contact hours. Bela said she preferred the system in her first year where 10% of the final mark had been given to participation in seminars. She declared that seminars were "a really important part of the course" and that she had never missed a seminar in the two years she had studied English. Joy agreed that "It's only right to go," and Becky introduced a financial incentive: "It seems like a huge waste of money not to go." Leslie felt that contact hours were "not enough for what you're paying". She said that she understood that, as a third-year student, she needed private

time to prepare her dissertation; "but the same time you need to be able to make contact and talk to other people and swap ideas." "English is not a sociable subject," said Antonia. "You are there in your little bubble on your own, reading on your own. You go to your seminar and then everyone goes home." Joy countered this bleak view by describing the communal method of her study group: "We go to each others' houses; we all share." She explained that the students had been organised into study groups in the first year, but these changed for each module and each seminar group. "It depends on the seminar tutor how much they use it." Her current seminar tutor assigned each study group a seminar to conduct, "so we are responsible for bringing in the articles and deciding what everyone reads and what ideas are discussed." In her experience, this worked well. "The worst thing," said Leslie, "is when you go to a seminar and no-one says anything and it's the worst experience ever." She felt for the tutors: "They're trying to get it out of you, it's nine o'clock Friday morning and no one wants to talk."

Lynda said that she often wanted to sit down with her seminar tutor and discuss an essay after it had been marked; but she didn't want to bother the tutor, and felt: "If you got a good mark you should just be quiet about it" - a comment which aroused laughter of recognition from the other students. Bela said that the office hours were insufficient. "How can you see all those people, queuing up outside the door?" Lynda thought that more lecture time could be spent in discussing the texts themselves rather than on biographical and theoretical issues: "It does feel in the lecture sometimes that we get exclusively background information rather than going in depth into the book." Bela agreed: "We spent two weeks doing formalism and two weeks doing feminism, then we spent one week on *Paradise Lost*." Lynda suggested (supported by others) that such textual work would be more profitable than study skills sessions, which she represented as banal: "They said things like: if you write an essay you should have an argument, you should have a conclusion."

The students commented on what Becky called the "huge minority" of boys: "I remember sitting in my first lecture," she said, "thinking I should have done engineering!" - a remark which produced much laughter from the others. Naomi said there was supposedly one male student in one of her seminars and three in the other, "although they don't really turn up - well, some of them don't." Bela suggested: "If you are the only guy there and there are fifteen girls, I don't think you'd be turning up for many seminars." She suggested that the tutors deliberately grouped the relatively few male students together in one seminar. The students agreed that that there was a large majority of male lecturers, however, and that the authors studied were predominantly male. According to Lynda, her first term consisted entirely of male authors: one of her seminar leaders had pointed out that they were all dead white men.

Despite the predominance of male voices in the authors studied, Lynda felt that it was limiting to have "the one gender perspective" in a class comprised entirely of girls. There was a murmur of agreement with Antonia's view that in her seminar group the boys came up with the more interesting points, and were often the ones who would "push the argument further". The boys would "come up with the really controversial stuff, just to make it a bit more interesting". Bela said that she had enjoyed the greater number of boys in her seminar groups in the first year. "When we were having a discussion on feminism or something, it was really nice to have some boys there to add to the discussion - otherwise it becomes a bit one-sided, a bit samey." Antonia agreed: "We had guys in the seminar when we were discussing feminism, which made it interesting to see how they were responding to the texts, because to read them as women is very different to reading feminine texts as guys." Lynda agreed that it had helped, although she had found that, in discussions of feminism, "the girls were shying away from even labelling themselves as feminists." She imitated a female student's comment: "I don't know if I agree with this, this is quite an angry voice." Several of the males, she said, were more in favour of the feminist position. "At least verbally they seemed to be, but I think they were afraid of being labelled a certain way." Both sexes, she thought, had tried to appear accommodating and liberal.

"I mean this in the nicest way," said Becky, "but I think it takes a type of guy to do English." She thought they would be "a little more sensitive perhaps ... not the most macho kind of people." To laughter, she added: "I haven't met any like that yet!" Lynda reported that she had a lacrosse player in one of her seminars, "who shows up holding his lacrosse stick sometimes." Becky commented: "He does make sure to make some manly points." "They do seem to feel the need to compensate," agreed Lynda. "If there's a sex scene in the book," said Becky, "he'll pick up on that straight away. He'll find it coded in the language." "The two guys I know in English," commented Bela: "When they come to seminars, they'd never read the books and they never say anything. They spend all their time doing sport."

Antonia felt that she had gained an ability to write in her "own distinctive style" as a result of her university English course. "I write a lot more confidently ... I have my opinions." Bela felt more worldly ("You just learn so much about life") and "more cultured". Lynda felt the course had helped her question things that she would never have questioned when at school. "The whole poststructuralism thing was huge to me, it opened my eyes." Naomi had found that her interests had changed during her first year: "When I came to university I said I never wanted to study Chaucer and I've chosen a whole module in it."

Becky's recommendation to improve the course for students would be "more chances to practise writing". Bela wanted "more lectures and more intense detailed study of the works we read". Lynda agreed, and asked for more

feedback and discussion of essays. Overall, the students agreed that, despite their critical comments, they were enthusiastic about the course.

Lambton University – Group 1

Four students made up the focus group at Lambton, a post-92 university. Jenny was in her second year of a degree in English Literature. She had studied A level English Language and Literature, Home Economics and Psychology in the sixth form of a mixed comprehensive school. She said that she had decided to study English at university because she had always had a passion for English. She enjoyed reading and writing and said that studying English had developed her knowledge and encouraged her within her chosen career.

Yvonne was also in her second year and was taking joint honours in English Literature and History. She too had studied in the sixth form at a secondary school where she had studied A level English Literature, History and Business Studies. She said she enjoyed reading and studying English; she wanted to go into teaching with English as her specialist subject.

Nancy was in her first year of a course in English Literature. She had studied in the sixth form centre of a high school, where she had taken at A level English Language and Literature, ICT, health and social care and psychology. She said she decided to study English at university because of a love of literature; an interest in the development of literature over the centuries; an interest in the purpose behind the author's chosen subject and the meanings behind their books.

John was a mature student in his late 40s. He was taking a BA in English Language and was in the third year of the course. He had previously studied in an FE college where he had taken electronics to an A level equivalent and English and Maths to GCE O level. He had decided to study English at university because of a lifelong love of language and he was ready for a change following 20 years of employment.

Yvonne and Nancy agreed they had expected university study to be harder than A level. Nancy's teachers "used to always say you won't get this much help at university", but she hadn't quite expected the magnitude of the difference: "The difference between A level teachers and lecturers is huge because you are expected to be a lot more independent." John said he had been "more intrigued than scared": he approached university study with enthusiasm and knew "what it means to get up in the morning every day". He hadn't written an essay for twenty years but felt reasonably confident: "Having worked for twenty years, I had done other types of writing."

Jenny emphasised “the amount of reading and background reading and stuff that you would have to do for essays in order to show you know what you are talking about”. The girls all agreed that at school, in Yvonne’s words: “You weren’t really expected to do secondary reading; you were just told what to read.” She had read one novel at A level and one Shakespeare play, and then some more poetry, “and then that was my year.” Unlike some of the students in the other focus groups (especially those from the pre-92 universities), these students had not supplemented their reading: according to Yvonne, “I just did what was expected of me.”

John offered a different definition of reading from the other students in the group. He was “never really a big reader of novels” but had always enjoyed using reference books, and was an avid reader of the internet: “I’ve been using the internet for maybe twenty years.” While not “well read in English terms”, he felt he was “certainly well read”. He compared his work as a language student with that of literature students: “Doing literature you have to read a set text, but with language I wouldn’t be always reading books; I would be looking at journal articles.” He still read a lot on the internet: “I read a lot more blogs specific to my subject area.”

Nancy remembered her first experience of university English. “When I first got to university we had to read Homer’s *Odyssey*. We were just so overwhelmed with this massive book that we had to read, and then on top of that we were getting background reading to it at the same time. I think we had to read it in about two weeks.” Yvonne said she now worked much faster than she had at school: “It does teach you like, to read a lot faster to get all the information down.” The other girls agreed they had no time for personal reading: in fact (according to Yvonne), “I find myself getting behind with the reading that’s expected.” John had taken one literature module in the second year and was “amazed that we had to read a book every week”. Jenny said that she approached a book for study differently from reading for pleasure: “You are aware that you are reading to try and get information out of it; you might neglect some chapters in order to get to the stuff you’ll need in your assignment.”

Yvonne claimed never to have had a reading list of secondary texts for her English modules, although she was given such lists for History: “In English in the modules I’ve always taken it’s just primary texts. The ones that you have to read.” Nancy agreed: “I’m in my first year and the lecturers do say to you a lot of the time they don’t expect you to do much background reading or secondary reading.” All four students had taken a module on Psychoanalysis in which the main reader had been a collection of essays. Nancy explained: “Because they weren’t novels we did a lot of essays and different texts throughout the time. So ... in the exam, you could talk mainly about the ones you wanted to and then use the other ones as secondary readings, perhaps, just bring them in slightly.” The other girls agreed with Yvonne that this was “one

of the better organised modules". John, the English Language student, was given a list of recommended texts for each module. "The lecturers would see that as things that would be useful for background, stepping off points to other resources, other books or articles or internet sites even ... It would be indicative of what you should be reading to get good grades in your assessments."

