

**Questioning the ideal of the good student: a qualitative study into how business students
view their own learning.**

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Abstract

Title: Questioning the ideal of the good student: a qualitative study into how business students view their own learning.

This study investigates the ideal of the good student and the value attributed to independent learning. Business students are frequently thought of as being career focused and outcome driven to the detriment of their development as independent learners. Much of the research in this area looks at how we can support students to become good, successful, independent learners. The metrics of attendance, engagement and graduate outcomes are increasingly used to define what the good student does, and this is operationalised through institutional agendas that are focused on meeting national government policy. My research aims to illuminate the student view of what a good learner is and to investigate their perceptions of success.

I have approached my study with a constructionist and interpretivist stance and have used qualitative methods. The research setting is a business school in a post-1992 university and the sample comes from undergraduate students. The setting is also my workplace and so aspects of insider research are acknowledged and discussed. Nineteen undergraduate students were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. These interviews took place in person and then moved online due to the Covid lockdown. These students all self-reported as successful in terms of attainment. The interview data were analysed using a thematic approach.

The main findings are that the students come from diverse backgrounds and are interested in the subjects they have chosen to study. They feel personally responsible for their own learning and indicate an awareness of being part of a mass education system. They mainly expected having to learn independently but interpreted it as finding their own way of studying. They had not expected to be engaged in group work and indicated that learning with and from others, both students and staff, is very important. How the participants talked about what success means to them is nuanced and frequently is about emotion rather than grades. In contrast, the students felt that lecturers measured student success more bluntly and via grades. Students also highlighted that they felt under challenged by their programmes of study.

The implication of these findings is that the idealised norm of the good student, who is independent in their learning and whose engagement and success is measurable, is unrealistic and therefore problematic in that there is no one version of a good student. I argue that the focus on independent learning is unhelpful and rather than seeing the 'bad' student as the problem the focus should be on learning as a social activity. This means that disciplinary context needs to be made transparent and that students should be expected to engage with and be challenged by this. This study is significant in that it calls into question some of the everyday assumptions that permeate much of higher education and provides a basis for seeing students and their learning differently.

Declaration

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

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Publications and presentations based on my PhD work

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Mynott GJ. (2016) Personal tutoring: positioning practice in relation to policy *Innovations in Practice*, 10 :103-112

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1 Introduction

As a lecturer in higher education (HE) with over 19 years of teaching experience, I have heard talk of 'good students' almost every working day. These good students attend, engage with teaching, and go on work placements; all of which ultimately add up to the student getting a good graduate level job. They are successful. They are independent learners who master the vagaries of academic referencing and who do not question the need to read academic journal articles. While the good student is held up as the ideal by almost all involved in HE (Brooks et al., 2023), the belief that most students are not 'good' permeates the thinking and literature on teaching, learning and the student experience.

The focus of my research is on questioning the persona of the good independent student. This matters because to provide for our students we need to understand them, and we need to do this from their viewpoint rather than through the lens of existing practice and institutional agendas that are often directed by current HE policy. The introductory chapter of my thesis sets out to explain why I chose this topic area, provides some context, and details my research questions. An overview of my research design and limitations leads to an outline of my contribution to knowledge before detailing the structure of my thesis.

1.1 Why this topic?

The message that students are expected to study independently, in addition to classroom contact hours, is frequently re-enforced and forms a key aspect of what can be termed being a good student. The emphasis on being independent also explains why the focus is on the individual and as Peelo (2002b, p.160) states, the reasons why students who "fail, withdraw from university, drop out or do not progress are often expected to lie within the individual". It is the student who is deemed to be lacking or failing. The problems that students have as independent learners are often thought to start with the transition from school to university and it is frequently argued that the development of students as independent learners is a key area of concern (Thompson et al., 2021). A good student will quickly get to grips with the demands of independent learning (IL) and will thrive, or not, because of it.

The Office for Students (2018, p.152) refers to “a crucial responsibility to ensure that every student has the chance to develop as an independent learner” and this is indicative of policy documents at both national and local levels that form the foundation for and re-enforce the need for students to develop as independent learners. 1992 saw a fundamental restructuring of the UK HE sector with polytechnics brought into the sector; these former institutions are now referred to as post-1992 universities (Shattock 1999). Within my teaching in one of these post-1992 universities, IL is encoded in module proformas as private study hours and is part of the institutional discourse of teaching and learning. In an era in which universities are continually having to prove that they offer value for money the low number of contact hours is often questioned. The hours, however, built in for private study and IL are frequently justified as being there to develop the student as an independent, critical thinker. It is this approach to teaching and learning that is inherent to our understanding of HE within the United Kingdom (UK).

Alongside this, there is a growing trend of measurement and monitoring of student engagement (Williamson, Bayne, & Shay, 2020). Metrics are increasingly used to measure things such as attendance at taught classes, computer logins to learning platforms, library visits, and attainment statistics. Students can and are being measured against institutional performance indicators of what a good student should do. The good student is measurable, and the not-so-good students can be identified and are often labelled as at risk. The system of HE in the UK wants students who are focused, independent learners and career focused; this is illustrated by statements made by universities such as the one made by the University of Kent (2022) “university graduates are expected to be independent learners – to demonstrate initiative and the ability to manage themselves and their work ... independent learning ... is key to employability”.

Despite the current focus on employability, the research literature of the last few decades has been frequently disparaging of the career orientated, goal focused student. One of the criticisms of business students has been that they enrol on business courses with future employment in mind (Lawson, 2014; Friedland & Jain, 2022) and that because of this these students are outcome focused and less concerned about the intellectual learning associated with their studies than about achieving high final grades. Bennett (2004) highlighted three motivations for students to study business and management at university level. These were:

“goal orientation” connected to career paths and future employability; “activity orientation” relating to wanting to meet new people and experience new things and finally “learning orientation” concerned with the joy of learning new things (Bennett 2004 p.29). The literature mainly portrays business students as falling into the goal and activity orientations to the detriment of their learning. Interestingly, in a Higher Education Academy report on attainment and retention in business schools, Hibbert (2016) highlighted the tensions between employee competencies and scholarly competencies in business schools. Questioning the balance between a curriculum that focuses on studying a theoretical discipline or providing a course that focuses on vocational education leading to employment is necessary. This is always a balance in business education but there is a distinct difference in purpose between training in a specific practice and a university education in a particular discipline (Wenger 1998). As Wenger (1998 p.263) states, “education is not merely formative – it is transformative”. Importantly, the Hibbert (2016) report also highlighted that there is a research gap in relation to business students’ development as scholars. It is from this starting point of an interest in IL and a particular issue around business students and their learning that my research interests developed.

