

## **Locus of control and motivation in a neoliberal educational climate: a longitudinal study of a group of foundation year students over the course of an academic year**

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Locus of control and motivation in a neoliberal educational climate:  
A longitudinal study of a group of foundation year students over the course of an  
academic year.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
Wolverhampton for the degree of Doctor of Education in Professional Inquiry

2024

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of a group of non-traditional students (n=14) undertaking a foundation year in the School of Education at a post-92 university. The study is located within the widening participation agenda, with foundation years becoming an increasingly popular way to access undergraduate courses. However, data at both national level and at the site of this research show that continuation rates onto undergraduate study are low.

This research is situated in the context of the neoliberal economic and social policies that have been dominant in the UK since 1979. This study explores the acceptance, or not, of a neoliberal discourse by the participants. The psychological concept of locus of control is used as a theoretical framework through which to explore individual acceptance of neoliberalism, and the effects of the extent of this acceptance on student motivation.

A longitudinal study was conducted over one academic year. Data was gathered from four focus groups, at the beginning and end of each of the two semesters that made up the year. Data was collected using a metaplanning technique, a semi-structured focus group framework, followed by more open discussion. Using Richards' (2015) model, data was analysed thematically in relation to current literature and the research questions.

Although, ideally, neoliberalism appeals to a sense of individual freedom, in this study 'psychological reactance' (Brehm, 1966) was more commonly found as the reason for the acceptance of the current neoliberal education climate. This was demonstrated in the finding that whereas participants perceived external constraints on their progress, they expressed the conviction that individual action was needed to overcome these barriers and to succeed in their studies. Having an internal locus of control was also linked to feeling motivated, and specifically to intrinsic motivation.

Recommendations include both supporting individual students in developing a more internal locus of control, and also creating an environment that supports all students, whether they feel an internal or external locus. Specific strategies include developing an understanding of locus of control in students and of its influence on achievement, providing opportunities for a greater sense of affiliation between students, and also between students and their lecturers, and using strategies to offer support for students to work independently, including the use of a flipped approach.

## Abbreviations

BERA: The British Education Research Association

BIS: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

DfE: Department for Education

EdD: Doctorate in Education

FY: Foundation year

HE: Higher Education

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

I - E scale: Internal – External Expectancies scale

JRF: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

OfS: Office for Students

SENDIS: Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion Studies

UCAS: Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter begins by explaining how this project emerged from my professional experience and academic background, and how it is located within the foundation year (FY) at a university that attracts many non-traditional students. An outline is then given of the context, rationale and aims of the study.

### 1.1 Emergence of this project

The idea for this research project came from my experiences of teaching on the FY in the School of Education at a post-92 University in the West Midlands. At the start of this study, I had taught on the FY for two years and had recently taken on the role of FY co-ordinator within the department. I wanted to know more about how students experienced the year in order to support their achievement and progression into level four. At the beginning of this study, my initial broad aims were to:

- Gain a greater understanding of students' experiences of undertaking their foundation year.
- See how students developed academically, socially and emotionally over the year.
- Find out how they could be better supported over the course of the year.

My reasons for undertaking this research came from my educational background and professional experiences as a teacher and university lecturer. My undergraduate degree was a joint BSc (Hons) in Psychology and Sociology. After completing a

PGCE in secondary education, I taught A-levels in Psychology and Sociology for 15 years in a sixth form college. During this time, I completed an MSc in Psychology before gaining my current position as a university lecturer in the School of Education. In developing my initial ideas and using my background in psychology and sociology, I became interested in researching the ways in which the students I taught experienced their time at university. I wanted to explore which sociological and psychological concepts I could use to better understand and so support students. I felt that I was in a unique position in having a background in psychology and sociology, and working with FY students. This study is therefore located at the conceptual intersection between the fields of Education Studies, Psychology and Sociology.

In my experience, whether starting at level three or four, students can struggle to make the transition to university. This was supported by a previous piece of work that I carried out for a module in my EdD programme, where I separately asked three small groups (total n=19) of level four students about their experiences of their first year at university. Findings were that, to a greater or lesser extent, participants were unsure of what to expect when beginning university, with their understanding of the demands of university study emerging over the course of the year. They reported that the main challenge was in becoming an independent learner and feeling a sense of ownership and control over their studies. While some found a sense of freedom in this independence, others struggled to adapt. Another finding was that participants reported being reluctant to seek the academic and pastoral support available to them, even when this was signposted. This was encapsulated by one student saying, 'It's a big thing to ask for help.'

While this previous study involved level four students, my past and present experiences of teaching students on the FY of their degree are that they face many of the same challenges identified by this previous study, but with some of these challenges being much larger for FY students. Whereas starting at level four indicates a level of prior educational success, my experience of teaching FY students is that many, if not most, have experienced disappointment in their past encounters with the education system. Therefore, starting the FY is a big step for most of these students, entering into an environment where they may not initially feel confident.

## 1.2 Location and scope of the research

The FY that this study concerns was, and continues to be, the first year of a four-year degree programme for the degrees of BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies and BA (Hons) Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion Studies (SENDIS). Successful completion of the FY leads to progression onto level four of one of these undergraduate programmes. Although participants in this study had enrolled onto one of these specific degree courses, at the time of this study the FY was organised centrally in the faculty and after completing the FY students could choose to transfer onto other courses. Of the six modules studied during the year, only two were subject-specific, delivered within the department. The other four modules were more general and covered topics including study skills, professional practice and communication, and were delivered alongside students from other departments.

The demographic characteristics of the FY students on the courses that participants in this study were selected from have remained stable since the FY was first taught in the department in 2016. The majority live locally and reflect the social and ethnic diversity of the surrounding area. The campus is situated in one of England's 10% most deprived local authority areas (Ministry of Housing, Government and Local Government, 2019). It is a culturally diverse area where one in three residents are from minority ethnic groups (Office for National Statistics, 2021). A typical FY student on these courses is a working-class female, age 25-40, who is returning to education after a number of years, possibly supporting a family and working part- or full-time in a low paid job. These students fit definitions of 'non-traditional' students, meeting one or more criteria of being first-generation students, mature (age 21 or over on university entry), from low-income households, and minority ethnic/racial backgrounds (Wong, 2018). This reflects the national picture where FYs increasingly attract older students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, looking to advance their career opportunities (Moreton *et al.*, 2017; Nathwani, 2019; Department for Education (DfE), 2023a). These are very different from 'typical' students, with greater diversity of prior experiences, pre-existing skills, expectations and motivation (Petrie and Keohane, 2017).

This study took place over the period of the 2018-19 academic year. It consisted of a series of four focus groups at the beginning and end of each of the two semesters that made up the year, in which participants were asked for their opinions and experiences on a range of university and course related issues. Each focus group

comprised of between seven and eleven participants. There was an open invitation to all of the students in the cohort to participate in any of the focus groups. From this, there was a core group that participated in most of the focus groups but also some who participated in one or two groups. In total, there were 14 participants. Each focus group used a metaplanning technique, (described in the methodology section, pp. 73-74), followed by a more open discussion.

### 1.3 Context

One of the key ambitions of the reforms made over the last thirty years, as stated by Jo Johnson, then Universities Minister (Johnson, 2017), has been to provide more choice for students and to increase the proportion of disadvantaged students entering university, with research demonstrating that obtaining a degree increases social mobility and leads to better financial outcomes for students and their families (Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), 2014; The Sutton Trust, 2021), with 90% of graduates in work or further study, and 66% using what they learnt while studying (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2023). Over recent decades, there has been a rapid expansion of Higher Education (HE) in the UK with the number of people attending university reaching over 50% by 2017/18 (DfE 2019), meeting the target set by Tony Blair in 1999 and up from 15% in 1980 (Coughlan, 2019). Widening participation is a key focus for the university where this study is located. The latest strategic plan states that the university is committed to widening participation in education, being open to students from all backgrounds, and being a champion of diversity (not referenced to protect the anonymity of the setting).

According to Webber (2014), although politicians of all sides agree on the benefits of widening participation, there is a lack of understanding as to how this is best achieved and of how institutions need to change to fulfil this aim. Literature shows that many non-traditional students are not prepared for the experience of entering university and so have higher drop-out rates than more traditional students (Ganah, 2012; Petrie and Keohane, 2017; Hillman, 2024). Feelings of isolation and of not-belonging have been found to be common (Gregersen and Nilesen, 2023), as well as a lack of confidence to approach staff (Heagney and Benson, 2017). O'Boyle (2015) found that non-traditional students felt separate from the main body of students, and Chapman (2017) found that imposter syndrome was commonly felt by her participants. Whilst these issues concern all non-traditional students, those starting at FY level have often had previous negative experiences of education, potentially leading to lower levels of confidence and wellbeing than those entering at level four (Hale, 2018; DfE, 2023a).

The introduction of FYs was designed to attract more non-traditional students, supporting universities' widening participation agendas (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016; DfE, 2023a). The entry requirement for the course that this study is based was a level 2 English qualification, although students without this could be offered a place following discussion with a member of staff. Nationally, numbers enrolled in degrees with a FY have increased from less than 9,000 in 2010/11 to over 30,000 per year by 2018/19, the year of this study, to nearly 70,000 by 2021/22 (Office for Students (OfS), 2019; DfE, 2023b). A search of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website in the year of this study found that for undergraduate

degrees including a FY, there were 2835 courses available at 91 institutions (UCAS, 2018), by 2021/22 this had increased to 3717 courses at 105 providers (DfE, 2023b). Most of these courses were at post-92 universities, covering a wide variety of courses in all areas of study. The university where this research is based offered degree courses including a FY in 132 different subjects.

FYs are a way to support students into university who would otherwise not have entered HE, with programmes designed to support students build their study skills and confidence (Sanders and Daly, 2013; Dougherty, 2022; DfE, 2023a; Webber, 2023). A review of university websites found that the marketing of FYs to be similar across post-92 universities. They promote the advantages for students of starting their degree course in an environment that is familiar to them, knowing the lecturers, campus and university systems, so easing the transition into degree-level study. For example, 'We hope the Foundation year helps you to feel at home on campus.' (University of Wolverhampton, 2018, para. 2). Student testimonies are used that focus on the themes of feeling nervous about entering university from non-traditional backgrounds and the need to feel comfortable in these unfamiliar surroundings. One student wrote that, 'The best thing about doing the foundation course was that it eased me into the University lifestyle... I'm already nice and settled and ready to go.' (Staffordshire University, 2018, para. 4). These advantages have also been reported in the media, 'You are able to move seamlessly into the first year of a degree course, having learned the ropes of higher education.' (Hodges, 2014, para. 12).

This marketing of FYs is supported by research, with the FY students interviewed by Chandler *et al.* (2018) and Webber (2023) agreeing that being taught on the university campus supported the transition to undergraduate study, with it also being found that FYs were important for mature students in providing a bridge from employment to education. In particular, Webber (2023) found that FYs support the development of confidence, study skills and peer relationships in mature students. Hale (2020) found that FYs were especially beneficial in supporting working class students into HE and found similar advantages to Chandler *et al.* (2018) and Webber (2023), with students starting their undergraduate courses understanding the university campus and systems. Dougherty (2022) found that undertaking a FY enabled students to feel part of the university community and Shepperd *et al.* (2023) found that the FY helped students feel settled in their new environment. O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019), Dougherty (2022) and Shepperd *et al.* (2023) all found that confidence in their academic ability increased in FY students over the course of the year, with Feather *et al.* (2023) finding that the FY improved students' 'soft' academic skills such as becoming organised, working in groups and contributing to discussions.

#### 1.4 Rationale

Although most students on the FY at this university are successful, the rates of retention and progression onto level 4 are disappointing, with regularly only 60-70% of students progressing. This is reflected in the national picture where only 70% of students progress directly from their FY into undergraduate study (OfS, 2019). This has led to concern over the rise in the number of FYs, with the Augar Review (Augar, 2019) recommending that funding be removed from FYs, with Access Courses

provided by Further Education colleges giving better value. Even though the recommendations of the Augar review were not implemented, performance measures brought in by the OfS mean that there is pressure to meet retention, progression and employment targets, with courses not meeting these at risk of being cancelled (Feather *et al.*, 2023). It is therefore important to investigate possible reasons for, and strategies to improve, progression and retention. Primarily, I hope to be able to better support the students that I teach. I also aim for my findings to generalise beyond this setting to add to the wider body of knowledge around FYs.

Sanders and Daly (2013) state that there has been limited research conducted on the student experience of undertaking FYs. There is also much to learn about how students engage with their studies (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Although there has been an increase in research specifically on the FY since then, for example the *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* began publication in 2018, a search of the literature shows that there is a still room for further research in this area. My aim is to add to this body of research, investigating how to support FY students in order to increase retention and progression for this group.

In studying the experiences of FY students, I felt it was important to take into account how their values and beliefs were influenced by wider social and economic policies and the discourses related to these. Therefore, I decided to explore the extent to which their views reflected the prevailing neoliberal social and economic climate of the UK, and more specifically of HE in England.

The psychological impacts of living in a neoliberal society is an under researched area of study (McDonald *et al.*, 2017; Beattie, 2019). In reflecting on the previous study that I undertook (internal ref., p. 2), it appeared to me that the psychological concept of locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966), could be used to investigate the student experience. Rotter (1954, 1966) believed that people could be understood by whether they feel that the results of their actions are caused by their own efforts (internal locus) or due to factors beyond their control such as powerful others or luck (external locus). From this previous research, it seemed to me that those students showing confidence and motivation were expressing a more internal locus and this was something I wished to investigate further. This relates to a neoliberal discourse that emphasises the role of individual freedom, with neoliberal beliefs correlated to an internal locus (Bay-Cheng *et al.*, 2015).

### 1.5 Research aims

This study aims to examine the impact of neoliberal education policy and practice on the lived experiences of those entering university in the present climate, with a specific focus on students undertaking a FY.

The objectives selected to achieve the aims were:

- To explore the extent to which students express attitudes showing an acceptance of neoliberal discourse in relation to their studies, or whether they are resistant to this narrative.

- To ascertain whether students display an internal or external locus of control regarding their studies, and whether this changes over the year.
- To explore the extent to which students' motivation changes over the year.
- To find ways to improve provision for students which may lead to higher rates of retention and progression onto degree programmes.

These aims were developed into more precise research questions after a review of the literature. The research questions are formally stated at the end of each section of the literature review.

## 1.6 Thesis structure

The literature review chapter is split into separate sections, examining research relating to the themes of neoliberalism, locus of control and motivation. The methodology chapter explains how the research was conducted and how ethical issues and my positionality were addressed. The discussion section is divided into the same themes as the literature review, with an added section on how participants believed the FY could be improved. The final chapter concludes the thesis by clarifying the original contribution of this study to knowledge and practice, and offering recommendations for supporting FY students throughout their studies which will have relevance to the many institutions in the UK that provide such courses.

## Chapter 2. Literature review

The literature review is divided into three main sections which encompass the substantive conceptual and theoretical aspects of the thesis and related empirical research. These are:

- Neoliberalism
- Locus of control
- Motivation

The first section defines and discusses neoliberal ideology and the policies that have impacted HE over the last forty years. Literature is explored regarding the impact of neoliberalism on individual behaviour, with the concepts of hegemony and governmentality used to explain the acceptance of neoliberal rule. The concepts of appeal to freedom, psychological reactance and learned helplessness are further used to explain individual reaction to neoliberal social and economic policies. It is shown that there has been a lack of research into the effects of neoliberal policy on individual psychology. This section concludes by outlining this study's aim to explore whether neoliberal ideology is reflected in FY students' attitudes and behaviours.

The second section of this review shows how research has found that the psychological concept of locus of control is critical to understanding individuals' adaptation to neoliberal policies. Ideally, neoliberalism appeals to individual freedom and aligns with an internal locus of control. Research is discussed that relates locus of control to students' wellbeing, motivation and achievement, the causes of having an internal or external locus, and how students can be supported in relation to these.

This section relates to the aim of this study, which is to explore the changing locus of control of participants over the course of their FY.

Locus of control is linked to motivation, which is the focus of the third section of this review. Motivation is shown to be a key factor in determining student success, and research is examined that links motivation with locus of control. Different theories of motivation are examined and related to locus of control, with a particular focus on research relating to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This relates to the aim of understanding the extent of motivation felt by participants over the course of their FY.

Through this review it is demonstrated that although there has been important research published relating to neoliberalism, locus of control and motivation, there has been a lack of research in the area where these fields converge, certainly in the field of education and specifically in the area of university FYs. This study aims to redress this gap in the literature and provide a more holistic understanding of the social, educational and psychological experiences of FY students.

### 2.1 Literature search strategy

Literature was found through the University of Wolverhampton library and learning resources website. Databases used were Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, APA PsychInfo and SocINDEX. A wide range of search terms were used around the themes of 'foundation years', 'neoliberalism', 'education', 'locus of control'

and 'motivation'. Searches began with the most recent publications (2015-2024) except for seminal texts such as works by, for example, Rotter (1954, 1966).

## 2.2 Neoliberalism

FYs are situated in the context of widening participation, which is itself situated in the context of the changes in the nature and purpose of universities as a result of neoliberal policies over the last forty years. This study aims to understand how students' attitudes and values reflect this wider social context. This section of the literature review begins by explaining neoliberal ideology and its impact on HE. This then leads to a discussion of the impact of neoliberalism on individual behaviour and the psychological theories which can help explain this. The section ends with a discussion of the criticisms of neoliberal policies in education.

### 2.2.1 Neoliberal ideology and policy

All participants in this study (see pp. 78-80 for participant profiles) grew up during the time when neoliberal social and economic policies were dominant in the UK, from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Ideologically, neoliberalism appeals to a sense of individual freedom and responsibility (Jackson, 2015), valuing these over more collective organisations of people (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009). The moral aim is to deliver freedom by extending choice to all aspects of life, in contrast with what are viewed as authoritarian social and political systems that inhibit choice and freedom. Friedrich Hayek is most commonly associated with founding the principles of neoliberalism (Sparke, 2013). Hayek (1944) argued that the welfare model of capitalism that was introduced in the UK and other western countries after the second world war, based on Keynes's (1936) policies of state intervention to manage demand, is both morally wrong and economically mistaken, as increased levels of

taxation and government spending reduce individual economic and social freedom and lead to economic decline.

Therefore, the overriding principle is that the market should be left to generate and distribute wealth, with state intervention reducing the market's ability to do this.

Economic policies promoted by neoliberalism to achieve these aims include transferring ownership of businesses and public services (including universities) from the state to the private sector, low taxation (especially company and income taxes), low government spending and low regulation of business (Duménil and Lévy, 2005; Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009; Springer, 2012; Sparke, 2013).

In putting neoliberal policies into practice, the turning point away from the post-war Keynesian consensus is seen as the elections of the Thatcher government in the UK in 1979 and the Reagan Government in the USA in 1980 (Bettache and Chiu, 2019). Only one participant in this study was born before 1979, with most born during the Thatcher and Major governments of 1979-1997. The New Labour government in the UK, elected in 1997, continued with a neoliberal policy agenda, highlighted by the white paper, *Modern Markets: Confident Consumers* (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999), which set out an economic policy to, among other objectives, promote open and competitive markets and avoid burdening businesses with unnecessary regulation.

Neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies about reducing the role of the state through low taxation and deregulation, it is also about producing a certain way of living and relating to one another (Dardot and Laval, 2014). In the words of Margaret Thatcher, 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.' (Beattie, 2019, p. 89). The stated aim of the Thatcher government was to produce a culture whereby people relate to each other as individuals, maximising their outcomes by making decisions based on their own needs. This was famously expressed by Thatcher's (1987, para. 108) quote that, 'There is no such thing as society.' She went on to say that,

There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first. ...There is a living tapestry of men and women and people, and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.

This neatly articulates the neoliberal belief in the primacy of the individual and that state intervention is detrimental to the human spirit, preventing recipients of welfare from taking responsibility for their own lives and inhibiting generosity from those in a position to support others.

The neoliberal model of human behaviour is based on economic principles. People are re-cast as 'homo economicus' (Belsey and Peters, 2007), who make rational decisions to increase their own wealth, both material wealth and intrinsic wellbeing.

This aligns to Rational Action Theory, which assumes that given sufficient information, individuals will be able to weigh up the costs and benefits in any given situation and make optimal decisions (Elster, 1989). This individualist perspective is in contradiction with models that try to understand individual behaviour by employing macro or structural explanations (Jackson, 2015). In this enterprise culture, individuals compete with each other over resources. The state has a role in providing equality of opportunity, such as widening access to HE, but inequalities of outcome are justified as reward for hard work or punishment for laziness (Sparke, 2013). Thus, people are seen as entrepreneurs of their own lives, maximising profits and eliminating losses, with all aspects of life and society reduced to marketplaces where people freely enter into exchanges with others. This replaces more traditional views of people as being bearers of grace, or of inalienable rights and duties; and of society being a polis, a civil sphere or a kind of family (Metcalf, 2017).

### 2.2.2 Neoliberal policy in higher education.

Although primarily an economic theory, neoliberalism has been applied to all areas of government policy, including education (Springer, 2012). For example, the government's white paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS, 2016) aims to increase competition between HE institutions, providing more choice for consumers and so driving up standards. Ball (2015) reflects that the life of the university has been transformed by successive neoliberal government policies, with universities competing in the free market to sell knowledge and skills to consumers. Pierce (2015) argues that individuals receive a clear and consistent message about the value of educational

investment in themselves. Also, the discourse of individual responsibility means that problems such as non-participation and non-completion are seen as individual failings rather than structural problems (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

The introduction of, and subsequent increase in, tuition fees in England and Wales since 1998 has fundamentally changed the relationship between the university and its students (Ball, 2015). In the past, decisions on funding, provision and enrolment were either directly taken by, or at least influenced by, the government. Such decisions are now taken more directly by the university and its students. Tuition fees were first advocated in The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) and then increased as a result of the Browne Review (Browne, 2010). There were several principles underlying these changes. Firstly, in terms of equity, the Dearing Report made it clear that as students benefit from HE, they should contribute to the cost. Secondly, it was believed that the transfer of power from producers to consumers would promote higher teaching quality, with students demanding both more choice and better value for money (Besley and Peters, 2007; Johnson, 2017). Thirdly, Browne (2010) explicitly stated that one of the purposes of attending HE is to gain a highly paid job. By emphasising the economic rather than cultural and social benefits of gaining an education, individuals are expected to be more likely to make decisions that benefit themselves financially. This has the additional benefit that when entering the workforce, these students then contribute more to the wider economy, boosting prosperity for all (Besley and Peters, 2007; Ball, 2015). This has led to universities becoming increasingly employment-focussed (Ward, 2012), equipping students with employability skills and an

entrepreneurial attitude (Burke, 2013). Employers talk of a 'skills crisis' (Carberry, 2022) for which HE provision is seen as the solution (Martin, 2010; OfS, 2019).

FYs align with these neoliberal principles and education policies, especially to the widening participation agenda, with individuals given the opportunity to make an investment in themselves in order to pursue a better standard of living for themselves and their families (Burke, 2013; Gale and Parker, 2013; Jackson, 2015). FYs give an additional choice to potential students, alongside more established level 3 qualifications such as A-levels and access courses. In the study conducted for this thesis, the FYs were attached to employment focussed undergraduate courses in the field of education.

There is mixed evidence as to the extent to which students do behave as rational consumers when making choices regarding their university education. Hassel and Ridout (2018) found that students largely had a realistic understanding of what university study involved and so were able to make informed decisions on enrolment, although they tended to believe teaching would be similar to school. Woodhall, Hillier and Resnick (2014) found that students adopted consumer-like behaviour, weighing up costs and benefits when making decisions on enrolment. Ball (2015) observed students behaving more like consumers and lecturers like service providers, and Tomlinson (2017) found evidence of an increasing consumer-orientated approach in a study across seven UK universities.

On the other hand, Saunders (2015) found that only 28.9% of a sample of first year undergraduates expressed a customer orientation in their attitudes to their education. Clifford (2022), in a series of focus groups with FY students, found that financial rewards were only one of the perceived benefits of university study. More important was the personal development that occurred, including increased confidence and self-awareness. Milian and Rizk (2018) found that in choosing their courses, students rarely consulted official information such as university ranking tables and instead relied on informal networks of family and friends to assess the worth of different courses and universities. Dashper *et al.* (2020) found that students did consider their future careers and earning potential when making decisions about choices of universities and courses, but were more influenced by subjective criteria, such as whether they felt welcomed and that they would fit in. Similarly, Winter and Chapleo (2017) found that more subjective criteria such as a pleasant physical environment and enthusiastic staff were important in attracting students. In summary, Ingram (2018) argues that students are consumers to an extent, but they are more than this and it is reductive to conceptualise them in this way. Most of these studies focused on first year undergraduates, with limited research found using FY students as participants.

### 2.2.3 The Influence of Neoliberalism on Individual Behaviour

This research aims to examine the extent to which neoliberal social and economic policies have been internalised by the participants, and how this has influenced their attitudes to, and engagement in, their studies over the course of their FY. Pertinent to this is Belsy and Peters' (2007) argument that neoliberal policies have become

successful in welfare and education through individual moral regulation rather than because of levels of state spending. Springer (2012) identified Gramsci's (1947) concept of hegemony and Foucault's (1978) concept of governmentality as being the most common theorisations of neoliberalism. These concepts will now be outlined in order to contextualise the following reflection on the influence of neoliberalism on individual behaviour.

Hegemony is distinguished from the use of force as the principal means of maintaining order in capitalist society. It can be defined as the interests of the ruling class becoming accepted as universal interests. Culturally, this involves the production of ways of thinking and understanding the world, manufacturing consent of the masses and legitimising the social order (Marshall, 1998).

The traditional Marxist view of how the state maintains its power over the population is explained by the concept of false consciousness (Pines, 1993). The Marxist belief in economic determinism argues that the economic base of society determines the make-up of the superstructure, with the economic interests of the ruling class being promoted through government policy, media output, educational content and methods, and religious teachings. Ruling class values are thus internalised by the masses, leading them to accept beliefs and vote for politicians that work against their own interests (Pines, 1993; Jones, 2006).

Written in a series of notebooks between 1929 and 1935, Gramsci (1947) had a less economically deterministic view than Marx. Like Weber (1904), he believed that the

cultural and social superstructure was not passively determined by the forces of production. Rather than by false consciousness, he believed that the state achieved control through the approval and consent of the population, with hegemony arising more through negotiation and compromise than imposition. The population are persuaded to accept the values of the ruling classes, with the ruling classes making concessions where necessary. Gramsci (1947) however did believe that there is a tension, with individuals possessing 'dual consciousness'. On one hand, people are persuaded by schools, media, churches and other societal institutions to accept capitalism as natural and desirable. However, their lived experience of poverty and inequality produces a dissatisfaction with the system and a desire for reform. This could possibly be a factor in the poor retention of FY students, which will be discussed in the findings chapter. It is possible that even though they are enthusiastic to study at university, there is a dissatisfaction with either some aspect of their studies or their lives beyond university, affecting their ability to engage fully.

Foucault (1978), in a series of lectures in 1977-78, developed the concept of governmentality as a way of explaining the relationship of power between the state and the population in neoliberal society. Foucault identified three types of power relationship. Firstly, sovereign power is the central power of a king or pope; the population has no right to question this power, their job is to accept it. Secondly, in the modern period, disciplinary power was exercised by the state through the police, schools, hospitals, prisons and other institutions. Here, power is linked to knowledge, for example the power of a doctor relies on their expertise to diagnose illness, prescribe treatment and in extreme circumstances to section somebody against their will. Both of these types of power are inefficient as the state has to

spend time and money enforcing its power directly by force or indirectly by propaganda.

Thirdly, power is exercised by governmentality. Rather than being governed by obedience or coercion, people are governed by themselves through their own choices. Governmentality involves power being shifted from a central authority and distributed throughout the population. The art of governmentality is to persuade people of the desirability of this and to teach people how to govern themselves, establishing widely shared social norms and moral values (Bettache and Chiu, 2019). Therefore, neoliberal governments rely less on enforcement or knowledge and instead on discourses of individual freedom (Rose and Miller, 2010).

Thus, in neoliberal governmentality people are 'produced rather than oppressed' (Davies and Petersen, 2005, p. 93), with the population both being governed by others, but more importantly involved in governing themselves. This 'governance at a distance' (Springer, 2012, p. 137), whereby people regulate their own behaviour, is the essence of neoliberalism. There are clearly limits to this, with the individual's freedom to operate constrained by historical, political and economic contextual factors (Ball and Olmedo, 2013). However, what people perceive as being possible is more important than what is actually possible, and to make life meaningful people need to believe that opportunities are available and that taking these opportunities is within individual capability (Lolich, 2011). Once these beliefs are established, government policies can then be presented as common sense (Springer, 2012).

In relation to this study, governmentality is supported by policies and practices that include tuition fees, the proliferation of different degree subjects, rating and ranking of universities by such mechanisms as the National Student Survey, and student voice initiatives. These strategies support the discourse of choice, autonomy and individualisation, with students as independent learners who make rational decisions about their education (Bragg, 2007; Lolich, 2011).

There is a growing convergence of Marxist and Foucauldian explanations of neoliberalism to combine macro- and micro-level explanations (Barnett *et al.*, 2014; Joseph, 2017), with England (2019) arguing that the concepts of hegemony and governmentality are different aspects of a common project. The main point of similarity relevant here is that whether by false consciousness, hegemony or governmentality, for social order to be maintained the population has to feel satisfied that the political and economic system is fair. In relation to neoliberalism in HE, it is required that students feel that their choices, results and future careers are determined fairly by their own decisions, abilities and efforts (Lolich, 2011). This in turn will produce graduates who are independent, self-sufficient and economically active rather than interdependent and other-centred (Lynch, Baker and Lyons, 2009). Therefore, drawing on these key concepts provides the opportunity to explore the extent to which FY students feel that their choices and efforts will result in consequences that are fairly determined, and not by forces beyond their control.

#### 2.2.4 Psychological Theories and Neoliberalism

Although there has been a great deal of research into the effects of neoliberal social and economic policies, there has been less attention paid to the psychological effects of living in a society shaped by these policies (McDonald *et al.*, 2017; Beattie, Bettache and Chong, 2019). However, it is becoming increasingly recognised that it is important to examine the impact of these policies on psychological experience, in order to understand how people adapt to these policies and the effects on their wellbeing (Adams *et al.*, 2019). In relation to this study, how students react to the structure and demands of their course will affect success and progression. How psychological theories can help understand the impact of neoliberal policies on individual behaviour and wellbeing will now be discussed.

Building on Foucault's concept of governmentality, the term 'responsibilisation' (Rose, 1990) describes the individual acceptance of neoliberal ideology, with the acceptance of individual responsibility rather than collective or state responsibility (Peters, 2001). Juhila, Raitakari and Löfstrand (2017) note that one of the central puzzles in the literature is how the process of neoliberal responsibilisation actually happens. Most explanations in the literature explain responsibilisation by an 'appeal to freedom', with people persuaded by an increase in personal freedom and their ability to pursue satisfaction through their own efforts (Rose and Miller, 2010; Joseph, 2017). Therefore, individuals consciously and willingly participate in the construction of neoliberal society. However, Farnsworth and Irving (2018) question how an appeal to freedom can be effective in adverse social and economic conditions and speculate that it is more difficult to maintain an appeal to individual

responsibility in an age of austerity, with increased external pressure on individuals' livelihood and wellbeing. This echoes Coates's (1984) point that hegemony is easier to maintain in times of prosperity than hardship.

To help explain why people accept neoliberalism even when their individual efforts are thwarted by external economic and social factors, Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) suggest an alternative explanation to an 'appeal to freedom', which they call 'responsibilisation through threat to personal control' (p. 217). Here, people accept the tenets of neoliberalism not through any enthusiastic embrace of these values but out of necessity, as a defence against feelings of uncertainty or perceived threats to their livelihood. For example, somebody might leave their salaried job to become self-employed because of a fear of redundancy rather than the possession of an entrepreneurial spirit. Similarly, a student might undertake a course because of poor employment opportunities rather than a wish to become more educated. There is some evidence for this, with Chandler *et al.* (2018) finding that a feeling of stagnation at work was a key motivator for mature students in applying for FYs.

Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) identify two forms of responsibilisation through threat to personal control: 'psychological reactance' and 'learned helplessness' (p. 221). The concept of psychological reactance was developed by Brehm (1966) and is a motivational state whereby an individual feels threatened by external forces and attempts to re-establish control over the situation. This reactance leads people to resist the social influence of others (Steindl *et al.*, 2015), with the response being cognitive, emotional and behavioural, arguing against and

being angry at the perceived threat and acting to regain control of the situation (Rains, 2013). This concept has been applied to areas such as health, marketing, politics (the 'take back control' theme of vote leave being a good example), and education to explain why people react against the advice, instructions or requests from others (Steindl *et al.*, 2015). This could explain why a student might feel that course content or teaching quality is affecting their progress, but then takes steps to improve the situation, perhaps by doing additional reading or seeking further support.

Learned helplessness was originally discovered by Overmier and Seligman (1967) when they showed that dogs facing inescapable electric shocks eventually stopped trying to escape and passively accepted the shocks given to the extent that, when escape was made possible, the dogs did not take the opportunity. Subsequent studies found that these findings generalised to humans (Hiroto and Seligman, 1975; Maier and Seligman, 1976) with motivational, cognitive and emotional effects.

Learned helplessness leads to reduced motivation to improve one's situation and to a cognitive bias whereby outcomes are not seen as resultant on individual efforts, leading to a depressed, resigned feeling. An example could be where students feel that their outcomes are due to factors beyond their control and so disengage from their studies.

In relation to governmentality through responsabilisation, 'Psychological reactance' is when somebody feels a threat to their wellbeing from the external economic environment but maintains a sense of individual agency and acts to try to reassert control over events. 'Learned helplessness' occurs when the perception of this

external threat is seen as too great to overcome and so there is a passive acceptance of a neoliberal discourse as inevitable, and so even when hardship is felt this does not give rise to any attempt to challenge it. Overall, while 'appeal to freedom' might be seen as the ideal type of explanation for responsabilisation, 'learned helplessness' and 'psychological reactance' offer more indirect explanations, but again strengthen neoliberal rule (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017).

Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) state that to the best of their knowledge, these explanations had not yet been applied to the understanding of governmentality. This research project for this thesis takes these ideas as a starting point, seeking to discover whether students' experiences, for example their reasons for enrolment, engagement with their studies and relationships with their lecturers and fellow students, can be related to the concepts of appeal to freedom, psychological reactance and learned helplessness. Central to these explanations is whether individuals feel a sense of personal control over their lives. The concept of locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966) is therefore central to understanding these different explanations of responsabilisation and this concept will be explored further in the next main section of this review (internal ref., p. 33).

#### 2.2.5 Critical Approaches to the Impact of Neoliberalism on the Individual.

There have been many criticisms of neoliberalism and its effects on the lives of individuals and on society as a whole. Three lenses that have been used to examine

the negative effects of neoliberalism in HE are Commodity Fetishism (Furedi, 2011), Educational Fundamentalism (Alvesson, 2013) and Stultification (Rancière, 1991).

Commodity Fetishism is a Marxist term for when the value of a commodity becomes separated from the labour needed to produce this commodity (Marx, 1867). The changing relationship between students and the university to being consumers and service providers has been argued to encourage a form of this in education (Furedi, 2011). The status of attaining a degree and the resulting expectation of a highly paid job are valued rather than the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that lead to being awarded the degree. Also, being at university and having the status of being a student become valued as ends in themselves, removed from the academic labour involved in this. Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009, p. 277) characterised this as students seeking to 'have a degree', rather than to 'be learners'.

This commodity fetishism also affects the interactions between teachers and learners. There is pressure to develop pedagogical practices that view knowledge as a commodity that is provided by the lecturer to the student, with assessment guides, assignment workshops, 'you said, we did' and other initiatives tailoring the university experience to the demands of the consumer (Jackson, 2015). Although strategies such as this are aimed at empowering the consumer, they are likely to encourage an attitude in students whereby they expect lecturers to provide for their needs rather than taking personal control.

Educational fundamentalism is an uncritical acceptance of the benefits of gaining an education and the opportunities it provides (Alvesson, 2013). On an individual level, neoliberal discourse sees education as a means of getting ahead in a competitive market, with qualifications acting as gateways to employment opportunities. On a social level, education is seen as the means to economic growth, with widening participation seen as providing social mobility. It is accepted without question that education will achieve these aims, with policies such as those aimed to widen participation, discussed earlier (internal ref., pp. 5-8), developed to pursue this.

Stultification relates to the supposed distance between the knowledgeable teacher and ignorant student (Rancière, 1991). The purpose of education becomes the journey of the learner from a state of 'not knowing' to 'knowing'. Stultification occurs when learning is reduced down to the acquisition of knowledge as determined by the teacher. This provides a form of false consciousness whereby the student internalises the discourse provided and views their education as emancipatory, whereby in reality it serves the needs of the neoliberal system.

These critical approaches all argue that neoliberalism actually does the opposite of its intentions. Rather than producing students who take individual responsibility for their learning and career development, they produce students who are dependent on external controls and who lack personal initiative. These criticisms explain responsibilisation through learned helplessness rather than by appeal to freedom.

### 2.2.6 Section summary

This section has explored the literature regarding neoliberal policies in HE and how these policies and practices affect individual behaviour. This leads to the first research question of:

To what extent do students express neoliberal ideology in relation to their learning experiences during the FY of their degree?

The key psychological concept identified to explain the acceptance of neoliberal ideology is that of locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966). The next section of this literature review examines this concept, firstly in relation to how it relates to neoliberalism, and secondly in relation to student achievement.

### 2.3 Locus of Control

The key factor recognised by Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) in order to explain responsabilisation, the individual acceptance of neoliberal ideology, is that of locus of control. The concept of Locus of Control was developed by Rotter (1954, 1966) and can be simply defined as, 'the extent to which people believe that the rewards they receive in life can be controlled by their own personal actions.' (Wang, Bowling, and Eschleman, 2010, p. 761). This section of the literature review concentrates on this concept, examining how it relates to the acceptance of neoliberal ideology. Research concerning how and why locus of control affects student performance is considered, followed by a discussion of the reasons for individual differences and how best to support students.

#### 2.3.1 Explanation of Locus of Control

Over the last sixty years, locus of control has been widely studied by academics in a number of fields including education, health and the workplace (Galvin *et al.*, 2018). Rotter (1954, 1966) showed that people with an internal locus of control (sometimes known as 'internals' in the literature) believe that the consequences of their actions are due to their own decisions and feel a sense of individual agency. On the other hand, those with an external locus of control ('externals') believe that the reasons why their actions result in rewards or punishments are more due to factors beyond their control such as the actions of others, chance or fate.

The concept of locus of control builds on the work of Skinner (1938) on operant conditioning. Operant conditioning shows that rewarding behaviour is important in the learning of new skills and knowledge, and that behaviour can be shaped by the expectation of receiving rewards. Whereas behaviourist theory sees individuals as passive recipients of learning from environmental forces, Rotter (1954, 1966) added a cognitive element. He believed that the perception of the cause(s) of any reward affects the expectation of the reward, and so is important in shaping behaviour. If the reward is seen as a consequence of individual choices or effort, then the behaviour leading to the reward will be reinforced and learning will occur. For example, if a student believed that their assignment success was due to their hard work, then this hard work is reinforced, and they will work hard in future assignments. However, if the reward is seen as being due to external factors, then the behaviour will not be as strongly reinforced. These external factors were categorised by Levenson and Lefcourt (1981) into those relating to luck or chance, and those coming from the behaviours of powerful others. So, if a student believed their success was more due to lucky guessing at answers or the lecturer's generous marking, then their own efforts will be less well reinforced. In this way events that affect us are seen either as predictable and under our control, or unpredictable and under the influence of other people, fate or other forces beyond our control.

A sense of individual freedom and autonomy is central to the appeal of neoliberalism. This was supported by Bay-Cheng *et al.* (2015), who developed the Neoliberal Beliefs Inventory (NBI) to study the relationship between neoliberal social, political and economic beliefs and personality traits. Using questionnaire data, they found that expressing neoliberal beliefs correlated with having an internal locus of

control, a high feeling of environmental mastery and a sense of personal agency. On the other hand, neoliberal beliefs were negatively correlated with an external locus of control and belief in collective action.

### 2.3.2 Relation of locus of control to attribution theory

As well as relating responsabilisation to locus of control, it can also be related to attribution theory. There is some confusion as to how locus of control differs from attribution theory (Galvin *et al.*, 2018). The difference is that attributions are applied to explain the current situation or are made after the event to explain past outcomes. In contrast, locus of control relates to expected future outcomes resulting from decisions about current behaviour (Ng, Sorensen and Eby, 2006). Attributions and locus of control can be aligned or different, for example a student might attribute a poor mark to lack of support from their teachers. This might lead them to believe that future marks will also be determined by level of support offered and so feel dependent on this, or they might believe that they can take action to ensure they get the support they need.

There is also a potential problem of self-serving biases when attributing internal or external causes. Such biases can occur due to us attributing internal causes to our success and external causes to our failures (Hoorens, 1993). Fazey and Fazey (2001) used the Academic Locus of Control Scale (Rossouw and Parsons, 1995) to study first year undergraduates at Bangor University. Whereas on the whole they found that students had an internal locus of control, they also analysed their results

in relation to perceived success or failure. In doing this, they found that students saw failure as being caused more by external factors such as ‘luck’ or ‘powerful other’ and success more by internal factors such as ‘effort’.

In relation to Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle’s (2017) three explanations of governmentality by responsabilisation, appeal to freedom relates to an individual attributing past events and the current situation to personal decisions and having an internal locus of control in relation to current decision making leading to future outcomes. Psychological reactance relates more to an individual attributing past events and the current situation to external causes but maintaining an internal locus to take action to improve their future situation. Learned helplessness would indicate an external locus and fatalistic attitude for future outcomes, regardless of the perceived causes of the current situation. This can be illustrated in a table:

Figure 1. Explanations of responsabilisation by attribution and locus of control.

Explanation of responsabilisation	Attribution of cause of past events or current situation	Locus of control for future outcomes
Appeal to freedom	Internal	Internal
Psychological reactance	External	Internal
Learned helplessness	Internal/external	External

Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) applied these explanations for responsabilisation to findings from two surveys of Australian Farmers in 1996 and 2003 (Pyysiäinen and Vesala, 2013). Between these years there had been a number of changes in agricultural policy along neoliberal lines. They expected to see an increase over time of farmers expressing attitudes aligned with an 'appeal to freedom' as farmers became more accepting of these neoliberal changes to their working lives. However, they found little change in attitudes over this time period. They found that 'psychological reactance' was the most common form of responsabilisation, with over 60% of responses showing this at both points in time, compared to less than 20% of responses relating to 'appeal to freedom'. This is the only study found by this literature review that applied these three explanations of responsabilisation to participants in a research study. This thesis will take these concepts and apply them to students over the course of their FY. This thesis will also expand on Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle's (2017) work by examining the concept of locus of control in greater depth.

### 2.3.3 Research studies on locus of control in students

For neoliberal ideology to be accepted, it is preferable for members of society to feel an internal locus of control. It therefore needs to be demonstrated that having an internal locus is beneficial. Research conducted on locus of control in students will now be examined, focussing on achievement, wellbeing and procrastination.

There is evidence that locus of control is a factor in achievement in education, with several studies finding 'internals' having higher achievement and lower drop-out rates than 'externals' (Kalechstein and Nowicki, 1997; Gifford, Briceno-Perriott and Mianzo, 2006). Curtis and Trice (2013), from a study of 322 American college students, found statistically significant relationships between locus of control and student grades, and also with student attendance. Rakes, Dunn and Rakes (2013) found that students with an internal locus of control were more engaged with their studies and better at meeting deadlines, whereas those with an external locus procrastinated more. Valdes-Cuervo, Sanches Escobedo and Valadez-Sierra (2015) found in a sample of Mexican students that high achievers had an internal locus of control. Kader (2014) divided students into 'internals' and 'externals' and found that internals achieved better academically and spent more hours working. He also found that internals suffered less from performance anxiety.

A possible reason for this higher achievement was shown in a study by Grimes (1997), who found that students with an internal locus spent longer preparing for assessments, believing that their preparations would have an impact on their results. Other studies have shown that an internal locus of control correlates with good study skills (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott and Mianzo, 2006). Schipor and Schipor (2014), in a questionnaire-based study of 180 teacher training students, found that those with an internal locus of control reported spending more time and energy on their studies and had a more positive evaluation of their course than did students with a more external locus.

While there is value in this general finding that those with an internal locus have higher levels of achievement, other research has shown that the relationship between locus of control and achievement is more complex, with some findings showing that students with an external locus worked better when tasks were more highly structured (Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton, 2005). This corresponds with workplace studies, where most research in this area has been conducted. In a study of management, Krenl (1992) found that those with an internal locus worked better when managers employed a participative management style and where they were given autonomy to develop ideas, make decisions and set their own goals. On the other hand, those with an external locus found that being given autonomy created stress, and were better managed using a more supervisory style, given more detailed instructions. Similarly, Li *et al.* (2015) showed that under conditions of low autonomy, where work patterns are set by others with little individual control, those with an external locus outperformed those with an internal locus. In work conditions of high autonomy, the performance of both those with internal and external loci improved, but much more so for those with an internal locus. They concluded that increasing autonomy at work increased performance for all workers, but with larger increases for those with an internal locus of control. Although most research has been conducted in workplace setting, there is relevance for this study in that having lecturers employ participatory or supervisory styles, creating conditions of high or low autonomy, will have an impact on student engagement and satisfaction.

The relationship between locus of control and wellbeing is complex. Karkoulian, Srour and Sinan (2016) found that in general, those with an external locus reported feeling more stressed than internals, and Sagone and De Caroli (2014) found that

students with an internal locus expressed a more positive self-concept. Because those with an internal locus feel that they have more control over their environment, they respond to stressful situations by engaging with the situation to solve the problem that is causing the stress. In contrast, those with an external locus feel powerless to reduce the stress they feel and may respond emotionally or withdraw from the situation (Abouserie, 1994). Typical of research in the area is that of Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018), who in a study of 307 students found a positive correlation between external locus of control and high stress levels. Abouserie (1994) also found a significant positive correlation between external locus of control and higher stress levels in students and stated that this was in line with previous similar studies. In addition to this general finding, one of the questionnaires given by Abouserie (1994) asked participants to rate how stressful they found a series of factors related to their academic study. It was found that external factors dominated the findings, including, 'Too much to do', 'Amount to learn', 'Lack of time for study', 'unclear assignments', 'Timing, spacing of assignments'.

Norton (2005) found that those with an internal locus had better coping skills and responded more positively to difficult situations. This is explained by those with an external locus of control interpreting stressors as being externally caused and feeling powerless to change their situation. Therefore, externals may behave more destructively to themselves and others rather than take constructive steps to address the problem and change the situation (Sprung and Jex, 2012). In contrast, those with a sense of being in control feel able to reduce their stress levels by taking control of the situation.

However, these findings do not hold in all situations. The more serious the consequences of decisions made, the more that internals feel stressed due to them taking responsibility for their actions, with a tendency to self-blame for any failures. Also, evidence shows that internals are less willing to seek or accept help than externals (Aube, Rousseau and Morin, 2007). Therefore, in some situations, a level of learned helplessness might serve to protect an individual from feeling stressed.

One of the main factors that affects both student grades and stress levels is that of academic procrastination. Garnham and East (2021) found that time management was a significant stressor for FY students, especially around completing assessments. Procrastination can be defined as delaying a task despite knowing that this delay will not improve task performance, with one study showing that between 75-90% of students identified procrastination as a problem (Steel, 2007). Academic procrastination has been linked to poor study habits, missed deadlines and poor grades (Kader, 2014). One cause of this procrastination has been found to be a feeling of academic helplessness. This has been shown in several studies, for example, Sagone and De Caroli (2014), in a study of 183 Italian university students, found a statistically significant correlation between feelings of helplessness and avoidance of completing academic assignments.

It is expected that those with an internal locus will procrastinate less as they feel that their efforts will make a difference to their outcomes, and so they will be more inclined to proceed with a task. However, research linking procrastination and locus

of control have had mixed results. While some show that those with an external locus procrastinate more than those with an internal locus, others show no relationship (Kader, 2014). Prihadi, Hairul and Hazri (2012) found that students with an external locus internalised the view that they perceived their lecturers had of them. This led to academic helplessness and greater procrastination, especially if they believed their lecturers had a negative view of their abilities. They also found that those with an internal locus were less affected by their perception of their lecturers' assessment of their capabilities, even if negative, and procrastinated less. Wäschle *et al.* (2014) emphasised that it is the perception of their lecturers' views that are important. Therefore, a combination of having an external locus of control and a perception of negative appraisal from others leads to learned helplessness, in turn leading to procrastination.

These studies show that having an internal locus of control is beneficial for students in many ways. It is therefore important to see if it is possible to increase an internal locus in order to support students. The next part of this section examines the literature on the causes of locus of control and how fixed a personality trait this is.

#### 2.3.4 Determinants of locus of control in individuals

With the aim of governmentality being to teach people to govern themselves, it is important to consider whether this is actually possible. Theories of governmentality assume that it is possible for people to develop a more internal locus of control and so learn to govern themselves. Also, on a more practical level, with student

achievement linked to having an internal locus, it would be beneficial for students if they could develop a greater internal locus. However, many theorists believe that having an internal or external locus of control is a relatively stable personality trait, although there is no agreement on the cause(s) of this (Galvin *et al.*, 2018). This section examines the literature on the causes of locus of control, examining whether it is more of a fixed trait or changeable state, and the influences of nature and nurture on this.

Rotter (1966) believed that whether individuals feel an internal or external locus of control in any given situation will depend on both the specific situation itself and on individual differences. In some situations, it is clearer that our individual decisions and actions will affect our outcomes, and in others it is clearer that whatever we attempt will have little or no impact on these. However, he also believed that there are consistent individual differences in whether we are more likely to feel an internal or external locus of control.

In relation to individual differences in locus of control, Rotter (1966) theorised that people would be normally distributed along a continuum of having an internal or external locus. Although he believed that having an internal locus was usually beneficial, those at the extreme internal end of the scale would be just as maladjusted as those at the external extreme, with unrealistic views on their ability to control (or not) their life chances. More recent research has supported this view, with those at the ends of the spectrum reporting lower subjective wellbeing than

those with a more balanced mix of external and internal expectancies (April, Dharani and Peters, 2012).

In looking at the causes for the development of locus of control, sociologists have long recognised that alienation results from workers feeling a lack of control of their labour, with work practices being set by others (Rotter, 1966). In Marxist terms, workers do not own the means of production and are forced to sell their labour to survive, entering into relations of production that they are not in control of. This differs from the neoliberal model whereby workers in a free market do have control of their labour and choose to enter into relations of production that they perceive as advantageous to them.

At a more psychological level, Rotter (1966) believed that an individual's history of reinforcement would determine whether reinforcements were seen as due to internal or external reasons, with individuals building generalised expectancies for internal or external control. This has been linked to a number of factors in a child's upbringing, for example Bodovski (2014) showed that socioeconomic status had an effect, with children raised in families that struggled financially developing a more external locus of control as effort is not seen to result in financial reward. On the other hand, he found that children raised in conditions of socioeconomic advantage developed more of an internal locus, believing that hard work is rewarded. In a study of students, Serin, Serin and Sahin (2010) found that students from high income backgrounds had a higher internal locus than those from middle- or lower-income backgrounds. Other studies have shown that parenting style and the stability of the home

environment also have an effect (Carton and Nowicki, 1996; McClun and Merrell, 1998). However, there is still a lot that is not understood about how experiences in childhood and youth affect locus of control and whether locus of control becomes fixed during childhood during some kind of critical period. Although locus of control is seen as a stable trait in adults, there is much work to do to explore this and it might be that it is actually more fluid over the course of our lives (Galvin *et al.*, 2018). The longitudinal aspect of the research for this thesis will examine changes in locus of control over the academic year.

Although the research for this thesis is more focussed on investigating any changes in locus of control over the year, and the social influences on these changes, there is also the consideration that locus of control might be biological or genetic in origin. In a twin study that examined monozygotic and dizygotic twins, some reared apart and some together, Pederson *et al.* (1989) found that there were both genetic and environmental causes of locus of control. They found that genes accounted for 30% of variance in scores on Rotter's (1966) Internal–External Expectancies Scale (I-E scale), a questionnaire devised to measure locus of control. Also, this literature review found that locus of control has been studied in many different countries and for over half a century. The material drawn on here is from a range of countries including China (Li *et al.*, 2015), India (Ahluwalia and Preet, 2018), Indonesia (Sundjoto, 2017), Mexico (Valdes-Cuervo, Sanches Escobedo and Valadez-Sierra, 2015) and Romania (Schipor and Schipor, 2014). None of these studies suggest that their findings might be limited to their location, and it is assumed that the conclusions drawn are universal. If locus of control is a universal human characteristic, then it is likely that there is at least some biological influence.

In terms of locus of control being dependent upon situational factors, while there may be an objective truth regarding how much control people have in any given situation, Rotter (1966, 1975) was more interested in the subjective beliefs people hold regarding the amount of control they perceive that they have in any situation, with Lefcourt (2014) agreeing that it was the extent to which people believed that they could behave autonomously that was important. Krampen's (1988) Action-theoretical Model of Personality (AMP) is relevant here as it links theories based on situational determinants of behaviour with theories based on stable personality traits. Krampen's theory makes a distinction between 'strong' situations, where the norms of behaviour expected are perceived as clearly set, and 'weak' situations, which are novel or unpredictable, with no clear norms to guide behaviour. It has been suggested that in a strong situation there is little room for individual differences in locus of control to be a factor (Kacmar *et al.*, 2009). However, the more unclear the situation, the more important individual differences in locus of control become as a predictor of behaviour (Kormanik and Rocco, 2009). Participants in this study are entering a new situation, one that is structured in terms of the timetable, modules studied and assessment requirements, but offering flexibility in terms of independent reading and research and in how assessments are tackled. If participants offer similar responses, this will indicate the perception of a stronger situation, whereas different responses between participants will indicate a weaker situation.

Krampen (1988) also believed that an individual's locus of control can change and adapt depending on changes in the environment, and changes in reinforcement

received. For example, a student might start their course feeling an external locus but over time become more confident in their abilities and develop a more internal locus. Likewise, a student might begin with an internal locus but over time develop a degree of cynicism, believing that there is little scope for autonomy in their studies.

There is evidence that shows that locus of control changes over time in both work and education settings. Ahluwalia and Preet (2018) found that in a study of 460 teachers, external locus of control correlated positively with number of years' experience, suggesting that experienced teachers feel less autonomy over their work. They concluded that, as the teachers in their study became more experienced, they became more risk averse and preferred to follow the norms and expectations they saw as being set for them. On the other hand, they argued that younger, more inexperienced teachers were more willing to take risks to achieve their goals. Although focussed on teachers, this might relate to students who over time learn that it is more beneficial to closely follow the advice given in structured assignment plans and examples of model essays rather than attempt to be innovative in their work.

In education-based studies with a similar focus, Reed (2007) found that over the course of the first year of their degrees, 153 medical students' loci of control became more external, again suggesting an increasing conformity to the perceived expectations of others over time. In another study, Kovach (2018) predicted that postgraduate students would, as a group, have a more internal locus than undergraduates, and theorised two reasons for this. Firstly, by the nature of the

sample, postgraduates have been successful at university, with other studies having shown that successful students have a more internal locus. Secondly, three years of undergraduate study in a university environment would be expected to develop an internal locus in students. Interestingly, she found no such findings. She found that average scores on Rotter's (1966) I-E scale, were actually slightly lower for undergraduates, indicating a higher internal locus than for postgraduates. This suggests that for these students, three years of undergraduate study might have actually increased an external locus. While these findings might be specific to the organisations that were examined, they do highlight the general point that locus of control can change over time under influence of an organisation's culture. Therefore, FY students are likely to be affected by the culture within their university.

There is also discussion in the literature as to the extent to which locus of control might change in individuals in different domains in their life (April, Dharani and Peters, 2012). For example, somebody might have an internal locus in their work life but an external locus in their love life. Galvin *et al.* (2018) hypothesise that even within the same domain, individuals might have an internal locus for some aspects and an external locus for others. For example, students might have a different locus when dealing with their lecturers compared to when dealing with their fellow students, or even between different modules studied.

It has been seen that there is mixed evidence as to how much locus of control is a stable personality trait or can change due to environmental changes. In relation to Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle's (2017) classification, governmentality by

responsibilisation through appeal to freedom can only work if locus of control is fluid and can change to a more internal locus. However, if locus of control is more fixed, it explains why some people feel a sense of learned helplessness, even when given opportunities to control their own outcomes. Using the literature reviewed here will enable me to explore the locus of control reported by my participants over the course of the year, with possible ramifications in relation to their motivation and engagement in their studies.

### 2.3.5 Supporting students

There is a debate in the literature as to how best support students, related to the discussion of how fixed a personality trait locus of control is. Support can either focus on changing the mindsets of individual students, working with them to help develop a more internal locus, or it can focus on creating a more supportive learning environment for all students, whatever their locus of control.

Those studies that focus on changing individual students so that they can meet the demands of their courses advocate study skills programmes focused on changing student attitudes and behaviours, increasing individual students' internal locus. For example, 'Exercises should be incorporated in retention programs that help students develop the ability to behave and learn autonomously. This will help students believe that academic success is not in the hands of professors or luck, but in their own capable hands.' (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott and Mianzo, 2006, p. 24). Kormanik and Rocco (2009) agree, believing that HEIs should develop students' feelings of

independence and autonomy and so should actively help students to increase their internal locus of control. Prihadi *et al.* (2018) suggest that supporting activities could help students internalise their locus of control in order to reduce procrastination. Similarly, Kovach (2018, p. 43) suggests that support be given to encourage an internal locus where, 'the student could seek additional assistance to develop a mindset where expectations are directly in line with respective academic goals.' Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018) identify some of the strategies that could be used to increase students' internal locus of control, including Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, Narrative Therapy and the use of positive psychology techniques. They believe that by using counsellors to employ these techniques with students, students can increase their internal locus. Likewise, Abouserie (1994) recommended that through academic counselling, students could learn to develop a more internal locus. Similarly, although not specifically focussing on locus of control, Davison *et al.* (2022) found that a programme of non-academic skill development including goal setting, time management and reducing procrastination was particularly helpful for non-traditional students undertaking their FY.

Other recommendations focus more on changing the university environment rather than on developing individual students. Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton's (2005) findings highlighted the influence of environmental factors and they recommended that more focus should be given on creating environments that foster achievement for all. This relates to Krampen (1988), who believed that education settings should cater for those with both internal and external loci, the ideal environment being one that has enough structure to be predictable but also one that allows freedom to encourage independent work, for example Garnham and East (2021) found that

increased scaffolding of the assessment, breaking it down into discreet tasks but also leaving flexibility for innovation, helped students to better manage their time in completing their work. As well as advocating working with individual students, Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018) also support this approach and argue that universities have a duty to provide a healthy educational environment where all students can feel a sense of satisfaction with themselves and their studies. This can be achieved through a combination of quality of education offered, administrative procedures and pastoral support.

Although not focussed specifically on locus of control, relevant findings from studies conducted using FY students as participants include Clifford's (2022) recommendation of the use of self-esteem programmes for FY students and Seal and Parkes's (2019) recommendation of the use of small tutor groups as a means of empowering students, where students can discuss and reflect upon their experiences. Webber (2024) advocated a range of measures to increase FY students' academic confidence and resilience including having a specialist FY team to offer academic and pastoral support through the year, including the development of study skills and opportunities for the development of peer learning and support. Davison (2021a) found that flipped learning was effective for FY students in the development of independent thinking, with more class time spent engaged in higher-order thinking skills when compared to traditional lectures. These measures largely relate to developing an internal locus in individual students so that they can thrive at university, but also take into account the importance of providing an educational environment that is supportive to all students.

### 2.3.6 Section summary

This section examined the literature on locus of control, how it affects student performance and wellbeing, and also the reasons for individuals having an internal or external locus. This research project aims to investigate the locus of control felt by FY students. Through attending university in a neoliberal social and economic climate, it is important to explore students' loci of control both at the start of their studies and to see how this changes through their course. This will help to understand the relationship between neoliberal educational policies and practices in the HE sector and their impact on individual student behaviour. This leads to the second research question:

To what extent does locus of control change in students over the course of their foundation year?

Students' levels of achievement is directly linked to their motivation to succeed. The next section examines the literature on motivation and how this is related to locus of control.

## 2.4 Motivation

Motivation has been defined in a number of ways, focusing on psychological, cognitive and behavioural elements (Locke and Latham, 2002; Aarts, Gollwitzer and Hassin, 2004; Jones and George, 2017). Definitions have in common that they see motivation as involving the planned movement from a starting point to an intended goal. Individual motivation is a key aspect of the ideology of individual responsibility that is central to neoliberalism. Motivation has been demonstrated to be a key factor in success, both in general (Kovach, 2018) and more specifically for students (Ariani, 2016; Howard *et al.*, 2021). This section links locus of control and student achievement to theories of motivation, specifically the needs theories of Maslow (1943) and McLelland (1961), and the work regarding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

### 2.4.1 Locus of Control and Motivation

Rotter (1966) believed that those with an internal locus of control would be motivated to make greater effort to achieve than those who did not believe their efforts would determine their success. To support this, he summarised several studies that showed that those with an internal locus had a stronger motivation to succeed than those with an external locus. For example, Rotter and Mulry (1965, in Rotter, 1966) found that internals took significantly longer on tasks they were told were skill based rather than chance based, but there was no such difference for externals. A study by Erfan (1963, in Rotter, 1966) showed that internals were more likely to forget (repress) tasks where they had failed compared to those that they had succeeded in. Externals showed no such difference, suggesting that as externals attribute external

causes to their failures, there is not the same psychological need to defend their egos from feelings of failure. These findings have been confirmed in subsequent research, with many studies finding significant positive correlations between motivation to achieve and having an internal locus of control (Karaman and Watson, 2017).

There are limitations to the general rule that having an internal locus leads to higher motivation. Rotter (1966, p. 21) identified some people as being 'defensive externals', who attribute failure to external causes, but remain highly competitive. This is similar to the concept of psychological reactance. In addition to this, it has also been found that in certain circumstances, having an internal locus of control can inhibit motivation. Somebody with an internal locus might choose to seek a satisfactory outcome rather than an optimal one, possibly to save time or energy (McFadyen and Thomas, 1997).

#### 2.4.2 Theories of motivation

There were many different theories of motivation before Rotter's work that influenced him in developing the concept of locus of control (Kovach, 2018). The most well-known of these is by Maslow (1943), who proposed that motivation was caused by a drive to achieve a hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow's theory, once lower-level needs are fulfilled, we are motivated to fulfil the next level of needs. The lowest level needs are physiological such as the need for food. Higher up are the needs for love and friendship, and then needs related to esteem such as independence, self-

respect, and social status. Once all of these are achieved, we are able to attain self-actualisation and be our true or best selves. For university students this might include the enjoyment of learning for its own sake, working independently, being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses, and being able to address these weaknesses (Ormrod, 2016). It is reasonable to say that having an internal locus of control would be beneficial for students in fulfilling these needs, especially at the higher levels (Kovach, 2018).

Similarly to Maslow, McLelland (1961) produced a model of motivation based on the fulfilment of needs. Whereas Maslow's (1943) model focusses on survival-based needs at the lower end and moves up to the fulfilment of more psychological needs, McLelland (1961) focussed more specifically on psychological needs that could be placed near the top of Maslow's hierarchy, including the needs for achievement and affiliation. Although those with internal and external loci of control might feel these needs as strongly, how they maintain or fulfil these needs might differ.

A need for achievement is most obviously related to university study and could be framed by students as a need to achieve externally set goals such as high marks, or to more internally set aims such as a need to achieve a level of learning for personal fulfilment. FY students especially find assessments stressful and find the prospect of failure as damaging to self-esteem (Hale, 2018). Those with an internal locus will more easily maintain a higher drive to fulfil achievement needs as they see this as being under their own control whereas those with an external locus are more easily disheartened when they find their studies difficult or receive a poor mark.