While claiming that the lecturers emphasised the importance of primary texts, the students agreed that (in Yvonne's words): "You have to read contextual stuff about the novels and about the authors. You didn't really use that in A level." She suggested that the lectures were often used to convey such information: a drama lecturer "would spend the whole lecture talking about what kind of people would go to the theatre at that time". At the time, she wanted to hear "about whatever play we were doing"; but, looking back, she felt "it is very helpful to know about the contexts of things".

Picking up the idea of context, John said that he hadn't expected "the breadth and depth of English Language theory". He explained that the course covered linguistic structures, the development of English over the last sixteen hundred years, and language in use. "I'd never thought of language in those terms before. I'd always thought of it as little discrete words stuck together ... the critical discourse analysis, it was quite a revelation to me. To see it was a much bigger subject than I first thought."

Assessment in literature was predominantly by essay. "In English Literature it's essays all the way," said Yvonne. She conceded: "We've had a couple of presentations, and we did this thing in Psychoanalysis, a learning log, like a journal." Jenny said she was "never quite sure" about assessment criteria. "With A level I always felt like I knew what was expected of me, but here ... even at the end of my second year I still feel like I don't know what is expected, because we have got different tutors and they all mark differently." She had asked a tutor what was expected, but the answer had been couched negatively rather than positively. "She said don't treat it like you did A level. You don't need to know it in as much depth, you don't need to learn loads of quotes." This did not clarify matters: "I just thought, if I didn't do that [know the book in depth] I wouldn't pass the exam. I wouldn't know the novel." "Knowing" the text remained central to literary study for Jenny.

Yvonne agreed that A level teachers had made the criteria clearer ("you are given the assessment objectives throughout the year") but she surmised that university teachers were looking for an assimilation of ideas about literature rather than "analysing a book as your primary topic, which is what you're taught to do at A level". She suggested: "Because you done [*sic*] so much more reading than the context, you can add three or four books into an essay about one in particular and that may be more of what they are looking for."

John said that the English Language course had a “very varied” assessment programme including a portfolio of assessed coursework: “We’ve had to do small five hundred word essays as well as two and a half and three thousand word essays.” He had just finished a module on reflective practice in which the students had given five presentations to their peers. The participants had valued the other students’ comments: “Everyone thought it was fantastic: it was instant feedback each week.”

The students agreed that females greatly outnumbered males on all their courses (including English Language: John suggested that a more traditional Linguistics course would attract more men). Yvonne suggested: “The course kind of asks for that,” as some of the modules focused on women writers and feminist approaches. She added: “I think boys would look at the reading list and think I don’t want to read *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*.” She herself did not want to read Bronte and Austen: “Books like that aren’t my kind of thing, never mind the boys’ kind of thing. A lot of girls don’t enjoy reading them.” In John’s experience: “Boys don’t like reading books anyway, particularly novels.”

Nancy disagreed that the topics discussed in class were initially directed towards females. “I think it’s just because there are a large amount of females in the group ... the discussion tends to veer that way.” She gave an example of a module where discussion focussed on nineteenth century women writers. “We were discussing ... what’s the purpose of her doing it, like, was she trying to equal men? ... I guess that’s just something the girls in the group could relate to.” Yvonne, however, felt that some of the modules made males uncomfortable: “When you’re looking into books, a lot of girls tend to go over the top on the whole feminist thing and sort of search for feminist issues that maybe aren’t there.” She suggested this caused the males to feel negatively conscious of their gender: “The guys feel uncomfortable with that because they are aware of things that happened in the past and how women were sort of classed as second class citizens.” John concurred. He had taken a module on language and gender: “Some of the lectures were quite challenging really. To think of the way that women had been portrayed not just in literature but just in scientific writing in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century. You can see all the lads thinking, I don’t want to be associated with this, that’s not me.”

The students rehearsed familiar complaints about the time taken to receive assessment feedback. As Yvonne put it: “By that time anyway you’ve kind of forgot what you’ve written as well, so unless you take the time to read through what you’ve written again and then read the comments, it doesn’t make that much sense to you.” John said that not only the timing but also the depth of feedback was a problem. Jenny agreed: “When I get an assignment back I just go and speak to my tutor because I either can’t read what my lecturer has put... or it’s just general comments that aren’t very helpful.” John would

contact his lecturers while he was writing an assignment: "Does that look like a good plan for an essay? - and they'll give you feedback then or by email." The others agreed that their lecturers were generally approachable.

The students agreed that they had made progress in their studies, Yvonne and Jenny citing particularly their grasp of bibliographies and referencing. Yvonne felt, though, that essay presentation and structure were still problematic for many students in their second year. "I'm still getting like little remarks about, oh you shouldn't do this. You know, the format of the essays has not been very clear." Nancy said that she could not say how she was progressing as she was still in her first year, but she was disconcerted by the (in)frequency of assignments: "I go through periods of writing three essays at once, then nothing." Yvonne felt that essays were probably more spread out in the first rather than in the second year, but "they do sometimes come all at once".

John spoke with enthusiasm about his sense of progress: "It's amazing the capacity I've learnt to look at language in use ... I really notice everything even if it's just conversations with people or things I read or things I hear or things on the sides of buses. It's all language and it all now triggers all sorts of thoughts in my head ... I love it; it's great." Yvonne appreciated "how the lecturers do encourage you to read so much of a varied variety of authors and texts from different periods". At the time, she said, you ask what is the point in doing this. "Looking back [however] it makes such a difference. You just draw on things that you've learnt in other modules, that you don't think are particularly relevant and you find that they are and it adds so much more substance to the things that you're writing." Nancy, still in her first year, felt that her "scope of knowledge" had expanded. "It does bring more substance to your writing. I do find myself thinking about things more ... so it's just getting different perspectives on things just around you that English has helped with."

Asked how they would improve the experience of English students at their university, Yvonne and Jenny asked for more discussion. Nancy said that she had been disappointed by the amount of discussion in her first year compared to her A level class the previous year. "I wanted to discuss things more with the people in the class and people haven't been so willing to do that." She thought that having more contact time would probably encourage discussion. John said that he had benefited most from classes "where you sit and do a few things together in groups or collectively". The classes that stuck in his mind were those "where there's been more active involvement with all the participants in the lecture including the lecturers".

With the obvious exception of John, the students conveyed an overall impression of a rather passive, "outsider" relationship with the curriculum. During their A level course, they had done what was expected of them, and at university they were keeping abreast of things, though somewhat unclear about what was expected. They had a fairly conservative view of the feminist

elements of the curriculum, feeling that some of their contemporaries found feminist issues in literature "that maybe aren't there ", and aware of the discomfiture they felt was experienced by the relatively few boys on the course. Like students in several of the other universities, they would have liked more discussion and involvement generally; perhaps this was one reason for volunteering to take part in the focus group. Nonetheless, they felt their lecturers were approachable and appreciated the cultural benefit of their university work in English.

Hunsford University – Student 1

Elaine was a mature student in her forties at Hunsford, a post-92 university. She was in the second year of her degree in English Literature, having studied a range of subjects in a pre-university Access course. She was a single mother whose children had reached the age where she could return to full-time work. She wished to qualify as a teacher: "I love reading," she said; "so an English degree was the natural choice for me."

Elaine had "thoroughly enjoyed" her Access course: "It was very much like school in that we'd have hour long seminars and we'd have an awful lot of essay writing to do." The course had "got [her] back into the routine of attending lessons and writing essays." She added: "Nothing actually prepares you for the real independent study that you have to do after year one at university."

In her first year at university, Elaine had felt "very led along" with "a lot of support". "We had regular seminar sessions which involved, you do this, you go on to this web site and search for this ... step by step ... and I relied on that an awful lot." In her second year, she felt she had to be more independent and "make myself actually do it".

Elaine expected university study to be different from her previous experience. "It was what I wanted ... I always knew there was something more to just reading a book." She compared A level and university study specifically in terms of the theoretical dimension: "Schools of theory for instance. You just do close reading and writing about texts at A level. It was a whole lot more learning about other people's critical works and evaluating or criticising them."

Elaine illustrated the way in which her first year work had opened her to different texts and critical approaches. "I thought originally I would just want to read Shakespeare and nothing else. Now I don't read as much Shakespeare as I did before - it's opened up a whole new realm. I've got very interested in feminist criticism. So now I can read a book and take a different viewpoint and understand where a book is coming from."

Elaine's study practices had changed during her second year at university. During the Access course, she had had very little time: "You know, working and having children." She had worked out how to do the minimum necessary to pass, and had transferred this approach into her first year at university. "I would put in the search engine the title of the book and ... then I would search through and find those excerpts without reading the whole critical piece." Now she would give herself time to read a whole critical work if possible: "Not just picking out random sentences and using them totally out of context, just because it fits with what you want to answer in the essay."

This student's love of reading - "I devour books, I suppose" - enabled her to organise her study so that she got to know the primary texts well in advance. "I have always read all my primary reading in the Summer before the year starts, and then I read it again - so, come essay writing time, or come the part in the course where we cover that particular piece of reading, I've read it at least three times." She found her secondary reading less easy: "I carry around bags full of books, but ... I suddenly realise that I haven't actually looked at them until I get the notice from the library saying that it's due to be returned."

Elaine felt that her interest in and commitment to her university work separated her from many of the other students. She had "a particular bugbear" about seminars where apparently only she had done the preparatory reading. "It got to be that everyone knew that I'd always done the reading and I'd always turn up with sheets of notes and questions." This gained her "black looks" from the other students, who felt she was "domineering the seminar", but "then that's their fault". She insisted on her right to contribute as a fellow (and fee-paying) student: "I don't sit there and not say anything ... I'm paying money to learn." She was also annoyed by other students' not attending seminars, "especially when you are supposed to have done a piece of group work - that's particularly annoying." The relationship with her fellow seminar students had deteriorated. "I don't mind what the other students think of me now. If the seminar leader thinks I'm talking too much, they say so. They say: 'OK, Elaine - anyone else want to say anything?' They all sit there silently."