1.2 Context

The expansion of the UK HE sector in the 1990s and the introduction of student fees in the following decade was accompanied by a growing body of research that sought to investigate the impact of both fees and widening participation. Undergraduate student numbers in the UK hit a record high of 2.66 million in 2020/21 including record increases in students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bolton, 2022). During this time business schools have been a global success for universities (British Academy, 2021). The subject area of business and administrative studies accounts for the highest number of students overall, with 17% of all students in the UK studying in this area (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022) and significantly, business schools are financially very important to UK universities (Cassell, 2019). Undoubtedly, the HE sector has undergone massive transformation and business schools have been at the forefront of this expansion.

In the decades including and following the introduction of student fees, HE research strongly focused on the predication and expectation of a more consumerist approach to university studies by the student body. The introduction and then increase of student fees, saw a body of literature that critiqued students as “becoming synonymous with self-interest and a sense of entitlement” (Finn et al., 2021, p.187). The view of the student as consumer is seen both in the academic literature and in governmental and institutional policy documents (Brooks, 2018). Tight (2013) discussed metaphors for students as being consumer, customer, co-producer but perhaps controversially saw the dominant discourse as being that of students as pawns. The implication here is that students were being used as part of a wider agenda (Tight, 2013) and the focus on employability and servicing industry has certainly gained prominence in what can be described as a neo-liberal political agenda in HE. There is a glimpse of an alternative viewpoint in the research of Budd (2017) who argues that the predictions that a market driven HE system would erode the responsibility felt by students have been exaggerated. Undoubtedly though it is the view of the entitled, consumerist student who lacks an academic work ethic that appears strongest in the years following the introduction of student fees.

The view of the modern student as consumerist and goal orientated becomes exacerbated by claims of dumbing down of UK HE for students who are viewed “through discourses of lack, failure and decline” (Finn et al., 2021, p.187). This means that alongside the view of student as consumer students have also been portrayed as non-traditional and often deficit in terms of capability to study, learn and achieve at university level. The expansion of HE and the widening participation agenda means that there has been a transformation in terms of the types of students enrolling to study. With the widening participation agenda came a research focus on traditional versus non-traditional constructs of the student. Traditional implies as Sykes (2021, p.78) states “temporal comparison with a period where university attendance was completed by fewer students and less diverse cohorts”. These traditional students were mainly seen as middle class, male, and with family members who had also attended university (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Non-traditional students have been defined as including “first-generation students, students from low-income households, students from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, mature students (age 21 years or older on university entry) and/or students with a declared disability” (Wong & Chiu, 2019, p.869).

In the research literature, the student body is segmented in various ways, for example: traditional, non-traditional, by gender, and by their commuter status. These non-traditional students are often construed as being deficit in both study skills and their ability to transition smoothly into a HE world they are unfamiliar with (Haggis, 2006) and certainly, this view of the non-traditional student persists, despite the transformation of HE. It is this that provides the backdrop to my research.

1.3 Research questions

The broad aim has been to research how undergraduate business and management students view themselves as learners. My research questions link together in that they reflect the different dimensions of how we think students should operate in HE and that a good student is thought of as someone who can learn independently and therefore goes on to be successful in terms of attainment. The questions have been worded to give the student perspective on how they think and feel about these aspects of being a learner. The emphasis here is on what the students say about their own experiences rather than trying to match their actions with a perceived set of criteria for being a good student. This is different from asking them what they do and is more exploratory in terms of what students think and feel. Undergraduate business students are the focus because of both my workplace interests and also because they form the biggest group of UG students in the UK (British Academy, 2021) and therefore are an important and mainly overlooked area of study.

Research questions (RQ):

1. What do students think makes a good learner?
2. What value do students give to independent learning?
3. How do students measure the success of their own learning?
4. To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with being business students impact on their identities as learners?

1.4 Theoretical position

Tight (2020) discusses theory and frameworks as sometimes being too restrictive and too narrow. I have found this to apply to my research and I have not taken the approach of using one overarching theoretical framework but instead have drawn upon a range of different theorists. I have attempted to be explicit about how their thinking has influenced and informed my work. As Lewin (1945, p.129) wrote “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” and the practical application of theory as a thinking tool rather than a step-by-step guide as to how to approach a research project has been my approach. Much of my original thinking was informed by the theoretical framework of self-regulated learning (SRL) as proposed by Zimmerman (2015, p.541) who defined it as “self-regulated learning involves metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural processes that are personally initiated to acquire knowledge and skill, such as goal setting, planning, learning strategies, self-reinforcement, self-recording, and self-instruction”.

My starting point then was an interest in the development of students as independent learners and with a view that this was crucial to student success and that SRL could be used to investigate this. Before moving into lecturing, I worked as a librarian both at a university and then the National Health Service. I was very much involved in training library users to find information themselves rather than seeing and using librarians as the gatekeepers of knowledge. The equipping of students and staff with the tools to find information for themselves was crucial to this. As such, theorists such as Candy (1991) and Rogers (1969) who saw education and IL as emancipatory tools that empowered learners have been important to me. The work of Freire (2013) and the ideas of education as being fundamental to the emancipation of people have also been influential. I argue that these ideals are important, but that IL as generally understood and practiced in HE is far removed from how these theorists proposed it and that instead, IL is something that is imposed on students as a best practice way of studying and learning.