The need for affiliation can be seen in students in their interpersonal relations, how much they value their friendships with other students, their enjoyment of group work and their need to form good relations with their lecturers. Chandler *et al.* (2018) found that before enrolment onto their FY, participants expected relations with lecturers to be very formal and were pleasantly surprised when they found that they could approach their lectures for support outside of lectures and that their lecturers showed interest in their personal circumstances. They appreciated that their lecturers recognised their life experiences and the value that these added to their learning. They also found that before starting, mature FY students believed that they would be much older than other students and were happy to find others of the same age. Shepperd *et al.* (2023) also found that one of the advantages of the FY was the opportunity it provided to make connections with both fellow students and teaching staff. While a need for affiliation may be high in all students, those with an internal locus of control will be more proactive in initiating social relationships, whereas those with an external locus are more likely to wait to be invited to join a group. This could potentially be a problem with such students feeling isolated in their course groups (Kovach, 2018). There has been much research on how students can be encouraged to form social connections, for example Davison (2021b) suggests the use of structured peer review tasks to support assessment writing. The need for affiliation relates to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, where through the need to belong to a group people start to categorise others as being similar or different to them and identify with those perceived as similar. Those with an internal locus will be more active in seeking out people they see as similar to themselves and in creating in-groups.

One of the key themes when discussing motivation is whether motivation is caused by intrinsic or extrinsic factors. The concept of intrinsic motivation was first introduced by Woodworth (1918) and later developed by White (1959). They argued against behaviourist theories that proposed that motivation was extrinsic, with task completion driven by the desire to gain an external reward (Skinner, 1938). They believed that behaviour was also motivated internally by curiosity and the inherent desire for exploration and play, and that the enjoyment of doing an activity was motivating in itself.

In relation to academic study, intrinsic motivation comes from an interest in the topic and an enjoyment of learning. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation comes from the expectation or hope of an external reward, for example a student who studies in order to attain a well-paid job (Fazey and Fazey, 2001). This is similar to achievement goal theory, first proposed by Dweck (1986), which makes a distinction between mastery and performance orientations to completing a task. For students with a mastery orientation, the focus is on learning, developing skills and understanding. On the other hand, for those with a performance orientation the focus is on meeting performance standards. Evidence shows that having a mastery orientation leads to deeper learning, with more effort being given to conceptual understanding, whereas performance orientation leads to more surface level learning strategies such as memorisation (Kader, 2014). This can be seen as problematic for neoliberal ideology. When students are encouraged to view gaining an education in economic terms, they may value the expected monetary benefits of gaining a degree

more than the process of learning or interest in the subject content. This relates to the concept of commodity fetishism discussed earlier (internal ref., p. 30) where gaining of a qualification is valued more than the work done to achieve this.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be seen as extremes on a continuum, with in-between states identified. Deci *et al.* (1991) identify two such states as 'identified regulation' and 'introjected regulation'. Identified regulation occurs when even though the parameters of a task are set externally, the individual accepts the worth of the task and is internally motivated to work to the best of their ability to achieve success. Further towards the extrinsic end of the spectrum, introjected regulation is when an individual accepts the value in completing the activity but is more concerned with avoiding failure or gaining a reward on completion. Deci *et al.* (*ibid*) also describe an 'amotivated' state, characterised by apathy and a lack of desire to act at all, similar to that of learned helplessness.

Fazey and Fazey (2001) found an interesting pattern of motivation between mature and younger students. They found that all students showed high levels of motivation but that mature students showed higher levels of intrinsic motivation and introjected regulation, whereas younger students showed more extrinsic motivation and identified regulation. This suggests that students have a mixture of reasons for entering university, with mature students both having an intrinsic drive to study but also a fear of failure associated with introjected regulation. That younger students scored higher on extrinsic motivation and identified regulation is explained by these students being more used to having their goals, and rewards for achieving these

goals, set for them by others. This is relevant to this study as the participants are mainly mature students who have not achieved highly in their past education and so may also have a fear of failure, as also seen in Chapman's (2017) study of mature students in their first year at university.

The link between having an internal locus of control and being intrinsically motivated seems logical as it follows that those who feel intrinsically motivated will feel in control of the outcomes of their action. This is clearly stated in some of the literature, for example, 'strong intrinsic motivation characterizes those with internal locus of control.' (Galvin *et al.*, 2018, p. 823). Fazey and Fazey (2001), in their study of first year students, found a correlation between being intrinsically motivated and having an internal locus of control, which they described as, 'not surprising' (p. 355). Likewise, Kader (2014) found an association between having an internal locus of control and having a mastery orientation. This has also been shown in the workplace with Sundjoto (2017) finding that measures of an internal locus of control were significantly correlated to those of intrinsic motivation in a sample of 270 employees in a ceramics manufacturing company. However, other research has shown that the link between internal locus and intrinsic motivation is complex and, although logical, is not always borne by findings. For example, Barbuto and Story (2008), although hypothesising that intrinsic motivation would be related to an internal locus of control, found no such results in their study of government employees and recommended further research in the area.

Earlier on, Deci (1971, 1972) suggested that the way in which external rewards are perceived can have different effects on intrinsic motivation. External rewards can be perceived by recipients as controllers of behaviour or as indicators of competence. In general, when external rewards are given for tasks that are intrinsically interesting, intrinsic motivation falls. This is seen as a controlling effect of the reward. However, if external rewards are linked to task competency, then these can enhance intrinsic motivation. This is seen as an informational effect of the reward.

Earn (1982) investigated how locus of control would interact with motivation and found that when given an external reward, those with an external locus perceived the reward as controlling and their intrinsic motivation decreased. However, in the same situation, those with an internal locus emphasised the informational aspect of the reward, seeing the reward as linked to their performance, and their intrinsic motivation increased. In this way, locus of control acts as a 'critical boundary' (Malik, Butt and Choi, 2015, p. 62) for the effects of external rewards on intrinsic motivation, and so the same external reward can increase motivation in those with an internal locus and decrease motivation for those with an external locus. Using questionnaire data from 239 respondents, Malik, Butt and Choi (2015) found that this was indeed the case. However, these results only held when the situation was ambiguous enough to allow interpretation of the reward as being controlling or informational. When the rewards were made to be more clearly controlling, intrinsic motivation dropped equally for both internals and externals.

This interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and internal and external locus of control is of particular interest to understanding the participants in this study. While neoliberalism encourages the pursuit of external, economic rewards, research finds that better performance is more associated with intrinsic motivation. However, those with an internal locus of control will see these economic rewards as informational, indicating competency, while those with an external locus will see them as controlling. Therefore, neoliberalism's focus on economic rewards can encourage intrinsic motivation in those with an internal locus of control but decrease motivation in those with an external locus. In this context of this study, gaining high grades and the expectancy of a well-paid job will be motivating for those with an internal locus of control, who will view these as confirmation of their efforts and so increase intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, they might be demotivating for those with an external locus, as these external performance measures will be perceived as controlling, decreasing intrinsic motivation.

### 2.4.3 Section summary

This section examined the literature relating to motivation, and especially that linking motivation to locus of control. As motivation is so linked to success, it is important to investigate the motivation felt by participants in this study over the course of their FY. This leads to the third research question:

What factors affect students' levels of motivation during their foundation year?

## 2.5 Conclusion to the literature review

Taking the model of governmentality by responsabilisation from Pyysiäinen, Halpinb and Guilfoylec (2017), this review has drawn together work from sociology, psychology and education to understand the individual student experience in a neoliberal context, with a specific focus on the challenges to students of undertaking a FY.

There has been much sociological research into neoliberalism, with neoliberal rule being explained by hegemony and governmentality. This review has demonstrated that a key factor in the acceptance of neoliberal rule is the cultivation of an internal locus of control, with an assumption that people can change in order to thrive in a neoliberal social and economic environment.

There has been much psychological research into locus of control and motivation. There has also been much research conducted into students' achievement and wellbeing, although little of this investigates the specific challenges to students in undertaking a FY.

The present research project focuses on a specific area where there has been little previous research, investigating the interaction between the sociological concept of governmentality and the psychological concept of locus of control, applying them to the field of education.

The goal of this research is to use the concepts identified to better understand the experiences of FY students over the course of the academic year. The aim is to investigate the positive and negative aspects of the delivery of the course, the things that enable success and those that act as barriers. In doing this, and in giving voice to the participants, it is hoped that improvements to provision can be implemented that will support achievement, engagement and wellbeing. This leads to the final research question:

How do foundation year students feel that their experience of the foundation year can be improved?

## Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter begins with a discussion of why an interpretivist approach was taken. It then explains the decision to conduct a case study of FY students, with data collected by a series of four focus groups over an academic year, using the metaplanning technique. The chapter then describes how participants were sampled and considers the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the research, as well as the ethical considerations. Finally, the way the data was analysed is discussed.

### 3.1 Approach

This study took an interpretivist approach, which is characterised as seeking to understand how humans interpret the situations in which they find themselves, and how they create meaning from this (Creswell, 2013). In this way, truth is context-dependent and emerges from individual construction, rather than the uncovering of objective facts about the world. Any conclusions generated can apply, and make sense, to those that they emerged from rather than generalising to the wider population (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

There are several reasons why an interpretivist approach was taken for this study. Firstly, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) argue that methods associated with positivism are difficult to apply to the study of humans, who are far more complex and unpredictable than events in the natural sciences. They add that this is especially so in the field of education and that, 'the problems of teaching, learning

and human interaction present the positivistic researcher with a mammoth challenge' (p. 11). They continue by saying that the more effort researchers in education make in operationalising and controlling variables to find causal links between them, the more banal their findings appear to teachers in their practice. Positivism makes an assumption of determinism whereby events have causes that can be found, understood and generalised across the population (Hammersley, Gomm and Woods, 2003). While a large-scale study might identify factors that determine the success of foundation year students, any such study would not tell of the human stories of individual students.

Secondly, as found by a review of the literature, there has been little previous research conducted specifically on the topic of FYs, especially employing sociological and psychological lenses of analysis. Bryman (2015) argues that where there has been little previous research in an area of study, it is often beneficial to proceed with a small-scale exploratory study that is focussed on understanding a particular situation. Also, many studies that take a positivist approach build on the findings of more interpretivist studies, testing hypotheses that have been devised from smaller scale case studies.

Thirdly, most research on locus of control has taken a positivist approach, measuring an individual's locus of control by their score on a questionnaire, with Rotter's (1966) I-E scale still the most commonly used measure (Ng, Sorensen and Eby, 2006). Other questionnaires have been developed that have adapted this to be more domain specific, for example the Spector (1988) measure of work locus of control

and the Academic Locus of Control Scale by Rossouw and Parsons (1995). Typically, individuals' scores on one of these scales are correlated against other variables, for example Curtis and Trice (2013) found statistically significant relationships between scores on the Academic Locus of Control Scale, student grades and attendance. As noted by Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018), there is a need for more interpretivist research in this area that explores individual experiences of locus of control.

Finally, Gadamer (2013) argues that researchers should put themselves at the centre of their research and use their pre-understandings of the world as a starting point for acquiring knowledge. As I was directly involved with the participants of this research as their subject tutor, this gave me an opportunity to access their insights regarding their journeys through their studies. In relation to Le Gallais's (2008) continuum of insider/outsider research, I was nearer to the 'insider' end, occupying the second of four positions of being, 'known and knowing the respondents' (p. 151). According to Le Gallais (*ibid*), this position has the value of achieving enhanced rapport and increasing the depth of data provided by participants.

I needed to be aware of how my own positionality might influence how I conducted my research. Although my position of being the participants' lecturer gave me an insider's understanding of some of the issues they faced in undertaking the FY, I had to be mindful that as a middle aged, middle class, professional white man I would not be able to fully empathise with my participants. I was also aware that, as their lecturer, there was a potential power imbalance in our relationship. I therefore had to

acknowledge my identity and be reflexive in considering that I might unintentionally be biased in the way that I collected and analysed my data (Basit, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013). I had to understand that, as a researcher, I was part of the research process and would have an influence on the ways that the participants responded to me and the data they provided (Czerniawski, 2023; Gounder, 2025). For example, from previous experience I have found that the way male students react to me can be influenced by our shared gender identity. Ormston *et al.* (2014) recommend that researchers aim to achieve 'empathic neutrality' by recognising and avoiding their own potential biases, but acknowledging that it is not possible to be fully neutral or objective when conducting research. Creswell (2013) advises being aware of and reflecting on how the researcher's positionality might affect the research process. In order to support me in my research, I had meetings with my supervisors both before and after the data collection where we discussed such issues. I also kept a research journal whereby I wrote my reflections after each focus group.

Interpretivism is most closely associated with the collection of qualitative data. However, the assumption that research can be neatly divided as being either quantitative or qualitative has been challenged (Scott and Usher, 1996). When suitable, qualitative data can be quantified by the coding of the data (Bryman, 2015, Richards, 2015). The data collected in this study came from students' written and spoken answers to questions, and so was mostly analysed qualitatively. However, for some of the data collected, especially the written responses, it was possible to categorise it and count the number of occurrences in these categories.

There is also an element of this research that aligns with critical theory (Habermas, 1972, in Held, 1980). In giving FY students a voice, this study has an emancipatory aim, giving participants a space to reflect on their experiences and a platform to express themselves in order to enhance provision for themselves and future students.

### 3.2 Case study

A case study is an in-depth study of a real situation, studying the events, human interactions and other factors unique to that situation (Opie, 2004). Case studies are concerned with investigating the features of one particular individual, group or setting, usually collecting qualitative data and offering a rich insight into real-life situations.

In this study, the case in question was a group of students on the FY of their degree course, in 2018-19. In relation to Yin's (2013) classification of different types of case study, this study is a 'representative' or a 'typical' case. Although it is not the aim of case study research to generalise beyond the specific case, the participants in this study were not extreme or unusual, and were in a common situation, although one that has not been studied extensively. Therefore, the experiences of students on this FY may exemplify common experiences of other students in similar situations.

### 3.3 Longitudinal design

Case studies often have a longitudinal aspect to the research, looking for continuity and change in the case over time (Bryman, 2015). Such studies have been important for educational researchers for the rich data they give tracking changes in participants' experiences as they progress through their education (Coe *et al.*, 2021). Kovach (2018) states that little work has been done to see how locus of control changes over the course of students' studies and recommends longitudinal research in this area.

One of the decisions to be made when conducting longitudinal research is when, and how often, to collect data. Neale (2016) states that decisions need to be made regarding the time frame (overall length of the study) and the tempo (the number and spacing of data collection points). However, he argues that there are no set formulas or easy ways to make such decisions, with Bryman (2015) agreeing that it is not possible to give clear guidance on how to decide on the best times to collect data in longitudinal research. Neale (2016) suggests that decisions regarding time frames and tempos should be based on both theoretical and practical issues, including the needs of answering the research questions of the study and the characteristics of the sample.

In relation to this research, the decision was made that the time frame would be the academic year of the FY. This was due to the aim of the study being to examine students' experiences over the course of the year, but also acknowledging that it would be practically difficult to start the research process earlier or to continue after

the end of the academic year. The decision regarding the tempo was more difficult. Having too many data collection points could result in participants dropping out due to fatigue or becoming accustomed to the research and so introducing demand characteristics (both of these issues are discussed below). On the other hand, too few data collection points would mean that I did not get a clear enough picture of the participants' journeys over the course of the year. In deciding when to collect data, Neale (2016) suggests the beginning and end of the timeframe, which for this study were the beginning and end of the academic year. I also decided that collecting data in the middle of the year was needed in order to gain a picture of the changes that occurred over the year. For the university that this study took place at, the academic year is split into two twelve-week semesters and so collecting data at the start and end of each semester was deemed appropriate. Weeks three and ten of each semester were chosen for several reasons. To gather a sample and gain informed consent, week three of semester one was the earliest practical point to begin data collection. Also, by week three students had been introduced to their new modules and so it was felt that this was a good point for them to be able to reflect on the start of each semester. After week ten of each semester students were working independently on their assignments and not attending set lectures, so would not have been available to take part in focus groups. Therefore, week ten was chosen as the latest possible occasion to get participants' reflections at the end of each semester.

There are several challenges associated with longitudinal designs. One potential problem is that of participants dropping out of the study between the different points of data collection (Cotter *et al.*, 2002). In this study, it was thought unlikely that all

participants would be able to attend all four focus groups. To overcome this, there was a standing invite for all members of the class to join in any of the focus groups. Such refreshment samples are one strategy recommended by Deng *et al.* (2013) to overcome participant attrition in longitudinal research. Also, I wanted the study to be inclusive for all students and did not want to form an exclusive group of participants, potentially alienating students who might feel that they did not have the chance to participate in the study.

Cotter *et al.* (2002) found that the most effective strategies to maintain participant engagement were the persistence of the researchers in contacting and reminding participants, the building of rapport with participants and making participation as convenient and enjoyable as possible. By choosing to use students that I lectured, it was easy to keep in contact with participants, and from my previous teaching experiences over a number of years I was confident that I could build rapport with the group (I was also aware of the disadvantages of already knowing the participants, which is discussed in the section on validity, pp. 84-86). The focus groups took place during students' lunchtimes where they would be on campus waiting for their next lecture to start, and so was a convenient time for them.

In longitudinal research there is also the potential for participants to become sensitised to the study, with the first data collection point introducing a set of expectations in the participants that would affect subsequent findings. In this way demand characteristics can be introduced whereby participants come to understand the aims of the research and give desirable responses (Bryman, 2015). The

decision to use focus groups rather than individual interviews reduces this problem as the focus of discussion is moved away from the researcher and onto the interactions between participants. Another problem arising from multiple data collection points can be that taking part in the research affects participants' attitudes and behaviour, leading to changes in later responses (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This was not seen as a problem but as a potential benefit to participants, in that reflection on their studies might lead to improved outcomes for them.

### 3.4 Preparation and planning

In planning this research, to allow me to practice my interviewing skills and to gain ideas for what to ask, I conducted a pilot study of three focus groups as part of a previous module in my EdD. In these, I asked a range of questions to find out what was important to students, which formed the basis of my interview schedule. Before I began my data collection, I attended a workshop where the metaplanning technique was used (see below, pp. 73-74). From this, and from discussion with the researcher who ran the workshop, I decided to incorporate this into my research.

### 3.5 Focus Groups

Focus groups are a type of group interview whereby the emphasis is on the interactions between the participants, rather than between the interviewer and the participants. The interviewer introduces themes or asks questions to the group which the group then discuss, with the interviewer's role in the group being as a facilitator or moderator of the discussion rather than a participant. This allows the

discussion to be led by the group, with the focus of the participants' discussions being on each other (Barbour, 2018; Harding, 2019).

As well as being the researcher, I was also the participants' lecturer. As stated when discussing longitudinal research, it was possible that this could affect the responses given. Focus groups were chosen over other forms of interview as this would allow me to be less prominent in the discussion and so encourage participants to express their views more freely than they might do in a one-to-one interview with me (Morgan, 2012). Also, Ord (2012) suggested that focus groups are good to use with students as they reflect the type of groupwork that is commonplace in their studies, so putting them at ease to express their views.

Possible problems that can occur in focus groups are that one participant can dominate the discussion, with other participants not able or confident enough to speak. Also, the dynamics of the group might lead some participants to conform with the majority view, not feeling comfortable to express contradictory opinions (Barbour, 2018). To overcome this this a metaplanning technique was used (Matheson and Matheson, 2009).

### 3.6 Metaplanning

Metaplanning was originally devised as a management tool in Germany to facilitate brainstorming (Habershon, 1993). It has mainly been used in business and engineering, with little use in educational research (Baker-Oxley, 2019). The

schedule used for this study was based on that of Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002).

Metaplanning is a technique whereby an interviewer asks questions and participants write their answers on post-it notes. These answers then form the basis of group discussion and at different stages participants are asked to categorise these answers, decide which category is the most relevant, and to write further answers on post-its reflecting on this. By doing these different group tasks it gives a structure to the discussion and ensures that all participants contribute, making it more difficult for some participants to dominate and others to conform to the majority view (Matheson and Matheson, 2009).

### 3.7 Participants

For quantitative research, there are guidelines on how sample sizes relate to the type of statistical analysis to be carried out (Silverman, 2022). However, for qualitative research, fewer participants are needed and a more important consideration is that of the sorts of relationships that are being studied between researcher and participants, or between participants (Opie, 2004). In her metaplanning study, Baker-Oxley (2019) used groups of 6-12 as neither being too small or too large.

Access to participants is one of the key factors in sampling and practical considerations must be considered, as without access to participants primary

research is not possible (Newby, 2014). A decision was made to select participants from one of the teaching groups that I taught. Participants were selected from a cohort of 58 students enrolled onto a FY programme for the degrees of BA(Hons) Early Childhood Studies and BA(Hons) SENDIS. The FY teaches all students on these two courses together for the year before they separate into their different subject groups at level 4. During the first two weeks of the course students were told about the intended project and each given an information sheet setting out the aims of the study and commitment involved in taking part (appendix A). During this time students had the opportunity to ask questions about the proposed research. At the end of the third lecture students who wished to participate were asked to stay behind and so a volunteer sample was gained.

A criticism of such a volunteer sample is that it is unlikely that the participants will be representative of the wider group of enrolled students. However, generalisability of findings is not an aim of qualitative research, rather it is more important to generate in-depth analysis (Bryman, 2015). The advantage of using a volunteer sample in this research was that participants were keen to take part and were engaged in the focus groups. If a probabilistic sampling method had been employed, participants might have either declined, making the sample a voluntary one anyway, or felt compelled to participate, raising the ethical issue of consent. Also, they would probably have been less interested in the study and so less likely to give rich data.

A specific issue relating to the use of a volunteer sample in this study was that although the whole cohort were invited to participate, it was possible that it would be

a group of friends who volunteered. Although, as discussed in the previous paragraph, the aim of qualitative research is to gain in-depth analysis rather than generalisable data, this might have made the sample particularly unrepresentative. Another issue to be aware of was that if a group of friends did volunteer, then I might miss important information due to an assumed understanding between participants that I was unaware of, with Flick (2014) arguing that it is preferable to recruit a group of strangers for a focus group as the discussions between participants are more explicit. On the other hand, MacNaghten and Myers (2007) suggest that focus groups work best when the participants know each other, as they feel comfortable around each other and contribute more freely. It was important to consider both of these positions as, ideally, I hoped to gain a sample of participants of different backgrounds in order to gather as wide a range of experiences of studying on the FY as possible, but also for participants to feel comfortable during the groups and confident to express themselves. Luckily, as shown in the participant profiles below (pp. 78-80), in all four focus groups there was a balance of participants with a diversity of ages, ethnicities, academic and employment experiences. Also, all participants volunteered with at least one other person that they sat with in lectures.

Overall, there were fourteen different participants over the course of the study, the level of participation can be summarised in two tables:

Figure 2. Number of participants in each focus group

Group	When	Number of participants
Focus group 1	Semester 1, week 3	8
Focus group 1 continued*	Semester 1, week 4	8
Focus group 2a	Semester 1, week 10	7
Focus group 2b**	Semester 1, week 11	4
Focus group 3	Semester 2, week 3	7
Focus group 4	Semester 2, week 10	9

\*Focus group 1 ran out of time and was continued the week after, where six of the original group attended, joined by two new participants.

\*\*Some participants who had participated in focus group 1 were absent for focus group 2. When they expressed disappointment at missing this focus group an additional one was held for these participants.

Figure 3. Participation rate

Participants attending all 4 focus groups	3
Participants attending 3 focus groups	4
Participants attending 2 focus groups	6
Participants attending 1 focus group	1

A pattern was seen with most of the focus groups having the same core group of participants, with others joining for two of the groups. There was enough continuation of participants that the groups felt like a stable group over the course of the study. As participants knew each other from lectures, there was no disruption

with new participants joining, indeed most new participants joined out of curiosity from hearing about the study from friends and wanting to join in. This had the benefit of widening the sample and hearing new voices through the year, but not disrupting the dynamics of the group.

### 3.8 Participant profiles

At the start of the data collection, all participants filled in background questionnaires (appendix B) relating to age, gender, previous education and qualifications, current and previous employment. These took less than five minutes to complete. Although not intended to be a representative sample, the participants can be seen as typical of the students on their courses and characteristic of FY students more generally (apart from the gender composition of the group), as identified by Moreton *et al.* (2017) and Nathwani (2019):

- There were 13 females and 1 male (this is typical of students on Early Childhood Studies and SENDIS courses, but untypical for other subject areas).
- 2 participants were in their late teens, 8 in their twenties, 3 in their thirties and 1 in her forties.
- All lived locally and commuted to the university from home.
- Eight worked either full or part time whilst attending university.
- Of the nine who listed previous qualifications, all had level 2 qualifications, 3 had begun level 3 courses but not completed, 4 had some level 3 qualifications and 2 had higher level qualifications from other countries.

Figure 4. Participant details

Name (pseudonyms used)	Age (Sept 2018)	Previous qualifications/ education	Current employment	Focus Groups attended					
				1	1*	2a	2b	3	4
Maria	29	Degree in Anthropology from Portugal. 2016: BTEC level 2, health and Social Care	cleaner	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Steve	25	A-levels in music and art. 2017: NVQ as teaching assistant	Teaching assistant, support assistant	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Nazreen	29	No previous education listed			✓	✓		✓	✓
Celine	33	2008: Trained accountant in France FETAC level 5	Care assistant	✓	✓		✓		✓
Charmaine	29	2015: Level 3 diploma in health and social care	Mental health support worker	✓	✓		✓		✓
Grace	28	2010-2012: HND Biomedical science. Did not complete course				✓		✓	✓
Rubina	25	2012: GCSEs and AS levels. Did not complete A-levels	Marketing executive	✓		✓		✓	
Deborah	35	GCSEs. 2017: NVQ teaching assistant	Occupational therapy assistant	✓	✓		✓		
Stacey	21	No previous education listed						✓	✓
Saadiya	19	No previous education listed			✓	✓			
Laura	21	No previous education listed				✓		✓	
Sadie	39	2006: NVQ level 3 in social work with	Support worker/ carer/	✓					✓

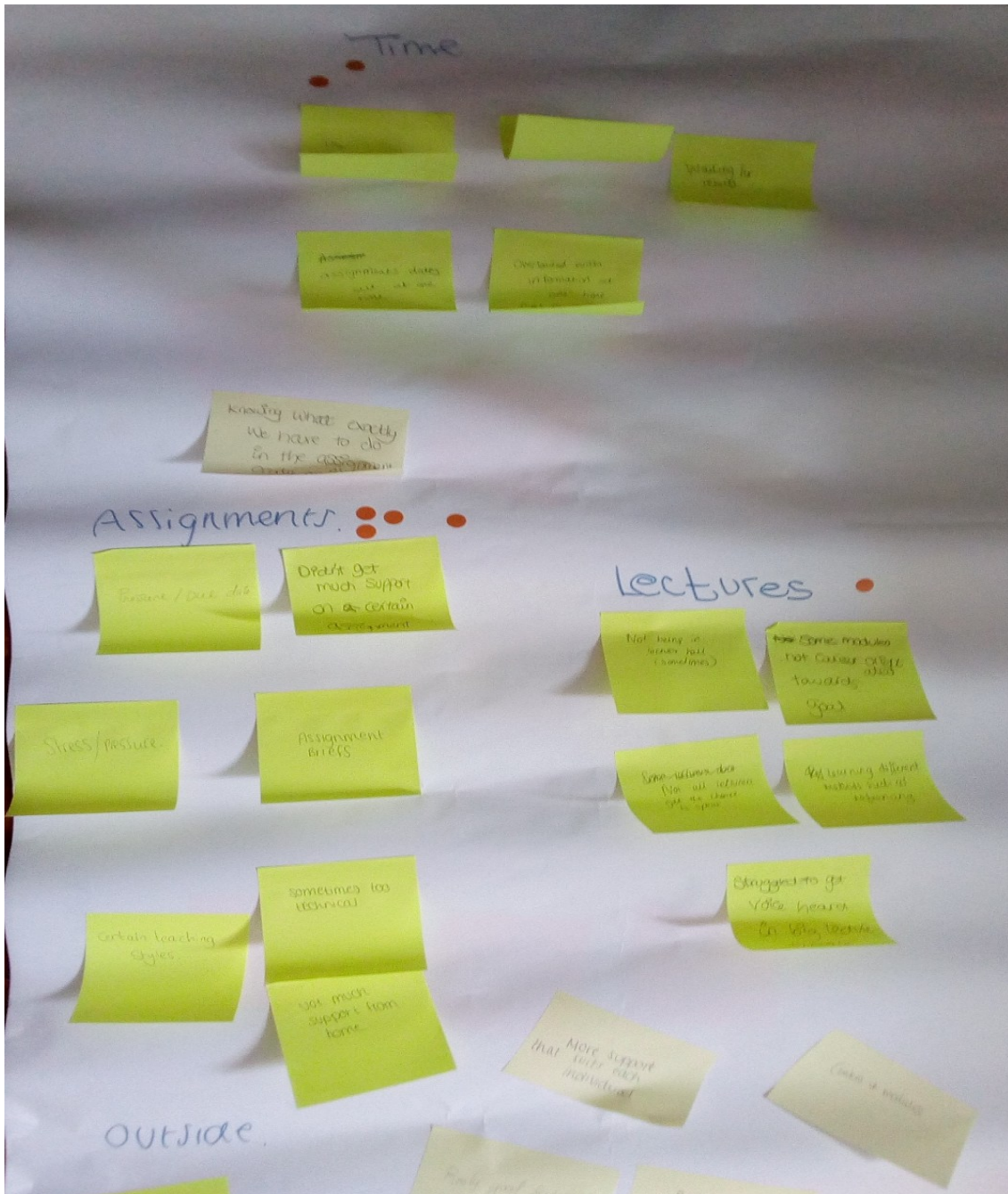
Name (pseudonyms used)	Age (Sept 2018)	Previous qualifications/ education	Current employment	Focus Groups attended					
		young people and adults	residential social worker						
Dominique	45	No previous education listed				✓			✓
Myra	18	GCSEs. Started A-levels but did not complete.	waitress	✓	✓				

### 3.9 Procedure

The procedure for all of the focus groups was the same, with participants sat in a circle around a table. The metapanning activity (appendix C) began with each participant being given three post-it notes and asked to write three positive expectations or experiences of the FY and to stick these post-it notes onto a sheet of poster paper. As a group they were then asked to put these notes into categories and to give each category a name. They were then each given a sticky dot and asked to put it against the category they thought was most important (sometimes participants asked for extra post-it notes or sticky dots as they wanted to make more points or could not decide which category to vote for, these extra post-its or dots were given). This was then repeated with different coloured post-it notes and sticky dots, but this time they were asked to write down three negative experiences or concerns about the course. In the final part of the activity participants were each given two further post-it notes of different colours and asked to write down one positive that might overcome the problems discussed and one problem that might occur that could undermine the positives (see figure 5).

There was discussion throughout the metapanning activity which carried on when the formal stages of the activity were completed. As the facilitator, I had a list of questions and prompts to use in this further discussion but tried as much as possible to focus the discussion on the answers given in the metapanning activity. Although focussing on the same themes, I did adapt these questions for each focus group (appendix D). Each focus group lasted about an hour. Of this, the structured metapanning activities of writing notes, categorising and voting took about 20-30 minutes, with the more open discussions that followed these taking the rest of the time.

Figure 5. Example of metapanning task



This shows the 'negatives' of the course, taken from the metapanning task from focus group 3. Students have written their answers on the post-it notes, categorised them and voted on the most important category by adding a sticky dot to one of the categories. The lighter coloured post-it notes show the 'solutions' to the problems

listed (see appendix G for full data of all metapanning tasks, including what was written on the post-it notes).

### 3.10 Reliability

Scaife (2004) notes that although reliability is defined differently by different researchers, the common factors are that of repetition and consistency. Scaife (*ibid*) also believes that it is better to apply the term to the data gathering process rather than to the data itself. To this extent, there was some reliability to this research as the metapanning tool was applied in the same way in all of the focus groups and the interview schedule was very similar for all groups.

As well as the differences in participants taking part in the different focus groups, there were other factors that reduced the reliability of the study across the four data collection points. Although the metapanning activity was done in the same way, because of the longitudinal nature of the study, participants became familiar with the technique, leading to differences in how this part of the study was conducted. The metapanning part of the focus group took less time during the latter focus groups, with participants knowing the routine and spending less time writing their responses on the post-it notes. However, although taking less time, there was no reduction in the amount written on the post-its. Another factor was that during the latter focus groups, more experienced participants instructed any new participants on the procedure. Also in the latter groups, more experienced, or more confident, participants took more of a leading role in the procedure, for example in focus group 3, at one point Charmaine said, 'this is where we hand the pen to Steve'.