She enlarged on her difference from the younger students. "I've got children. I'm a single mother and I'm full time in university and I've got a hectic social life as well. I think some of the other students can't even roll across the grass from the halls of residence, to even get dressed, let alone read anything." She acknowledged that the other students had to support themselves too - "they've got to go to McDonald's and do a job" - but felt that it was up to them to "change their life style". In her view: "They ought to stop sleeping as often as they do. They work all night doing the essays. They've got to sleep all day. It's up to them, because there is [*sic*] plenty of groups and clubs and associations and meeting places."

Work deadlines had been “no problem” to Elaine in the first year. “Essays were wonderfully spaced out ... The exams were at the end of the year, no problem.” The second year had been more difficult: “Three exams at Christmas, and I hadn’t even got my teeth into the course really by then. Then you get four very large essays due in the same week.” She felt that “to leave it until the end of the year to have huge 4000 word essays, three or four of them, plus an exam can be a bit daunting”. All her essays counted towards her degree mark, and she had learned to manage her disappointment at a mark lower than she had hoped for. “I have learnt that, when you receive an essay back and you see the mark and you’re really upset about it, don’t read the remarks all through the essay, because it’s just criticism and you feel very disillusioned and a bit down about it.” Elaine’s strategy was to look first only at the mark. “I don’t read all the comments page by page of my physical essay until a while later.” She would “go back to previous essays when you are about to write the next one”, to learn from the tutor’s comments.

Despite her general view that students gained from the course proportionally to their commitment to it, Elaine felt that the study atmosphere and sense of comradeship could be improved. She acknowledged that “somebody’s got to organise it”, but she was surprised at the lack of communal events. “I would like to have seen more extra curricular trips. For instance, going to see a few plays, or poetry reading, a book signing. There are so many things that could be there, optional.” Generally, though, Elaine was satisfied with her university experience. “That’s what I’ve really enjoyed, reading books that I’d never have dreamt of reading in my life.”

Hunsford University – Student 2

Diana, also at Hunsford, was a mature student in her late 30s in her second year of a course in English Literature. She told me she had wanted to take a degree in English several years previously and wanted to be a teacher at that time. She no longer wanted to be a teacher and was working as a volunteer at the Citizens’ Advice Bureau: she wished to develop work in advice and counselling. She had always wanted to study literature, having loved the subject at school, but having two children meant that “everything was postponed and it just wasn’t the right time for me”. She now wanted to gain her degree. She was sure she was capable of it and would be proud to be the first in her family. She also felt that she was probably enjoying the course much more than she would have done had she come up straight from school.

Diana made the decision to take the university course after attending an Open Day. She had liked the enthusiasm of the lecturers and was glad to have been able to speak directly to them, rather than, as was the case with the younger

students, being accompanied by parents. She felt it was important for the students "to get away from their parents for a bit and to talk to the tutors about the subject". The tutors would then be able to speak to the students about the books they would be reading and the students "might be encouraged to buy the books earlier and read them as well, in the summer".

Studying English at university had in some ways exceeded Diana's expectations, but she was surprised at "the way that some students act and don't participate". She approved of giving 10 per cent of the total mark for 90% attendance, as she thought "you learn so much from the lectures". She thought seminar length should be longer than the 50 minutes scheduled. "You get right into it and then you're finished." Like Elaine, the other mature student at this university, she found it annoying to carry the seminars. "You end up saying everything, and they [the younger students] write it all down." She liked the way some of the tutors dealt with difficult students. One would check at the beginning of the seminar whether or not the students had done the preparatory reading, and, if not, would send them to the library to do it. Diana's relationships with the other students seemed better than Elaine's: "I don't feel I was shunned."

Like Elaine, Diana had previously studied English in an Access course. She had found that moving to university from her previous education had not been an enormous leap, because her tutors had prepared the class for university work in discussion and also by bringing in students from the university to talk to the Access students. Some of these were former Access students themselves. "They told us things like: make sure you get the module handbook. ... They told us to buy books of literary criticism and have a look and see what sort of things we would have to do." However, the Access tutors had not prepared the class for certain academic aspects of the university course, particularly literary criticism: "[at Access level] it's more about the analysis of the text".

Despite this foreshadowing of the experience of higher education, Diana had found it "quite scary to step into university" as a mature student after "having worked and done lots of other things". She had found at the beginning that it was easier to talk to the tutors than to the students. She had prepared herself by buying the books required before the start of the course, and was aware of being more intent on her study than many of the younger students. "I don't mind sitting drinking the bar dry and all that stuff that they do; it's just not interesting. I've got to go and pick the children up, you know, get my car. It's all different."

Diana's tastes in reading had changed during the time she had been at university. "There are things that I'm doing now that I would never have probably been interested in before. I've done a lot of Renaissance literature in the last couple of years." Now she would be "not quite so inclined to choose just a poetry module", although, as transpired later in the interview, she loved

particular poems. Like the students in other focus groups, Diana agreed that at university she didn't have as much time as previously for personal reading. Nonetheless, she "really craved it", and "always had a book on the go". She found that the only way to keep up with the reading required for the course was to read the novels and other texts during the previous summer. She felt that all module handbooks should be available several months in advance. "I order all my books as soon as I'm sure that the module reading lists are not going to change." She wanted to plan ahead and sequence her reading appropriately: "It's all very well reading the chunky ones in the summer, but, if they are not going to come in until the second semester, you've just got to read them all over again!" She appreciated tutors who reminded the class: "This is a long novel - don't forget to start reading this one now."

Diana spent about three quarters of her reading time with print and the rest with the computer screen. Even when researching with electronic documents, she preferred to print these. "It's more of a sensual thing. Visually remembering where bits are is quite important." She liked to annotate her texts, using female or male symbols to indicate gender issues.

Diana's liking to be well prepared and up-to-date with her work led to her feeling considerable annoyance with the organisation of essay writing and assessment. Each of her modules was assessed by two, three or four essays and sometimes also by an examination. Echoing students in some of the other focus groups from other universities, she felt that tutors should give the students longer to prepare their essays. "If you've only got two weeks, the chances are the books you really want or not there." Module handbooks usually indicated when essays would be set, but not what the titles would be: "Only the really organised tutors [give titles] well in advance." She also found it distressing not to receive the marks for long essays for several weeks. "If we don't get it back, you've just got to go on to the next year, and if you're doing a module that is linked to that module, it can be quite important." Again echoing students in other focus groups, she felt that some writing should be expected throughout the course. "You see big gaps in the room when it's not near assessment time." She conceded, though, that some tutors "could not keep up with that".

Despite these criticisms, Diana was very enthusiastic about her course. We met in June, towards the end of the summer term, and she told me: "I can't wait to come back. I've already started to think about getting my books." She spoke with particular warmth of one tutor who, she said, was "like fireworks. She loves literature and it is really a privilege to spend time with someone like that." She enjoyed the exchange of views in a good seminar: "Other students can look at things from a completely different angle, or a tutor might come in as a devil's advocate and turn it all around so you actually see it from a completely different point of view."

Diana spoke with unusual feeling of what English Literature meant to her. "I had a bad accident and got divorced and various things were going on and poetry was what saved me." With an access of emotion, she said: "There's always a poem that will just ... speak to you." She insisted that the motive for her study was emotional rather than vocational, and said that all the hard work had not put her off reading. "It's opened up lots of other avenues. Lots of areas of interest."

Ashworth University – Group 1

Alice and Jane studied at Ashworth, a post-92 university college. Alice was in the third year of a joint honours degree in English and Drama. At school, she had taken A levels in English Literature, Psychology and Drama and Theatre Studies. She believed that "a good knowledge of English is essential for life" and had chosen this university college to take her degree because, she said, it had an excellent reputation.

Jane planned to become a primary school teacher and was following a BA degree with qualified teacher status; English was her main subject. She had followed an Access course before joining the university college. As she had always enjoyed English and had done well in literature studies in secondary school, it had seemed natural to choose the subject as part of her teaching degree.

Jane felt that her Access course and previous education had helped her "to take [books] to pieces", so she was "pretty much prepared for that when I came here". Alice had enjoyed her A level course in English Literature but had found at university that she was "given a little bit more individual creativity and [encouraged] to put [her] own interpretations to the text". A difference that both students had noticed was the focus on language in their university course: students of English had to take an introductory Language module in the first year. Jane echoed John, the mature student in Lambton University, in saying that studying language had been an eye opening experience: "You didn't realise so much stuff went into one sentence."

Both students' previous reading had been limited by the demands of their courses, although Jane's Access tutor had taken a genre-based approach which had allowed considerable freedom in the choice of texts for assignments. Alice said that at A level "you didn't use outside criticism", although one tutor had encouraged the students to "read Wilson Knight books" when studying Shakespeare. It was then "quite a shock", she said, to be told to read psychoanalytic criticism as part of a Children's Literature module, but "the library are quite helpful and the English module had them organised". Alice had read *Othello* at A level and in her third year at university. She said that,

at A level: "You're not taught to appreciate the book in its context in the sense of different critical perspectives on it." She had a strong sense of having progressed when she revisited the play three years later, but felt students could be better prepared for the jump to a mode of study that required "a four page long bibliography" rather than "just looking at the texts".