Zimmerman (1989b) argued that environmental factors need to be considered as part of SRL with a view that it is the interaction of environmental, individual, and behavioural influences that impact the self-regulation of the individual. I argue though that SRL typically focuses on individual regulation rather than considering the environmental aspects of being a learner. Biggs (1999 p.62) terms this “a blame the student theory of teaching” and this persists in

practice. As such the focus remains on the individual and their failings rather than questioning the practices of the environment itself. I contend that if the environment becomes the focus it changes our perception of HE teaching practice and calls into question many of the everyday assumptions that are made about students.

During the process of undertaking this research, my thinking has gone on to be influenced by a different body of work that has critiqued the ideals of SRL (Vassallo, 2013, 2015) and IL (Leathwood, 2006). Engaging with these critiques of SRL and IL has led me to question my thinking and instead of working from a stance of wanting to promote SRL and IL amongst students my position has moved to questioning these constructs. In understanding SRL and IL as being part of a neoliberal system of HE that sees the student as an economic being the perspective changes. Neoliberalism sees the student as a self-interested individual with economic motivations to study and work within a free market economy (Tight 2019). As such this turns IL away from the original emancipatory ideals and into something that is now used within HE as something that becomes measurable in terms of the ideal student.

The focus in the literature on the student as a neoliberal being led me to seek an alternate body of thought and in turn, my thinking has been influenced by the work of Lave (1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning and communities of practice. Wenger (1998, p.3) states that “our institutions ... are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching” but that learning can be seen differently. That learning can be seen as something other than an individual endeavour has been influential in some of my questioning of what were givens around the importance of IL and by association SRL. Wenger (1998, p.3) posed the following questions “what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world?”. These different theories have influenced my work and analyses by providing a basis on which to see things differently and to approach the dominant ideas of student learning from a more critical stance. It was an iterative process and meant that while working with the data and beginning to formulate themes of analysis I was directed back to question the theoretical underpinnings of what I was finding. In this sense it was the data and initial stages of analysis that lead me to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991).

1.5 Research design

I have approached my research with a constructionist epistemology. As such I believe that there is no “objective truth waiting for us to discover it” (Crotty, 1998, p.8). The topic of student learning is often studied from a psychological perspective and therefore frequently takes a quantitative approach. The deductive and positivist approach does not fit with either my world beliefs or the research topic itself. The constructionist world view of how things can be understood fits both with my ontological stance as interpretivist and aligns with the research questions which seek to explore rather than prove. I have taken an interpretivist stance that takes the lived experience of the social world into account (Crotty, 1998).

The research setting is my own workplace and so I also address my position as an insider and my stance as a reflective practitioner and researcher. In total nineteen undergraduate students studying on programmes within a business school were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and the majority of these took place online during the first Covid lockdown of 2020. The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

1.6 Contribution to knowledge

The notion of IL and the good student is one of the bedrocks of HE and as such little has been written that questions the underlying assumptions about their worthiness. Most of the literature in this field addresses how to make students ‘good’ rather than exploring what students think about being a good learner. In doing so, the research perpetuates the given ideal of the good independent student persona and does little to listen to students themselves. Whilst important to do so, in researching only segments of the student population (such as first in family, working class, etc), we miss what Tight (2020, p.697) refers to as “more holistic approaches to researching the student experience”. The importance of this is in practice, as a lecturer walking into a teaching room has to contend with not only the individuals but the whole group of students facing them (Haggis 2003).

My study contributes to knowledge in that it addresses the gap about the student perspective on learning and the findings of this have implications for knowledge, policy, and teaching practice. Academic practice in terms of the day-to-day interactions with students

and the planning and delivering of teaching can be taken for granted and unexamined. Some of the organisational culture can be unquestioned and everyday assumptions of the inherent value of some of the approaches we take can mean we never step back and view things afresh or use a different lens to critique what we do. In investigating the idealised norm of the good student, who is independent in their learning and whose engagement and success are measurable, I question some of the everyday assumptions of HE practices. Importantly, if student learning is seen as a social practice rather than an individual endeavour it has implications for both the direction of future research and teaching practice. In arguing that the focus on IL is unhelpful and rather than seeing the 'bad' student as the problem the focus should instead be on learning as a social activity within a given subject area. This does not mean that individual student responsibility for their own learning is unimportant or equally that student engagement in terms of things like attendance is unimportant. It can be too simplistic to view responsibility as either lying with the student or the institution (Sabri, 2023), but rather that students are expected to engage with and be challenged by disciplinary knowledge and that this should be the focus. By arguing this I am making a much-needed contribution to knowledge.

1.7 Limitations

I acknowledge that my study is small in terms of sample size and that the setting is particular to the institution that I am employed in. I have not set out to prove anything and I do not claim to have done so. Rather I seek to question and provoke a debate that may influence future research and inform teaching practice. While I did not actively seek out high achieving students the participants, who were all volunteers, self-reported as high achieving. As such I have not captured the voice of students who may not be doing so well or who are not so personally invested in their studies. While the research does not set out to be replicable there are still important implications for how we work with, and provide support for, both business students and the wider university student population.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

Following on from the introductory chapter which provides background, context, and details my research questions the thesis then continues to chapter 2 which is a thematic discussion of the literature with sub-sections of business students; what is a good student? independent learning and finally success and failure. Chapter 3 details my research design and outlines and justifies the decisions I have made concerning methodology and research methods. The sub-sections are research setting; research methods; data collection; quality & trustworthiness; reflecting on my research position. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present a thematic discussion of my research analyses. Chapter 4 covers business students in a mass education system and introduces the participants of the study; their motivations for studying on business related courses and their sense of personal responsibility. Chapter 5 critiques the construct of a good learner, including a discussion of being a bad learner, and learning mindsets. Chapter 6 addresses being an independent learner including a discussion about the social aspects of learning. Chapter 7 discusses success and failure, including how students think lecturers view success and how students themselves view their own success. The final concluding chapter 8 sums up key findings in relation to the research questions and discusses my contribution to knowledge and reflections on the study.