For the more open discussions that took place there was a change in the way these occurred. In the first focus group I did more talking and asking questions and relied more on my prepared interview schedule. In the latter groups I was able to take a less prominent role, relying less on the interview schedule as the participants discussed their experiences more freely. This part of the procedure also lasted longer in latter focus groups.

While reliability is used to assess quantitative research, some argue that the concept is unworkable in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Although it has been useful to reflect on the reliability of this study, the nature of the study means that it was not possible to fully replicate the procedure in the different focus groups. If the focus groups had been more rigidly controlled, this would have led to less rich data being gathered. The aim of the research was to explore students' experiences of the FY, and a decision was made to allow participants to lead the discussions as much as possible.

### 3.11 Validity

Validity can be defined as, 'the degree to which a method, a test or a research tool actually measures what it is supposed to measure.' (Wellington, 2000, p. 201). In qualitative research it is difficult to measure validity as there are no objective tests of how accurate the data-collecting tools are. Scaife (2004) makes a distinction between findings that can be measured against some external criteria and those that

can be judged by whether the claims made for the data are justified from the data gathered. This relates to LeCompte and Goetz's (1982) definition of internal validity, whether there is a good match between the data collected and the theoretical ideas developed from these. This means a more subjective measure is used and it is for the reader to decide whether the data presented supports any claims made on behalf of the data. In order for the reader to assess the validity of this research, I have done my best to demonstrate that it was carried out honestly and that a depth and breadth of data was collected, with the views reported and the conclusions drawn accurately representing the beliefs and feelings of the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

It is more difficult to claim a high level of external validity as it is not possible to know whether the findings generalise beyond this study to other students on the same course or even more widely beyond this. However, from my experience of teaching on this course for a number of years, the participants that took part in this study did meet Yin's (2013) criterion of being typical of FY students on these courses, and I would expect many of their views to be representative of other similar students.

One of the biggest threats to validity in interviews is that of bias. Sources of bias include the preconceived ideas and expectations of the interviewer, leading them to misrepresent the views of the participants, and misunderstandings on the part of the participants, leading them to provide answers that do not fully represent their experiences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Due to the interpersonal nature of interviews, it is inevitable that researcher and participants will have some influence

on each other and so it is not possible for interviews to be conducted neutrally (Denscombe, 1995). This was of particular concern because over the course of the year I got to know the participants well. As stated previously, one way to decrease bias was to use focus groups rather than conduct individual interviews. Another possible source of bias in any form of interview can be caused by poor questioning and prompting, including asking ambiguous and leading questions. To help me with this, I used a standard metaplaning schedule that had been devised by Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002).

### 3.12 Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have questioned whether the criteria of reliability and validity are useful in assessing the value of all research. These criteria were developed to judge positivist research and are less helpful for judging the value of qualitative research. They have suggested that it is more useful to judge the trustworthiness of a piece of research. Trustworthiness involves credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which extend, or adapt, the more traditional measures of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity.

The most important of these criteria for assessing case study research is that of credibility (Scaife, 2004). Sturman (1999) lists several strategies that can enhance the credibility of case study research which this study used as guidance. In following Sturman's (*ibid*) advice, I have given as 'thick' a description as possible of the study

and have (hopefully) communicated clearly how the conclusions drawn fit the data collected and are not the result of biased interpretation.

Triangulation is also recommended to achieve credibility (Scott and Usher, 1996). Using the structured metaplanning activity and more informal discussions that followed these allowed me to be more confident in my analysis of the data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have been criticised for simply adapting criteria used for assessing positivist research, with interpretivist researchers needing different ways of evaluating their research (Scott and Usher, 1996). Hammersley (1992) identified three criteria of plausibility or credibility, coherence and intention. As data generated is socially situated, plausibility or credibility is judged by the audience in accordance with the situation, so the findings of a piece of research can be credible at one time in a specific location but not so in another time or place. Secondly, there should be a logical coherence between the evidence presented and the arguments developed on the basis of this evidence. Thirdly, qualitative research should be judged according to its intentions and whether these are fulfilled within the study rather than by imposing external criteria to judge the value of the research. Being mindful of these criteria, I have intentionally demonstrated these in the write-up of this study.

### 3.13 Ethics

The research was approved by the university's ethics committee and conducted in accordance with the university's ethical procedures. The research was judged to be

'category A', as the participants were not deemed vulnerable and the research was unlikely to cause offence (see appendix E for the ethical application and approval form). The British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines were used to plan and carry out the study. The issues that were considered especially important from these guidelines were:

Informed consent. It was important that participants understood the study and took part of their own free will. Before the study, all potential participants were given an information sheet about the study (appendix A) and asked if they would like to participate. Participants had two weeks to consider this and ask any questions before the first focus group. Those who did volunteer were given further information and a consent sheet to sign (appendix F). Each subsequent focus group started with a verbal reminder of this. At every stage it was made clear that participants could withdraw from the study and also have previous data withdrawn. It was explained that after write-up it would not be possible for them to withdraw their data.

Privacy and data storage. The data collected was kept secure. The paper records were kept at my home in a locked drawer. The audio recordings and transcripts were kept on an encoded memory stick. All material will be destroyed after the thesis is completed. In the write up of the research, pseudonyms were used for participants. These were generated by typing, 'names similar to ...' into Google and choosing what I felt was the best fit for each participant, but not too similar sounding. I was also mindful to choose names of the same cultural heritage as the participants' real names. At times participants talked about issues that might identify them such

as their home lives and children. No data that could possibly identify participants was included when transcribing or writing up the findings.

Harm arising from participation in research. There was no predicted potential harm or discomfort to participants, however I had to be ready for any unexpected harm to occur. There were two possibilities that occurred to me. Firstly, that due to the nature of focus group discussions, sensitive topics could arise and secondly, that there could be antagonisms within the group (Barbour, 2018). To this end I was aware of my responsibility to regularly check that participants were happy, both during and after the sessions, and be ready stop the focus groups if I thought that any participants felt uncomfortable. Fortunately, the need for this did not arise.

As well as gaining ethical approval from the University ethics committee and addressing the criteria laid out in the BERA guidelines, there was also the need to be reflective throughout the study of my own moral behaviour (Pring, 2013). I needed to ensure that I was 'being' ethical in the moment rather than simply following procedures (MacFarlane, 2010). One way to do this was to imagine how I would feel if I was a participant in this research (Sikes, 2004) and to keep in mind the costs and benefits for the participants in contributing to this research (Oates, 2006).

In consideration of the costs and benefits, potential costs included time and the research relationship. Participants were giving up their time and I had to be mindful that they felt that the focus groups were worthwhile. As the participants' lecturer as well as the researcher, I had to be careful that I did not use my position selfishly.

There were two possible problems. Firstly, I had to be careful not to simply use the participants for my own purposes and not give anything in return (Sikes, 2004). Secondly, I needed to be careful not to use my position to manipulate participants into giving answers that suited my purposes. Related to this is that I needed to be careful not to misrepresent my participants' views in my writing up of the research. To deal with these issues, it was important that participants felt a benefit to contributing. One of my aims for the research was that it would have an emancipatory aspect, with students benefitting from reflecting on their experiences and having their voices heard. Luckily, this proved to be the case with students expressing their enjoyment in taking part in the discussions and their desire to voice their opinions to improve provision for future students. The next section deals with the issue of the way the data was analysed so as not to misrepresent participants.

### 3.14 Data analysis

As soon as possible after each focus group, the data generated from the metaplanning sessions was copied out and the audio recordings were transcribed (for each focus group, see appendix G for the metaplanning findings and appendix H for example extracts of the more open discussions). Some quantitative analysis was appropriate for the metaplanning data which allowed for categorising and counting responses. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data generated from the metaplanning exercises and more open discussions. The computer package NVivo was used to manage the data analysis and I attended training on how to do this.

Most guidance on thematic analysis states a number of steps or stages to go through to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). There is also advice on the questions to ask oneself when analysing data (Berkowitz, 1997) and on common types of coding categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Harding, 2019). Reading this material gave me a background of how to analyse my data. The model I chose to follow most closely was from Richards (2015).

Richards (2015) states that the key purpose of coding qualitative data is to understand patterns to support the understanding of the data. To this end she recommends three types of coding: descriptive, topic and analytical. Doing this allowed me to find meaning in the responses of the participants and draw conclusions from their answers. NVivo was particularly useful for this exercise (see appendix I for examples of the use of NVivo).

Firstly, descriptive coding was used to categorise data from the different participants, data collection points and types of data (for example from that written on post-it notes in the metapanning tasks or spoken in the following discussions). Therefore, I was able to categorise a response as being, for example, from 'Maria', 'focus group three', 'metapanning', and as a 'positive' of the course.

Secondly, topic coding was used to categorise together instances of similar data, labelling the text according to its subject. Richards (2015, p. 106) describes this as the 'hack work of the qualitative researcher', organising data into categories without

yet interpreting it. This was an inductive process with categories built from the participants' responses, and gave an indication of the most prominent areas of discussion throughout the data collection. Examples of labels given for frequently occurring responses included 'time', 'assessments', 'support', 'lectures', 'friendship' and 'attendance', with material written on the post-it notes or passages of speech allocated to these topic codes. Sometimes the same piece of data was added to more than one category, for example the metaplanning negative comment from focus group four of 'less time for assignment' was allocated to both 'time' and 'assessments'. These topic codes were also matched with the descriptive codes so, for example, I could compare the number of times that 'assessments' were discussed in the four different focus groups, or which participants mentioned 'time' the most.

Thirdly, analytic coding was used to apply the theoretical concepts identified in the literature review, allowing the data to be understood in relation to these theoretical lenses. Whereas descriptive and topic coding are fairly straightforward processes, Richards (2015) states that analytic coding requires interpretation of, and reflection on, the meaning of the data. The starting point for my analysis were the three broad categories of 'neoliberalism', 'locus of control' and 'motivation' that relate to my first three research questions. These were divided into subcategories, which were often divided again and again into extensive 'category/subcategory trees' (Richards, 2015, p. 111). For example, one subcategory of 'neoliberalism' was 'criticisms of neoliberalism', which was further divided into 'educational fundamentalism', 'commodity fetishism' and 'stultification'. The category of 'motivation' was divided into the different themes identified in the literature review, including 'intrinsic' and

'extrinsic'. Again, using NVivo allowed me to cross reference material from different categories and types of coding. For example, I was able to see whether the topic code of 'time' was seen as more of an internal or external issue. Another important example was that it allowed me to analyse how locus of control and motivation were linked, for example whether having an internal locus was related to feeling intrinsically motivated. This process took a long time but eventually I felt satisfied that I had a thorough understanding of the data collected and was able to move to writing the findings and discussion section of this thesis.

### 3.15 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the methodology used in this research, including the decisions taken in relation to the approach taken, how the study was conducted, and the recruitment of participants. There was a consideration of the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the methods used, the ethics involved and of and how the data was analysed.

## Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion sections have been integrated into one chapter.

Traditionally, presentation and discussion of the findings of research are separated into different chapters. This format arose from the positivist paradigm, whereby data/evidence is presented before analysis occurs (Wellington *et al.*, 2005).

However, with interpretivist research the findings are not neutral, but are generated by the researcher when analysing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, it is often more appropriate to present and discuss data together so that a coherent picture of the data is given. This also prevents the danger of the presentation of the findings becoming repetitive (Wellington *et al.*, 2005). For these same reasons of coherence and avoidance of repetition, I also decided to integrate discussion of the data from the two aspects of the data collection, that of the metaplanning activities and the more open discussions that followed these.

This chapter draws upon the material from the introduction and literature review to discuss the findings. It was possible to present the findings of this research either sequentially, in relation to the different focus groups throughout the year, or thematically, in relation to the themes covered in the literature review, which in turn align to the research questions. I decided that the findings would be best represented by taking a thematic approach, and so this chapter is divided into sections focusing on the key theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism, locus of control and motivation, which are used as interpretative lenses to understand the data collected. The final section of this discussion focuses on the data collected relating

to how participants believed the course could be improved. Although presented in these sections, at times there is some crossover, especially in the locus of control section, where in places it made sense to discuss the data more widely and include material relating to neoliberalism and motivation.

## 4.1 Neoliberalism

The growing number of students enrolling onto FY programmes is seen as one way of making HE available to those who previously would not have enrolled (BIS, 2011; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016; DfE, 2023a). This relates to neoliberal ideology in that it gives increased opportunity and choice to consumers, allowing them to invest in themselves to increase future prosperity (Pierce, 2015; BIS, 2016). This section begins by examining whether the FY has fulfilled this aim of widening participation for participants in this study. The next part of this section looks to see whether participant attitudes are aligned with neoliberal ideology and government policy in the way suggested by Woodhall, Hillier and Resnick (2014), Ball (2015), Tomlinson (2017) and others, with students acting as consumers, or 'homo economicus' agents (Belsey and Peters, 2007). Evidence for the extent to which neoliberal discourse is accepted by participants is examined. The data is then analysed to see the extent to which the criticisms of neoliberalism of commodity fetishism (Furedi, 2011), educational fundamentalism (Alvesson, 2013) and stultification (Rancière, 1991) can be applied to the participants' responses. This section of the discussion is focussed on the first research question:

To what extent do students express neoliberal ideology in relation to their learning experiences during the foundation year of their degree?

#### 4.1.1 Widening participation

Widening participation is a stated aim of both government policy (DfE, 2019) and of the university that this study was carried out in, as set out in the university's mission statement. The neoliberal policy agenda emphasises the importance of individual choice and responsibility in decisions such as university enrolment. Widening participation is a key part of opening up the market in HE, providing consumers with opportunities to make choices that benefit themselves economically and personally, with a particular emphasis on attracting students who would not have previously entered HE (Pierce, 2015; Johnson, 2017), with FYs seen as one of the ways of achieving this aim (Sanders and Daly, 2013). As seen in the participant profiles (internal ref., pp. 78-80), the participants in this study were mainly mature students, most of who had no family history of attending HE, therefore fulfilling some of the main characteristics of non-traditional students and being similar to FY students found in other studies (Moreton *et al.*, 2017; Petrie and Keohane, 2017; Wong, 2018; Nathwani, 2019).

There was evidence from participants that the objective of attracting students who would not otherwise have enrolled (BIS, 2011; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016) was being achieved, helping to meet successive governments' policies of appealing to a broader demographic of students (Johnson, 2017; Coughan, 2019). Throughout the year, participants reflected that the FY allowed them access to university, as Steve commented:

I never thought I'd come to university. I thought I would just work and ... I've had a steady job for years. I've been working since I've been 17, I always had

a steady job and never thought I'd [enrol at university]... (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

Specifically, the FY was seen as offering flexibility compared to other options, which was important for those with work and/or childcare responsibilities:

I started an access course at my local college but it was five full days a week and that was so I could get onto university. And I didn't know about any courses like this when I signed up for that. I just couldn't do five days. (Deborah, focus group 2 discussion)

There was also agreement that the FY was helping to prepare students for their degree courses. In the third and fourth focus groups, participants expressed more confidence regarding their progression to studying at undergraduate level. There were several relevant comments in the fourth metaplanning activity, including, 'See that I can do it' and, 'Belief that I am more than capable'. This was expanded on in the more open discussions:

I just don't feel like it will be a big shock. As we're here now. (Steve, focus group 3 discussion)

It shows you exactly what you are stepping into. (Charmaine, focus group 4 discussion)

I'm looking forward more to next year now. I feel like I've got into it more that I can move onto the next step which is like moving away from home. (Laura, focus group 3 discussion)

I'm feeling like I'm a little bit more organised. I've started on assignments now, while last semester I kind of left it too late. So next year probably be

more organised and then time might not be a factor anymore. (Dominique, focus group 4 discussion)

Also, when asked at the end of the fourth focus group whether they would recommend the FY, all participants said that they would. An added advantage of the FY was that it allowed students to get to know other students. The appreciation of the friendships formed between participants grew over the year, as expressed by Dominique:

It gives you exposure also because you meet with other people, so you feel like you belong already. (Dominique, focus group 4 discussion)

These comments suggest that participants in this study saw the FY as a distinct one-year course that prepared them for degree level study, rather than being the first year of a four-year programme. The findings here are very similar to the student testimonies given in university marketing materials (Staffordshire University, 2018; University of Wolverhampton, 2018), emphasising that the FY allows students to feel prepared for the start of their undergraduate studies. They also support the research of Sanders and Daly (2013), Chandler *et al.* (2018), Hale (2020) and Webber (2023), that FYs help to support students into HE, and compared to other options have the advantage of acclimatising students to the university environment before starting their undergraduate studies. The findings also suggest that the FY can help overcome the low levels of confidence in FY students found by Hale (2018) and support the findings of O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019), Dougherty (2022) and Shepperd *et al.* (2023), who found that academic confidence increased in FY students over the course of the year. Therefore, from the findings of this study, undertaking a FY can potentially help reduce the low retention rates for non-traditional students,

highlighted by Ganah (2012), Petrie and Keohane (2017) and the OfS (2019).

Overall, these findings suggest that scrapping FYs, as proposed by the Augar Review (Augar, 2019), would be damaging to the prospects of students similar to the participants in this study.

#### 4.1.2 Expressions of neoliberal thinking

In their decisions to enrol onto the course, participants displayed elements of neoliberal thinking, making individual choices to enrol based on predicted individual gains (Jackson, 2015). In the metaplanning activity at the start of the first focus group, the positive expectations were largely expressed as the personal gains that would be made from completing the course, with an expectation that completion of the degree would lead to career development. For example, 'Better employment opportunity' and 'To lead a successful career following the course'. Also, in the more open discussion that followed this metaplanning task, all participants stated career goals as a reason for enrolling onto the course. This reflects the increased employment focus in HE (Ward, 2012; Burke, 2013) and Browne's (2010) view that one of the purposes of entering university was to gain a highly paid job. They are also similar to the findings of Woodhall, Hillier and Resnick (2014), Ball (2015) and Tomlinson (2017) who found students adopting consumer-like attitudes and behaviour. Some comments specifically expressed that the course would lead to financial gain, for example.

It was because I had had enough of working as a carer. I really love my job, it's just that it's low pay. (Celine, focus group 1 discussion)

Other participants also stated financial reasons of gaining a better paid job with two (Steve and Charmaine) looking forward to being able to afford to buy a house. This suggests an awareness that obtaining a degree does lead to better financial outcomes, as shown by the research by the JRF (2014) and The Sutton Trust (2021). However, as well as being drawn to the perceived opportunities that the course provides, this might suggest that the feeling of stagnation found by Chandler *et al.* (2018) is also a driver for participants in this study to enrol.

Neoliberal thinking in education views qualifications as a product that can be exchanged for higher wages (Ball, 2015). Throughout the discussions with participants over the course of the year, there was a strong focus on the assessments that lead to these qualifications, with concerns about failing expressed throughout the year. Even in the first metaplanning activity, 'failing' was the most voted for category in relation to the potential concerns on starting the course, with comments including, 'not passing' and, 'worried about failing'. In focussing on the assessments there was a frustration when material was covered that was not seen as directly relevant to these assessments. Even at the start of the year there was a frustration that the material covered in each module was of an introductory nature, not focussed on the assessments:

Because once you get into the swing of it you might have a better idea of how to do it [the assessment]... because now that we've just started, and the assignments are about to be launched. (Steve, focus group 1 discussion)

This equating of the start of the course with being able to start the assessments suggests a performance orientation (Dweck, 1986). While participants accepted the

need to cover introductory material at the start of each module, this was seen as separate from the real learning that they needed to do rather than a foundation for this. This focus, so early in the course, on the assessments indicates a neoliberal attitude where the product of the course, passing the assessments, was at the forefront of participants' minds.

#### 4.1.3 Expressions of non-neoliberal thinking

From a neoliberal perspective, if the participants were acting as 'homo-economicus' agents (Belsey and Peters, 2007), it might be expected that financial rewards and costs would be much more prevalent in their responses, especially at the start of the course. Although financial considerations were evident, similarly to Clifford's (2022) findings, personal development was also valued. From the first metaplanning activity, expected positives included, 'To get more educated', 'Future for me and my children', 'Help me build communication skills', and, 'To be inspired'. This was also seen in the more open discussions. Although in the first focus group many comments did relate to career aspirations, more of the discussion related to the personal satisfaction from studying rather than the financial gain. For example:

I think it's a personal thing for me to achieve for myself. (Deborah, focus group 1 discussion)

Celine, who even though motivated by the hope of gaining a better paid job, was more excited at this early stage of the course by feelings of a sense of development in her learning:

In thinking it's changed a lot. My way of thinking, my way of saying things, of writing some notes, of taking some notes, or reading some books. (Celine, focus group 1 discussion)

Also, in the first focus group no comments were made that related to the financial costs of studying, which might have been expected in a cost/benefit calculation when enrolling. In relation to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, it appears that students were more motivated at the start of the course by the desire to achieve higher order needs of personal fulfilment rather than of financial gain.

For neoliberal society to operate successfully, consumers need to be making informed decisions regarding the products they purchase. However, most participants were not very well informed about the nature of the course when enrolling:

I didn't know what to expect. (Grace, focus group 2 discussion)

There was a lack of knowledge regarding the course content, lecture style, fellow students and the difficulty of the material. For example, although the marketing material stressed the common nature of the FY, with most modules being shared across a number of courses within the faculty:

When I first started the course, I thought it was going to be more SEN straight away, so I was, really wasn't expecting this at all. It's been good, but it's just that the content hasn't been what I thought I'd signed up for. (Deborah, focus group 2 discussion)

This supports the findings of Saunders (2015) and Milian and Rizk (2018), in that most students did not express a consumer orientation in the attitudes to their education and did not make full use of available information before enrolment. This lack of knowledge of the course content before enrolment highlights the problem that if consumers are not fully informed about the product, they will not be able to make optimal, rational decisions regarding their enrolment.

There was also a misapprehension regarding the way that lectures would be presented. There was an expectation that university would involve formal lectures:

Before I came at all, you expect some sort of battle-axe kind of person standing at the front of the room. (Steve, focus group 1 discussion)

I did think I was going to come and literally fall asleep. (Nazreen, focus group 3 discussion)

I expected it to be, sort of, a lot more formal, so I came [dressed] in all nice stuff. The first time I came, I came in a shirt. And my hair was all nice, you know. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

This supports previous research by Hassel and Ridout (2018) who found that students expected the teaching at university to be similar to school. There was also an expectation voiced from several participants that they would be surrounded by much younger students, typified by:

It's been a better experience than I expected to be honest because I thought I was going to be stuck in a room with 18-year-olds. (Rubina, focus group 3 discussion)

In relation to the level of work, participants did not realise how difficult they would find the work:

I just expected it to be, coming in and slowly understanding what uni's about, how to write and this and that. Not be thrown so many different things at me.  
(Charmaine, focus group 4 discussion)

I don't think A-levels were this tricky. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

Also, although career progression was seen by all participants as an important reason for undertaking the course, some of the questions asked throughout the year showed a lack of knowledge as to progression routes following the completion of the degree:

Can you do a Master's after this? (Nazreen, focus group 2 discussion)

Can you go onto to a PGCE? (Rubina, focus group 2 discussion)

In relation to neoliberalism, although participants were acting as consumers, choosing from a range of educational options, they were not particularly well-informed consumers. These findings align to those of Winter and Chapleo (2017) and Dashper *et al.* (2020) who found that student decisions about enrolment were based on emotional, subjective criteria rather than on informed consumer choice. This is of particular concern for this study as previous research shows that non-traditional students are at greater risk of dropping out of university before completing their courses (Ganah, 2012; Petrie and Keohane, 2017).

#### 4.1.4 Criticisms of neoliberalism

Another way of examining whether the participants were accepting of a neoliberal discourse was to see whether criticisms of neoliberalism were evident in their responses. In doing this, the concepts of commodity fetishism (Furedi, 2011), educational fundamentalism (Alvesson, 2013) and stultification (Ranci re, 1991) can be explored in relation to the data.

A criticism of neoliberalism is that students develop a commodity fetishism towards their studies, where the status of being a student and attaining a degree are more important than the skills and knowledge acquired from studying (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009; Furedi, 2011). This was seen in participants' responses related to their own feelings:

It does make you feel better in yourself by saying that you're at university.

(Stacey, focus group 3)

I love it, I love it, it's given me so much satisfaction. The fact that I'm here, I can't believe I'm at university. I always thought I'd go but I never thought I'd have the brains for it for some reason I haven't got that confidence in me because I know I struggle with reading and things like that so I never thought I'd be able to. So, when I got the place I was absolutely overwhelmed.

(Charmaine, focus group 2 discussion)

As well as the personal satisfaction felt, there was some discussion about the value of the degree as giving a status in the eyes of others. This can be seen as a sort of commodity fetishism projected onto others:

Now that you go to uni, everyone thinks you're clever! (Saadiya, focus group 2 discussion)

It's more of a status thing to have a degree, they know that you're studying for a degree and it's like you're on a level, a platform, you know what I mean, they give you a certain title as ... the standard person, oh this person has a degree ... it gives you a status. (Charmaine, focus group 1 discussion)

For some, this increased status in the eyes of others affected relationships with their friends and family:

I've noticed my friends. We used to call a lot, call each other. But they are asking me, 'are you free to talk now? Are you studying?'. So yes, people are changing their perspective of me. How and when to approach me. I don't know whether that's good or bad. (Dominique, focus group 2 discussion)

Like my dad who's, like, the biggest critic in the world because he's so clever, and he's really high up in his profession, and I rang him up, and he always thought I was a bit stupid, and I rang him up and he said, 'well you must not be a stupid as you look then'. (Steve, focus group 3 discussion)

There was also an expectation that the status of having a degree would bring benefits to everyday dealings with people. For example, Deborah was frustrated that her son's schoolteachers would not listen to her, and that having a degree would make them take her more seriously:

My own children have got SEN and I have been let down big style by the system. I know what I'm saying [but] I haven't officially got the qualification. And so they'll listen, hopefully, with this behind me. (Deborah, focus groups 1 discussion)

Although they do allude to learning and the development of knowledge, these comments mostly show an extrinsic motivation, with the status of having a degree being valued over the learning and skills acquired from studying. While critics regard this negatively, advocates of neoliberalism would see the participants in this study as acting rationally, with a realisation that possession of a degree increases both employment opportunities and earning potential (JRF, 2014, The Sutton Trust, 2021), but also their self-confidence and social status (Pierce, 2015).

There were also examples of educational fundamentalism, with an uncritical acceptance of the benefits of gaining an education (Alvesson, 2013). 'Qualifications' was written several times in the metaplanning activities as a positive of the course. The belief in the value of education was shown by participants throughout the year of the study:

It's really been a great experience for me. I've been out of education for so long. Just to be able to take that step to get an education is a great achievement. (Dominique, focus group 2)

This somewhat unquestioning view of education was also evident in the guilt felt when missing a lecture:

If I miss a session, I feel really bad. (Maria, focus group 3)

Even when participants could rationalise not attending lectures, they still had a deferential approach whereby they saw missing education as wrong:

I did feel bad but when I speak to other people, and they were like, 'you know what, it's good you didn't come because you didn't miss anything'. And that's

not just the one person, that's quite a few people that said that to me, and so I'm like, 'I'm glad I didn't go.' But I did feel bad because I don't like missing lectures, but it was just, and I can see from when I do come into the lectures it's just, literally I feel like crying because I just can't, it doesn't sink in.

(Nazreen, focus group 3)

This sentiment of feeling guilty when missing lectures was common across the participants and suggests an acceptance that education is beneficial. This also indicates an element of dual consciousness (Gramsci, 1947), in that even when participants were critical of the course content, teaching quality and assessments, there was never any questioning of the overall value of gaining an education or the system of formal education they had grown up in and had chosen to re-enter.

While there was evidence for commodity fetishism and educational fundamentalism, there was mixed evidence for stultification, which refers to the distance between the knowledgeable teacher and ignorant student, with the student's role to acquire the knowledge passed on from the teacher (Ranci re, 1991). There was evidence that the participants did not accept their passive role in this relationship and that rather than feeling distant from their lecturers, participants were keen to develop personal relationships and actively seek support from them. This is similar to the findings of Shepperd *et al.* (2023) who found that students appreciated the close connections formed with academic staff. The following exchange from the fourth focus group discussion suggests a breaking down of the perceived barriers between the staff and students:

Building relationships was good, with staff as well as with other people.

(Stacey)

The other day we were in the canteen. [Named lecturer] was in the queue.

And I said, 'do you want to come and sit with us for a bit'. And we had a chat with [named lecturer] for a bit, didn't we, he's a really nice guy. (Steve)

He is, he's sound. (Stacey)

It's nice to build those kinds of relationships. (Steve)

However, although students found that they could build good personal relationships with their lecturers, when marks and feedback were received a gap between students and lecturers was seen. For example, some participants thought that the praise received was excessive in comparison to their marks, as seen in this exchange from the fourth focus group discussion:

About some of the comments we get, 'you've done very well'. I feel like they are sometimes probably over the top and when it comes to assignments. You look at the results and you are thinking, 'I was expecting a little bit higher.'

Then, 'this is very good. Excellent.' (Dominique)

He said to me, 'you've got an excellent style of writing, it's fantastic, so thought-provoking', and then I got 65%. I'm like, what more do you want from me then? To change the world? (Steve)

I think that's him being nice to encourage us. (Nazreen)

There were other similar exchanges relating to several different assessments that showed that when it came to grades and feedback, there was lack of understanding of the grades awarded. Without this understanding, there is a possibility that

students, especially those with an external locus of control, will internalise perceived negative views of their abilities held by their lecturers (Prihadi, Hairul and Hazri, 2012; Wäschle *et al.*, 2014). This can arguably be seen as the product of a stultifying education system, with students ignorant of the course requirements and so dependent on the knowledgeable tutors (Ranciére, 1991).

#### 4.1.5 Summary to neoliberalism

The evidence from this study adds support to the contention that FYs are a good way of widening access to HE. Participants expressed that the FY was an attractive option as it gives a smooth entry to undergraduate study, equipping students with an understanding of the university systems, procedures and culture, as well being able to make connections with fellow students and lecturers before the start of level four. Overall, participants did demonstrate an acceptance of the neoliberal model of education. In enrolling at university, they were taking individual decisions to pursue a course of action that would lead to financial gain and personal satisfaction. However, there is a concern that participants were not fully informed of the nature of university study before enrolment, with a lack of knowledge shown of course content, lecture style and potential progression routes. Also, there was evidence that for some participants, decisions to enrol were partially driven by a desire to gain the status of being a graduate, or even of being a university student, without being fully informed about the course content or level of commitment required.

## 4.2 Locus of Control

Locus of control is central to the concept of governmentality, the way in which power is exercised in neoliberal society (Foucault, 1978). Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle (2017) identified three ways in which individuals come to accept neoliberal ideology. Ideally, neoliberalism has an 'appeal to freedom', whereby individuals feel free to make choices that they believe will be beneficial to them (Rose and Miller, 2010; Joseph, 2017). However, this acceptance can also be explained by 'psychological reactance' (Brehm, 1966) and 'learned helplessness' (Overmier and Seligman, 1967). These explanations correspond to whether individuals have an internal or external locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966), whereby outcomes are perceived as being caused by individual action or by external factors such as luck or the actions of others. This section of the discussion applies the concept of locus of control to the data, examining whether participants felt an internal or external locus, comparing findings to previous research in this area, and how this relates to the acceptance of neoliberal ideology. This section of the discussion is focused on the second research question:

To what extent does locus of control change in students over the course of their foundation year?

The previous section was organised around the different themes in relation to neoliberalism. To examine changes in locus of control that occurred over the course of the academic year, it was decided that for this section it was best to discuss the focus groups sequentially. In places, where it is appropriate to integrate the

concepts within the overall discussion of locus of control, some material relating to neoliberalism and to motivation is used to analyse the findings.

#### 4.2.1 Focus Group 1

As seen in the previous section on neoliberalism, participants stated that they had made a free choice to enrol onto the course. None of the participants said that they felt pressured to enrol or that they were taking a least-bad option. In this, they attributed their decisions to enrol to individual, internal factors.