Alice felt that English was a difficult degree subject because of the amount of reading required. Like the mature students at Hunsford, she declared: "You have to read all your books before your course." Even where a student had previously read the primary texts, it was still "very much a balancing act with English to get your reading done and be able to be in the lectures and know what you are talking about". She had recently taken a module on culture and identity. "I had to read four novels and then I had to read around the four novels to be able to analyse the theory that we were doing in the lectures."

Alice felt that expectations had been raised when she moved from the first to the second year of her university course. "I got quite high marks in my first year and then struggled to get the same marks in my second year." As a joint honours student, she had had to submit six essays by Christmas at the end of the first term of the second year, and had had difficulty in time management, as "you can't start writing until you've been to every session". In the second year, her Creative Writing portfolio had had to be submitted at the same time as an essay for another module. More recently, she had had to submit a dissertation (worth 100% of the marks for the module) followed shortly by a presentation (again worth 100%) and an essay. In her view: "There doesn't seem to be much emphasis on balancing it out." Jane felt comparatively relaxed in her final year, as she had completed her teaching practice by Christmas and had then had to complete only a presentation (she had chosen the topic of the educational needs of children in care), an essay based on her presentation, and her dissertation.

Jane agreed with the researcher's suggestion that her Education modules had involved more collaborative and group work than her English modules, but cited a drama based module, the *Mantle of the Expert*, as an example of group work in English. Alice gave examples of varied modes of work she had undertaken in her joint honours course in English and Drama. In a first year module on genre, she and three fellow students had made a cookery video, "and looked at how [language] is aimed at different people." Her second year English module on film and literature had involved an assessed presentation, and she had taken a module in Creative Writing assessed by portfolio. She said she enjoyed writing essays but tended to get better marks for presentations, "because I can communicate it better through that [means] rather than by writing."

The students described their schedule at university. In her first year, Jane had attended five days a week, "because it was teacher training." She had covered

all the school subjects. In her second year, she had had four days' college attendance, but eight weeks' teaching practice had been a major commitment of time and effort. Alice attended two days a week in order to cover the thirty hours' contact time offered for each of her modules. She appreciated those modules that had divided students' time between lectures and seminars, "because you'd go and look at what you did in your lecture and then you could discuss it between yourselves." She enjoyed discussion - "I stick my hand up all the time and I've got opinions" - and, although she knew that some of her contemporaries didn't attend seminars ("they don't see the point in discussing"), she felt that the English department should retain them as a mode of learning. "I was able to get my ideas out and my tutor was able to say you're on the right track but you've gone off - if you did that in your essay you'd miss the question." Jane added: "You sort of bounce off one another as well. So you might have your own idea but someone else is going to say something that will make you think ... very differently." Alice felt that part of the value of seminars was to manage the "balancing act" of reading and knowledge she had described previously. "Say if you haven't read all of [a text], but somebody else has, and they are able to bring that out to you and say: look at this. Your thoughts at the beginning [of the seminar] actually will change by the end."

These students did not express, even mildly, the sense of isolation that was a recurring theme in the other focus groups. They described learning and teaching strategies that had had produced a social as well as academic benefit. Jane said that the Short Story module in the first year had helped students get to know each other. "We received lectures, three hours long some of them, but then we would split off from that into small groups and actually have discussions. ... And we would group off again at break times and go and sit and talk about it so I don't think I ever felt lonely." Alice enlarged: "In the first year, when we did the Short Story module, it was encouraged that you go around different tables ... one table would look at one thing and then someone from that table would go and talk to the other table about it." The size of seminar groups helped: "There's only about twenty people in the biggest group that I've got (said Alice) and you do know everyone by name." She added: "You're encouraged to be friends with everyone, at least associate with everyone in your group and listen to each others views."

The online discussion forum *Moodle* enabled students to discuss with each other even when (in Alice's words) "you're sitting at home and you're on your own and you feel like it's the end of the world because you don't understand the question." If you go on *Moodle*, she explained, "there will be some body on there that's probably in the same boat as you and you'll be able to bounce ideas off." The tutors participated in the online forum: "Sometimes they'll comment on it as well, you know, that is a good idea, why don't you think about this or you know you've gone a bit off track, why don't you go down this line of enquiry?" Alice felt that *Moodle* was helpful if a student had been ill

and did not want to phone her tutor to find what she had missed. "I'm not good with phones, but knowing that I could email them or talk to them on *Moodle* helps a lot with the course."

The students praised the tutors' commitment to teaching and their interest in the students. In Alice's words: "The tutors are very approachable and know you by name, or if they don't know you by name they know roughly where you sit every lecture and they'll know if you're not there." She praised her tutors' availability and quick response. "The tutors always make it clear," said Alice, "that, if you've got a problem, they are there for tutorials." When she was doing her dissertation: "I could email her [the tutor] in the middle of the night and she'd get back to me the next morning, and say like this is what you need to do."

There was a different tone to Alice's account of tutors' availability than that expressed by students at other universities. It should be quoted at length:

"I think ... if you ever need to talk to your tutor you've only got to go up that corridor and knock on the door and they'll be there, or put a note through the door or email them ... They are there; they are there thirty hours of your module. They're teaching you, and they hang around afterwards if you need to talk to them or in the seminar; they are just like one of your group. They'll lead the discussion. They'll chip in and say: 'Oh that's an interesting opinion, but I think this ...' It is very much, if you feel like it, you can go and talk."

Jane made a link between the affective and academic regime: "It probably helps that it's a teaching college [rather than] a university, so perhaps they understand the more theoretical side of how people learn." Alice's parents had wanted her to attend a bigger university; she had visited one with a well-regarded English department where she felt "nobody would know you". Here, she felt: "I'm not just number 2472; I'm actually a person. They know my style of writing and they know that I can get a bit carried away when I'm looking at Shakespeare."

Discussing gender issues, the students said that there were a number of male students at the university college, but relatively few in the English groups. Jane recalled that a male fellow student on her Access course had chosen to take PE as his main university subject. He had told her that he loved studying English at college but had decided not to read the subject at university because "English was too laborious". He did not want to "break things down" and balked at "looking in depth and all the reading". Alice agreed that a man might choose to study PE "because he can run around the field and be all masculine ... If they are all sitting in English and reading a poetry book it's not doing anything for their image". She added: "Especially if they've only been taught by females."

Most English teachers in secondary school were female, claimed Alice, "and then you come here and it's all female lecturers." The students agreed that female tutors predominated in English. "We have a drama lecturer that's a man," said Alice, "but all the English tutors are women." She had found that the few boys in her seminar groups had usually been quiet, "especially if you're doing something like feminist studies." She felt it would be interesting to read these male students' essays, as their views were submerged in class by the forthright girls who "say what they think about anything". Jane felt that the subject was not particularly feminine in practice: "If more men had a taster of it," she thought, "there might be more men who would take the degree." Alice agreed that the subject was "theoretical and quite gender neutral," but added: "There is also something, especially when you talk about what motivates a character. I think that's where the female part comes in." She felt that this affective aspect "was only a really small part of [English], but that's what overshadows it for the rest [sc. male students]."

The students said that nearly all their written submissions were assessed as part of their course work; only the first assignment in the first year had been set, in Jane's words, "to see if you were on the right lines" and had not been graded. The students felt, however, that conversations in seminars with the tutor and their diverse contemporaries offered feedback on work in progress that assisted essay preparation.

Alice said that her seminars had been a useful way of trying out her ideas and getting feedback. "In seminars you put across what you would have said in your essay to your tutors and to your peers and it's been graded not by a 2.1 or a first, but it's been graded by: 'Yes you're on the right track.'" "It's more like peer assessment than tutor assessment," said Jane. Alice emphasised the importance of a stable, diverse seminar group where people got to know each other and their differences over time. She had come from a rural school where "there are not many different cultures", whereas at university: "It's different religions, different races." "And age," added Jane. "There are a lot of mature students here, so obviously we bring something different to it too." Alice agreed: "I came straight from A level and found it quite weird sitting with someone the same age as my mum or someone who's been to work before they came here." She felt that she offered something to the seminars because of the freshness of her school experience: "But we are like babies; there are some people who know so much more because they've had to work, or they've had kids and come back."

Jane said that the students were given marking criteria, "so you know exactly where you need to be heading." The feedback sheets, which they handed in with their assignments, told them what they needed to do to gain various classes of mark. Alice gave an example of a language module where the tutor had used a chart to indicate the level of students' attainment in the various aspects of textual analysis (lexis, graphology and so on). Jane said that her

tutors "tell you what you need to do, where you need to go to improve your mark next time". Alice felt that feedback comments were generally specific and clear. "They might say to do more background reading but usually they will say background reading about such and such. They don't just give a general comment." "They underline the points that you're good at," said Jane, "and where you fall within the marking criteria, so you know where you've done well." Assignments were usually returned between three and six weeks after submission: "If it's a shorter assignment or a presentation," said Alice, "that usually takes less time." The students felt that the English department appeared to be well organised and well supported.

The students tried to articulate how they had benefited from studying English at university. Alice felt that she now had a more rounded knowledge of English as a whole: "It's not just literature and it's not just language. So much goes into English and, you know, it's not just a book or grammar. English feeds into film; it feeds into TV." She valued critical discussion of literature. "It's not just analysing the book by what's written there. It is what somebody else thinks about it. And, ultimately, it leads up to your dissertation. You get the confidence to do a study in English."

"I've got to say how much I've loved it," said Jane. "It's been an absolutely fantastic course." She spoke of the way in which her English studies and her education studies related to each other. The study of children's literature, for example, had helped her to understand "what it is within the text and within the illustrations that helps children learn to read". She felt she had learned a great deal about the theory and practice of English teaching: "How children learn to read and how they learn to write and how they learn from one another."