1.9 Chapter summary

In choosing to research how business students view themselves as learners I have focused on something that has been of interest to me personally in my teaching practice but also has wider implications for HE in general. Recent HE policy, practice, and research constantly calls for a student focus while frequently neglecting the student viewpoint. It is the student viewpoint that I aim to explore in my study using a constructionist and interpretivist approach that fits with my research questions that aim to explore and illuminate rather than look for cause or effect. This is significant in that rather than constantly focusing on how to make students fit an ideal type it gives lecturers and those working with students a clearer idea of how students themselves think of their learning. In doing so we can better understand and meet their needs within their discipline of study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

As with any research, my work is situated within an existing body of knowledge and this chapter aims to provide a critical discussion of the pertinent literature in this field. The literature review does not aim to be exhaustive or systematic but presents a thematic discussion of existing knowledge that is pertinent to my area of study. The themes reflect my research questions, and this chapter is structured using the broad themes of business students; what is a good student?; IL and success and failure.

Most of the literature in this area focuses on what undergraduate students are lacking in terms of their attitudes and approaches to learning and then also what to do about it. I have been guided by Thomson (2020) who describes “reading against the grain of the field” and that “if the result of your critical reading of your field results in finding literatures not often recognised and valued, it is important to read them – and to hear what they say”. This is the approach I have taken in locating, reading, and using the literature I will now go on to discuss. Literature searches were carried out using Google Scholar, ERIC database, and Business Source Complete. This meant that both the education literature and business literature were searched. It is the literature that focuses on undergraduate students that is emphasised within the discussion but if appropriate the literature on postgraduate studies has also been drawn upon.

2.2 Business students

While undergraduate students in general are frequently maligned as deficit and consumerist in their approach to studying, I argue that these issues are magnified in the business and management education literature. However, much of the literature in this area is conceptual and there is little research that investigates the views and goals of the students themselves. Koris and Aav (2019, p.152) highlight this in relation to a post-1992 university stating that the “literature on this topic is not only predominantly negative towards the business school” but also its curriculum and its graduates. The negativity towards the business school and its students has wider societal implications if graduates from these schools go on to be the business leaders of the future (Parker, 2018). Business schools are

often linked with the negative aspects of the capitalist system and are accused of promoting economic growth to the detriment of wider societal issues (Holmqvist, 2023; McMurray, et al., 2016). If business schools are providing the leaders, entrepreneurs, and managers of the future then what business students experience and learn in HE and how they develop as learners has a potential impact far beyond their own individual goals.

Those individual goals are usually perceived to be that of a neoliberal and economically driven individual. Neoliberalism puts business and economic gain at the forefront of government policy, and therefore university policy, and views the individual as an economic being (Davies & Bansel, 2007). I contend that it is a neoliberal agenda that is pushing the employability agenda and as its dominance gains pace graduate employment outcomes become a key performance indicator in HE (Woodfield & McInstosh, 2022). This is particularly notable in the assumptions that are made about students studying within the field of business and management. They are seen as having chosen professionally orientated courses with future employment as a key goal and are therefore viewed as more career focused than students studying other disciplines (Adcroft, 2011; Wardley et al., 2021). The careerist aspirations of business students have also been linked to the increase in fees and student loans and a marked desire to gain a return on the investment made (Cassell, 2019; Kristjánsson et al. 2017). Undoubtedly, the conceptualisation of the business student as career and money driven permeates the literature in this field.

The construct of the business student as neoliberal in their individualistic approach to their learning and graduate futures permeates not only the research literature but also the everyday thinking of academics about their students (Jabbar et al., 2018). What is notable here is that this is the impression of the academic staff rather than the views of the students themselves, which is often lacking in the literature. What is difficult to untangle is whether it is policy, HE institutions and academics that see students as consumers and that this perception is then mirrored by students, or at least by most of the research that is done in this field, or whether business students really are neoliberal beings. The view of the business student as career focused is not new, Bennett (2004) found that the motivations of business students in a post-1992 university were higher levels of pay and graduate employment options. In contrast, however, the findings of Lawson (2014) give a glimpse that there might be more than purely a careerist approach with interest and enjoyment in

the subject rating more highly than employability for reasons to study marketing. Despite this, I support what Muddiman (2018, p.2) states in “the idea that students attend university to enhance their job prospects has become so pervasive that it largely goes unchallenged in public or policy discourses” and that the predominant view of the business student is as careerist and consumerist in their approach to learning.

If HE is seen as a commodity and students as consumers then much of the literature implies that what is at risk is the development of learners as scholars (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Anderson et al., 2018). There is nothing inherently wrong with students wanting to gain employment, it is to be expected that mainly young adults want to secure their future. However, the view of the business student as a consumer, driven by the need to achieve the grades to maximise employment opportunities has been linked to the notion of students developing passive and instrumental learning strategies that then has a negative impact on student learning (Gunn, 2018). Importantly this construct of the business student as wholly focused on future graduate employment is seen in the wider literature as encouraging a consumerist approach to HE that lessens the self-identity of students as learners (Bunce et al., 2017). This is the point made by Nixon et al., (2016) who argue that young people arrive at HE with little knowledge about the different learning personas available to them and that this results in the commodification of HE in the pursuit of a financially lucrative career.

The view of the student as career focused and the business school providing a vocational education provides some explanation as to why business studies courses are frequently criticised for lacking in intellectual stimulation. Indeed, business schools themselves have been “also widely regarded to be intellectually fraudulent places” (Parker 2018 p.viii). The sense from the literature can be that getting students to engage intellectually with their studies is problematic due to their tendency to expect results without much work because of the financial investment they have already made (Finn et al., 2021). Indeed, this leads to spurious assertions that business students as lacking in ethical standards and as cheating more than students from other subject areas (Brownet al. 2010; Lord Ferguson et al., 2022).

Intellectual challenge has been an area of concern for business schools for several years (O'Donovan & den Outer, 2020) and this is reflected in the National Student Survey rating on intellectual stimulation for business studies which is consistently below the average for other subject areas (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021). O'Donovan (2010,

p.7) notes that teaching colleagues in a business school “bemoan the lack of criticality or evaluative behaviour in first year undergraduates”. Importantly, the focus is usually on the student, implying that it is them that are not up to the challenge of studying at university level. The results of the National Student Survey contradict this in that business students consistently report their courses as intellectually unstimulating. This implies a lack of challenge that should be viewed as a fundamental part of HE and one that students expect (O'Donovan and den Outer 2020).