At the time of the first focus group, in the third week of the first semester, there was a general feeling, expressed by all participants, that the course was only just beginning. The first few weeks of lectures were seen as largely introductory in nature, setting out the aims of the modules and outlining the content to be covered. There was agreement when Steve summarised the current point in time as being an 'in-between stage', before teaching of the content of the different modules had fully begun. At this point, as evident in the extracts below, participants expressed feeling a lack of control over their environment, with little autonomy in their studies. At this stage, their experiences can be seen as reflecting a strong situation (Krampen, 1988) where the norms of behaviour are set, with little room for individuals to deviate from this (Kacmar *et al.*, 2009). In this case, the material being studied so far was set by the lecturers. For some, this introductory phase was starting to get frustrating, with relief expressed that it was coming to an end:

It's getting a bit more 'lecturey', so like it's less introductory. We're getting into it a bit more now. It's making me feel a bit more like I'm at university rather than doing a welcome week. I feel more like I'm here and I'm doing it now.

(Steve)

Now I really want to know what is coming ahead. And so, I'm very excited.

(Celine)

However, for others, the end of this introductory period was causing some stress, with an expectation that the work was about to get 'more intense' (Deborah), or 'harder' (Charmaine).

Although there was a general agreement that as the course progressed it would enable more independence, there were different views as to whether this was seen as exciting, as expressed by Steve and Celine, or worrying, as expressed by Deborah and Charmaine. This suggests a weakening of the situation (Krampen, 1988), with the reduced external structure meaning that individual differences in locus of control become more relevant to predicting behaviour (Kormanik and Rocco, 2009). So far, the strong situation led to a shared experience, leading to participants feeling an external locus in the first few weeks of their studies. This expected weakening of the situation meant a divergence of attitudes began to emerge. This reflected individual differences in locus of control in the participants, with this switch to having more responsibility for their own learning being seen as liberating by most but worrying by some. This relates to the findings of Krenl (1992) and Li *et al.* (2015), which showed that those with an internal locus of control prefer conditions of greater autonomy in their work, while those with an external locus prefer a higher

level of supervision. Also, previous studies (Norton, 2005; Sprung and Jex, 2012) showed that those with an internal locus react positively to challenges while those with an external locus feel more stress in less structured environments.

Such individual differences were also evident when participants were asked about the potential causes of possible future problems. In the metapanning activity, concerns about the year ahead could be divided as being from internal and external sources, with more comments relating to internally focussed problems, including, 'Drive to stay focussed', 'Not being able to do the course' and 'Being afraid to speak up'. A lack of confidence was also cited several times in the metapanning activity and in the more open discussion leading from this. Externally focussed problems included, 'Not getting enough support', 'Childcare' and 'Other factors in life interfering with completing the course'. Whilst these expressed real problems, Rotter (1966) was more concerned with how these problems were framed by individuals.

While these comments show a mixture of internal and external loci, the finding that there were more comments, both in the metapanning activity and the following discussion, that related to an internal locus can be seen as beneficial as most research shows that having an internal locus leads to better study skills and higher achievement (for example Curtis and Trice, 2013; Rakes, Dunn and Rakes, 2013; Schipor and Schipor, 2014; Valdes-Cuervo, Sanches Escobedo and Valadez-Sierra, 2015).

From background information gathered at the start of the first focus group, it appeared that socioeconomic status and upbringing might have had an impact on the differences expressed in locus of control. While most participants were first generation learners from working class backgrounds, those who did have professional parents and more middle-class backgrounds expressed more optimism and confidence, for example:

Once you get into the swing of it you will have a better idea of how to do it.

(Steve)

Others though, who had less experience of family and friends attending university, were more concerned about the perceived increase in expectations of them as the course continued:

That's what my problem is that I've been so worried about what's coming up so soon. (Charmaine)

Although based on individual participants, with it not possible to draw firm conclusions, this does align with the findings of Serin, Serin and Sahin (2010) and Bodovski (2014), who found that upbringing had an effect, with those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds having a more internal locus of control.

There was some reflection on participants' personality types, for example, Nazreen commented that she found it challenging because, 'I'm the kind of person that can be easily put off something.' This shows insight that Nazreen is aware that she can be distracted by external factors and would benefit from developing a more internal locus. Later on, Nazreen discussed her upbringing, with her perception that her sister had been the 'golden child' (focus group 2) and her feeling the less favoured

sibling. Previous research has speculated that parenting style might affect locus of control (Carton and Nowicki, 1996; McClun and Merrell, 1998).

Part of the reason given as to why the first few weeks felt like an introductory phase was that participants could not yet start to work on the assessments. There was a common sentiment that the course would only fully begin when this was possible:

We've been introduced to all of the assignments at the same time, but we've been told not to start them at the moment. When do we get enough information to actually start? (Nazreen)

This again reflects an external locus, with a perception of lecturers withholding assessment information and not allowing students to start their work. This gives further evidence of stultification (Ranci re, 1991), with a perceived distance between the knowledgeable lecturers and students who are reliant on this knowledge being given to them. There was an expectation that when the assessment information was given, this would lead to a shift to a more internal locus and an ability to make progress with the work. While this shows a performance orientation (Dweck, 1986), whereby passing assessments is prominent in participants' minds, it also indicates identified regulation (Deci *et al.*, 1991), where participants accepted that the parameters of the assessments would be set externally but wanted to know what these were so that they could take control of working towards them. This somewhat goes against the findings of Fazey and Fazey (2001) who found that identified regulation was more common in younger students.

When thinking of how any problems that might occur could be overcome, participants overwhelmingly expressed an internal locus, with solutions coming from them rather than from any external sources. This was best shown in the final part of the metaplanning activity for this first focus group, with potential solutions to the previously identified concerns being, 'Staying focussed', 'Not give up', and 'Commitment and drive'.

Overall, at this stage, participants mostly displayed an internal locus of control. In Pyysiäinen, Halpinb and Guilfoylec's (2017) classification of the explanations of responsabilisation, although not neatly falling into any category, there was an appeal to freedom expressed. Participants reported that they had made an individual choice to begin the course and a belief that their outcomes were largely in their own hands. Participants believed that their current feeling of being a bit stuck in an introductory stage of the course would soon pass, and as the course continued that they would be able to gain more control over their studies. This suggests that students accepted a neoliberal discourse of individual freedom (Rose and Miller, 2010; Joseph, 2017), believing that opportunities are available to be taken by individual effort (Lolich, 2011).

#### 4.2.2 Focus group 2

The second focus group took place near the end of the first semester, when students had completed the taught content of their modules and were preparing for the upcoming assessments. In both the metaplanning activity and in the more open

discussions that followed, the standard of teaching was a prominent theme. Participants' responses suggested a belief that the quality of their learning experience was determined by the lecturers, rather than through any interaction, input from themselves or from other students. Typical comments, both positive and negative, exemplified attitudes towards teaching:

Lecturers are understanding and willing to help. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Tuesday's lecture, it's just read off the board, which you can do yourself. (Nazreen)

He's really good, he's engaging. (Grace)

If I get bored, I'm zoned out. (Charmaine)

While these may be valid points of praise and criticism, it is the perception of control that was of interest to Rotter (1966). In this second focus group, there was agreement between participants that the quality of these experiences lay outside of their control, with little difference evident between participants. This displays an external attribution, with interest and engagement being determined by the lecturers. As these feelings about the teaching quality and subject content were shared throughout the group, it again suggests a strong situation (Krampen, 1988), with this being situationally caused (Kacmar *et al.*, 2009). This again relates to the criticism of neoliberalism of stultification, whereby there is a perceived distance between the knowledgeable teacher and ignorant student (Ranciere, 1991). Stultification occurs when learning is viewed as the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, the quality of which is determined by the quality of instruction rather than any joint

endeavour between teacher and learner. This has the effect of making the student dependent on the teacher, leading to an external locus on behalf of the student.

As well as comments relating specifically to teaching quality, issues of how interesting the course content was and the value of support offered were also seen as external to the participants. An interesting difference though was that although both positive and negative comments showed an external attribution, the positive comments related more to personal support offered by the lecturers, with the negative comments referring more to structural issues such as the timetable and university systems. Examples of positive comments included:

Support from course leader. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Lecturers feel more understanding and willing to help. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Examples of negative comments were:

One course – two locations. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

Lesson times/days. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

Again, while these may be valid points, in relation to McLelland's (1961) motivational model, the number of comments stating how supportive the lecturers were indicate that a personal affiliation with the lecturers was important to the participants.

Participants expressed an external attribution here, seeing this relationship with the lecturers being determined by the helpfulness and support offered by the lecturers rather than being an equal relationship. On the other hand, the number of criticisms relating to factors outside the personal control of their lecturers suggests no such

need for affiliation to the university as a whole. It appeared that the university systems and regulations were a safe target for any feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Confidence was an issue that arose, and was commented on both positively and negatively in the metaplanning activity, with comments including:

My own self-belief. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

I am more confident. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

When explored in more depth in the focus group discussions, the issue of confidence was focussed on the upcoming assessments. Those expressing anxiety spoke more about factors that were out of their control, for example, the number of assessments and volume of work:

We have to give all assignments in at almost the same time. (Celine)

There's so much to hand in, so much. It's overload, I don't even know where to start, there's just so much going on at one time. (Charmaine)

There was also an expression that the assessment marking had an impact:

But do you know like, are you going to be lenient with us? (Nazreen)

In these students, a feeling of an external locus was displayed, with the capability to complete the assessments and the marks attained being caused more by external factors. On the other hand, participants who were feeling more confident expressed taking of control of their studies, for example:

I've gone through stages since we've seen the questions, and now I've gone through fear, worry, am I going to make it, am I going to be able to write it academically, am I going to write academically. And now I'm in a position where now you've got to do it. I am understanding it more, so I am feeling more confident at the moment to probably tackle it. (Dominique)

In this, Dominique expressed a common feeling of anxiety, that of being away from education for a while and entering an unfamiliar academic environment. While some participants then focussed on external factors, Dominique felt that it was within her control to be able to work towards an understanding of the course material and complete the assessments.

This indicates that whereas in much of the discussion there was agreement between participants, there were also clear individual differences. This was also evident in the solutions offered by participants to their difficulties. Some focussed more on what others should be doing, such as having smaller teaching groups (Deborah), better structure to the work (Charmaine) and more assessment support (several). This was the first time that an element of learned helplessness was displayed, with both the problems faced and solutions to these being located externally. Others, however, focussed more on what they could (and should) do better themselves. A common sentiment was expressed by Steve:

And just being motivated enough to sit down and say, 'I've had plenty of time recently to do it, or even if it's just a couple of hours.' You think, 'I could have really made a good start on this by now.' (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

Steve is showing more of an internal locus here, focussing on what he can do to complete the upcoming assignments.

The issue of time identified here by Steve arose repeatedly and supports the findings of Steel (2007), who found procrastination was commonly identified as a problem for students and Garnham and East (2021), who found that time management was a significant stressor for FY students, especially around completing assessments. For some participants this was perceived as a lack of time due to external factors, while for others it was seen more as an internal issue of time management. For example, from the metaplanning activity, time management was mentioned by five participants, with a typical comment being 'making a start!'. The findings of Kader (2014) found that those with an external locus of control procrastinate more than those with an internal locus. However, in this case it appeared more that those with an internal locus of control were able to recognise their procrastination as being an internal issue, whereas those with a more external locus were more likely to view lack of time as a problem caused by external factors, and so beyond their control. An acceptance of individual responsibility for procrastination also aligns with a neoliberal view that outcomes are due to personal efforts (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Sparke, 2013).

Much of the discussion about the semester and the upcoming assessments reflected an external locus. However, in the part of the metaplanning activity where participants were asked for solutions to the problems encountered, or negatives that could hinder progress, there were more comments relating to internal, individual

issues than to external ones. For example, solutions to the problems discussed included, 'Effort and self-discipline', 'Think positive' and 'Taking advantage of support.' In looking at the potential problems that could undo the previous positive comments, 'lack of motivation' and 'poor time management' were seen as potential internal causes.

Overall, in the second focus group, although there was mainly an external attribution in relation to the work over the course of the semester, performance on the upcoming assessments was mostly seen as being in the control of the participants. In Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle's (2017) classification of the explanations of responsabilisation, the most common one demonstrated by participants was that of psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966), whereby past events are attributed to external factors, but there is an internal locus looking ahead.

#### 4.2.3 Focus group 3

The third focus group occurred at the start of the second semester, just as participants were getting their marks and feedback from the semester one assessments. As with the second focus group, there was a focus on these assessments in both the metapanning activity and in the more open discussion that followed. When asked in the metapanning activity to categorise the post-it notes and vote on these categories, the category of 'Assignments' received most votes of the problems encountered. It was clear that participants found the assessments stressful, with several negative metapanning comments stating 'stress' and

'pressure' as concerns. This was elaborated upon in the discussion that followed the metaplanning activity:

I got really stressed over it. (Laura)

I think we all doubted ourselves. (Stacey)

In studies in both the workplace and with students (Abouserie, 1994; Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela, 2018), stress has mostly been linked to an external locus of control, with a feeling of powerlessness causing stress.

This external locus was expressed by there being an emphasis on how external factors shaped the participants' experiences. There was much comment on the teaching, support offered and the learning environment, with the quality of these determined by external factors rather than being in the control of the participants, or through any joint enterprise. Similarly to the second focus group, but more pronounced in the third, were that the negative comments were focused on the course structure and content, for example:

Assignment dates all at one time. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

Some modules not career-oriented towards goal. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

On a Tuesday I struggled in the massive lecture, where you've got 100 people in a room. (Laura)

These negative comments are very similar to those reported by Abouserie (1994), who found that stress in students was caused by external factors such as having 'Too much to do' and 'Timing, spacing of assignments'.

Also similar to the second focus group, the positive comments focussed on more human factors such as support offered and teaching quality:

Lecturers are willing to help and are keen to support. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Good quality of teaching. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

[Named lecturer] was really helpful. The seminars were really good because any other questions you had that you didn't want to ask in the lecture room. It was more personal in the seminar. (Grace)

As with the second focus group, these comments suggest a need for affiliation (McLelland, 1961) with the individual lecturers but not with the university as an institution.

Although there was a strong focus on the assessments, showing a performance orientation (Dweck, 1986), in contrast to the second focus group there were also a number of comments reflecting on the personal learning and development that had taken place over the first semester. Comments that related to a growing mastery orientation, and to the learning that had taken place included:

Enhanced knowledge on subject. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Understanding children's needs and care for them to have a good start in life. (Metaplanning, positive comment)

Other comments related to the development of personal qualities such as becoming more focussed, organised or independent, for example:

Help me learn how to become more independent. (Metapanning, positive comment)

Opening my mind again into education and preparing me for further studies. (Metapanning, positive comment)

Although these positives might be seen as originating externally, they show an internalisation of learning and development and suggest a growing internal locus for some students. Previous research by Prihadi *et al.* (2018) and Karaman, Nelson and Cavalos Vela (2018) suggest that it is possible to support students in developing an internal locus. These findings suggest that the supportive teaching received within the FY encouraged this in the participants. This also supports Foucault's (1978) concept of governmentality, where it is important that people internalise the discourse of individual agency and so can learn to govern themselves in neoliberal society.

There was an interesting difference in that while nearly half of the positive comments in the metapanning activity showed this internalisation (10 out of 21 comments), with a feeling of personal progress being made, there was no equivalence for the negative comments. For example, while there were several positive comments about becoming more focussed and independent, there were no negative comments about becoming less focussed or less independent over the course of the first semester. Instead, the negative comments were almost wholly focussed on external problems, such as those reported earlier regarding assignment timings and class

sizes. Participants could be showing an attribution bias here, similar to the findings of Fazey and Fazey (2001), whereby they were keen to internalise the positives of the course but kept an external attribution for the negatives.

Also seen in this focus group was an increase in individual differences between participants, shown in both the metapanning comments and the discussion that followed. This suggests a further weakening of the situation (Krampen, 1988), with less external structure leading to individual differences becoming more important in determining behaviour (Kormanik and Rocco, 2009). Towards the end of the first semester, the emphasis was changing from more structured taught sessions, readings and activities to more independent assessment preparation. While there was still a lot of discussion of the external support and difficulties faced, some participants expressed positive individual steps taken to complete the assessments:

I've engaged better with the assignments than I thought I would. (Steve)

I did it the week we broke up I purposely didn't plan anything that week so I could get all my assignments done and not stress about it over Christmas.

(Laura)

This internal locus from Laura suggests that the stress that she expressed (see previous comment, p. 125) was caused by her feeling a sense of responsibility (Aube Rousseau and Moron, 2007) for her performance in the assessment. There is possibly some attribution bias, whereby achievements are attributed to internal causes, as Steve and Laura had both achieved marks that they were happy with at the time of this focus group (Hoorens, 1993).

Building on an issue from the second focus group, individual differences between participants were also seen in the issues of time and academic support. The issue of time was seen either as being an external pressure or in the control of participants. Some saw the problem as being a lack of time:

Overload with information at one time, not enough time to digest.

(Metaplanning, negative comment)

Struggling to juggle other commitments. (Metaplanning, negative comment)

But there's just a lot of it. It's overload, I don't even know where to start.

There's just so much going on at one time, and I think that's what's stressing me out, there's so much to do in such little time. (Charmaine)

These findings are similar to those by Sagone and De Caroli (2014), who found a link between struggling with time management and feelings of helplessness. Others, though, saw the issue as being their own time management:

For me, the structure and support was ok, it's just again, that time management. (Nazreen)

I think that the only reason why I probably struggled is because of how I managed my time with the assignments. I mean the CV and the PowerPoint, if I did those in the first instance and then gradually did everything bit by bit then I think would have felt a bit better about everything, so I think that was down to me. (Grace)

I've had plenty of time recently to do it. Or even if it's just a couple of hours. You think, 'I could have really made a good start on this by now.' (Steve)

Although these show real issues and many participants had very busy lives with work and family commitments, it is the framing of these as being internally or externally caused that is important, with Rotter (1966, 1975) and Lefcourt (2014) believing that the key was the individual's belief that they could affect their situation.

In relation to Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle's (2017) classification of the explanations of responsabilisation, compared to previous focus groups there was more diversity between different participants in this one. In the final part of the metaplanning activity, where participants were asked to consider solutions to overcome difficulties and potential problems that could arise, the answers given were more external than in previous groups. While there were still many comments relating to internal issues such as 'organisation', 'time management' and 'self-belief', in this focus group there were more comments that related to external factors such as:

More support that suits each individual. (Metaplanning comment, positive to overcome concern)

Knowing what exactly we have to do in the assignment early on in the semester. (Metaplanning comment, positive to overcome concern)

Don't get enough information. (Metaplanning comment, anticipated possible problem)

Content in modules. (Metaplanning comment, anticipated possible problem)

These findings from the metaplanning were reflected in the more open discussion. While in previous focus groups, most participants had expressed optimism looking forward, there was now more concern, for example:

I feel like this semester is going to be worse than the first. (Maria)

Everything was a lot clearer last semester. (Steve)

This semester, we don't know what books we need to look at, we don't know what the structure is. (Martha)

I'm more confident within myself that I can do it, but I feel like this semester, no disrespect to anybody, but I feel that I'm not going to get what I need, the information what I got last semester. (Nazreen)

These comments express an external locus looking to the future, with participants possibly showing elements of a learned helplessness.

However, while there were signs of learned helplessness in evidence, the most common type of responsabilisation expressed was still that of psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). To focus on one participant, Stacey, as an example of this:

We didn't get any support [over the Christmas holiday period], obviously, not anything against [named lecturer] or [named lecturer], but from all the time we had off they weren't available until the day that the assignment was due, so we literally had no support at home at all. We had a month off which made it even worse with no teaching, nothing. (Stacey)

This shows evidence of the perception of an external problem with the academic calendar, with frustration that there was no support over the holiday period. The stress shown might have been caused by a feeling of lacking control over the situation (Sprung and Jex, 2012). At a different time, she also showed frustration that the teaching was not as structured as she would have liked:

I don't understand why the teaching isn't the same. Why everybody does it differently. That's what gets me. (Stacey)

When asked if she wouldn't expect the teaching to be less structured moving forward, she replied:

No, I'd want it to be more and more and more. (Stacey)

This suggests an external locus of wanting more support and a structured environment, relating to previous research which found that those with an external locus work better under set conditions (Li *et al.*, 2015). However, these frustrations did not lead to a feeling of helplessness in Stacey, rather she looked for the positive development that could happen as a result of this:

It is intense, yeah. But I do see that as a positive though as it does prepare you for the first year [of undergraduate study]. Because if you made this too easy then when we got into the first year then it's going to be really hard. (Stacey)

And later, when discussing setbacks encountered:

When somebody puts me down that just makes me come back even more. (Stacey)

Whilst this focus is from one individual, Stacey's views were typical of those expressed during the third focus group. Indeed, while she was talking, other students were in nodding or speaking in agreement with Stacey.

#### 4.2.4 Focus group 4

This focus group took place in the final week of teaching, before students completed their semester two assessments. Following the pattern of previous focus groups, there was again an emphasis on external support given. As before, there was a difference in that positive comments related to the personal support given by lecturers, including, from the metaplanning activity, 'Helpful lecturers', 'Friendly and helpful staff' and 'Help with essay writing'. These were elaborated upon in the following exchange:

What have been the good things about this semester? (interviewer)

The staff are very nice. (Steve)

They've always got time for you as well. (Stacey)

Yes, they're very helpful, and supportive, all the staff. [Named lecturer] so, so loves helping the students, he loves that. (Sadie)

He is awesome. (Stacey)

These comments are stronger than previous focus groups and demonstrate an increased sense of affiliation with the lecturers, with this affiliation also being able to act as a source of motivation (McLelland, 1961). This is an important issue as previous research found that FY students can lack confidence in approaching staff

(Heagney and Benson, 2017) but do very much benefit when close connections are made with academic staff (Shepperd *et al.*, 2023). However, in seeing this relationship with their lecturers as being formed by the member of staff, if staff are not seen as friendly there is the potential for students with an external locus to feel isolated and unable to ask for help (Kovach, 2018). There is also the danger that if students perceive that staff have a negative opinion of them, those with an external locus will internalise these views (Prihadi, Hairul and Hazri, 2012; Wäschle *et al.*, 2014)

Also, in line with previous focus groups, the criticisms made regarding participants' experiences were not aimed at the members of staff but again related to less personal aspects of the course. In previous focus groups there was dissatisfaction with the course structure, including the academic calendar and assessment dates. There was a difference in this focus group as criticisms were more focused on module content, for example, from the metaplanning activity, 'Too broad modules' and, 'Some things not covered enough'. In the discussion that followed there were a lot of criticisms that the lecture content was not focussed enough on the upcoming assessments:

Unnecessary work. Some things you're just like, 'how is this, you know, relevant?' (Stacey)

Feeling, 'what have I learnt there?' because I don't know what I'm putting in my assignment. (Steve)

I think the assignment prep is too late. (Grace)

Around 11 o'clock today, that was the first time I understand what we're going to do. (Celine)

This pattern of having an external locus but being positive about staff members and negative about the structure and some of the content is similar to previous focus groups. This relates to Levenson and Lefcourt's (1981) distinction in external locus between chance and powerful others. At no point in any of the focus groups did participants view luck as being a factor in their success, but they very much saw the role of others as being critical. A further distinction to Levenson and Lefcourt's (1981) 'powerful others' is that the 'others' that are present in person (in this case lecturers) are seen positively while the 'others' that are not dealt with on a personal level but are responsible for setting the course structure, timetable and assessment deadlines are seen more negatively.

It can be seen from the above comments that students wanted to be given detailed guidance on what should go in the assessment. When this advice was less structured, the participants expressed a stressful response. None of the participants saw this as an opportunity to develop their own ideas or of being given greater freedom regarding the work. This suggests an external locus in the participants, leading to a feeling of stress caused by external pressure (Abouserie, 1994; Karkoulia, Srour and Sinan, 2016; Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela, 2018). In the first focus group, there was a common expectation held by participants that as the year progressed there would be an increased internal locus, with participants working more independently. This did not fully materialise, with participants still feeling a lack of autonomy in their studies at the end of the year. This is similar to

the findings by Reed (2007) and Kovach (2018) who found that students developed a more external locus as they progressed through their courses.

This performance orientation (Dweck, 1986), equating the learning taking place to the module assessments, was consistent over the course of the year. This could be interpreted as reflecting a neoliberal attitude to education that when purchasing a product, in this case the assessment, full information about that product should be transparent. On one hand, this can be seen as a criticism of the course for not meeting the expectations of students. On the other hand, this can be seen as more of a criticism of the neoliberal model of education whereby the students are encouraged to develop a commodity fetishism (Furedi, 2011), valuing the qualification achieved rather than embracing the uncertainty that enables learning and personal growth.

To an extent, participants could be seen to be showing a form of dual consciousness (Gramsci, 1947). On one hand participants showed signs of educational fundamentalism (Alvesson, 2013), with an unquestioning belief in the benefits of the degree they had enrolled onto. Also, they did not question the use of the assessments as a legitimate tool with which to monitor their progress. However, they did express feeling stressed, especially by the assessments, with this stress voiced by complaints about the course structure, module content and assessment preparation.

Further evidence of this dual consciousness can be seen in an interesting reflection regarding a comment made by a lecturer for one of the modules, which challenged the participants' external locus:

One of the lecturers did say that, like, 'you don't have to come', and then the following week there was not many people there. So, they probably shouldn't have said that. (Grace)

Some participants were somewhat confused, and conflicted, by this comment. They felt that some lectures were not worth attending, but were uncomfortable if they did not attend:

I feel guilty after. (Stacey)

You do feel guilty. (Grace)

You do feel guilty but then it's like, you just, I don't know, you're not missing anything. (Nazreen)

There was some discussion on why this was the case, highlighted in the following exchange:

That's interesting, because that's almost a little bit 'schooley' isn't it?  
(interviewer)

Yeah (several participants together)

Because the teacher says we don't have to come, so we don't? (interviewer)

Yeah (several participants together)

So, what's that all about? (interviewer)

The way we've been brainwashed! (Steve)

This displays participants having an external locus of control regarding attendance, accepting the expectations of the University. Although joking, Steve is expressing the Marxist criticism of having a false consciousness (Jones, 2006). The comment made by the lecturer challenged this, inviting students to take responsibility for their decision to attend, or not. While some students felt uncomfortable with this, others showed a more internal locus and saw these comments regarding attendance as liberating, giving them responsibility to decide whether attendance is worthwhile, for example:

I really like that comment about you don't have to come because it made me think actually, I'm independent, I can do, it's up to me whether I come or I don't turn up in class. (Dominique)

This indicates that lecturers can have an impact on students' attitudes to their studies. This represents a challenge to lecturers. On the one hand participants act as consumers of a product and want highly structured input that leads to assessment success. On the other hand, there is the danger that this undermines the development of independence.

Also building on the findings from the third focus group, the issue of time was again prominent in this focus group discussion. A lack of time was mentioned by all participants in the metaplanning activity and voted as the most important category by participants when voting on the negatives of the year. Again, there was a difference in how participants discussed time, and the demands of the course. Some saw this as an external problem of work overload and a lack of time:

Assignment launches too late. (metaplanning, negative comment)

Less time for assignment. (metaplanning, negative comment)

Others, though, felt the problem was less that there was a lack of time and felt that it was more that they were responsible for not making good use of the time available.

This was shown in the following exchange:

The time's fine, it's us. (Steve)

I think the time is fine, it's us. Because, what time do we finish? 2, 3 o'clock.

If we don't have kids or anything like that... (Grace)

Yeah. (Sadie)

We can go to the library, right now. (Grace)

And we don't. (Sadie)

And we could go to the library in our lunch break, and we don't. (Grace)

Chances are I'll have a nap later. (Steve)

*Sound of several laughing*

Yeah, like I can't wait to go home. (Grace)

It's self-inflicted, pretty much. (Stacey)

As with the findings from the previous focus group, these comments show individual differences in the perception of how much control participants had outside of the lectures in managing their time, with the most common sentiment being that of having enough time to complete the work but lacking the personal organisation to do so. Previous studies showed mixed results, with procrastination linked to an external locus or showing no relationship (Kader, 2014). Here, procrastination is again linked

more to an internal locus, with awareness of procrastination linked to an acceptance of individual responsibility for this.

Following from this was a discussion on the anxiety felt because of the upcoming assessments. Those with an external locus were stressed because they felt that they did not have the time or control over their studies, similar to the findings of Abouserie (1994) and Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018). On the other hand, those displaying an internal locus felt stressed from blaming themselves for not making better use of their time, corresponding to research by Aube, Rousseau and Morin (2007). There was an interesting exchange regarding the cognitive processes that led to stress:

That's not what the problem is. We're all capable enough. (Steve)

I think we're putting ourselves down more than anything. (Stacey)

Yeah (Several others)

I think we make our expectations too low, where what we can actually achieve. (Stacey)

Yeah (Several others)

We put ourselves down before we've started. Because I felt the same with your semester, the first one, I felt exactly the same, I'm going to fail this, I'm going to fail. But I actually didn't. And now I feel the same now. (Stacey)

There was an insight into this shown by Steve:

There is a little anxiety. I think we go into it automatically thinking the worst, because we've got this anxiety and so we automatically go in and say, 'Oh, I don't understand what's going on here, they haven't taught us anything', blah blah blah. Now there is a bit of that in there with that anxiety because you're setting yourself up for that way of thinking so it might not necessarily be their fault, but you're just set up for that way of thinking because you have got that anxiety, I suppose. (Steve)

This suggests an interesting mixture of internal and external locus. Stacey and Steve appear to give an external attribution to their own thoughts. Although Stacey passed the semester one assessments, this did not lead to her gaining confidence, rather she felt trapped by her negative thinking. Steve saw these negative thoughts as being 'automatic' and not under conscious control. While Stacey's pessimism appears to be rather stable and not affected by previous success, Steve believes that this external locus felt is caused by internal cognition, suggesting that it is possible to develop a more internal locus. While Stacey's comments support the view of Rotter (1966) and Galvin *et al.* (2018) that locus of control is a relatively stable trait, Steve's comments suggest that it is possible to recognise and so change locus, supporting the views of Prihadi *et al.* (2018) and Kovach (2018).

In relation to Pyysiäinen, Halpinb and Guilfoyle's (2017) explanations of responsabilisation, there was a mixture of appeal to freedom, psychological reactance and learned helplessness demonstrated in this final focus group. Psychological reactance was still the most common explanation, with most criticisms related to external factors such as lack of time, or assignments not being explained

clearly enough, whereas solutions given to these problems were to have a positive outlook, remain committed, become more organised and improve time management. However, some participants were starting to see possible future problems of losing motivation and commitment, with the danger of developing a learned helplessness.

#### 4.2.5 Summary to locus of control

Throughout the year, there was evidence that locus of control was both individually and situationally determined. Locus of control varied over the year and in relation to different situations, with clear factors emerging that affected locus of control felt, such as the structure of the year and presentation of material. However, throughout the year, differences between participants to the same situation became evident. In relation to Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle's (2017) explanations of responsabilisation, there were changes over the year. At the start of the year an appeal to freedom was evident but as the year went on more individual differences were seen with a mixture of appeal to freedom, psychological reactance and learned helplessness shown. Overall, psychological reactance was the most commonly seen explanation, with participants expressing feeling limited by external factors but having an internal locus to affect their progression.

### 4.3 Motivation

Previous research found a link between locus of control and motivation in general and specifically related to students (Rotter, 1966; Karaman and Watson, 2017), although this link is not straightforward. Some discussion of motivation was included in the previous section, but as motivation is so important to student success (Ariani, 2016; Howard *et al.*, 2021), it was decided to discuss the findings regarding this theme in a separate section. This section relates to the third research question:

What factors affect students' levels of motivation during their foundation year?

In analysing the data, three themes that relate to motivation were identified. Firstly, the overall level of motivation felt by participants towards their studies; secondly, the different levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation expressed; and thirdly, the needs theories of motivation. Whereas the previous section was organised in relation to the different focus groups, this section, to avoid repetition, is organised by these themes. Links are made between locus of control and motivation as they relate to the participants' responses throughout this section.

#### 4.3.1 General level of motivation

At the start of the year, high levels of motivation were expressed by all participants in the group, exemplified by:

We all want to do our best. (Saadiya, focus group 1 discussion)

Participants felt that they were on a course that they had chosen freely, were keen to do well and had a determination to succeed. For example:

For me, it's an absolutely amazing feeling. (Charmaine, focus group 1 discussion)

Nobody at this point shared any doubts about their enrolment, and everybody expressed that their decision to enrol was a positive one. Nobody said that they felt pressurised to enrol or that this was a least bad option. This motivation correlates with the internal locus of control that participants reported feeling at the start of the course, as found in the previous section, supporting previous research that found a relationship between motivation and having an internal locus (Karaman and Watson, 2017). It also suggests an appeal to freedom in explaining the acceptance of the neoliberal ideology underpinning the education system in relation to HE, with individual responsibility taken for the choice to enrol (Peters, 2001).