Alice also hoped to teach, and felt from her university experience that she knew what made a good teacher of English. At A level she had been told: "Just agree with what [the teachers] said; just write it for your exam; you're going to get your marks for that." At university, on the other hand: "They encourage you to think on your own, be individual; if you can back it up - as long as you have got evidence from somewhere." The course had encouraged her to question: "Just because somebody's written something, you don't have to agree with them." She felt that the course had been valuable "no matter what I come out with, what degree classification". She felt that the support she had gained was related to the intimacy of the institution. "I know that I put the work in but I also got the support from the course, which at a lot of bigger universities perhaps you wouldn't get." Jane added: "I've never felt from any tutor here that they didn't have time for us." Alice concluded: "You do feel like you've got support here. You're always included in discussions. If you choose to step out, they'll respect that. If you're like me and just talk on and on and on, they don't mind that. It is very much you are supported."

Gender and university English

This section, like the report as a whole, focuses on student experience rather than quantitative data. However, in the context of gender, it is worth recording that the focus group discussions indicated that there was a majority of female English tutors at Longdown, Lambton and Ashworth, and a majority of male tutors at Pemberley. The discussions with students at the other universities appeared to suggest that the ratio of male to female tutors was approximately equal.

The most direct evidence of male experience of undergraduate English came from Alan and Mark, the two male students at Longbourn University. Alan's previous experience of English had been extensively masculine in character, in that he had studied at a boys' grammar school where the men who had taught him in the sixth form had chosen *Tom Brown's School Days* as one of the A level set books! Alan commented ironically that his East End grammar school hadn't exactly been Rugby, but the classroom atmosphere had, he said, been similarly boisterous, and the teachers had engaged the students in a strategic approach to the texts to maximise their chances of success in the A level examination. There was a bond between the male students and the teachers, who "had that whole air about them of being one of the gang", and handed out bullet points at the end of the lesson to confirm the textual conclusions to which they had directed the class. Alan compared this pedagogic approach to that of university, where, he said, there was "a far more open floor for discussion", which he thought was "in itself ... quite a feminine approach".

Mark's experience had been different in that he had attended a mixed school where the A level class consisted mainly of girls and some of the teachers had been women. He had been told that English was "an effeminate subject" and, he said, he had "always been fighting with that". Since he had been at university, Mark had become "much more aware of the greater ratio of girls", had noticed that most of his tutors were women, had seen that some of the options focused on women writers, and had found that seminars tended to "move towards feminine readings and interpretations". However, the gender aspect of his university experience was not very different from his previous learning context, and overall his studies in English had made him interested in "female related" options.

Alan expressed strong hostility towards the affective element in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, commenting that, in a poem about the birth of her first child, she seemed "extraordinarily wrapped up in her own emotions and senses". He thought that his dislike was related to his strongly masculine experience of education, although he remembered a female school teacher who had complemented the work of the male staff by helping the students sympathise

with the characters in a drama text. As a male student, he thought he brought a "different perspective" to discussions at university; in a seminar on a Victorian novel, he had challenged the focus on feminist readings. However, he allowed the legitimacy of such readings in a patriarchal world where "it's been masculine readings ever since day one".

Mark and Alan echoed the comments of many of the female students about the low number of contact hours and the overall lack of social involvement in their university English course. Their response to this situation had a certain masculine tone. The assessment regime made essay writing (in Alan's words) "the only thing that really matters on the course", and thus it was sensible to put effort into essays rather than into attending seminars. Like Seamus at Pemberley, Alan enjoyed "creating new ideas ... having critics to back it up, but not relying on someone else's argument too much". It was necessary, of course, to have in mind the preferences of the tutor who would mark the essay (Alan felt that some of the younger tutors took a rivalrous stance and marked harshly "almost out of a sense of competition with your ideas"). These students adopted a robust approach to the tutor-student relationship: it was up to the student to approach the tutor. The system worked, Alan thought, "so long as the student isn't reticent ... otherwise you get nothing." Admittedly, the anonymous marking system meant that tutors often had little to say to students, as they had no real recollection of their work. Alan would look at the mark his essay had gained, and read what the tutor had to say about it, but he hadn't "sourced out the tutor to have a little discussion about it". He had been focused on the next essay: "Turnover is the key I guess."

Mark and Alan presented, then, a male response to a learning context that appeared feminine in several respects. Most of their fellow students were women; a good proportion of the tutors were female; the subject matter was often feminine or, indeed, feminist; and the overt pedagogic method was of inclusive, open discussion. The assessment regime, however, appeared to emphasise the importance of isolated, individual effort, and the tutor-student relationship was distant.

Seamus, at Pemberley University, was the only male in a focus group of six students, but he spoke confidently about his experience of English. He was scornful of the attainments of the students with whom he had studied for the International Baccalaureate, and glad to be surrounded by "intelligent" people at university. He had a strong sense of what was "proper" to university study: a theoretical module in the first semester had included "proper stuff" like formalism, but more recent material (including a three-week unit on feminism) had been "lightweight". He was glad that he had the opportunity to write essays that were "a bit more proper", with a "burning idea" that was exciting to write about and that his tutors would find interesting, even if they disagreed with it. He wanted more opportunities for writing and a longer time to reflect on the topic. He seemed confident in his student identity and said that he had

never occurred to him to question why he had chosen a subject studied predominately by females. He did, however, feel that he couldn't argue as strongly at university as he liked to do, because female students appeared to feel threatened by such argument.

Robert and Luke, the male students interviewed (along with one female) at Netherfield, participated vigorously in university life - Robert as a student journalist and Luke in the drama society. Robert saw the transition from school to university in terms of a leap into independence: he had been "spoon fed" at A level, whereas at university "people expect you to read a lot more independently and by yourself". The students in this group appreciated their tutors' support, although Robert complained about having to pay the same fees as did other students who, he claimed, received much more tuition. He took a robust attitude to study: "You've paid your money - if you don't do the work that's your problem." Luke liked university tutors' expectations of essays: "They're looking for an argument ... there is more focus on coming up with your own ideas about the text." Robert was pleased that his module choice in the second year had enabled him to develop the reading tastes he had learned at A level. He felt that his English course had benefited him by developing skills of debate and analysis. The students had some complaint about the amount of writing expected, which they thought insufficient, but overall they appeared confident and comfortable within English studies.

John was a distinctive figure in the Lambton focus group in that he was male, a mature student, and taking a degree in English Language. He had the confidence of a man who had been employed for many years and "done other types of writing". He defined himself as "well read" owing to his use of information books and twenty years' experience of the internet. Rather like Alan in Longbourn, he saw his tutors as deliberately supporting his learning, giving an indication "of what you should be reading to get good grades in your assessments". He gave the impression of enjoying a "hands-on" mode of English study. He praised the tutors who had excited him by introducing him to methods of linguistic analysis, and he appreciated the use of group investigations and the "very varied" assessment programme. He had found a module on language and gender chastening: "To think of the way that women had been portrayed not just in literature but in scientific writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth century." He felt that "the lads in the class" would be thinking: "I don't want to be associated with this."

The girls in the focus groups expressed more awareness than did the boys of the difference in numbers between the genders. Sometimes this had overtones of sexual opportunity: Becky, in Pemberley, remembered thinking in her first lecture: "I should have done engineering!" They often welcomed the presence of boys: Antonia, in Pemberley, said that in her seminar group the boys usually came up with more interesting points and would "push the argument further". Bela liked the presence of boys in seminars with a feminist agenda - without

them, she thought, "[the discussion] becomes a bit one-sided." Several of the female students were anxious about the feelings of males in such classes. Yvonne, in Lambton, suggested that the male students in a class on nineteenth-century women writers would feel uncomfortable "because they are aware of things that happened in the past and how women were classed as second-class citizens". Some of the female students expressed distance from feminist discourses. Carrie-Ann, at Pemberley, had disliked the aggressive feminism of the female tutor who had announced: "If all the boys at the room left, it wouldn't make much of a difference." Yvonne (Lambton) thought: "A lot of girls tend to go over the top on the whole feminist thing and search for feminist issues that maybe aren't there." In more than one group, women students expressed a sense of embarrassment and reticence at being thought a feminist. Lynda, in the second Pemberley group, said the girls would shy away from being labelled as feminists, while male students would try to accommodate a feminist position.

While several of the girls expressed concern for the feelings of boys who found themselves discussing feminist issues in a largely female group, they also admired the confidence and relaxation that some of the boys demonstrated in class. As Holly (Netherfield) put it: "They are always laid back in the chair ... and they'll just throw something in at the end." The girls found this particularly surprising given the belief (expressed in various ways) that English was a more natural subject for girls to study than for boys. "I mean this in the nicest way," said Becky (Pemberley), "but I think it takes a type of guy to do English." She thought he would be "not the most macho kind". Rebecca (Netherfield) suggested: "We [women] don't have to make any sacrifices or go against the grain to do it." Lydia, in the same group, felt that an engineering student would regard her as stupid and that, talking to him (the imagined student was implicitly male) she would feel "a bit of a cliché ... talking about all these ... pretentious ideas". She thought that this fear was probably irrational, "a female thing". To her, subject choice and gender combined to create a sense of inferiority to those who studied the masculine outer world.