There are alternative viewpoints in the literature, notably the work of Örténblad et al. (2013) and Koris and Aav (2019) who were surprised that their findings were in contrast to the majority of literature in this field. Using a typology of business school graduates, they found that rather than being self-interested and career orientated the business students they surveyed were attuned to societal values and their purpose in supporting social responsibility (Koris & Aav, 2019). While the authors acknowledge that the sample was small and that individuals can offer a positive version of themselves it is an important counter argument to the claims of business schools as being hotbeds of corporate greed (Parker, 2018).

If business schools are not providing intellectually stimulating programmes of study, then there needs to be a questioning of the curriculum. There is an argument that because of the graduate employment focus of business schools it is the technical and practical aspects of business and management that are foregrounded in teaching and learning rather than the questioning of key concepts, theories, and practices. As Kristjánsson et al. (2017, p.4) put it “there seems to be a focus on the idea that in business what really matters is ‘how’ you do what you do, not why you do what you do, or, even, in fact, what you choose to do”. The issue here is that the cash cow of universities can be said to replicate and regurgitate existing business practices rather than producing graduates that are equipped to think differently and creatively about solving the problems that society faces (Anderson et al., 2018). Indeed, it has been argued that this focus means that bad practice is replicated and that financial crises such as that seen in 2008 have been associated with the practices and narrow focus of business schools on profit (Cassell, 2019; Friedland & Jain, 2022).

It can be argued though that instead of working to provide solutions to world problems business schools are reproducing past mistakes and that what needs to happen is for

business curricula to integrate the core components of critical thinking and reflective practice into teaching and learning (Spee & Fraiberg, 2015). The need for the incorporation of more critical thinking into business studies courses is frequently linked to developing supposed graduate attributes such as problem solving and analytical thinking (Rodriguez, 2009). It is argued in the literature that there is a connection between the need for business students to be both independent and critical thinkers while at university and going forward into careers as managers and in business settings (Bloch & Spataro, 2014; McMurray et al., 2016). IL then is seen as important both for academic study but also for future employment and is therefore integral to undergraduate business education.

The dominant discourse then continues to be one of business students as entitled consumers who expect good grades but who are not willing to put in the necessary work to get them (Vuori, 2021). It is very much a neo-liberal version of what a student should be. These students are seen as being motivated by graduate employment as an end goal of their studies. They could be described as “active entrepreneur of the self” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.252) or as Houghton (2019, p.520) terms it “enterprising individuals”. This can be observed in the focus on career development and personal branding within business schools that is linked to the employability agenda. I argue that it is policy that drives the consumerist view of the student and that this is then reflected in the actual practice of teaching in the classroom and the resultant academic literature on teaching and learning. Little is known of how students themselves view their experiences as learners. If this is how students are negatively construed, it leads to the question of how we would prefer students to be and what a good student looks like.

2.3 What is a good student?

The everyday practice of teaching in HE is frequently peppered with talk of good and, by implication, bad students. These bad students are often referred to as weak learners who are poor in terms of study skills and lacking in motivation. This is summed up by Browder (2013) who states that we all moan about academically poor students and “their slacking off during group work; their bizarre inability to comprehend simple directions; their disorganization ... the way they sometimes put their heads down on their desks”. Certainly,

the literature in this area focuses mainly on the deficit model of the student. As Lave (1996, p.158) stated in the 90s, “it is difficult to find research on learning that focuses on great learners learning” and I assert that this focus on the negative has not fundamentally changed into the present day. What does appear in the literature is a striving for an ideal student, the good learner and it is frequently this ideal that students are measured against. This section then addresses how the good student is construed in terms of an ideal and the measurement of that ideal and mindsets.

2.3.1 The ideal type

The presupposition of there being such a thing as an ideal student is not new but despite this, it is an under researched area of study (Wong & Chiu, 2021b). Previous studies, both in schools and HE, have found that ideal pupils are “attentive, disciplined, obedient, respectful, responsible and punctual” and in HE “prepared, engaged, committed, critical, reflective and progressing” (Wong & Chiu, 2021b, p.6). In an equally long list of aspirational virtues Siivonen and Filander (2020, p.252) found that Finnish students thought of the ideal as:

“active, self-directed, independent, responsible, efficient and hard-working, a student who is well motivated and graduates in the expected time, has good learning skills and social skills, is flexible, ambitious, resilient, ready to face challenges, energetic and physically and mentally healthy”.

These ideal students know how to study and learn independently, do not take up too much of the faculty’s time and by implication, do not use up too many resources. More recently the ideal student finishes their studies and goes on to gain graduate level employment.

If we think we know what an ideal type is, then the approach of HE can be to get students to fit into what is expected of them and to strive to meet the ideal (Wulf-Andersen, 2023). This is echoed in the work of Wong and Chiu (2021b) who propose eight dimensions of the ideal student and argue that it makes the implicit expectations of HE clear to students.

Undoubtedly by making these assumptions explicit students would have a clearer idea of what they need to do to achieve (Chiu et al., 2021). I argue though that what this does is reinforce the constant focus on the student as the problem. This does little to question the underlying assumptions of the ideal student or the HE environment in which they study. The

work of Wong and Chiu (2021b) identifies fifty ideal university student items which are then grouped into eight dimensions: diligence & engagement, organisation & discipline, reflection & innovation, positive & confident outlook, supportive of others, academic skills, employability skills, and intelligence & strategic approach. It is interesting to note that academic skills only form one, small, part in this list and that much of this ideal student construct is personality type and individual characteristics. It is a long list that could seem overwhelming to both students and staff. If this is seen through a neoliberal lens then the list can be seen as part of the ideal neoliberal subject which no individual will ever completely meet (Houghton, 2019).