However, at the start of the second semester, motivation appeared to have dipped for some participants. There was a feeling, frequently expressed, that a lot of effort was put into the first semester and into the completion of the assessments, and that it was difficult to get started on the new work. This was demonstrated in the following exchange from the third focus group discussion:

I feel really, really, erm, demotivated. (Nazreen, focus group 3 discussion)

I feel the same. I feel lost. (Stacey, focus group 3 discussion)

This reduced motivation was linked to a lack of engagement in some participants:

I feel like I don't even need to come in because I don't feel like I'd be missing anything. (Rubina, focus group 3 discussion)

I feel like skiving the Friday lectures. (Nazreen, focus group 3 discussion)

This lower sense of motivation could be linked to the increased external locus of control reported by most participants at this point in the year and the feeling of learned helplessness shown by some participants, supporting previous research that linked low motivation with an external locus (Karaman and Watson, 2017).

By the end of the year motivation was again high, with most participants reporting that they had found the year fulfilling, highlighted by this exchange in the fourth focus group discussion:

You've been here nearly a year, how does it feel? (Interviewer)

I'm proud. (Stacey)

Yeah, good. (Several others)

I can do it! (Maria)

I'm proud of myself, I didn't think I'd do it, I thought I'd quit after 2 months.

(Stacey)

I was just going to say that I'm proud of myself. (Charmaine)

This led to participants feeling motivated to continue with their studies:

It makes you want more, you want to strive for more, you want to do more.

(Sadie, focus group 4 discussion)

This increased level of motivation at the end of the year links to the increased internal locus shown by participants during this final focus group.

Although there were individual differences in both locus of control felt and level of motivation, overall, the findings from this study show that when participants felt that they had control of their work, motivation was high. This supports the many studies that have found a relationship between internal locus of control and higher levels of motivation (Kovach, 2018).

#### 4.3.2 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

As seen in the section of the discussion relating to neoliberalism (internal ref., pp. 96-111), when starting the course there was a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards anticipated by the participants. This included, from the first metapanning activity, 'to be inspired' (intrinsic) and 'qualifications' (extrinsic). Overall, more intrinsic than extrinsic motivation was evident in the first focus group. In the discussion in this first focus group there was an interesting reflection on the participants' attitudes, compared to their former selves, and how their motivation had changed:

I think being a mature student makes you think like that more than if I was 18, I would be like, 'this assignment is due on the 7th, OK, I'll do it on the 6th'.  
(Nazreen)

Yeah. (Several others)

Literally that's just the way it is. (Nazreen)

... and aim for 41%. (Steve)

Yeah. I'm not aiming for that. I'm going to hopefully, hopefully aim for this highest. If I just about scrape it, I won't be happy. (Nazreen)

It sounds like we're completely in the same boat. (Steve)

This indicates a shift for participants, moving from previously studying for more extrinsic reasons to now being more intrinsically motivated. Whereas in the past success was seen as doing the minimum to reach the standard set by others, it is now seen as important to do as well as possible for feelings of personal satisfaction. This supports the findings of Fazey and Fazey (2001) who found that younger students show more extrinsic motivation, with older students, like the participants in the above extract, being more intrinsically motivated. This intrinsic motivation is linked with the internal locus of control felt during the first focus group and supports the previous research by Rotter (1966) and Karaman and Watson (2017) who found positive correlations between intrinsic motivation and having an internal locus of control.

In the second and third focus groups there was a lot of discussion of the semester one assessments. The motivation expressed in these groups was largely extrinsic, with a desire to avoid failure. For example, in the second focus group metapanning activity, when asked about negatives that would overcome the positives of participating in the course, four comments directly stated that 'failing' was a concern. This increased extrinsic motivation is linked to the overall reduction in motivation at this point of the year, as outlined previously, with the initial excitement shown in the

first focus group changing to more of a concern about passing the assessments, for example:

For me, I was happy the first time I started but right now I just want to wait for my results for how I will do. My assignments results are going to tell me if I'm going to be happy. Then I will feel more confident and I will feel, 'yes I did, I made it'. (Celine, focus group 2 discussion)

I've been really waiting for our feedback because if I've got a really good mark, it will really push me on. (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

These comments suggest a clear performance orientation (Dweck 1986), with meeting the externally set standards being crucial, with the extrinsic reward of passing determining the perception of whether the year has been a positive experience. These findings also suggest an identified regulation (Deci *et al.*, 1991), whereby it is accepted that tasks are set by others and there is a focus on avoiding failure. It also appears that Celine and Steve are demonstrating an internal locus, with the upcoming assessment grade having an informational quality. They are expressing that if they receive good marks, this will be seen as an indicator of competence and so increase intrinsic motivation for future studies (Earn, 1982).

As well as the assessment grades affecting motivation, the course content was also relevant. While assessment grades are an external measure of performance, course content can be seen as an external stimulus. When subject matter was found interesting, although externally set, participants reported being intrinsically motivated. This was shown by Nazreen and Dominique:

I feel your assignment is actually interesting because, I'm personally, myself, not just doing it because, oh god, for the sake of doing an assignment. It's something that I'm really passionate about so, I'm kind of, how do I say it, it's interesting! (Nazreen, focus group 2 discussion)

Do you know what I feel. It's made me think of reading even more and doing more research in small bits that I don't pay much attention to. Even things that are not related to the course. But just reading, being encouraged to do the reading. (Dominique, focus group 2 discussion)

This suggests that when external factors are seen as enabling, in this case the subject content being interesting, intrinsic motivation increases. This intrinsic motivation also led to participants expressing a more internal locus of control in their work. On the other hand, when subject matter was seen as uninteresting or unclear, this led to a reduction in reported motivation overall and a move towards viewing the material, and subsequent assessment, as being more controlling, with a feeling that it needed to be 'got through' (Rubina, focus group 3 discussion). Also from the discussion:

You're being thrown these things and you're here to do them, you've got to do them, and I've been stressed about it and stuff, but you've still got to do them at the end of the day, stress or no stress. (Steve, focus group 3 discussion)

Studies by Earn (1982) and Malik, Butt and Choi (2015) found that locus of control affected how external rewards were perceived, either as informational or controlling, which then affected levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The findings here reverse the direction of this with the perception of the material as being interesting (informational) or not (controlling) affecting whether motivation was felt to be intrinsic

or extrinsic, affecting locus of control felt. This suggests that motivation and locus of control are affected by the perception of the stimuli as well as that of the rewards.

At the end of the year, there was reflection on the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for completing the course. There was a sense of intrinsic satisfaction and a feeling of personal pride at having completed the year. The metapanning activity for the fourth focus group showed this feeling of personal achievement. Of the positive comments, there were seven comments that related to personal growth, including 'See that I can do it' and 'Belief that I am more than capable'. These comments were echoed in the following exchange from the open discussion for this focus group:

How has that changed your view of yourself? (Interviewer)

I feel cleverer. (Stacey, focus group 4 discussion)

I've realised it. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

This suggests that participants found the year intrinsically rewarding, with this linked to a developing internal locus of control, which again supports previous research by Rotter (1966) and Karaman and Watson (2017) who found similar findings.

In terms of extrinsic motivation, some participants spoke about the rewards given by family:

My family are very proud of me, because obviously, my age, I didn't think I can do it. I have tried at different times to enrol in university, I would just go to an open day or one day and I would just not turn up again. So for me to finish

one semester, and pass, that was a great achievement. So everybody is proud of me. (Dominique, focus group 4 discussion)

He's [Steve's father] the first person now that I ring if I've got a good result.

And he never would have been that. And he's like, 'that's brilliant, you've just got to keep it up now.' I never heard that from my dad. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

For others, there was a sense of proving people wrong:

For me, I've always been put down and still am, and that's what makes me try even more. I don't tell anyone my result, like family and stuff. I'm just carrying on with it, and it's like, 'I don't care about you'. (Stacey, focus group 4 discussion)

Rather than relating to an external locus of control, these extrinsic rewards appear to be acting as informational rather than controlling (Deci, 1971, 1972). The responses of others are seen as affirming the effort and achievement of the participants and so linked to an internal locus, whereby intrinsic motivation to succeed is enhanced by these external rewards (Earn, 1982).

#### 4.3.3 Needs theories of motivation

In relation to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the extrinsic motivators identified in the metaplanning activities aligned more to lower-level needs, especially of financial security, which can be seen fulfilling a need for safety. In contrast, the intrinsic motivators often related to the more higher-level needs and self-fulfilment stated by Ormrod (2016), such as 'reaching my own expectations' (Steve, focus

group 1 discussion) and 'I just think it's a personal thing for me to achieve for myself' (Deborah, focus group 1 discussion).

Probably to be expected at the start of the course, most concerns related to the need for achievement. However, it was noticeable that in the first metaplanning activity, of 48 comments relating to both positive and negative experiences/expectations, not a single one reflected the need for affiliation (McClelland, 1961). However, this first focus group did have a strong social element to it. Participants tended to volunteer in groups, or at least pairs, of those who sat next to each other in lectures. Also, throughout the session, participants were laughing and joking together. Therefore, although not mentioned, making friends was clearly important, although not a conscious aim or one deemed important enough to mention in the focus group activities.

While in the first focus group there was a strong emphasis on the need for achievement, in the second focus group a more conscious need for affiliation could be seen to be emerging. Some comments showed an appreciation of the learning done in groups, while others focussed more directly on the emotional benefits of making friends. A comment that reflected both the academic and social benefits of working with others stated, 'Being able to interact with peers on course and share experiences of uni life.' (focus group 2, metaplanning comment). These benefits were elaborated upon in the open discussions:

I feel that knowing that we are all on the same page has taken the stress load off me. Sometimes what you think might not be right and so it's good to know

that everyone else is on the same page. Most of the times that is the case, when we talk around it's like, 'oh, you were thinking that', 'yes, I was thinking the same.' (Nazreen, focus group 2)

There was also a recognition that there had been a change in attitude from the first focus group:

It's been much better than I expected, much better. I expected to come, it's such a bad way of looking at it, 'I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to get a piece of paper and go. I've got friends, I don't need all that sort of stuff'. I have got a group of friends now and that's good for support as well. (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

These findings show how participating in the FY can help tackle the feelings of isolation and not-belonging found by Gregersen and Nilesen (2023) and support the findings of Shepperd *et al.* (2023) that forming friendship networks is beneficial for a sense of belonging and mental health. Others though thought that more could be done to support students in making social connections. For example, Maria had previously attended university in her home country where there was a formal programme of introducing new students to others in the years above:

I have been to uni back home and there, when the new students come, they interact more with other students who are in the second year and they give us information, how to find things, how to do it. Or simple things like 'this teacher is like this, this this. You should do this, this, this'. So it's good to engage with others, other years. (Maria, focus group 2 discussion)

This supports Kovach (2018) who suggested that those with an external locus of control feel the need for affiliation but are hesitant to initiate social contact, with

O'Boyle (2015) also finding non-traditional students can feel separate from the main body of students. This was supported by findings from the third focus group where some participants reported finding it difficult to engage socially at the start of the year:

I was eating in my car the first few weeks. I was like, I don't want to talk to anyone, I just want to, like you said, come in, do it. (Grace, focus group 3 discussion)

This sense of affiliation was helped by some of the class activities that encouraged social interaction.

I think how you did it was really good, how you had to go round asking people questions, like, you had no choice, you had to go and speak to other people. (Stacey, focus group 3 discussion)

This suggests that for those with an external locus of control, structured group activities during the lectures supported students in fulfilling their need for affiliation. This supports Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton (2005), who recommended focussing on creating environments that foster support for all students.

This growing need for affiliation throughout the year saw the emergence of a group identity forming, with evidence of social categorisation and identification (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). One initial form of categorisation took the form of participants being concerned about being much older than the rest of the group and a feeling of relief when this was not the case:

I've not felt, I've not actually felt like the odd one out, or I'm the oldest. I've felt equal. (Nazreen, focus group 2 discussion)

The following exchange from the third focus group discussion highlights the emergence of social identification:

I like the people that I'm with and the environment and... (Rubina)

We've got a good group like... (Nazreen)

No one messes about. (Stacey)

It's like everyone wants to be here. (Laura)

We're all definitely on the same page. (Steve)

This group identification was a growing source of support for participants towards the end of the year and has similarities to Seal and Parkes's (2019) finding that FY students benefit from peer group support. The negative aspects of social comparison (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), that of comparing out-groups unfavourably, was not evident in any of the focus groups.

The final focus group took part in the last week of lectures and one of the main themes from this was the strength of the friendships that had been formed over the year. In the fourth metaplanning activity there were comments reflecting this, with three identical positive comments of, 'Meeting new people'. 'Friendship' was also the category name given by the participants that achieved the most votes. This was the first time that the issue of affiliation had arisen in the metaplanning part of the focus groups. In the discussion that followed the metaplanning task participants reflected upon the support that they gained from each other, with a growing

acknowledgement of this group identity and social identification (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). A few examples from the fourth focus group discussion demonstrate this:

Sometimes I understand in my way and she understands in her way and so sharing this information can help a lot. (Maria, focus group 4 discussion)

I suppose going through that journey together, knowing you are struggling together. (Dominique, focus group 4 discussion)

It's that feeling of all being in the same boat. I know if there's someone else in my boat, then I'm not too worried. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

We're like family. We see each other and it's like, 'you alright? you alright?' (Charmaine, focus group 4 discussion)

Although this sense of identification and belonging was seen as very positive, there was also evidence that this could have a negative effect on participants' progress:

If someone else is like, 'I haven't even started yet', I'm like, 'thank God', it's not just me. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

This suggests a possible negative effect of conformity within group situations, whereby following the social norms within the group is a more powerful influence than individual reasoning. This growing camaraderie also appears to show participants moving away from a neoliberal, individualistic view of themselves (Dardot and Laval, 2014), towards a more collective identity (Metcalf, 2017). From a neoliberal perspective, this can be seen as individually rational if it helps students in achieving their academic aims, however Steve's views show the danger of group identification leading to behaviour that can reduce the chances of individual success.

#### 4.3.4 Summary to motivation

Overall, the findings show that participants were mostly very motivated to succeed, and that this overall motivation was linked to an internal locus of control. There was also evidence of a relationship between having an internal locus and intrinsic motivation. At the start of the year, motivation was focused on the need for achievement, but as the year progressed a need for affiliation grew and a group identity emerged.

#### 4.4 Improvements to provision

One of the aims of this study was to give students a voice. In each of the focus groups, students were asked what improvements they would like to see to the course. This section of the discussion relates to the fourth research question:

How do foundation year students feel that their experience of the foundation year could be improved?

In the literature there is a discussion as to whether support should be directed at changing individual student behaviour to help them adapt to the demands of university study (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott and Mianzo, 2006; Prihadi *et al.*, 2018), or whether the university environment should adapt to fit the needs of students (Krampen, 1988; Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela, 2018). There was evidence for both from the participants. This section is organised into firstly looking at the findings that relate to supporting individual students, and then to looking at the learning environment for all students.

##### 4.4.1 Support targeted at individual students

Throughout the year, there were positive comments in the metaplanning exercises that indicated that the course had supported individuals in developing personal attributes, for example:

Help me learn how to become more independent. (metaplanning group 2, positive comment)

I am confident. (metaplanning group 4, positive comment)

It was seen that the attitudes of the lecturers and the amount of support offered had a significant impact on how participants felt.

In the 3rd lecture we had, 3rd or 4th, you said that, 'you don't have to agree with me', and I was thinking, like, 'OK, you're giving us a chance to think for ourselves'. And that's why I felt more like a student. Because when you're in school or college it's like, 'this is what it is', and 'this is what you need to write down', where this is more, 'what's your thought on this?'. (Grace, focus group 2 discussion)

These sentiments were echoed by others, for example:

I feel like we've got more independence than at college which is quite nice. (Laura, focus group 2 discussion)

You know how there you always had the teachers telling you, 'do this, do this', whereas here, like Laura said, you're more independent. You're basically responsible for your own thing. (Saadiya, focus group 2 discussion)

This suggests that the input from the lecturers can support students in taking responsibility for their studies, moving from an external to an internal locus of control. When reflecting on what would be helpful in overcoming the difficulties identified in starting university, there was some reflection on the usefulness of individual help to support the transition to university, for example:

It would be good to have a one-to-one session with somebody to try and come up with something on how best to manage my time. You know how you do a budget with an accountant. Maybe do, like, a time map, work out what I do and when I do it. (Steve, focus group 3 discussion)

This demonstrates the perceived individual support needed to develop a more internal locus, similar to the type of academic counselling suggested by Abouserie (1994) and Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018).

Overall, these findings suggest that students' feelings of confidence and control can be enhanced on an individual level and that programmes of individual support in developing an internal locus would help students in their studies, in line with the programmes advocated by Gifford, Briceno-Perriott and Mianzo, (2006), Kormanik and Rocco (2009), Clifford (2022) and Davison *et al.* (2022). This ties in with the finding previously reported that even when some participants' confidence was low and it was expressed that there was a lack of support felt, particularly in the third focus group, participants felt that the solutions lay in individual effort. This fits a neoliberal ideology whereby people can be supported to adapt to the social and economic climate to reap individual benefits from this.

#### 4.4.2 Improvements to the learning environment

As well as this personal support for participants to become more confident and independent, there was also discussion of how the university environment could be adapted to make studying easier for students. Findings from the previous section on

motivation showed how participants felt that their need for affiliation could be met through groupwork in lectures and organised meetings with students from other years on the course. Also, throughout this chapter, there have been examples of when participants believed that lecture and assessment materials could be presented more clearly.

The lectures for the course took place on two different campuses. This issue arose repeatedly when asked about improvements that participants would like to see. Participants preferred one campus to the other, with the disliked campus having an impact on participants' feelings:

I hate it there. (Deborah, focus group 2 discussion)

You're so close to the city centre it doesn't feel like uni at all. (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

On their preferred campus, participants felt that the environment allowed them to develop their study skills and take more ownership of their learning, for example, from the second focus group discussion:

It's more calm, it's more chilled. (Charmaine)

You feel like you're at uni. (Steve)

I think that's really good because even on our days off we can still come into uni to do our work. I feel the resources are quite good. They're there, you don't have to book an appointment, they're just provided. (Saadiya)

This supports the view of Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018), that universities have a responsibility to provide a healthy educational environment.

Another factor that affected students was the number of different lecturers they had. One suggestion was to have the same lecturers. The following exchange was from the focus group 3 discussion:

I'd definitely recommend the lecturers though, having the same ones, definitely, because you engage with that person then and then having to start again. (Stacey)

You know them. (Laura)

Yeah, so some people, if they're comfortable with that person they'll speak up, but when you're with someone new some people don't speak up because they're not comfortable. (Stacey)

I don't speak up. (Grace)

These findings support the research of Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton (2005), and show that the environment and the way the course is delivered can be an important factor in supporting students, as well as offering individual support. Comments above, including those from Saadiya and Stacey, suggest that a supportive environment is especially important for those with an external locus, who are less likely to ask for support.

There was an interesting discussion regarding the way that academic skills, such as referencing, were delivered, possibly highlighting a difference between students with an internal or external locus. Some participants had taken part in additional workshops provided by the skills for learning team:

Study skills helped a lot with referencing. (Laura, focus group 3 discussion)

Yes, that was good. (Maria)

Other participants expressed reluctance to access this support, finding it difficult to take the initiative in booking and attending workshops, or in asking for help from staff members that they did not know. These participants displayed a more external locus and would prefer workshops to be timetabled into their schedule rather than them having to access them independently:

I feel like I need someone to show me rather than just saying, 'you can go into the library'. (Rubina, focus group 3 discussion)

It's a big thing to ask for help. (Nazreen, focus group 3 discussion, using the exact same words as the student quoted in the introduction, (internal ref., p. 2), that supported the conception of this research.)

Because everyone commits around the lectures and then having to book something else, it's like, well you've got to. It's awkward. (Stacey, focus group 4 discussion)

This again suggests individual differences between those feeling an internal locus and an external one, supporting previous research that found that those with an internal locus prefer flexible working conditions where they can act autonomously, whereas those with an external locus prefer a more structured environment (Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton, 2005; Li *et al.*, 2015). These comments suggest that there is a need for greater scaffolding of the out-of-lecture work given, which would also support students in managing their independent study time (Garnham and East, 2021).

#### 4.4.3 Summary to improvements section

These findings suggest that there is much that can be done to support students, both in supporting them to fit into university life and in adapting provision to support all students. The external environment appears to affect student locus of control and motivation, and an enabling environment can support students in developing these. This is best done when support is scaffolded so that the support meets the students where they are at rather than expecting students to independently access the support available. Findings that arose from this section are also used to inform the recommendations for practice discussed in the conclusion section of this thesis (internal ref., section 5.4, pp. 183-185).

#### 4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has analysed the findings from the four focus groups in relation to the material outlined in the literature review. The data was organised in relation to the themes of neoliberalism, locus of control, motivation, and how to improve provision. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, rather than present the data in relation to the themes identified, it would have been possible to organise this chapter sequentially, around the findings of each focus group throughout the year. As a summary exercise, the findings will now be related to the beginning, middle and end of the year.

#### Beginning

At the beginning of the year, the views of participants were at their most similar. Participants were mainly in agreement that they had made a positive, individual, choice to enrol, and felt highly motivated. Participants expressed feeling a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation based on interest in the course material, the prospect of gaining qualifications and pursuing a fulfilling career. There were elements of commodity fetishism expressed with a focus on the status of being a student and gaining a degree being motivating factors in themselves, detached from the associated academic work. Participants stated a belief that their outcomes would be determined by their efforts, with an internal locus of control more strongly felt at this point than over the rest of the year. Acceptance of neoliberalism appeared to be mainly based on an appeal to freedom, the ideal form of responsabilisation.

## Middle

In the two focus groups before and after the Christmas break, while there were individual differences, the overall level of motivation expressed by the group was at its lowest. Participants' motivation was focussed extrinsically on the end of semester assessments, and they reported feeling a number of external constraints, including a perceived lack of time due to busy lives and a reliance on support from their tutors. In this way they showed a more external locus, with progress seen as being limited by factors beyond personal control. Some expressed a dual consciousness, accepting the course structure and assessment requirements, but experiencing stress and dissatisfaction in completing them. In relation to explanations for responsabilisation to neoliberal rule, while some expressed elements of learned helplessness, most displayed psychological reactance, where even though they felt a lack of control over the situation, they felt that individual determination would lead to success.

## End

At the end of the year, the pessimism that had characterised the middle of the year had lifted for most participants. Most participants reported feeling a sense of satisfaction, and of pride, at completing the year. They expressed feeling more confident, feeling motivated and looking forward to starting their undergraduate courses. A growing feeling of affiliation to both their lecturers and fellow students was expressed throughout the year and was at its highest in the final focus group. There was more of a balance of feeling an internal and external locus. Mostly, there was an acceptance that many aspects of their experience were set by others, which

they often felt frustrated by, but they felt that their ability to progress was down to their own efforts. Therefore, the explanation of psychological reactance best fits their acceptance of neoliberal rule.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of a group of students over the course of their FY at a post-92 university. Their experiences took place against a backdrop of neoliberal economic and education policies over the previous few decades (Ball, 2015), and this research sought to explore the extent to which participants in this study expressed neoliberal attitudes towards their education. One of the key psychological concepts in understanding neoliberalism is that of locus of control (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017). In terms of this theoretical concept, for neoliberalism to be accepted as just, individuals should perceive an internal locus where the consequences of their actions are determined by their own behaviours rather than any external factors (Rotter, 1954, 1966). Therefore, a focus of this study was to investigate if and how participants' loci of control changed over the academic year. This led to the further aim of examining student motivation over the year and the extent to which this was linked to locus of control. A final aim was to examine how the student experience could be improved in order to formulate recommendations for future support and improve retention of FY students.

This chapter begins by using the research questions as a basis for summarising the main findings of this research. It then progresses to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the research and offers recommendations for practice. Ideas for further research are explored before the chapter concludes with the doctoral contribution of this thesis and some final reflections.

## 5.1 Summary of Findings

RQ1: To what extent do students express neoliberal ideology in relation to their learning experiences during the foundation year of their degree?

According to dominant definitions, neoliberalism appeals to a sense of individual freedom (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009; Sparke, 2013; Jackson, 2015), with widening participation programmes such as the FY seen as expanding individual choice.

There was evidence in this study that the FY did give access to university to students who would not have otherwise entered HE. Several participants had tried or considered other routes into HE but saw the FY as preferable to these, supporting the research of Sanders and Daly (2013), Chandler *et al.* (2018), Hale (2020), Dougherty (2022) and Webber (2023). Findings from this study suggest that removing FYs from university provision, as recommended by the Augar Review (Augar, 2019), would reduce opportunities for non-traditional students.

Previous research found that neoliberal government policies had affected students' attitudes and behaviours to their education, encouraging individuals to make an educational investment in themselves (Woodhall, Hillier and Resnick, 2014; Ball, 2015; Pierce, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). In concurrence with this, there was evidence in this study of participants behaving as consumers purchasing a product that would enhance their lives, with expected emotional and financial gains from completing their studies. However, although acting as consumers, participants were not acting

as particularly well-informed consumers, with evidence suggesting a lack of knowledge of the content of the course being studied, the demands of university study and of progression routes. This supports research by Ingram (2018), Milian and Rizk (2018) and Dashper *et al.* (2020), that students act as consumers to an extent, but their choices are also based more on emotional, subjective criteria, as well as informed, rational decision making.

Throughout the year there was some evidence for the established criticisms of neoliberalism, especially that of commodity fetishism (Furedi, 2011). For example, participants placed a high value on the status of being a student and the expected qualifications that they would gain. To a greater or lesser extent for all participants, these were valued in themselves and disconnected from the labour needed to achieve these goals.

RQ2: To what extent does locus of control change in students over the course of their foundation year?

Neoliberal ideology appeals to a sense of personal freedom where individuals pursue their own aims, which are achieved through individual effort (Joseph, 2017). This corresponds to an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966) whereby consequences of decisions made are perceived to be the result of individual action rather than of external factors.

Using the concepts of appeal to freedom, psychological reactance and learned helplessness to examine participants' experiences, as outlined by Pyysiäinen, Halpinb and Guilfoylec's (2017) explanations of responsabilisation to neoliberal rule, there were changes evident in participants' responses through the year. At the beginning of the year, an appeal to freedom was more in evidence, with participants expressing that they were feeling an internal locus of control. Participants were in agreement that their enrolment represented an individual choice and that their outcomes would be determined by individual effort. As the year progressed, and especially in the middle of the year, participants expressed feeling more that external factors were determining their experience of the course, with some showing a degree of learned helplessness (Overmier and Seligman, 1967). For example, it was expressed that level of assignment support offered, quality of teaching and external commitments were key factors that determined success, more so than those under individual control. However, towards the end of the year, an internal locus was again more in evidence, with participants feeling that their further progress was in their own hands and expressing a sense of optimism regarding their future studies. Overall, throughout the year, and especially towards the end of the year, the most common explanation of responsabilisation was that of psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). This was shown in participants attributing the reasons for many of their experiences, both positive and negative, to factors beyond their control. However, participants mainly expressed an internal locus regarding their performance in upcoming assessments and their progression onto the next year.

In looking at the factors that influence locus of control, towards the beginning of the year there was general agreement expressed between participants, suggesting a

strong situation (Krampen, 1988) whereby the external environment was more determining of the locus of control felt. As the year progressed, more individual differences emerged, with different participants expressing feeling different degrees of internal or external locus. This suggests a weakening of the situation over the year, with internal personality traits playing more of a role. However, the same participants often displayed a different locus of control at different times, even within the same focus group. This suggests that locus of control can be influenced by a combination of environmental and personality factors and can vary according to context. This is different to the psychological framing of the concept as a fixed personality attribute. This adaptation of the concept of locus of control as changeable in educational contexts is an original contribution of this thesis and part of my doctoral claim.

RQ3: What factors affect students' levels of motivation during their foundation year?

The findings from this study support previous research which found that having an internal locus of control correlates positively with a higher level of motivation to succeed (Karaman and Watson, 2017). In this study, motivation was highest at the beginning and at the end of the year, when participants felt an internal locus of control. During the middle of the year, participants reported that their motivation levels had dropped, when participants were expressing a more external locus.

Participants reported feeling a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation throughout the year. Higher overall levels of motivation at the beginning and end of the year

were more linked to participants feeling intrinsically motivated, with extrinsic motivation more commonly expressed during the middle of the year. This supports the findings of Fazez and Fazez (2001) and Galvin *et al.* (2018) that link intrinsic motivation with internal locus of control. However, there were individual differences shown whereby some participants saw extrinsic rewards as being informational and so kept an internal locus whereas others saw them as more controlling, indicating a more external locus (Deci, 1971, 1972).

At the start of the year the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961) was a clear motivating factor for all participants. Throughout the year there was growing evidence of the motivating power of the need for affiliation with lecturers and others on the course. Also, during the year, a sense of group identification (Tajfal and Turner, 1979) could be seen to emerge that supported participants and affected motivation, with participants referring to the similarities between them and the growing friendships between members of the cohort. However, although being beneficial to participants, there was a danger that group norms of not completing work could damage individual achievement, for example when participants expressed relief when finding out that others had also not started their assignments.

RQ4: How do foundation year students feel that their experience of the foundation year could be improved?

There was evidence from the participants to suggest that they believed that support could be aimed both at developing a more internal locus in individual students and

also on cultivating a more supportive environment for all students, whether they have an internal or external locus.

In relation to supporting individual students, participants noted a difference between university and previous study, with their learning now being less prescribed and offering greater freedom of thought and reflection. While some expressed feeling stressed by this perceived a lack of structure, others reported that the way that they were being taught was supporting them in becoming more confident and in developing as independent learners. These findings support the work of Kormanik and Rocco (2009), Kovach (2018) and Prihadi *et al.* (2018), that study programmes can support students in developing an internal locus of control and in adapting to the requirements of university study. This also supports the theoretical basis of neoliberalism, that people can be taught to govern themselves. However, findings from this study show that any such programmes need to be considerate of individual differences between students.

Findings also showed that as well as supporting students individually, the learning environment influenced all students. Factors that were seen as supportive included the built environment of the campus, offering a welcoming, studious environment, having a small team of lecturers that the participants could feel a personal connection to, and having study skills built into the taught programme rather than being offered as additional activities. These findings support the work of Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton (2005), Karaman, Nelson and Cavazos Vela (2018) and

Garnham and East (2021), with universities having a duty to provide an environment where all students feel valued and able to achieve.

Findings that arose from this research question are also used to inform the recommendations discussed below (internal ref., pp. 181-185).

## 5.2 Strengths and weaknesses of the research

In the introduction to this thesis, it was noted that there was little existing research done specifically on the topic of FYs, and also little on the psychological impact of neoliberal policies (internal ref., pp. 8-10). By focusing on these gaps in knowledge, this research contributes to the understanding of the FY student experience. Also, as outlined in the methodology section (internal ref., pp. 65-66), most research conducted on locus of control has taken a positivist approach, correlating results from a locus of control questionnaire with another variable, at one point in time. In using qualitative methods to explore the development of this over the course of a year, this study adds to the research in this area, allowing more in-depth understanding of the FY experience, which can lead to improvements to provision.

From the beginning of this study, I wanted participation to be beneficial to those taking part and for participants to feel that they gained something from the experience (internal refs., p. 68, p. 90). I undertook the research with sensitivity, followed all ethical guidelines (BERA 2018) and was pleased that participants expressed that they enjoyed taking part in this research project and that it was a

valuable space for them to discuss, and reflect upon, their progress over the year. Also, although this was a small group and care needs to be taken when generalising, this study has given voice to a cohort whose voices are less heard compared to other groups.

However, one criticism of neoliberalism, as highlighted in chapter two (internal ref., p. 30), is that practices such as course evaluations and other student voice initiatives could have the opposite effect to that intended. Whilst aiming to empower the consumer, it has been argued that they are more likely to encourage an external locus and a dependent attitude, where students expect lecturers to provide for their needs rather than taking personal responsibility (Jackson, 2015). In asking students to reflect on the positives, negatives and potential improvements regarding their university experience, there was a danger of encouraging this attitude during the course of this research. Although there was nothing in the data collected to suggest that this was the case, it is worth noting this as a potential criticism of this study.