Although several of the women regarded English as a natural subject for them to study, they were not necessarily confident or comfortable with either the learning situation or the subject matter. The former was often seen as private, individual and isolated. Caitlin, in Longbourn, spoke eloquently about the days during which she had nothing to do but write an essay, with no ready opportunity to communicate with others. "English is not a sociable subject," said Antonia in Pemberley. "You are there in your little bubble on your own, reading on your own." The students in Longbourn regretted the loss of a common room for English students which had been a good place to meet people and share interests. Even the mature student Elaine (Hunsford), who took a highly independent and determined approach to her study, regretted the lack of any group activities such as field visits or theatre trips. A sense of being "outside", not knowing how to engage with, the university and the curriculum

was expressed in various ways. The girls in the second Netherfield group, for example, were surprised to hear that it was possible to change one's tutor. Their brief discussion of this, in which each girl's comment overlapped the others', indicated their anxiety at having missed a foothold.

There was a sense of alienation not only from the social life of the university - the imagined collaborative study of scientists, medics and engineers was often mentioned - but also from the subject matter and the processes of study. The subject English, according to Knights (2008: 5), "has treasured affect, interiority and the 'soft' discourses of interpersonal relations." Most of the women students, however, did not find the transition from school to university English a move into a familiar language or territory. The selection process might require an assertive self-presentation: Isabel, in Pemberley, was "worried that I'd get an interview". Martine, in Netherfield, said that the problem of transition was not the amount of reading required, but "trying to understand what they are looking for and even what you should be reading". Isabel (Pemberley) would have liked to have had "just a general idea of what you are working towards". Alison, in Netherfield, appealed for "a summary lecture at the beginning, so you know what direction you're meant to be heading and where you're aiming for, as opposed to floating along and hoping you'll have an epiphany or something". While some students were excited by literary theory - "the whole poststructuralism thing was huge to me, it opened my eyes" said Lynda (Pemberley) - others found it "really difficult" (Polly, Pemberley). Carrie-Ann (Pemberley) had come to understand that the literary-cultural concepts were not really difficult: "It's just the phrasing they used to make it sound really heavy." She thought that the argumentative method required in seminars and essays was "quite masculine" and required "a slight desensitising". Isabel agreed that the focus of reading was "often about society and general themes such as race and religion". Polly said that the subject matter was not feminine in the sense that "we don't really talk about emotions in the books we read", and stated that, in her experience, Literature students were never asked to undertake imaginative writing such as the interior monologue of a minor character in a novel.

This sense of the uncertainty and difficulty of the subject matter went with an uncertainty about the method of study. Justine, at the end of her first year in Pemberley, was unclear as to whether "we are supposed to take the kind of skills we learned at A level and apply them on a weekly basis". Much of the reading the students did was directed towards a forthcoming essay assignment, which would almost invariably count towards their overall course grade. Even at the end of her second year, however, Jenny (Lambton) felt that she didn't know what was expected of an essay. A tutor had told her that a university essay should be different from A level writing about literature: "You don't need to know it in as much depth, you don't need to learn loads of quotes." However, "knowing" the text remained crucial to Jenny's sense of competence: "I just thought, if I didn't [know the book in depth], I wouldn't pass the exam." This

problem was exacerbated by the small amount of writing required in most courses and by the fact that most of this writing was formally assessed, so there was little opportunity to practise. Tessa (Pemberley) asked for weekly assignments "which would help us to focus what we should be looking at in the text". This, she suggested, would create "a kind of system in the mind for getting an essay done".

Despite, then, the preponderance of women students on university English courses, the majority of women tutors in several departments, and the traditional association of English Studies with affect, interior states and issues of human relations, the typical practice of English Studies as experienced by most of the students lacked something of the feminine. Diana in Hunsford was unusual in speaking directly of her response to poetry. To many of these students, university English meant a difficult journey of mastering theory, managing their reading, and writing essays for high-stakes assessment within an environment that was felt to lack nurture.

Students' experience of reading

All the students agreed that the reading demands of university study were much greater than those they had experienced at A level. They had usually expected this to be the case, but had still found the difference stark: "You read as much here in a week as in a year at A level" was a typical comment. There was no negative response to this quantity of work *per se*: it was seen rather as an essential aspect of the independent study that the students expected and appreciated at this level. Many the students compared unfavourably what they frequently termed the "tick-box" nature of A level study, where they had written essays in a way that demonstrated conformity with various "assessment objectives", with the intellectual challenge of writing a university essay. Some of them pointed out that, at A level, teachers and examination boards had frequently provided a thesis that merely had to be illustrated, whereas the university required them to read a range of primary and secondary sources in order to frame and argue a point of view.

This quantity of reading presented various difficulties, however. Many of the students commented that the limited and light reading demands of A level had (paradoxically) left them free to develop their personal reading in a way that they no longer found possible. Several students (especially those in pre-92 universities) had spent their sixth form years exploring authors and genres that they liked (or that they regarded as important) in order to prepare for university study. Some had moved out from their A level set texts in order to acquaint themselves with such areas of study as Shakespeare, the Victorian novel, or Gothic literature. Other students had unashamedly read popular literature such as *The Da Vinci Code* or *Bridget Jones's Diary* in their spare time. Some of the students, such as Martine and Lydia at Netherfield, saw

themselves as particularly committed readers who would continue the practice after university. A typical regret was that at university the textual demands of the course prevented them from reading anything else; some said they felt guilty if they did so, as time wasted on non-academic texts might be better spent invested in their studies.

For many of the students, a major problem of university life was to know what to read and how to manage their time. This was related to a larger issue: what kind of reading did the tutors want? Very few had had any significant encounter pre-university with the literary and cultural theory that underpins contemporary literary study; they had learned instead to read whole literary texts in detail. The problem of reading, then, was often a problem of balancing the time spent on primary and secondary texts. Did the tutor prefer detailed, personal, textual comments, or a demonstration of theoretical grasp? Lydia at Netherfield, having tried during her first year to adduce theory wherever it seemed appropriate, claimed to have returned in her second year to an "almost A level style" of quotation and comment, as her tutors seemed to prefer this. The habit of detailed, close reading made several of the students, such as Alice at Ashworth and Elaine at Hunsford, adopt quite extreme strategies of time management to cope with all the work involved. Alice declared: "You have to read all your books before your course."

The problems presented by reading were thus connected to the problems presented by writing. As many students (from almost all institutions) pointed out, essay writing was by far the most important activity of their course, as the greater part of their assessment depended on it. The students' reading was thus heavily influenced (as were their writing and wider study practices) by the assessment regime. Much of their reading was done in preparation for an essay. They would read, or felt that they should read, to prepare for seminars, but, as Alan put it, you didn't get a pat on the back for performance in seminars; credit was given for written expression in the form of an essay. Managing their reading in order to write a good essay submitted on time proved challenging to many. The issues raised here will be considered in more detail in the section on writing and feedback. A recurrent comment was the uneven pattern of work throughout the academic year, so that a long period when no written work was expected would be followed by a period where two or more essays had to be written simultaneously. For all but the most self-regulated (and even such students commented on the often short time between the announcement of an assignment and its completion date), this presented significant problems of time management. The solution chosen depended in part on the student's interpretation of the tutor's requirements. In some cases, students clearly felt (an attitude doubtless ingrained by their A level studies) that the primary text was indeed primary, and they would give most time to reading original literature. Where they felt the tutor or department emphasised the importance of theoretical orientations, students attempted to balance their reading of primary and secondary texts, and would give more

time to researching and rehearsing theoretical positions. Their reading practices would thus be inflected by their sense of what was required to construct a good essay.

The students interviewed in the focus groups did not make much confession of shortcuts in their reading practices, although Isabel at Pemberley was surely not alone in using SparkNotes and other study guides. They usually felt that the primary text should be read first, with as much secondary reading as was appropriate or possible. They reported increased facility as the course progressed in selecting passages for comment and in grasping the arguments of secondary texts - processes of reading again contingent on the demands of essay writing. Self chosen participants in the focus groups, these were usually committed students who approached their work with a measure of energy and enthusiasm. They did, however, report occasions where they did not prepare for a seminar, and there were several accounts of painful classes where it was apparent that few of those present had done any preparatory reading or thinking. They were also aware of the practices of those contemporaries who skimmed critical books and produced essays that were little more than a patchwork of undigested secondary reading.

All the students interviewed used their college libraries, and the printed book (and journal article) appeared to be their main source of reference, although there were several mentions of JSTOR and other internet sources. It may be that many of the students regarded the computer as so natural a means of reading and writing that they did not mention it specifically. Carrie-Ann at Pemberley was clearly not untypical in using the internet simultaneously for study and to keep in touch with friends via social networking sites and internet messaging services. As Joy at Pemberley said: "That's how the university community works." However, the student who used digital media most extensively in his studies was probably John, the English Language student at Lambton, who saw himself as "well read" partly because of his twenty years' experience of the internet.

Writing, assessment and feedback

The assessed essay is an enormously important factor in the experience of undergraduate students of English. In all departments visited, a significant proportion of the marks awarded for a module - in some cases, all the marks - depended on student performance in writing an essay (usually on three or four occasions) over a period of weeks. This would be formally submitted at a particular place and by a specific time, and received by an administrator or clerical assistant who would issue a receipt. The essay would then be assessed - often, but not always, by one of the student's tutors - and returned, often after four or more weeks, with a feedback sheet of comments. It would

sometimes have been marked by two tutors, and the mark given would reflect their joint evaluation.

This process is deeply embedded in the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) of the contemporary university English department. There are exceptions: one of the students compared the practice of her department to that of a department in another university where, she claimed, students wrote fortnightly essays for regular tutorial feedback. However, the evidence of this and other studies (e.g. Gawthrop and Martin 2003:42) is that, in most institutions, students are asked to do relatively little writing when compared to their pre-university studies; that most of this writing is on the form of a discursive essay; and that this comprises a large part, if not the totality, of the assessment regime. It appears that the marking of a coursework essay has taken on the judgmental power of examinations, "where the man was weighed As in the balance!" (Wordsworth 1805: 69-70).