Wong and Chiu (2021b) argue that one of the purposes of their work is to support non-traditional students to better understand the expectations of HE and argue that it is important in supporting inclusivity in HE. In contrast, in another paper Wong et al., (2021) question the focus on the individual in relation to the awarding gap observed between black, Asian and minority ethnic students, arguing that it means systemic issues are overlooked. Importantly though, what the ideal student study (Wong & Chiu, 2021b) does not do is challenge the implicit practices it aims to make explicit. All the identified ideal characteristics, attributes, and actions of ideal types form a dauntingly long list and not matching or developing those attributes could potentially add to so called non-traditional students never feeling good enough. Feeling not good enough was highlighted by a paper by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) that addressed the massification of HE and concluded that universities were being increasingly judged by the type of student they enrolled on their courses and that post-1992 universities, attracting non-traditional students, were somehow seen as second-rate institutions. It is important to note that this perception of both non-traditional students and a hierarchy of university institutions persists.

More recently, work by Wulf-Andersen (2023) and Nieminen (2023) problematise the ideal student in relation to students with psychosocial problems and disabled students, while Gregersen and Nielsen (2023) addresses mature students. All argue that the ideal student persona creates barriers rather than enhancing inclusivity. As Brooks et al. (2023, p.1) asserts university interventions are “aimed more at transforming them into ‘proper students’ who conform to the dominant educational culture, rather than at transforming

this culture to meaningfully include them". Even if it is students who have been surveyed about what makes an ideal student, this is still done within the framework of an existing system of HE. This framework is as Haggis (2003 p.102) asserted "a model of learning which is based upon a set of elite values, attitudes, and epistemologies that make more sense to higher education's 'gatekeepers' than they do to many of its students". It is this model that persists, and it is against this that students are measured. This is partly driven by the increasing monitoring of students via learning analytics, and this leads to a discussion about measuring the good student, or more frequently, identifying what institutions term 'at risk' and therefore effectively bad students.

2.3.2 Measuring the good student (or identifying the bad ones)

As Tight (2020, p.689) states student retention and engagement "are amongst the most discussed and researched aspects of HE in the last four decades" and the good student is often the focus of these studies. If it is thought of in this way the aggregate of individually good students becomes the measure of educational quality. This is reinforced by the Office of Students which is increasingly using metrics of engagement, retention, attainment, and employment outcomes to assess quality (Deem & Baird, 2020). The use of quantifiable outputs of HE as the measurement for quality means that the good student becomes more important than ever. While the ideal type of student may not have changed over time, it has always been some one that is studious and motivated, what has developed is the ability to measure students' engagement in terms of attendance, online logins, and library visits via the use of learning analytics.

This persistent quest to discover and promote the ideal composition of a good student can go hand in hand with the increasing use of data and metrics that constantly monitor student engagement. As Gunn (2018, p.134) states "when something is measured it becomes more important" and metrics of engagement are often collected to support policy agendas such as employability, retention, attainment, attendance, and student satisfaction (Evans et al., 2018). We know students not by talking to them and interacting with them personally but by constructing their identity via data that is collected by means of a variety of different online platforms (Selwyn et al., 2022). These metrics and the use of learning analytics have grown in importance within the ever-evolving system of a market driven HE sector but the

idea that we can identify students who are failing is not new. There is an argument that systems that identify students who are not performing as expected can be used to focus interventions and provide support where needed (Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008). This seems unquestionably a positive thing to do but the decisions on what data to collect and how to measure engagement is never a neutral decision but one driven by institutional and political imperatives (Williamson, 2019). Metrics used as an early warning system to predict student success or failure are based on an underlying assumption of what a good student is. What is of note here is that as Houghton (2019) describes “implied in this description of the ideal neoliberal subject is the implication of a neoliberal other: an ‘unideal’ subject”. If there is an ideal type, then by implication there is an unideal type.

What this means in practical terms is that much of the metrics that are collected are used to identify these unideal types and predicting who these students might be is the focus of much of the literature on HE retention and attainment (Archer & Prinsloo, 2020). I assert that what this misses is the intricacies of learning as a social activity and that it does not capture the lived experience of the student body (Parkes et al. 2020). Despite all the headlines about student drop out rates the data shows that UK non-retention rates are low in comparison to other countries (Hillman, 2021). Interestingly, Hillman (2021) argues that this could be viewed as the UK HE sector being risk-averse in terms of the profile of students who enrol at university. If this view is adhered to then there are obvious tensions between widening participation and keeping non-retention rates low. Too often, widening participation is associated with dumbing down or pandering to the needs of the deficit student who struggles with the need to learn independently. There are tensions between working with the students we have or moulding students to the ideal type. The reality of HE is that a large number of students are accepted onto courses with a variety of different qualifications and social backgrounds leading to highly individualistic needs that are often dependent on context (Evans et al., 2018). As such there can be no one ideal type of student and it becomes impossible for a university to address the individual needs of students in a mass higher education system. What does persist though, even if there are many different types of students, is the ideal of the student as self motivated and self regulating. These ideal students not only have the skills required to study and learn but also have associated

positive, productive, and confident attitudes. They have clear learner identities that transfer into action. They have the right mindsets, and it is this that I discuss next.

2.3.3 Mindsets

The ideal student is presented as enthusiastic and engaged in much of the literature, they have positive mindsets and are resilient (Siivonen & Filander, 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2021b). How students think about themselves and how this is then translated into action is highlighted in much of the literature. There is a strong focus on the psychological and therefore the individual level in the literature. The focus is often on a student fitting in and adjusting to university studies and becoming confident in their studies, which Bennett (2004, p.27) described as “the individual needs to feel that he/she is an ‘undergraduate type’”.