There were strengths and weaknesses found in using the metapanning technique. On the positive side, it ensured that all participants contributed by individually writing on the post-it notes. The sorting out of the post-its into categories acted as a shared activity, which brought the participants together in completing a group task that was similar to work done in lectures, and so putting participants at ease. Also, the metapanning activity aided the follow-up discussions, with the answers given in the metapanning activity acting as cues for discussion and opportunities for reflection. However, there were problems found in using the metapanning technique. While

the metaplanning exercise worked well in informing the more open group discussions that followed, some of the responses on the post-it notes were rather minimal, with some comments being one word such as 'support', 'time' or 'stress'. Due to this part of the task being anonymous, it was not possible to ask specific follow-up questions to individual participants.

The more open focus group discussions that followed the metaplanning exercise achieved the aim of allowing me to act as the facilitator of a discussion rather than directly interviewing the participants. At the time of the data collection, I felt that the focus groups had gone well, but later on I could see some problems. Analysing the data was at times frustrating as some of the discussion was rather unfocussed and I missed opportunities to prompt participants and steer the discussion more in the direction of the research questions.

In the longitudinal design of the research, having four data collection points, at the start and end of each semester, worked well to gather views at significant points during the year. On reflection, although separated by the Christmas holiday, the second and third focus groups were quite close together and the findings from these were quite similar. Also, although it would have been practically difficult, collecting data from before the year started and after the second semester assessment results had been published would have given additional findings that would have allowed greater insight of the student journey over the year.

The concern identified in the methodology section (internal ref., p. 70-71) of participants dropping out was borne out to an extent. However, there was a core group of seven participants who attended most of the focus groups, and the strategy planned of having refreshment samples (Deng *et al.*, 2013) worked well, expanding the overall number of participants without disrupting the cohesion of the group.

My insider position of knowing and being known to the participants (Le Gallais, 2008) as their lecturer proved to be an advantage for two main reasons. Firstly, without knowing the students, I am doubtful that I would have been able to recruit participants for this study. For the first focus group I was able to advertise the study to the whole group and to talk to students individually to explain the study and answer any queries. I could also carry out the data collection immediately after my lectures, reducing any inconvenience of participation. Even so, from a population of about sixty FY students, I was only able to secure eight for the first focus group. For subsequent focus groups, recruitment was easier, with students who had taken part in previous focus groups happy to be included. Also, some students who did not originally volunteer were curious and asked to be included. Secondly, having a positive relationship with participants meant that students were comfortable in my presence, with the activities reflecting the type of groupwork that participants were used to in my lectures (Ord, 2012). My position of being their lecturer did not appear to inhibit participants, and they appeared to speak freely, with several saying that they enjoyed the sessions.

Throughout the research, I kept in mind that I was also an outsider and that my age, gender, ethnicity, social class and educational background meant that my life experiences were different to my participants. Being their lecturer, I was also aware of the potential power differential in my relationship with my participants. Reflecting on the research, I am confident that I did accurately convey the voices of my participants in the discussion section of this thesis. As stated above, the use of focus groups and the metaplanning technique meant that I did not dominate the sessions, with the interactions being between the participants. Discussions with my supervisors, keeping a journal over the course of the year and listening back to the audio recordings allowed me to reflect on the data collection. Also, in conversation at the end of the final focus group, participants stated that they had felt comfortable in the sessions and were able to express their views over the year. In hindsight, this end-of-year evaluation could have been conducted more formally with a survey completed by students. Also, ideally, respondent validation would have been used to check the authenticity of the data. At the end of the year participants were given my details and invited to contact me to discuss the findings, but none of them did. I did plan to be more proactive in pursuing this member checking, but due to the time taken to analyse the findings it was not feasible to contact students so long after the data collection had taken place.

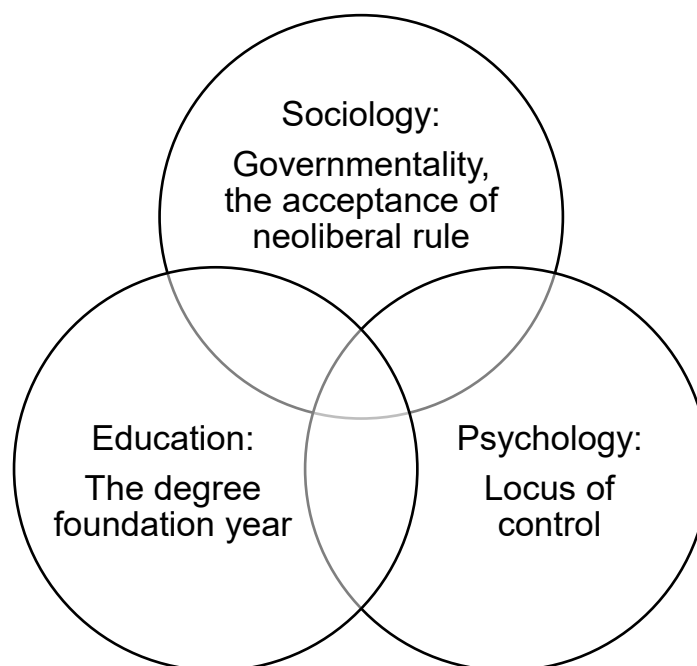
The study can be criticised for the nature of the sampling. The self-selecting nature of the samples for each focus group meant that I was capturing the voices of students who were likely to be more motivated and have a more internal locus of control than those that did not volunteer, making it difficult to generalise the findings

to others on the course. Indeed, the participants in this study had better rates of attendance, achievement and progression than average for their cohort.

### 5.3 Theoretical contribution of this research

This thesis has brought together different lenses from psychology, sociology and education to examine the experiences of a particular group of students.

Figure 6. Intersection of different theoretical lenses



From this intersection of different disciplines, it is shown that better support can be provided if these different areas are used together to understand the student experience. This study examined the experiences of FY students by applying sociological theories of governmentality and psychological ones of locus of control. This multidisciplinary approach is a novel contribution of this thesis and has the

potential to be applied to illuminate the experiences of other cohorts of students across the sector.

#### 5.4 Implications of the findings and recommendations for practice

On a broader level, this research highlights some of the issues relating to the neoliberal context of HE. On the one hand, students expressed that the FY offered an opportunity for degree level study and was seen as a good choice when compared to other options. On the other hand, throughout the year students showed that they felt frustrated by the system they found themselves in, feeling a lack of control over such issues as the university timetable, the material covered, the lecture style and content and the assignments that they undertook. In this sense, it could be argued that the neoliberal promise of freedom was not fulfilled, but rather there was a sense of dual consciousness (Gramsci, 1947), with governmentality achieved by psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). In this, participants accepted that they needed to work within the constraints of the system and that it was for them to achieve the best they could within this. It is possible that the reason for low retention rates for FY students, both at this university and nationally, is that for these students responsabilisation to neoliberal rule occurs due to learned helplessness (Overmier and Seligman, 1967), with students experiencing an external locus of control and either leaving or not submitting assignments due to feeling a lack of agency in their studies. From the findings of this study, more could be done to support those studying within a neoliberal economic and social framework, both before enrolment and throughout their studies.

As seen in the findings relating to the first research question, students in this study were not very aware of the nature of university study before enrolment and showed some degree of commodity fetishism (Furedi, 2011), valuing the idea of being at university and the potential rewards from attaining a degree, but without a full appreciation of the amount and level of work involved in university study. This is of concern because in focussing on the extrinsic rewards available from the course, students could be less focussed on the work required to achieve these rewards and find less intrinsic satisfaction from their studies, leading to shallower learning (Kader, 2014). It is therefore important to prepare students as fully as possible before they begin their studies, so that they are more informed of the demands of the course. Although the start of the academic year might seem the best time for setting expectations of the year ahead, findings showed that participants did not like the introductory nature of the first few weeks and they expressed frustration at the module content and assessment focus not starting sooner. Therefore, there needs to be a focus on pre-induction, for example marketing could focus more on the commitment required for full time study, a pre-induction programme could be expanded to give students more of a taste of university study before the course commences, including study days where students meet their lecturers and personal tutors, attend some lectures and produce a piece of work.

The findings related to the second research question showed that participants' feelings of control were sensitive to the perceived limits or opportunities of the situation. The findings of the third research question were that an internal locus of control was linked to higher motivation levels, and especially higher intrinsic motivation. Building on these findings and those relating to the fourth research

question, students would benefit from being supported at an individual level, to help their development of a more internal locus of control. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that some students will find it difficult to develop an internal locus and that more can be done to provide a structured environment to support them. Specific recommendations relating to this issue are given in the next five paragraphs.

The most obvious way to increase internal locus of control is to give students more choice over their studies, both in subject content and delivery. As the assessments were shown in this study to be one of the main causes of stress during the year, more choice of assessment topics and methods could be given, but also more flexibility of when to complete assessments.

Whereas lectures are very structured, the rest of the students' learning is more unstructured. While students are given various tasks and readings to do each week, they are left to do these independently. From the findings of this study, and also from my reflections as a lecturer, students with an external locus of control often engage well during the lectures but struggle to do so outside of the structure of these lectures. To support students in developing an internal locus, a flipped approach could be used with more independent learning tasks completed during lectures, such as reading, note making and assessment writing. Then outside of lectures, the University's virtual learning platform could be used to provide more structure to students' learning, with discreet tasks needing to be completed within a certain timeframe. This supports Davison's (2021a) findings that flipped learning was effective for FY students in developing independence.

The transition from the first to the second semester was a time when external locus of control was highest and motivation lowest. The modular nature of the course meant that students experienced a discontinuity between semesters. The findings from the second and third focus groups suggest that this period could be managed to offer more support to students. The most expressed view was that it would be beneficial if the lecturers, or at least some of them, could be the same in both semesters. Also, having some of the modules being year-long would allow for a continuity of subject content. On a broader scale, when listening to students discuss the course, they talked about the separate modules a lot, comparing them and the different requirements for each one. However, there was little discussion of the course as a whole. To support students, it would be beneficial if more links could be made between different modules so that they see the connectedness of their studies.

One of the key findings from this study was the sense of affiliation that students felt both to each other and their lecturers. This affiliation was a source of motivation and also supported students in feeling an internal locus of control. Building on the previous point regarding having a continuity of lecturers over the year, students on the FY would benefit from having a small team of teaching staff to support them. Since this study was completed, this has been achieved to a large extent at this university with a small, dedicated team of lecturers, student transition teachers, a departmental FY co-ordinator and an academic coach that are focussed on the FY. In relation to feeling a sense of affinity to each other, work has also been done to offer further transition and support events. Also, more group work has been

incorporated into the lectures. This could be built on further, for example with the inclusion of other year groups, including an idea from Maria who spoke of her experience of studying in Portugal where new students choose 'godmothers' and 'godfathers' from other years on the course.

The FY includes a study skills module, which focusses on areas such as note making, essay skills, referencing, as well as time management. This module could be enhanced by also including non-academic skills, similar to that advocated by Davison *et al.* (2022) which covers topics including mindfulness and resilience. Some of the concepts from this study could be included in such a programme. Raising students' awareness of the research relating to locus of control and motivation would be first steps in supporting students to increase their internal locus and intrinsic motivation, with activities developed to enhance these further.

Although these recommendations come from the findings of this specific study, from my experience as a lecturer throughout the degree course, and in working with colleagues from other subject areas, they do have relevance more generally, and these recommendations can be applied beyond this particular piece of research.

### 5.5 Suggestion for future research

Moving forwards, the best way to continue my research would be to complete a piece of action research to develop the ideas that have arisen from this study.

Action research is associated with critical theory, which has an emancipatory interest

and aims to empower students (Held, 1980). Building on the final recommendation in the previous section, activities aimed at increasing internal locus of control and motivation levels would benefit students both academically and possibly more broadly in enhancing their university experience. Action research is particularly suited to educational research (McNiff, 2017) and would involve working with students to improve their experience of the FY. This would allow me to work with students over the course of the year to initiate activities, but also to reflect with participants on the effectiveness of these and to plan new activities based on student needs. This research would take place over the year and follow the four-step approach of Kemmis and McTaggart (1981) of plan-act-observe-reflect. Several cycles would be planned over the year to reflect student needs. I envisage starting the research by introducing the concept of locus of control and how this affects motivation and other aspects of achievement, and work with students over the year to support them in developing and maintaining an internal locus.

## 5.6 Final reflections

One hope for myself when designing this research was that it would help me to better understand the needs of FY students and lead to improvements in the provision of these. Overall, I am more convinced than ever of the value of the FY and that the possibility of removing FYs as an option, as recommended by the Augar Review (2019), would be a mistake. Throughout the research I was impressed with the resilience of the students. One of the main findings of this study was the level of psychological reactance shown by the participants, that even when they found

external pressure upon them, they took responsibility for their progress and were optimistic for the future.

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## Appendix A. Participant information sheet

### **Student experiences of their foundation year.**

Researcher: Graham Jones, Doctoral Researcher, Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton. [e-mail address redacted]

### **Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study aims to explore your experiences of your foundation year, looking at the things that you find positive and negative about studying on this course.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **What will happen if I decide to take part?**

You will be asked to fill in a short questionnaire giving some basic details of your background and educational experience so far.

Then you will take part in a group discussion (lasting about 30 mins) asking about your expectations of the course. Further group discussions are planned for later on in the year (one at the end of sem 1 and one at the end of sem 2). It is hoped that you will be able to take part in all three discussions, but taking part in one discussion group does not mean that you are committed to taking part in further discussions.

There will also be the opportunity to volunteer for individual interviews, if you wish.

#### **What are the potential benefits and risks of taking part?**

Though there are no direct benefits for you if you take part, by taking part you will help us to find out more about the foundation year and this will help improve delivery of the course in the future. Also, you might find that reflecting on your experiences in a group and hearing the views of others to be an enjoyable, beneficial experience.

There are no risks to you in taking part outside of those you would experience in everyday life. However, by taking part in any study there is always the small risk that you find the experience stressful. If this occurs, the researcher will ask you if you want to continue to participate in the interview. Any decision you make will be respected.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. All the information about your participation in this study will be kept confidential. All materials relating to this study will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked office. Only the researcher working on the project will have access to the information. You will not be identifiable in any publication or report as the data will be grouped together and all identifying information will be removed.

### **What will happen at the end of the research study?**

When the study is complete, I will send you a summary of the findings if you request this. The results of the project will form the basis of a doctoral thesis and will potentially be published in academic journals. You may request copies of these publications from me.

### **What if I have a problem or concern?**

If you have a problem, please address this to myself in the first instance and I will try to answer any queries or concerns you may have. You may also contact my research supervisors via email: Dr David Matheson at [e-mail address redacted] and Dr Jennifer Worsley at [e-mail address redacted].

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

The FEHW Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wolverhampton

### **Contact for further information**

For any questions, contact me at [e-mail address redacted]

Thank you for reading this, I hope that you can find time to participate in this study and that you find your participation a rewarding experience.

Appendix B. Participant background questionnaire

**Title of Project: Student experiences of their foundation year.**

**Name of Researcher: Graham Jones**

Background questionnaire

As stated on the participant information sheet, all information given in this questionnaire will be kept confidential.

Name .....

Age

18-25 ....

26-30 ....

31-35 ....

36-40 ....

41-45 ....

46+ ....

Gender

Male ....

Female ....

Previous qualifications

Please give your highest level of previous qualifications, eg GCSE, Btec etc

.....  
.....  
.....

In regard to the last time you were in education:

Date finished .....

Course .....

Please describe your current/most recent employment:

.....  
.....  
.....

Do you live locally or have you moved in order to attend university?

Live locally ....

Moved from .....

## Appendix C: Metaplanning schedule

### ***Student experiences over the course of their foundation year: Metaplanning<sup>1</sup> workshop***

#### *Material required:*

Four colours of square post-its, sticky dots [two colours], four sheets of A1 flipchart paper, board markers, two audio recorders with fresh batteries.

6-8 participants per group.

- 1 What are/have been your positive expectations/experiences of studying on the foundation year this year?
  - a. Three Post-Its: what have been your positive experiences of doing the foundation year? Each participant to respond as quickly as possible, one positive per Post-It. Participants stick the Post-Its anywhere on the sheet marked *Positives*.
  - b. The group puts the Post-Its into categories and gives each category a name
  - c. Vote [one sticky dots per participant], vote for categories, NOT for individual Post-Its [this can be done after the negatives have been put up and categorised]
- 2 What are/have been your negative expectations/experiences of studying on the foundation year so far this year?
  - a. Three post-its: what have been your negative experiences of doing the foundation year? Each participant to respond as quickly as possible, one negative per Post-It. Participants stick the Post-Its anywhere on the sheet marked *Negatives*.
  - b. The group puts the Post-Its into categories and gives each category a name
  - c. Vote [one sticky dots per participant], vote for categories, NOT for individual Post-Its [this can be done after the positives have been put up and categorised]
- 3 Summary and comment/discussion: to what extent have these expectations so far reflected reality?
- 4 Fresh Post-It: which negative can overcome all the positives? This need not be a repeat of a previous idea. Stick on sheet
- 5 Fresh Post-It: which positive can overcome all the negatives? This need not be a repeat of a previous idea. Stick on sheet
- 6 Discussion

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<sup>1</sup> This follows the technique developed for Davies, P, Osborne, M and Williams, J (2002) *For Me or Not for Me? - That is the Question: A Study of Mature Students' Decision Making and Higher Education*. Research report 297. London: DfES. See also: Matheson, C and Matheson, D (2009) Déballage d'idées, catégorisations et hiérarchisation comme activités structurées en groupe focalisé, *Pédagogie médicale* 10, 1 pp65-68

## Appendix D. Focus group discussion prompts

### Focus group 1

Looking again at the posters, at the expectations of the course. How have these expectations so far reflected reality?

What was the strongest reason for coming to uni?

What are the biggest hopes for the year?

What worries (if any) did you have about starting the course? (How did you overcome these?)

So far, has your experience on the course reflected these hopes and worries?

What do you think will be the biggest challenges to come?

How does it feel to be at university?

Has it affected your views of yourself?

How have people around you reacted to you coming to uni?

## Focus group 2

The last focus group looked at your expectations of the course. Has reality met your expectations?

Have your hopes for the course been met so far?

Have the worries you had come true?

Looking again at the posters, looking in more depth at the positives, what have been the things that have helped you progress on the course.

What have been the things that have limited your progress?

How does it now feel to be at university?

Has it affected your views of yourself?

How have people around you reacted to you coming to uni?

Looking ahead, what are the biggest challenges facing you?

What do you need to do to face these challenges?

### Focus group 3

The last focus group was the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester. How have things been since then?

How has the experience of doing the assessments been?

Has the experience of doing the assessments met your expectations?

Has the course so far met your expectations?

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the course so far?

Have your hopes for the course been met so far?

Have the worries you had come true?

What have been the things that have helped you progress on the course.

What have been the things that have limited your progress?

How does it now feel to be at university?

How does starting semester 2 feel in comparison to starting semester 1?

Has it affected your views of yourself?

Has your view of yourself changed since the start of sem 1?

How have people around you reacted to you coming to uni?

Starting semester 2, what are the biggest challenges facing you?

What do you need to do to face these challenges?

#### Focus group 4

The last focus group was the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester. How have things been since then?

How has the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester been?

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester?

How ready do you feel for the Sem 2 assignments?

Thinking of the foundation year as a whole:

Has the course met your expectations?

Were the hopes you had for the course met?

Have the worries you had come true?

What have been the things that have helped you progress on the course?

What have been the things that have limited your progress?

How does it now feel to be at university?

How does it feel compared to the start of the year?

Has your view of yourself changed over the year?

Have you noticed a change in the view of others towards you over the year?

How do you feel about progressing to level 4 next year?

What do you need to do to face these challenges?

Would you recommend the foundation year? Why/why not?

## Appendix E. Ethics submission and approval form

### Ethics Submission Form 2018 Faculty of Education, Health and Well-being

- You must complete all sections of this form in as much detail as possible. (word counts are given if necessary) If your form is incomplete, it will be returned to you to resubmit.
- You must be given approval for your research project from the University before you can begin.
- Applications should be submitted by 1st Monday of each month to FEHWRsearch@wlv.ac.uk

#### SECTION ONE

##### 1. Enter Your First Name and Surname Below:

First Name	Graham
Surname	Jones

##### 2. Enter your University Student/ Number

1524321

##### 3. Enter your University e mail address (e.g. M.Name@wlv.ac.uk)

[e-mail address redacted]

##### 4. Enter your daytime contact telephone number in case we need to contact you.

[redacted]

##### 5. Enter the name of your Project Supervisor, Director of Studies, or Principal Investigator.

David Matheson

##### 6. Which subject area is your research / project located? Please ✓ all that apply

		✓
1	FEHW	✓
2	Education	✓
3	Health	
4	Sport	
5	Psychology	
6	FSE	
7	FOSS	
8	FOA	
9	COLT	
10	Cross University Project	
	Other – Please give details below:	

<b>7 Please indicate if this study is</b>	
	✓
Staff Research (Externally funded)	
Staff Research (University funded)	✓ EdD thesis

<b>8. Which Category of Project Are You Applying For?</b>				
Categories are outlined in the handbook from the RPU ( <a href="http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu">www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu</a> ) Please tick ✓				
Category A	✓	Category B		Category 0

<b>9. Give details of service user involvement</b>
The participants for the study will be University of Wolverhampton students.

## SECTION TWO

<b>10. What is the title of your project?</b>
A case study of student experiences over the course of the foundation year of their degree at a post-92 university.

<b>11. Give details of any proposed research questions/hypothesis</b>
In relation to students undertaking a level 3 foundation year of their Early Childhood Studies degree course:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. At the start of the course, what are students' expectations and concerns regarding the year ahead on the course?</li> <li>2. During the course, what factors impact how well students settle into the course and maintain their engagement throughout the course?</li> <li>3. Towards the end of the course, what factors do students regard as having affected their level of success during the year?</li> </ol>

<b>12. Briefly outline your project, stating the rationale, aims and expected outcomes. (300 words)</b>
<p>Rationale:</p> <p>Widening participation (WP) is a key focus for the university that is the setting for this study. Although all sides agree on the benefits of WP, there is a lack of understanding as to how this best happens and of how institutions need to change to fulfil these aims (Webber, 2014). Foundation years are an increasing part of the University offer, aiming to bridge the gap to university study for students without the necessary qualifications to enter straight onto the degree programme. A quick search of the ucas website for undergraduate</p>

degrees including a foundation year found 2549 courses on offer to begin in September 2018 with the university that this project is based at offering foundation years as a means of progressing onto 132 different undergraduate degree courses. Most studies on WP have been undertaken at either access courses in FE colleges or on level 4 university students. Little is known about the effectiveness of foundations years in meeting their objectives (Sanders and Daly, 2012)

Aims:

Having taught on the foundation year of the Early Childhood Studies degree (formally the LeAP course) and been the personal tutor for a number of students, I have seen at first-hand how students engage with the course academically, socially, emotionally and practically. I have observed their hopes, expectations and also seen the difficulties that they encountered during the year. The aim of this study is to give voice to these students over the course of the year and to investigate the factors that enable and hinder student engagement and success.

Expected outcomes:

The proposed study is an attempt to explore and gain insight into students' experiences of their foundation year. The data from this study will be used to identify issues and themes that inhibit and enable student engagement throughout the year of their course. The study is for the thesis part of my EdD programme. The findings will also be disseminated at staff conferences and development events.

Sanders, L. & Daly, A. (2012) Building a successful foundation? The role of Foundation Year courses in preparing students for their degree. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(Special Issue).

Webber, L. (2014) Accessing HE for non-traditional students: 'Outside of my position'.. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 19(1), pp. 91-106.

### **13. How will your research be conducted? (750 words max.)**

**Describe the methods so that it can be easily understood by the ethics committee.**

**Please ensure you clearly explain any acronyms and subject specific terminology.**

Potential participants will be recruited by a volunteer sample of students from the foundation year cohort (approximately 30-40 students). Potential participants will be given full details of all aspects of the study both verbally and on an information sheet and given time (at least a week) to decide whether they wish to volunteer. It will be made clear that they can withdraw at any time without prejudice.

Volunteers will first be asked to fill out a questionnaire relating to demographic details.

Focus groups of ideally six to eight students will be held at several points over the year (probably three points but possibly more). These will be near the beginning of the year, during the year and near the end of the year. The focus groups will be structured using a metaplanning technique developed by Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002). This is a technique that takes the focus of the group away from the researcher and allows all participants to contribute equally. Using post-it notes, participants are asked about their positive and negative experiences and then asked as a group to categorise and then vote on which categories are most pertinent. The focus groups will last about 30-45mins each.

Follow-up one-to-one interviews with a sample of the participants will be held to explore in more depth the findings of the focus groups. These will be held in a private room. Participants who volunteer for the focus group section of the study will not be expected or obliged to take part in the individual interviews.

No questions will be asked in either the focus groups or interviews that would not be asked as part of general tutorial discussions between personal tutor and student/group of students, where questions relating to students' progress and concerns are routinely discussed.

Both the focus groups and individual interviews will be audio recorded.

Davies, P., Osborne, M. & Williams, J. (2002) *For Me or Not for Me? - That is the Question: A Study of Mature Students' Decision Making and Higher Education*. Research report 297, London: DfES.

#### 14. How will your data be analysed?

Demographic data will be coded by categories relating to age, previous education etc

Qualitative data will be transcribed and analysed using nvivo software. The data will be analysed in relation to emerging themes. Richards (2009) three levels of coding (descriptive, topic, analytic) will be used as a basis of analysis.

Some of the data will be quantifiable, eg the number of participants who agree that a particular category is relevant; the number of positive/negative categories etc

Illustrative quotes will be used to highlight certain points. These will be anonymised.

Richards, L. (2009) *Handling Qualitative data*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Sage.

**15. Is ethical approval required by an external agency? (e.g. NHS, company, other university, outside organisation, etc.)**

1. NO
2. YES - but ethical approval has not yet been obtained

External Approval will be sought from:

3. YES - see contact details below of person who can verify that ethical approval has been obtained)

--

**16. What in your view are the ethical considerations involved in this project? (e.g. confidentiality, consent, risk, physical or psychological harm, etc.) Please explain in full sentences. Do not simply list the issues. You should also make it clear how you are going to deal with issues with regard to your own welfare and safety.**

Areas	✓	Intervention
Confidentiality	✓	Participants will not be identifiable from any reporting of the data. All data will be anonymised. Data will be stored on a password protected memory stick.
Consent	✓	Participants involved in the focus groups or interviews will be given full disclosure of all aspect of the study and asked to provide written consent. Continued consent will not be assumed by the researcher and will be re-sought for each focus group that participants volunteer for.
Participants Under 18	n/a	

**17. Have participants been/will participants be, fully informed of the risks and benefits of participating and of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the research at any time?**

1. YES (Outline your procedures for informing participants in the space below.)
2. NO (Use the space below to explain why)
3. Not applicable - There are no participants in this study

Participants will be provided with a participant information sheet informing them of the risks and benefits of participating and of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the research at any time. This will be repeated before each round of focus groups/interviews.

**18. How will you ensure that the identity of your participants is protected (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for guidance on anonymity)**

No identifiable information will be contained in the write-up of the findings. Student names or any identifiable information will not be used.

Audio-recordings and other data from interviews and focus groups will be held on an encrypted, password-protected memory stick for a period not exceeding five years, after which the data will be deleted. Only the researcher will have access to this data.

**19. How will you ensure that data remains confidential ((See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of confidentiality)**

All data will be stored on an encrypted memory stick (see answer to qu 18)

**20. How will you store your data during and after the project? (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of and guidance on data protection and storage).**

Until the publication of the thesis, all data will be stored on an encrypted memory stick (see answer to qu 18)

### SECTION THREE

The following questions must be answered otherwise your form will not be reviewed and it will need to be resubmitted to the panel at a later date.

**21. Does Your Research Involve Children Under 18 years of Age?**

Please delete and leave your response below

1. Yes /No

If Yes, Do you have an Enhanced Disclosure Certificate from the Criminal Records Bureau/Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)?

2. Yes/No

**22. Are participants in your study going to be recruited from a potentially vulnerable group? (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of vulnerable groups )**

1. YES (Describe below which groups and what measures you will take to respect their rights and safeguard them)

2. NO

**23. Does your research fit into any of the following security-sensitive categories? (For definition of security sensitive categories see RPU webpages ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) follow links to Ethical Guidance). If so please complete questions 22-26**

	Security Sensitive Categories	If YES, please tick below. ✓	If NO, please tick below. ✓
1	Commissioned by the military		✓
2	Commissioned under an EU security call		✓
3	Involve the acquisition of security clearances		✓
4	Concerns terrorist or extreme groups		✓

**24. Does your research involve the storage on a computer of any records, statements or other documents that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts? Please delete and leave your response below.**

1. YES / NO

**25. Will your research involve the electronic transmission (e.g. as an email attachment) of any records or statements that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts? Please delete and leave your response below.**

1. YES / NO

**26. Do you agree to store electronically on a secure University file store any records or statements that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts. Do you also agree to scan and upload any paper documents with the same sort of content? Access to this file store will be protected by a password unique to you. Please confirm you understand and agree to these conditions.**

1. YES I understand and agree to the conditions

2. NO (please explain below)

3. I do not understand the conditions

**27. Do you agree NOT to transmit electronically to any third party documents in the University secure document store?**

1. YES I agree

2. NO I don't agree

**28. Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with extreme, or terrorist, organisations? (for definition of extreme or terrorist organisations see RPU webpages ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow links to Ethical Guidance.**

1. YES (Please outline which websites and why you consider this necessary)
2. NO

**29. You are advised that visits to websites that might be associated with extreme or terrorist organisations may be subject to surveillance by the police. Accessing those sites from University IP addresses might lead to police enquiries. Do you understand this risk?**



1. YES I understand
2. NO I don't understand

**30. Appendices (All submissions) Please list the items that you are submitting with this document. (These will need to be submitted to [FEHWRResearch@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:FEHWRResearch@wlv.ac.uk) ) You may want to include additional information that will help the panel with their decision such as your proposal. You need to provide examples of research instruments, recruitment posters and leaflets, information sheets (age appropriate) assent forms (for children), consent forms, risk assessment if research is carried out abroad .**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Section 4****CONFIRMATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL AND FEEDBACK ON SUBMISSION****TO BE COMPLETED AS INDICATED, BY MODULE LEADER, SUPERVISOR AND/OR HEAD OF ETHICS PANEL****CATEGORY A PROPOSALS:**

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by the above student/member of staff is a category A proposal and that s/he may now continue with the proposed research activity:*

For a student's proposal – Name of module leader or supervisor giving approval	
For a member of staff's proposal – name of Head of Ethics panel giving approval	 DIANA BANNISTER
Signed	
Date	18/07/2018.

**CATEGORY B PROPOSALS:**

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by above student/member of staff is a category B proposal and that all requirements for category B proposals have been met.*

**On behalf of students (only):**

Name of module leader or supervisor	
Signed	
Date	

**On behalf of members of staff and students**

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by above student/member of staff is a category B proposal and has the following decision*

<p><b>Approved</b> with no conditions/ amendments. Continue with study.</p>
<p><b>Approved subject to conditions.</b> Make minor/major amendments.</p>
<p><b>Not Approved –</b> Substantial re-write. Resubmit as New application</p>

Signed	
Name of Chair of Ethics Panel	
Date	

**Checklist of submissions required for Category B proposals:**

Outline summary: rationale and expected benefits from the study, with a statement of what the researcher is proposing to do and how	
Explanation of the methodology to be used	
An information sheet and copy of a consent form to be used with subjects	
Details of how information will be kept	
Details of how results will be fed back to participants	
Letter of consent from any collaborating institutions	
Letter of consent from head of institution wherein any research activity will take place	

**ALL PROPOSALS:**

<b>Office Use Only:</b>	
<b>Submission Number</b>	
<b>Date of Review</b>	<b>18<sup>th</sup> July 2018</b>
<b>Identified Category</b>	<b>A</b>
<b>Decision</b>	<b>Approved</b>
<b>Comments and Feedback</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. First, given that you are a teacher of the students, you will need to address explicitly your own role as teacher/researcher in your briefing, and to consider what difficulty may be presented if students' perspectives are that you are for any of them an inhibitor to the full success of the course (unlikely but does need thinking about);</li><li>2. Second, (which interacts with the first) in the proposal you make a clear demarcation between sensitive issues and the focus of the research. Yet for many students the educational experience is a dialogue between the public, educational activity and the life experiences students bring with them. The transformative nature of foundation study may unlock sensitive experiences, interwoven with observations re the course for one or more of your interviewees. The panel therefore felt that although the research cohort may not explicitly include participants from 'vulnerable' groups, but that the HE experience may unlock vulnerability that will need to be protected. That said the exit clauses are clear</li><li>3. Finally, the panel recommend deleting 'quick' from the reference to a UCAS search.</li></ol>
<b>Proposed Actions</b>	<b>See above</b>
<b>Date of Further Review</b>	<b>None Required</b>

**CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Project: Student experiences of their foundation year.**

**Name of Researcher: Graham Jones**

**Please initial boxes**

- 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time<sup>2</sup>, without giving any reason.
- 3. I understand that my data will be stored securely and confidentially<sup>3</sup> and that I will not be identifiable in any report or publication
- 4. I understand that the researcher may wish to publish this study and any results found, for which I give my permission
- 5. I agree for my interview to be tape recorded and for the data to be used for the purpose of this study.
- 6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name

Date

Signature

.....