It is unlikely that the proponents of assessment reform in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s foresaw these consequences when they argued for coursework assessment as an alternative or complement to "sudden death" examinations. Advocates of coursework in English Literature at A level argued that this would allow the development of other aptitudes besides those of the good examination student. Tutors would be able to experiment with other modes of writing and assessment than the discursive essay. Students would be able to research more broadly, to consult tutors and contemporaries, and to demonstrate reflective argument rather than the capacity to "stand and deliver". The researcher has discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Hodgson 2007).

There was then in the assessment reforms of 40 years ago an ideal of collaborative, reflective learning which fits with contemporary emphases on the social nature of language. However, the experience of the students in these focus groups suggests that assessment by coursework essay is in some ways as oppressive as traditional assessment by end of course examination. The importance of every essay in determining the final degree class (symbolised by the ritual aspect of submission, and the long delay in returning the work to the student) affected every aspect of study. Other researchers have commented on the demoralising effect on many students of struggles with essay writing (Davies, Swinburne & Williams 2006). This is related to a recurrent theme in the interviews: the solitariness of university study in English. If what really matters is the individually written essay, students will spend a good deal of time in solitary study, reading, preparing to write, and writing their assessed essay. There is, of course, a long-standing linguistic association between study and solitude: Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford, who "hadde to logyk gonne longe ago", appeared emaciated and in need of company as well as food. However, it is curious, in view of contemporary understandings of language as socially constructed and learned (Carter 1997:120), to note that the mode of study on

which students place most importance, and to which they devote much of their time, is solitary reading and writing of essays for high-stakes assessment.

The students reflected on this mode of study in various ways. Several compared the experience of English students with those taking science or medicine, who were seen as enjoying more collaborative and companionable study time. Others mentioned their dissatisfaction with the relatively low number of student/tutor contact hours they experienced when compared with students in other disciplines. This complaint often went with an observation that they appeared to be paying the same fees for much less attention and involvement.

A related and frequent comment was that too little written work was expected, especially as everything submitted counted towards their final assessment. Students compared the A level regime of relatively frequent essays, formatively assessed, with the university regime of a few long essays, most of all of which were assessed as part of the coursework to the degree. Some complained that that assessment dates were not always staggered, so that two or more essays (for different modules) might require to be submitted simultaneously. Some claimed that assignment titles were often announced only a few weeks before the hand in date, so that a great deal of reading and writing had to be done in a relatively short time. This led to considerable pressure on library resources. Students commented on a "feast or famine" pattern where no written work would be required for several weeks and then two or more essays might have to be written simultaneously. Although these concerns may have arisen partly because of insufficient planning or effort on the part of individual students, the frequency of these comments suggests a structural problem.

The form of writing most often undertaken by students of English Literature was the discursive essay. No Literature student mentioned other forms, such as imaginative or recreative writing based on their literary studies. However, students taking courses in English Language and Creative Writing had opportunities for engagement with language that involved the production of original texts as well as of critical essays. Such texts sometimes received feedback and evaluation from their peers as well as from the tutor. Chris (Netherfield) wrote a different piece every week for her Creative Writing course; this work was shared amongst her fellow students for peer evaluation. John (Lambton) spoke of the collaborative work in language he experienced in his English Language degree, which again involved peer evaluation. However, some students - particularly those who were taking a Creative Writing module as part of their degree studies in English Literature - noted that was more difficult to gain a high 2.1 or first class mark for such modules, and regretted taking them for this reason. It appeared that an implicit hierarchy of value existed in the department whereby Creative Writing did not gain the legitimacy of the critical literary essay.

Some of the students appeared to share this valuation. Seamus (Pemberley) was glad to have left behind his international baccalaureate class and encounter some “bright” people at university (though he seemed still frustrated by the capacities of some of his contemporaries). He enjoyed the opportunity to write a powerful discursive essay on such classical authors as Milton, and scorned the English department’s providing film versions of texts and inviting students to write about these online. Other students in his group agreed that this attempt to link literary study with film and media sources had not worked, partly because the tutors themselves had not engaged with the online dialogue.

The predominant mode of writing for the students in this study was, then, the critical essay: they would write perhaps two or three a term, most if not all of which would be assessed towards their degree result. All departments also offered students the opportunity to write “non-assessed” essays, especially in the first year. Practice here varied widely, some institutions placing more emphasis on this than others. Where “non-assessed” essays were in fact given formative comment, and the writer invited to meet with the tutor to discuss these, the students valued the opportunity more than in those departments where the initiative was left to the student and the staff merely offered a notional opportunity for such a formative work. There was a distinct difference between the accounts of students in various institutions of their experience of their tutors’ helpfulness. The university college students remarked that “staff can’t do enough for you here”, while students in some other institutions felt that the system of anonymous marking, amongst other distancing factors, prevented their tutors from even recognising them as the authors of their essays; consequently, spoken feedback was unsatisfactory.

Generally, students accepted without much demur the assessments and feedback comments given by their tutors, but a number of concerns arose. In one of the older universities, students felt that, no matter how hard they tried to improve, their essays were unlikely to breach the 70% barrier and would remain classified as 2.1, a degree class which most of the students expected to gain. There was a good deal of feeling amongst most of the students that the mark given for an essay depended on the subjective opinion of the tutor, and no-one indicated awareness of any system of moderation or collaborative assessment (except in the case of the peer assessment of Creative Writing and language work). Opinion varied regarding the quality of written feedback. Students at one institution regarded most of their feedback as summative, while those at another found tutorial comment was helpful in preparing for their next assignment. Some students felt that feedback was not as helpful as it might have been, because they often could not translate tutors’ comments into practical action. (Lea and Street [1997], Chanock [2000] and other researchers have discussed this problem.) Almost all students agreed that the long period between submitting an essay and receiving feedback limited the

usefulness of the comments, especially (as was often the case) if the student had moved to a different module with a different tutor.

Students' sense of progression

All the students agreed that the transition from their pre-university studies to their degree courses had been a marked progression. In nearly every focus group, the students described this in terms of moving from "ticking boxes" to more demanding but less clearly defined objectives summarised by Caitlin (Longbourn) as "not just proving you can do things". In many cases, this was a difficult transition. Most students felt they had not been prepared in school or college for the amount or kind of reading they had to do at university. What Chris (Netherfield) called the "confined" A level course involved the lengthy study of a small number of texts, with little secondary reading. University demanded, in Alan of Longbourn's phrase, a prodigious amount of reading, and an understanding of literary and cultural theory.

Many of the students felt that, while they were glad to have transcended the "tick-box", assessment objective-led approach of their previous studies, they would have appreciated more help in orientating themselves to university English. Jessica (Longbourn) suggested that it would have been helpful if the reading list she had been given before coming to university had borne some relation to the work she had done in the first term. Looking back, Martine, a third-year student at Netherfield, said that the difficulty of transition was "trying to understand what [the tutors] are looking for". Snapper (2009) has given a graphic account of a silent first year seminar where students drown in incomprehension. Given the uncertainty expressed by many of the students about "what [we] are working towards" (Isabel, Pemberley), they sometimes described their sense of progression in terms of formal improvement in referencing and bibliographic skills. Yvonne and Jenny, in the second year of their course at Lambton, felt they had improved in these respects.

Students at the older universities, especially the boys, were more likely to express the view that the tutors required "a good argument". Alan (Longbourn) gave a robust prescription to students who were unsure: they should make an appointment to see their tutor. Jenny, at the end of her second year in Lambton, had asked her tutor what she expected, but the answer had been unhelpful. Other students, however, expressed a sense of progression and increased confidence even during their first year. Lynda (in her first year at Pemberley) felt that she had moved into a new domain of knowledge: poststructuralism had "opened [her] eyes". Naomi (also in her first year at Pemberley) was pleased at her maturing literary interests: she had disliked Chaucer's work when at school, but had now chosen to study it.

Some universities eased the transition by offering modules and/or seminar arrangements that recognised the need to bridge the gap between students'

previous experience of English studies and the concepts and approaches required at degree level. Netherfield, for example, provided general seminars throughout the first year with a tutor to whom students could bring issues for clarification. Students attending these seminars wrote "practice" essays that were marked by the seminar tutor. Pauline found these "really useful for the feedback on essay structure and [an indication of] the amount of research needed". Luke also valued these seminars and thought he would miss them in the second year. Elaine, in Hunsford, valued being led "step by step" in first year seminars. Ashworth gave all students an introductory module on language which introduced them to certain key concepts. The first year short story module was taught in three-hour sessions involving a lecture, discussion and other activities which had helped to create a feeling of mutual support. The online discussion forum at this university seemed a successful way for students to discuss problems with each other and with their tutor.

One of the reasons for the prolonged dip in many students' sense of progression, which lasted, in some cases, to the beginning of the third year, appeared to be the relatively small amount of writing - especially formative, experimental writing - required in many of the courses. Infrequent writing restricted opportunities for dialogue between student and tutor. This was compounded by the assessment regime. Most of the essays written were formally assessed towards the final mark of the course, and students' comments revealed that they regarded their essays less as a means of learning than as submissions for summative assessment. Elaine felt so judged by the process that she would not read the tutor's comments until she had assimilated her mark.