Some of the key concepts here include theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and also self-esteem and identity theory (Bennett, 2009). Often these are used indistinguishably, and self-efficacy and academic self-concept (ASC) are frequently combined in the literature (Mynott, 2018). ASC is defined by Bong and Skaalvik (2003) as an individual’s knowledge and perceptions about themselves in achievement situations. Bandura (1982, p.122) states that efficacy “involves a generative capability in which component cognitive, social, and behavioural skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes”. Academic self-concept and self-efficacy are mainly reported in the literature as quantifiable and there are several standardised survey tools used to measure these concepts and they receive a lot of research attention because of the influence they are believed to have on academic studying (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003) and also on confidence (Bennett, 2009). This is reflected in many research papers looking at the link between ASC and achievement (Boulter, 2002; Bresó et al., 2011; House, 1995; Rodriguez, 2009).

What these theoretical frameworks focus on though is the viewpoint of learning as a quantifiable change in knowledge or practice rather than using methodologies that incorporate a more person focused approach (Ciolan & Manasia, 2017). I argue that this emphasis on a quantifiable approach to understanding learning also links to ideas of intelligence and therefore the individual capability of students to learn. The implications of

this are highlighted by Cameron (2019) who argues that traditionally academic intelligence and ability led to a HE system that supports the illusion of meritocracy. What this means is that there is a narrow view of what a good learner is or should be and that this is based on a Eurocentric ideal in which Western European values such as individuality and free markets are dominant (Pokhrel, 2011) . Cameron (2019, p.319) asserts that “there is evidence to show that people of colour, unsupported disabled people, people from poorer backgrounds, and in certain fields, women, are less likely to be considered ‘good’ students”.

A good student then not only has intelligence and the academic skills needed to put that intelligence to good use but also has a strong learner identity, good academic self concept, and a self efficacy that enables them to achieve. However, someone with a strong identity as a learner is not necessarily a good learner as (Lawson, 2014). It is not just how they identify but also what they do because of that. This is where concepts such as self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL) come into play.

2.3.3.1 Self-regulation

I contend that the literature, frequently quantitative in approach, often focuses on students having the right self-concept before moving on to focus on self-regulation in terms of action and that students are frequently viewed as lacking the associated skillset and are therefore seen as “deficient populations of learners” (Zimmerman, 2015, p.543). SRL is viewed as students being self-motivated and having or acquiring the necessary skill set to be able to study individually (Mega et al., 2014). Zimmerman (2015) is the main theorist in this field, and he defines SRL as involving “metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural processes that are personally initiated to acquire knowledge and skill, such as goal setting, planning, learning strategies, self-reinforcement, self-recording, and self-instruction” (Zimmerman, 2015, p.541). This good student has the requisite study skills and is motivated to use these skills and in doing so is held up as the ideal type of student.

The focus on the individualistic nature of self-regulation has dominated the field (Thoutenhoofd & Pirrie, 2015). I contend, however, that there are numerous problems with the good student as self-regulating and intrinsically motivated. The focus on the individual squarely places the blame for failure on the student without considering or addressing the

institutional practices that might hamper a student's progress. Students need to be seen as being good, engaged, and committed otherwise the danger is that they will be labelled as not fitting in and not belonging (Cannon, 2002), this pressure only increases with the development of more sophisticated ways of collecting metrics about individual student engagement. I argue that any attempt to list the desirable attributes of the ideal student needs to consider and address these concerns. The good student construct is often based on individuals who fit the traditional construct of a student as described by Koutsouris et al., (2021, p.135) who state it is "as a young, white, able-bodied student, living away from home, without caring responsibilities or financial worries". Yet it is against these ideals that individual students are now constantly monitored and measured. Alongside this, the good student is strongly independent and needs minimal help to successfully complete their studies (Brooks et al., 2023). It is this theme of independence promoted via IL that I discuss next.

2.4 Independent learning

That IL should have a central place in the ethos and culture of UK HE can appear unquestionable (McKendry & Boyd, 2012). IL is what the Higher Education Academy (2015) terms "a type of study at the very heart of university education". It was mentioned in a parliamentary answer by Member of Parliament Donelan (2020) who stated that online learning during the COVID pandemic had "even led to improved directed independent learning". Despite this pervasive nature of IL, it proves difficult to define and it can be hard to ascertain whether its ubiquity makes it a tenet, or that being a tenet makes it ubiquitous. Multiple meanings can be seen in policy, practice, and in university promotional material. This confusion of meaning is also apparent in the literature with themes ranging from IL as something students do outside of contact hours (Hockings et al., 2018), as a skillset needed for improving retention and attainment, as a key feature of employability skills and also, contrastingly, as underpinning academic freedom and student choice (Macfarlane, 2016). The multitude of approaches means that IL is promoted and studied as both an issue for learner development and also as part of a more radical approach to pedagogy (Leathwood, 2006). Little of the literature, however, problematises the concept of IL itself and I argue that this is important work. An alternative view of IL and SRL is proposed by Vassallo (2015,

p.82) who states that such concepts are not “neutral, value-free, natural, ahistorical form of human engagement that is empowering for individuals”. The dictionary definition of independent is either “not influenced or controlled in any way by other people, events, or things” or “not taking help or money from other people”(Cambridge University, n.d.) and I argue that while universities might claim they promote the first definition, in practice it is the second definition that students’ focus on. What follows is a discussion around concepts of independence; the learning aspects of IL; IL and employability and IL through a different lens.

2.4.1 The independence of independent learning

One of the distinctions to be made about IL is that it can either be about the independence of mind or IL as self-study (Thorpe, 2002). Some of the early work on IL came about via the distance education movement but these insights are still applicable and in many ways are equally as important twenty years later. Much of HE provision is now blended in terms of face-to-face teaching and online delivery and student attendance at in person classes is relatively low and appears to be decreasing (Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al., 2021; Oldfield et al., 2018). The writings of Rogers (1969), Moore (1973), Candy (1991), and more recently Macfarlane (2016) have stressed the emancipatory power of autonomous IL and the need for students to take control of their learning based on an ideology of empowerment. I argue, however, as Loeng (2020, p.1) states that this form of IL “has been a concept present in theory, discussions, and exchange of views, but seldom systematically put to practice”. Instead, the concept of independence implied in IL in current HE practices is more aligned with neoliberalism that sees individuals as having sole responsibility for their own progression, enhancement of career opportunities and self-development in all areas of their lives (Vassallo, 2015). Added to this, the prevailing construction of the student as consumer means they are seen as needing to take responsibility for their learning and their development within a framework of autonomy and self-direction (Goode, 2007). IL is often associated with other similar and connected concepts such as lifelong learning, SDL and SRL. While some argue that all these concepts support emancipatory ideals of education, I argue that it is important to question the basis of this in terms of how IL is practiced, especially within business schools. This ties in closely with the construct of business students as future workers and corporate employees in the making. Importantly, this neoliberal individual is