.....

.....

---

<sup>2</sup> It may be difficult to withdraw your individual data once analysis of the data has begun, therefore you can only withdraw your data up until the commencement of the data analysis. Also, as data is collected anonymously it may not be possible to identify the data to subsequently remove it.

<sup>3</sup> If safeguarding issues are raised the information may not be kept fully confidential and may be shared with relevant organisations.

Appendix G. Metaplanning findings for all groups

Focus Group 1

8 participants

Positives

Categories	Outcomes	Study skills	Knowledge and understanding
Votes	3	0	5
Comments	Qualifications	Help me build communication skills through lectures	Learning new things
	Better employment opportunity	Be prepared	Learning interesting things
	To lead a successful career following the course	Finish it	To get more educated
	Ambition	Attend on time	To get knowledge
	Read around the subject		To learn new vocabulary
	Have good experience		Gain an understanding of the course
	To be inspired		Understanding the course
	confidence		Complete the year preparing me for 3 years of full-time university after not having an education for a while
	Future for me and my children		Give me knowledge of writing new good assessments
			To gain knowledge
			A relaxed and fair but driven learning environment

Notes added to the 'positives' poster: what is the biggest concern/challenge that might prevent you from achieving these things:

- Not getting the right support
- Confidence
- Achievement
- Confidence
- Time
- Time management and formal writing
- Completing assignments on time without rushing and stressing
- Self-confidence

#### Negatives/concerns

Categories	Support	Time and Commitment	Failing	Achievement
Votes	2	1	4	1
comments	My dyslexia	Childcare and behaviour	Other factors in life interfering with completing the course	Reaching my own expectation
	Not having any support	commitment	Not passing	
	Being afraid to speak up/ask a question	Drive to stay focussed	Not finishing the course	
	Not getting enough support	Time management	Being able to submit assignments to deadlines	
	Being disrespectful to tutors and peers	Not enough time	Not being able to do the course	
	Not having an understanding about the course		To fail	
	Academic writing challenges		Worried about failing	

Notes added to 'negatives' poster. One positive that could overcome these concerns:

- To fail
- Commitment and drive
- Staying focussed
- Confidence
- To fail
- Not give up
- Motivation from tutors and friends and family
- Drive and seeing the prize

Focus Group 2a

7 participants

Positives

Category	support	experiences	Knowledge
Votes	6	1	0
Comments	Support from course leader. Graham	The discussions during the lectures	Gaining knowledge of early child development
	Support	The time to discuss theories and case studies within groups	
	Support	Having two lecturers in the intro to child development class, which allows us to have different styles of learning and perspectives	
	Canvas	Experiencing a new environment and getting to know people	
	Canvas	Helped me settle in and get used to the way to write academic essays	
	Accessibility to computers at campus	Classes exercises	
	Canvas and other learning resources	Being able to interact with peers on course and share experiences of uni life	

	Online access to modules	Learning the theories of attachment	
	Help me learn how to reference	Having more information regarding child development and other areas of study	
	Help me learn how to become more independent but know who I can ask if need help.	Opening my mind again into education and preparing me for further studies	

One negative to overcome positives

- What to do if the internet goes down
- Failing assignments
- Fail the first assignments
- Failing
- Finances (tuition fees)
- If I lose hope of continuing with the course
- Didn't complete assignments on time

Negatives

Category	Support	Personal aspects	Lectures	Deadlines and assignments
Votes	0	2	0	5
Comments	Out of class support	Family commitments	One course – two locations	Time

		Being out of education for so long (struggling with writing/grammar etc)	Others years reception	Assignment deadlines are together
		Lack of enough knowledge in IT	Having 3 lecturers for module (Health and health behaviour)	Having all assignments at the same time
			The way lectures are delivered	6 assignment deadlines all at the same time
			In some lectures the way the information is delivered	Referencing
				The deadlines all on the same day
				Assignment deadline clash
				Starting on assignments
				Referencing

One positive to overcome negatives:

- Effort and self discipline
- Support on the health and health behaviour module
- Putting an effort into work
- Determination and seek help

- Having the right support, believing I can do it
- Finance and taking advantage of support/facilities
- Make if possible, think positive

## Focus Group 2b

4 participants

### Positives

Category	Inclusion and understanding	Learning
Votes	1	3
Comments	Lecturers feel more understanding and willing to help	Learning a new subject and learning theories
	Understanding children's needs and care for them to have a good start in life	New way to think about child development
	Inclusive practice for all ages and backgrounds	Interesting
	Made new friends	Getting back into learning
	Easing back into education more calmly	Knowledge
	I am more confident	Learn about child development

One negative to overcome positives:

- Not finding the time
- My motivation and time management
- More time to complete work
- Not to succeed

### Negatives

Category	Time management	Personal growth
Votes	4	0

Comments	Time management	My own self-belief
	Not a lot of time to read my books	Stress
	Personal circumstance	Needs simplifying
	Overload	
	Timing	
	Lesson times/days	
	Busy lifestyle	
	Making a start!	
	time	

One positive to overcome negatives:

- Finding the time
- Succeed
- Understanding
- Structure and routing. Setting aside quality working time in a good working environment

### Focus group 3

7 participants

#### Positives

Category	Support	Environment	Skills and org
Votes	5	1	1
Comments	Canvas	Calm environment	Helping me to focus
	Support	Other courses available through events such as carers week	Organisation
	Help and support is there if needed	I prefer Walsall campus (free parking)	Organisation
	Support facilities available (ie info available on canvas)		Develop my independence
	Lecturers are willing to help and are keen to support		Organisation
	Good quality of teaching		Presentations
	Good teaching		Enhanced knowledge on subject
	Helped learn new skills needed for course		More breadth of knowledge
			Appreciation of the start times

			Useful information has been given
			Tutors understanding other commitments

#### One negative to overcome positives

- Not being able to get the information and being able to believe in myself and my confidence
- Time management
- Time management. Give time to uni work
- Organisation
- Don't get enough information
- Time management and independent study
- Organisation and management

#### Negatives

Category	Time	Assignments	Lectures	Outside
Votes	2	4	1	0
Comments	Time management	Pressure/due date	Not being in lecture hall (sometimes)	Struggling to juggle other commitments
	Assignment dates all at one time	Didn't get much support on certain assignment	Some modules not career oriented towards goal	
	No time in between different	Stress/pressure	Not all lecturers get	

	modules for assignments		the chance to speak	
	Overload with information at one time, not enough time to digest	Assignment briefs	Learning different methods such as referencing	
	Waiting for results	Certain teaching styles	Struggled to get voice heard in bit lecture theatre	
		Sometimes too technical		
		Not much support from home		

#### One positive to overcome negatives

- Knowing what exactly we have to do in the assignment early on in the semester
- More support that suits each individual
- Content in modules
- Really good support
- Knowing that in sem 1 I overcame those feelings and barriers and knowing I can do it again
- Asking as many questions as possible
- Passing all assignments with help and more support during second semester

Focus group 4

9 participants

Positives

Category	experience	friendship	support	Other
Votes	4	4	5	0
Comments	Exposure to university life	Meeting people	Support with assignments	Choices/ options to change course
	A lot of knowledge	Meeting new people	Structured help	Free parking
	Getting a different learning experience	Meeting new people	See that I can do it	Getting a routine
	Prepare myself to the next level/step	I am confident	All the support I got	
	Learning different styles of learning	Belief that I am more than capable	Helpful lecturers	
			Loads of support	
			Help with essay writing	
			Support	
			Activities that have been done during lessons	
			Support	
			Motivation	

			Friendly staff and helpful	
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One negative to overcome positives:

- Not applying myself or using resources
- Commitment
- Loss of motivation
- Time management, attendance, motivation
- Bad attendance
- Lose the interest
- Time management

### Negatives

Category	time	parking	confused
Votes	10	1	2
Comments	Less time for assignment	No parking at Wolverhampton campus	Three lectures in one class
	Assignment launches too late	parking	Family issues, distractions
	Lack of time, too many assessments		Split the classes in to campus
	Not enough time		Less explanation in some work
	More pressure		Feeling confused
	Workload		Confused

	Assignment launches later than wished for sem 2		Too broad modules loosely relating to ECS
	Not enough time		Work overload
	Not condensing classes, 2 hour sessions instead of using a full day		Lack of understanding in some areas
	Everything is rushed and not explained in time unlike last semester		Assignments not being simplified
	Some things not covered enough		
	Assignments not been given enough time to explain		
	Assignments not been explained properly		

One positive to overcome negatives:

- Applying myself and seeing the positive in a negative situation
- Student improve on their time management
- Organisation, commitment
- Accessing support/asking for help when struggling
- Having commitment to stay positive
- Organisation and preparation
- Be more organised

## Appendix H. Extracts from focus group discussions

### Focus group 1

Me: Thanks you for turning up this week. I won't keep you longer than anybody wishes to stay for.

Looking at your voice, your experience as you go through the year.

Last week we looked at some of the positives and negatives you expect. We'll start by looking at these again and moving on to more general questions about how's it going, what you expect through the year etc.

Noise as rolling out posters made last week

Looking at these again we had 3 categories where we looked at the outcomes, which as you can see there are about developing confidence, ambitions, have good experience. These are outcomes, what you expect to get. The study skills – be prepared, finish the course, build communication skills. And the biggest category over here you've labelled knowledge and understanding which is about getting knowledge, learning new things, understanding of the course etc.

Looking at the negative ones (concerns). Categories of: support, are you going to get the support you need for the course, the academic writing challenges, the time and commitment. The practical things about child care and getting here and having the time to do your studies which is a big thing for a lot of you obviously. And failing was a category where you had concerns about – for a lot of you it is a return to education; the demands of the course; the failing of it; and then one about achievements which was about reaching my expectations

2.30

So, looking at these, these expectations, you've been on the course now for 3-4 weeks. So far, is reality reflecting these expectations

All mumbled – yes

3.00

Deborah: it's time really, to be honest, I know it's going to get....

Charmaine: harder

Deborah: more intense as we go along

Me: so time to, get your studies done?

Deborah: to do the work and do the reading

Steve: because we haven't done any assignments yet it's hard to plan your time

Several: yes

Celine: how to start

Steve: because once you get into the swing of it you might have a better idea of how to do it.

Several: yeah

Steve: because now that we've just started and the assignments are about to be launched. I think it's hard to plan now how much time I'm going to do for each one

Others: yeah

Steve: until I'm into it and doing it I won't really know

Several: yeah

Me: is that how you feel (speaking to all) that it's almost an in-between sort of stage

Charmaine: yes

Me: where you've started the course

Charmaine: I'm like, up, where's the door

All: laughter

Nazreen: we've been introduced to all of the assignments at the same time but we've been told not to start them at the moment and so it's like, when do you start?

Several: yeah

Nazreen: when do we get enough information to actually start? When you read through the information it's like, "I can make a go of it", but then it's like, "no, because we are being fed more information", so it's like when do you start? You don't want to leave it 'til the last minute. That's when you start panicking

Charmaine: that's where I'm at now – last minute panicking!

Nazreen: because they're all due at the same time so it's like

Steve: there's one due mid-November – we can't start it yet. I want to get going

Charmaine: I've been focussing on that one and neglecting the rest. That's what my problem is that I've been so worried about that coming up so soon I've been focussing on that and not really thought about the rest.

Me: so me saying "don't worry about it just yet" is not particularly helpful?

All: laughter, no!

Me: anything else from this in terms of the things from last week to feedforward on... anything?

5 mins

Steve: I like the way it's structured, and it does follow on from the week before. There's a lot of information to throw out at people. Obviously it doesn't all sink in if you talk and talk and talk it won't all go in

Others: yeah

Steve: so then to re-visit kind of helps ... erm ... I like the way it's structured like that ... it's getting a bit more "lecturey"

Several: yeah

Steve: so like it's less introductory. We're getting into it a bit more now. It's making me feel a bit more like I'm at university rather than doing a welcome week. I feel more like I'm here and I'm doing it now

Charmaine: what would be easier would be if we just focussed on one bit of the subject instead of having different modules, different study skills and everything else. If we just had one rather than three different ones to focus on. I think that's what my problem is with so much going on I just don't know how to take it all in

### Focus groups 2a

Me: do you feel like you've settled down at university?

Most: yes

Dominique: I still feel that there are things I need to know that I don't know. If you look at mywlv there are some things on there that I don't understand. There is so much information to go through apart from the studies and the research and all that. So I feel I could do with some extra support sometime

22 mins

Maria: because when you come here to have a look at the course, at the open days you have other students from other years and so we should have other students for the first or second...

Me: to help you settle down and get the feel of it?

Maria: yeah

Me: how about anybody else, what have been the things that have helped you settle into university life? And what things could have been better?

Nazreen: I feel that knowing that we are all on the same page has taken the stress load off me. I don't know about anybody else but I feel like, at this moment I feel like I'm settled in quite well and I feel like I do know the support is there if I need it, which is a big relief for me. So it's like, although at the moment I haven't actually taken use of the facilities or the support that I need, knowing that it's there is good enough for me, and knowing that it's there and that I can go and ask for help and stuff

23 mins

Me: anybody else. What's helped you feel settled in, or not?

Rubina: I wasn't actually expecting to have 6 assignments in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester

Others: laughter

Rubina: I thought you were going to be a bit more like...

Nazreen: lenient?

Rubina: lenient. But I guess it's pushing you for that level 4, but it's just not something that I was expecting

Nazreen: sorry, off topic – but are having a similar assignments for semester 2? Or are you going to be like ...

Me: well, semester 2 is the same structure. There's 3 modules in each semester

24mins

Nazreen: so are we not doing health?

Me: no, all of the modules are one semester long each, so they'll be 3 new modules next semester

Nazreen: Ah ... OK

Rubina: so we won't have this module?

Me: no, I don't teach you in semester 2

Rubina: you don't teach us?

Others: Oh

Others: laughter

Me: How does it feel, or how has it felt over the last 3 months that you've been here?

Laura: I think initially I struggled like with the contact of uni and how to get ... because I came from a special needs college where I had lots of support. It was ... it went from one extreme to the other. I think I struggled to make friends as easily as I thought I would. I've got better.

Me: in terms of the actual university, what could the university have done better?

25 mins

Laura: that transition from college to uni. That's why I did the foundation year and not go straight onto the course

Me: so how has it felt to be here? has it been a largely happy experience?

Dominique: It's really been a great experience for me. I've been out of education for so long. Just to be able to take that step to get an education is a great achievement. And to come, I enjoy the course, especially this module. It's very ... real life kind of thing, not too academic. It's nice, being a mother, and a carer. You just feel connected to it, and it's good.

Nazreen: another thing is. I don't know how to put this but ... it's similar to what you said in the sense that ... being a mature student I don't, ... like my first thing coming to uni was "I'm going to be the oldest one in the class" and I'm going to feel like... really dumb and stupid for coming to uni at my age. But I don't feel like that anymore because I feel like it's a very ... is it diverse?

26mins

Others: yeah

Nazreen: I don't know if it's diverse or it's like ... opportunities for anyone, and I've not felt, I've not actually felt like the odd one out, or I'm the oldest ... or anything like that. I've felt ... equal.

Others: yeah

Me: being a student for the last few months, has it changed your view of yourself at all? ... has it altered the way you think about yourself?

Grace: I'd say yes because. How this particular module has been taught is that we can actually do it. It's not something that's far off... erm ... it's like ... the encouragement. We're not babied in the sense of "we'll do everything for you" it's a case of, "here's the tools, here's what you need to do and if you need support it's there". So I do feel like it's given you a chance to grow, yourself, rather than at college where...

Nazreen: it's definitely made me think more positive about myself whereas before I was like, "oh, I'm going to uni" and even when I was going to tell somebody, "I'm starting uni" I was very hesitant, I was like hmmh because I don't know if they was going to look at me and think, "you're going to uni? Ok then!" (others laugh) kind of thing. I don't feel like that anymore, I feel really confident and I feel like ... it's what you tell your mind that's what you're going to do and if you think negative you're always going to end up negative. Like even sometimes with the assignments – I'm not going to lie – when I started it, before I started it, I was like "do you know what?" I wasn't thinking of dropping out because it's not something I want to do but it did kind of cross me that "is this really for me? can I do it?" but I was like "no way, I'm not going to give up". So for me it's made me think more positive, and kind of given me that push to carry on. And I think, it is achievable but then it's like, ... like we were saying before, it's the effort that you put in so it's kind of given me that ... erm ... more confidence, I think

### Focus group 2b

Me: is it OK to ask a few questions to elaborate on this. The last time we did this we looked at expectations. 1<sup>st</sup> question is have your expectations, if you can stretch your mind back to when you started the course, have your expectations been met? Both positive and negative, have your hopes for the course been met? Have your worries been met? Shall we go round one at a time?

Charmaine: it has been met because there's a lot of support, I've received a lot of support, so it has been met. There is a lot of information you give us, where to find it and things like that. So it has been met. But there's just a lot of it. It's overload, I don't even know where to start there's just so much going on at one time, and I think that's what's stressing me out, there's so much to do in such little time.

13mins

Me: so that's been the biggest barrier, the volume of

Charmaine: work. If there was three assignments or something it wouldn't be so bad because you can juggle it all. But there's like nearly ... five. In less than ... what ...

Deborah: three weeks

Charmaine: laughing ... literally, with all the referencing and things like that ... quoting ... it's a lot

Celine: I think it has been met because ... the problem is that we've got a lot to do, we've got a lot to do. We've got a lot of assignments, and ... you try your best ... it's just that we're not given ... good time to ourselves to read and go through everything. I notice that everyday we come to ...uni, yeah. If you ask us a question about what we did last week, it's really hard for us to just [clicks fingers] ...laughs

14mins

Charmaine: recap. And say yeah that was ...

Celine: it is really difficult to say what we did last week... it is very hard for us to start our assignment – make us a little bit conscious because everything comes together then

Charmaine: every subject we go to there's something

Me: so it's the volume of work and that it's all in at the same time?

Celine: yeah. Just a few weeks left for us to submit our assignment. I think we just have three weeks left

Charmaine: yeah, and there's so much to hand in, so much.

15mins

Deborah: when I first started the course I thought it was going to be more SEN straight away, so I was ... really wasn't expecting this at all. It's been good ... but it's just that the content hasn't been what I thought I'd signed up for.

Charmaine: yeah

Deborah: obviously next year it will be SEN, erm ... and it's just time really. Things have happened since I started the course that have just completely taken over my life, and I'm really struggling to. I thought this was going to be my time to carry on, but,

Charmaine: I'm with you, I understand exactly what you're saying

Deborah: you think it's the right time. I've waited three years to do this

Charmaine: same for me

Deborah: and I just haven't given it the time the course needs ...

Celine: that's been my main problem

Deborah: the extra reading and stuff. But that's just life isn't it. You know you've got kids

Charmaine: there you go, yeah

Celine: we all thought "this is our time", but we've got children, we're all working

Charmaine: yeah

16mins

Me: you're not traditional 18 year olds coming to university

All: yeah

Steve: I think that's it, we're not 18 anymore

Others: laughter

Steve: it's been a while since we've done ... or since I've done...any education. like I say, I did college but it wasn't at this level erm... the needs have been met of everybody in terms of ... the content's there, it's been well presented, we've had a lot of support, and that's where you've got to have your independent learning as well. That's a massive part, that you don't just turn up to uni and do it and then go home and forget about it, you have to juggle it. And I think ... I mean ...that's a positive, it has been, everything's been met for me personally, erm. The negative for me sometimes is that you have to wear three different hats, because ... we come in on Friday, and you do child development. And you take in a load of information and try and remember a lot. Then you go to Tuesday and do health, which I don't know about anyone else but it really doesn't interest me

Others: no

Charmaine: the worst day ever, Tuesday!

Steve: then I've got a load of authors, a lot of theories in my head from that. And then. You've got to wear two different hats, two different mind frames really. Because the content is vastly different to what it is on a Friday.

Charmaine: at two different unis as well. The atmosphere at that uni to the atmosphere here is two different atmospheres

Steve: I don't know what people have said to you graham but Walsall's such a nicer place to be

Charmaine: such a lot better

Me: in what way?

Charmaine: it's more calm, it's more chilled, it's more...

Steve: you feel like you're at uni

Others: yeah

Steve: you feel like you're in Wolverhampton when you're at Wolverhampton

Deborah: I hate it there

Steve: you're so close to the city centre it doesn't feel like uni at all

18mins

Deborah: and the Friday classes are quite small and you feel like you can speak out

Others: yeah

Deborah: whereas at Wolverhampton it's just like that lecture theatre we were just in

Steve: believe it or not, I'm silent on Tuesday

Others: yeah, me to

Steve: I don't speak at all, and I've got lots of opinions but I don't speak because there's a hundred ...

Deborah and Charmaine: yeah

Celine: so many people there on Tuesdays

Deborah: from all different courses

### Focus group 3

Me: could I put another thing to you, is that possibly part of your academic journey. That you're saying that things were more structured at the start – would you not expect them to get less structured?

Stacey: no, I'd want it to be more and more and more

Others: agree

Me: you might want it, but what would you expect?

Others: laughter

Laura: I expect it to be that

Stacey: but that is what I would expect, for it to stay the same

42mins

Nazreen: but it's not that we're given the information, we're not getting it

Steve: it's not the fact that they've left it to more independent study or anything like that, it's that there's no content. There's no assignment content, I don't know how to do this assignment

Stacey: in these ones it just seems like they're reading from a board, like there's no discussions like how there used to be, like you're not going in depth in things

Others talking

Stacey: it's literally reading off a board

Steve: I mean child development is a subject where you can discuss and discuss and discuss forever because there's no right answer but

Me: how about outside of the lectures, just being at the university, how's that feeling now?

All talking together

Stacey: normal

Grace: I live at home so I just

Laura: I live at home but I go to the Disney society at the Wolverhampton campus, which is good

Steve: I think it's just like coming to the canteen and eating though

Others: yeah

Laura: we all meet and chat together

Steve: I mean it is like, we all go to the canteen and have a chat. You feel like you're ...

Grace: We're more familiar with it

43mins

Stacey: We've got our wits about us. We've put our roots down, we know where everything is, pretty much

Steve: you feel like you're part of it more, so you feel comfortable, and that kind of thing ... because I never used to eat, I just to go straight home and eat

Others: yeah

Me: so you're more likely to hang around...

Steve: yeah

Grace: I was eating in my car the first, the first few weeks

Others laughter

Grace: I was like, "I don't want to talk to anyone, I just want to, like you said, come in... do it..."

Steve: yeah, yeah

Grace: it was awkward

Stacey: I think how you did it was really good how you had to go round asking people questions, like, you had no choice, you had to go and speak to other people

Me: (to Laura) you've joined some societies. Has anybody else got involved with any

All: no

Steve: I haven't got time

Others: laughter

Me: a recurring question... has being at university, how have other people responded to you? Has it changed anything or have people reacted to you differently.

Stacey: people don't acknowledge you, we just walk past each other

44mins

Me: I mean friends and family

Laura: I quite like that even though I've got disabilities, everyone's on the same level so they don't actually notice, like, they treat me like everyone else, they don't single me out, which I really like

Steve: I think ... yesterday, because I was really happy with my grade, I rang everybody I knew

Laura: literally

Others: laughter

Steve: like my dad who's... like ... the biggest critic in the world because he's so clever, erm, and he's really high up in his profession, erm, and I rang him up, and he always thought I was a bit stupid

Others: surprise

Stacey: people couldn't believe when I said I was coming to uni

Steve: and I rang him up and he said, "well you must not be a stupid as you look then"

Others: ooh, (shock), laughter

Me: I assume he was joking?

Steve: no, that's my dad

Me: What were you saying

Stacey: yeah, nobody ever expected me to come to uni, or they expected me to quit ... and I haven't

#### Focus group 4

Me: a couple more questions. About moving on to next year. What are your thoughts, or what are your feelings, about progressing onto level 4 next year?

Several: confident

Celine: I feel confident. For the moment I feel more confident but let's wait for the result and see how it goes

Others: laughter

Maria: I'm worrying about my English speaking because, my spoken English, sorry. Because we are going to do placements and I'm going to work with children and should speak ... better than I am speaking now, I think so. But if you ask me just about the classes I feel ok but I am afraid about the placement.

54mins

Sadie: but that will improve, that will improve with you being at uni

Maria: yeah, but at the beginning maybe some settings maybe will say no, because of my English

Sadie: just keep trying, don't give up

Me: anybody else

Stacey: I hate the fact that you've got to make all the friendships all over again. It's like starting all over again

Steve: changing course or doing whatever, we're not all together.

Stacey: it's like you make the friendships and then like you all move on and ... it's horrible isn't it because you can't take everybody with you...

Steve: it would be nice if we call continue on

Me: what about anybody else, what do you think about next year and moving on?

Steve: when I know what I want to do I think I'll be happy to do it. I've been ... been a bit stressed over time and stuff and a bit "I don't know what's going on" but I've never once been stressed about getting everything in and not know whether I'm going to pass it, not once been stressed about it. So I don't think the work itself is the problem for me, I know I'm capable enough to do it. I think it will be more the time and stuff. So I think I'll just ... ride the wave and see how it goes

55mins

Me: any more about how you feel about next year?

Dominique: prepared, confident, optimistic

Me: final question, before we just have another look at the posters if that's alright. Would you recommend the foundation year?

All: yeah

Sadie: highly recommend it

Me: is everyone saying that?

Stacey: instead of college, definitely.

Others: yeah

Dominique: instead of access, yes

Me: why is that

Charmaine: because it shows you exactly what you are stepping into before you choose, you know what I mean? It gives you that year to decide whether it's for your or not.

Stacey: it's like a taster year isn't it?

Charmaine: yeah, yeah, literally

Dominique: it gives you exposure also because you meet with other people in level 4, level 5, so you feel like you belong already. While if you come from college you have to find your way. And I think that access is done differently from foundation

56 mins

Others: yeah, it is

Celine: you have a chance, you have a choice, to choose what you want to be in the future. For example if you want to be a nurse, after doing a foundation you may change your mind, saying that, "oh, I don't want to be a nurse, I'm going to be a therapist," or something like that. And so it's a good ...

Me: so looking back ... the foundation year is a broad ... there's always the dilemma, do you have the foundation year as a broad course or narrow it down. At the end of doing it now, what are your thoughts on that?

Stacey: I think to narrow it down really ...

Me: to make it more child development

Stacey: I don't know, it's hard, because lots of people go off to do different things. But then, it was child development to start with and then it's teaching

Charmaine: I thought it was going to be more about disabilities

Sadie: we've not come to that yet

Grace: I think it's pretty good because I think a lot of the other girls want to do criminology. Which is a major jump from this. Not in a negative way but it's a good ... it gives you a good

57 mins

Stacey: but it's not covered though, that's the thing. Some things are covered more than others

Dominique: some things are relevant to what we want to do but others are not, but they will be relevant to other people. Because it is an access course and so it's open to everybody to accommodate all of us. So some of them I really liked...

Stacey: but the health one, that was just...

Dominique: I really liked that

Others: laughter and talking about which modules they enjoyed

## Appendix I. Examples of use of NVivo to analyse the data

Data was organised by the different focus groups, separating the data from the metapanning activities and from the more open discussions. Date was also categorised by the different participants (not included to protect confidentiality).

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with a table titled "discussion by groups". The table lists various discussion topics and their associated data.

Name	Codes	References	Modified on	Modified by	Classification
metapanning group 4 discussion	3	6	22/06/2022 10:47	GJ	
metapanning group 3 discussion	2	8	22/06/2022 10:47	GJ	
Metapanning group 1 discussion	6	19	22/06/2022 10:45	GJ	
metapanning group 2 discussion	4	8	22/06/2022 10:46	GJ	
focus group 4 discussion	4	16	22/06/2022 10:47	GJ	
focus group 3 discussion	5	13	22/06/2022 10:47	GJ	
focus group 2 discussion	7	19	22/06/2022 10:46	GJ	
Focus group 1 discussion	5	18	22/06/2022 10:46	GJ	

Each focus group was categorised by the relevant themes.

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with a table titled "focus group 1". The table lists various coding themes and their associated data.

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
first coding	0	0	04/03/2022 10:30	GJ	04/03/2022 10:30	GJ
criticisms of neoli	0	0	03/03/2022 10:29	GJ	02/03/2022 16:19	GJ
locus of control	0	0	03/03/2022 10:29	GJ	02/03/2022 16:00	GJ
mclelland	0	0	03/03/2022 10:30	GJ	02/03/2022 16:28	GJ
motivation	0	0	03/03/2022 10:30	GJ	02/03/2022 15:59	GJ
neoliberal thinkin	0	0	03/03/2022 11:29	GJ	03/03/2022 11:29	GJ
responsibilisation	0	0	03/03/2022 11:51	GJ	03/03/2022 11:51	GJ
second coding	0	0	04/03/2022 10:31	GJ	04/03/2022 10:31	GJ

**focus group 2**

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
1st coding	0	0	03/05/2022 11:20	GJ	03/05/2022 11:20	GJ
locus of cont	0	0	03/05/2022 11:23	GJ	03/05/2022 11:23	GJ
external	0	0	03/05/2022 11:23	GJ	03/05/2022 11:23	GJ
exte	0	0	03/05/2022 14:31	GJ	03/05/2022 14:45	GJ
: 1	1	1	03/05/2022 15:54	GJ	03/05/2022 15:55	GJ
: 1	1	3	06/05/2022 11:16	GJ	06/05/2022 15:45	GJ
: 1	1	2	06/05/2022 11:31	GJ	06/05/2022 11:31	GJ
: 2	2	4	03/05/2022 14:42	GJ	06/05/2022 11:44	GJ
: 2	2	10	03/05/2022 14:43	GJ	06/05/2022 15:50	GJ
: 2	2	8	03/05/2022 14:57	GJ	06/05/2022 15:33	GJ
: 2	2	7	06/05/2022 10:25	GJ	06/05/2022 11:43	GJ
exte	0	0	03/05/2022 14:32	GJ	03/05/2022 14:41	GJ
: 1	1	3	06/05/2022 11:15	GJ	06/05/2022 11:39	GJ
: 2	2	8	03/05/2022 14:38	GJ	06/05/2022 11:34	GJ
: 2	2	3	03/05/2022 14:41	GJ	06/05/2022 11:51	GJ
: 2	2	3	03/05/2022 14:58	GJ	06/05/2022 15:27	GJ

GJ 36 Items

An overall analysis was carried out by the different themes identified.

**themes**

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
improvements	2	3	22/06/2022 10:50	GJ	22/06/2022 15:52	GJ
linking locus and motivation	2	2	22/06/2022 15:41	GJ	23/06/2022 14:22	GJ
summarising	3	3	22/06/2022 10:59	GJ	22/06/2022 12:19	GJ
neoliberalism	4	6	22/06/2022 10:50	GJ	22/06/2022 16:01	GJ
criticisms of neoliberalism	4	14	22/06/2022 10:50	GJ	22/06/2022 16:06	GJ
introductory	6	8	22/06/2022 12:13	GJ	22/06/2022 15:55	GJ
motivation	7	28	22/06/2022 10:50	GJ	22/06/2022 16:06	GJ
locus of control	8	43	22/06/2022 10:50	GJ	22/06/2022 16:04	GJ

GJ 8 Items