Some students spoke with appreciation of the wider choice of modules that was usually available during the second year of the course, and the opportunities these offered to play draw upon and develop their previous reading. The third year dissertation was more frequently mentioned in terms of progression. Holly, in Netherfield, had been glad to write a dissertation despite the extra work involved (in comparison with alternative modules). Leslie, in Pemberley, appreciated the way in which her tutor had worked with her on her dissertation proposal: she had gained, she said, a "sense of progression and being able to improve". Alice, in Ashworth, felt that all her previous work had helped her gain the confidence required to undertake independent study in English.

Students who were following Language or Creative Writing courses usually expressed a sense of enjoyment and progression. Isabel, in Pemberley, said that she had not really enjoyed the course before taking a Creative Writing module in the second year. John, in Lambton, expressed amazement at "the capacity I've learnt to look at language in use". Jane, in Ashworth, described the first year grammar module as "an eye-opening experience", while John found critical discourse analysis "quite a revelation". It seems, from this small sample of student experience, that a well-framed language course or module

can help students gain a method of critical literacy and confidence in reading in unfamiliar ways. Peer-assessment was also a feature of Language and Creative Writing courses that Chris (Netherfield) and John (Lambton) appreciated: "instant feedback each week", as John put it.

Despite their reservations, nearly all the students expressed appreciation, in various terms, of their university English courses. Some, like Robert of Netherfield, spoke of developing "debating, analytical skills", while Antonia (Pemberley) felt that she now had a more distinctive written voice. Many students said they appreciated (in Elaine of Hunsford's words) "reading books that I'd never have dreamt of reading": these included Yvonne and Nancy (Lambton), who said they had read little before university. Caitlin of Longdown and Luke of Netherfield spoke of cultural insight: literature (in Luke's words) "reflects the time it was written and people's ideas around that time", a view echoed by Martine of Netherfield. Holly, also of Netherfield, liked the way her studies intertwined literature with art, history, film and popular forms such as comics and graphic novels. John (Lambton) and Diana (Hunsford) spoke of enthusiastic tutors who had illuminated their language and literature studies. Jane and Alice, at Ashworth, also greatly appreciated their tutors' support and commitment: Alice said with conviction that the value of what she had experienced was independent of any degree classification.

Conclusion: improving the student experience

The six departments demonstrated a range of institutional cultures, and student experiences of university English were accordingly diverse. One of the intriguing and heartening aspects of the study was, in fact, the differences in pleasure and satisfaction that students felt in their studies, depending on the curriculum they were following and a range of subtle but important variations in the university and department culture. It is apparent that changes in these cultures can make a difference to the experience of students, and thus to the increased success of the institution in social, cultural and economic terms.

It was noted in the section above on Gender and University English that, despite the far greater numbers of female than male students in English departments (and, in some departments, a preponderance also of female tutors), the male students sometimes appeared more comfortable with their English studies than their female contemporaries. They were more likely to insist on the student's responsibility to find help where needed and to regard the solitary writing of essays as the only aspect of the course that really mattered. Many of the female students expressed some reservations about the process of learning and assessment, suggesting that studying English at university lacked nurture in certain respects. The observations and recommendations that follow may, then, be seen as suggesting ways in which the experience of studying what is often seen as a feminine subject may indeed

embody feminine characteristics and values that would benefit not only female but also male students.

Many students arrive at university to read English after having completed a two-year course in A level English Literature. A level syllabuses have changed significantly from 2009, and the transition may become easier over the coming years. The tradition of A level English Literature, however, involves the intensive study of a small number of texts to which students are expected to give "personal" responses with little secondary reading. Many, indeed, will have read little or no critical argument before arriving at university. Some students (more usually, it appears, from the pre-92 universities) will have supplemented their A level texts with a considerable amount of self-directed reading in classical and modern literature, with an eye to impressing the university interviewer. Others, many of whom will be found in the post-92 universities, will be less invested in literary capital. All students, however, will encounter at university a practice of literary study which differs from their previous experience, which may not be made explicit, and which has somehow to be grasped. Alison, in Netherfield, spoke of "floating along and hoping you'll have an epiphany or something".

All departments aided the transition by offering introductory modules, some of which were very well regarded by students. At Ashworth, for example, students followed an introductory Language module that was, in Jane's words, "an eye opening experience". She had not realised that "so much stuff went into one sentence". It may be that an explanatory focus in the early weeks of the first year on the underlying philosophy of HE English study would help students make the changes in their mind-set necessary to understand the discipline they are engaged in (Snapper 2009:202). The rationale and method of post-structural and discourse analysis remain for some, it would seem, as opaque as did the rationale and method of practical criticism for an earlier generation.

Part of the difficulty of transition, for many of the students, was the limited number of opportunities offered for formative writing. Recognising the crucial market value of their coursework essays, many or most of which would be assessed towards their course total, students tried to discover what their tutors wanted, and to produce it in their essays. Lydia, in Netherfield, had "really stuffed up [in the first year] on trying to put in too many critics in all my essays," and had subsequently "reverted straight back to almost A level - just really close textual analysis". Several students said they would welcome writing tasks with more formative (rather than merely summative) assessment, to help them develop (in Tessa's words) "a system in our mind". Students at Netherfield especially valued such "practice" essay assignments, and, in at least two of the universities, students valued online written discussion as a means of communication with each other and with their tutors. Research repeatedly associates student success with an emphasis on formative

assessment in the early weeks of the first year (York & Longden 2007). Generally, English departments have much experience with which to develop concepts and practices of academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998).

A feeling expressed to a greater or lesser extent by students in most of the focus groups - with the notable exception of Ashworth - was the private and solitary aspect of much of their study of English. They felt that, unlike their imagined contemporaries taking degrees in science or medicine, they had few opportunities for communal or collaborative work and experience. In Longbourn, the closure of a departmental common room was regretted, and students elsewhere compared their A level or international baccalaureate studies with the relatively solitary experience of higher education English.

This feeling was related in many cases to the predominant method of assessment by a few critical essays written during the academic year. Because of importance of these essays in terms of academic credit, students in several focus groups stated that the solitary writing of these crucial essays was the only part of the course that really mattered. Essay writing was frequently discussed in terms of its assessment value rather than as a means of learning. A change in this culture, with more emphasis on low-stakes, collaborative, formative writing, for informal and peer assessment, would surely improve the experience of tutors as well as students. Nicol (2009) has reported case studies of collaborative writing and peer assessment that appear to scaffold the academic writing of students and provide social support.

Of other modes of learning, lectures attracted relatively little comment - which may reflect their importance in students' academic experience. Some students wished they would focus more on textual issues, whereas others liked their contextualising function. Seminars gained mixed reviews. Several students valued them as opportunities to meet fellow students had to have a good discussion with an enthusiastic tutor. Students at Netherfield especially valued the seminars in the first year which dealt with general literary and cultural issues and provided a helpful introduction to higher level study. At the same time, even some of the motivated and committed students who made up the focus groups regarded seminars as dispensable. Attendance was not required in any effective manner and they rarely gained positive feedback to their contributions. At worst, seminars were painful affairs where only a few participants were prepared for the occasion and the tutors struggled to maintain a dialogue. The students did not, however, suggest a reduction in the provision of seminars. They were realistic about the difficulty of increasing opportunities for individual feedback, and regarded seminars as potentially valuable learning opportunities.

Most of the students interviewed were following a degree course in English Literature drawn from a literary canon with options (depending on the department) including some study of popular culture and Creative Writing.

Some students, particularly those in the pre-92 universities, clearly gained pleasure from studying “difficult” texts from the English literary heritage and demonstrating in their essays their capacity for literary analysis and argument. The female mature students interviewed, who apparently expected a traditional course in English Literature, especially appreciated the expertise of the tutors in making accessible difficult texts and in assessing their essays. It was equally clear that students appreciated courses that extended literary study into non-traditional areas and enabled them to make connections with their personal reading. Such options as children's literature and media texts provided opportunities for students to make connections with, and draw upon, their wider literary and cultural experience.

At the same time, the study of literature (however defined), demonstrated and assessed by the critical essay, is not the only possible form of university English. The students of English Language who were interviewed in the focus groups were clearly enthusiastic about opportunities for the study of linguistic structures, the development of English, and language in use. Language study appeared to offer students a fruitful combination of theory and practice: through the direct study and production of language, they could explore and grasp its theoretical dimensions.

Students whose courses included writing assignments beyond the essay welcomed the opportunity for productive as well as critical writing. Isabel (Pemberley) spoke for others when she described the enjoyment of her Creative Writing module. Unfortunately, several commented that Creative Writing modules appeared to be valued less highly than other modules in assessment terms (*cf.* the student comments recorded by May [2008]), and it was more difficult to do well. Within a literary paradigm, there is nevertheless a strong tradition of alternatives to critical writing, exemplified most recently by Knights and Thurgar-Dawson's (2006) work on creative responses to texts. Many students clearly gain satisfaction from engagement in literary production as well as in other forms and genres. Increasingly this will become multimodal, as upcoming students will increasingly expect to use converged digital technology. English departments may wish to reconsider approaches to student production within English courses, taking into account the contemporary nature of production in new media.

New media have been scarcely mentioned in this study. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, we may wish to offer English courses that recognise and exploit the media in which, henceforth, language and literature will increasingly be constructed. Central concerns of university English study, such as the nature and process of authorship and of reading, are given new relevance by the process of publication, reception and adaptation through electronic media. New media may also offer a communication model that corresponds to students' calls in this study for improved dialogue and more communal or collaborative work. The rhetoric of Web 2.0 describes the

internet as a dialogic community. Might this be a suggestive metaphor for the future student experience of university English?

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