seen as having self-interest and personal financial gain at the heart of their motivation to study (Vassallo, 2015). Danvers (2021, p.643) makes this point when she argues that students see HE as an “individualised private investment tradable for future earning capacity”. This leads to the link with employability and the proposition that the modern business world needs workers who are self-motivated, self reliant and also flexible problem solvers and that IL facilitates this (Tight, 2019; Vassallo, 2015). The argument that students need to become independent learners because that is what employers want is often used in the defence of independent study time that forms the bulk of UK HE provision (Kingsbury, 2014). After graduation, employers often state that HE students are unprepared for the workplace and are not the independent, problem solving, critical thinkers that they require (McMurray et al., 2016). All this can seem unquestionable but Leathwood (2006, p.613) makes an important point in stating that the model of the student most frequently used as a foundation of IL “is not only a masculine one, but specifically western, white and middle class”.

These contradictions also play out in the surveillance and monitoring of the individual that is ever growing in HE and the increasing use of the phrase directed independent learning (see examples from Anglia Ruskin University, 2023 and Swansea University, 2023). I argue that the student is allowed to be independent but only in ways the system approves of and certainly not in the ways proposed by the emancipatory IL literature. If, as I contend, this is the dominant lens through which IL is seen in HE then what impact does it have on how we approach learning? In tightly controlled programmes of study with little or no choice of either modules studied or methods of assessment IL in practice has moved away from the ideas of Freire (2013) to one that sees IL as a skill or tool to increase attainment, retention, and also graduate outcomes. There are also arguments that the tightening control of metrics and oversight curtail the development of students as independent learners who should have the freedom to disengage as much as to engage (Macfarlane, 2016). If students are required to be independent in these ways, what impact does this have on learning?

2.4.2 The learning in independent learning

The emancipatory viewpoint of IL is in juxtaposition to the directed IL alluded to by Donelan (MP). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2017, p.23) states that IL is

“learning that occurs outside the classroom that might include preparation for scheduled sessions, follow-up work, wider reading or practice, completion of assessment tasks, or revision” and indicates that more time is spent on IL than on classroom contact hours and as such it forms a big part of UG provision. The Office for Students (2018, p.152) refers to “a crucial responsibility to ensure that every student has the chance to develop as an independent learner”. IL then takes a developmental approach, and the developmental view of IL is often discussed in terms of the unpreparedness of students transitioning into HE (Thompson et al., 2021). The over-arching view of the student as the problem in HE feeds off the idea of the student not being an autonomous independent learner capable of higher order critical thinking (Haggis, 2006). It is an individualised view of learning and begs the question independent from what? What is implied here is that the student is deficit in some way and that the deficit model of non-traditional students and the widening participation agenda has meant that students need more support to achieve higher level thinking skills and the requisite study skills needed to successfully achieve in HE. This is what is addressed in the following sections on critical thinking, study skills and academic reading.

2.4.2.1 Critical thinking

In much the same way as IL is deeply embedded in the psyche of HE so too is critical thinking. Critical thinking often appears alongside IL in policy, teaching and learning policies, and assessment criteria (Danvers, 2018). It is frequently linked to IL and developing students as critical thinkers has long been identified as a desirable outcome of HE, with higher order thinking skills being linked to graduate outcomes (An Le & Hockey, 2022). This is viewed as especially important to business students as illustrated by Calma and Davies (2021, p.2280) who state that “critical thinking impacts on how a business practitioner makes strategic investment decisions for optimising clients’ returns”.

If critical thinking is something that is both crucial to a student’s academic success and also to their employability, then the view of business students as being deficit is problematic. This view is typified by Smith (2003, p.25) who states that business students are unable to “understand challenging texts or complex issues; their reasoning is often illogical and they do not critically assess arguments; they solve problems in a rote formulaic way, rather than through creative strategies”. I assert that it is this deficit view that persists in business

schools. An example of this is Errington and Bubna-Litic (2015) who found that management students demonstrate there is a gap in critical thinking skills, perhaps somewhat oddly blaming management textbooks for not promoting a critical approach and encouraging a passive approach to student learning. While Samaras et al. (2022) state that critical thinking is needed by future leaders but is not commonplace in undergraduate teaching and learning and Wolcott and Sargent (2021) state that accountancy students need to demonstrate higher level critical thinking skills. The consensus of the literature and of practice is that critical thinking is another thing a good student should be able to do but that many of them cannot master.

Students' inability to think critically then is a particularly strong theme in the business studies literature. Employers frequently cite critical thinking skills as a key graduate attribute (Samaras et al., 2022; British Academy, 2021) and business schools have been trying to address how to embed critical thinking into curricula for decades. It is often the student who is viewed as the problem with comments such as "students at all levels are unable to think effectively" (Smith, 2003, p.24). It is a sweeping, and damning, statement but demonstrates how faculty can think about their students. Little has been written that problematises the concept of critical thinking. Critical thinking, much as IL, is defined in multiple ways, and how it is embedded in the curriculum and how students are expected to engage with it can be different in different classes. Much as IL, critical thinking has multiple meanings that can range from an ethically driven stance of emancipation to a more rationalist approach to interacting with bodies of academic knowledge (Danvers, 2021). I assert that the version of critical thinking that is described in business education is one of a rational process that is linked to problem solving. This links to decision making as a core graduate skill and Danvers (2021, p.642) describes one of the main approaches to critical thinking as presuming "a decontextualised critical subject who applies a series of 'rational' processes to interrogate truth claims objectively".

The literature shows that critical thinking is fundamental to academic success and business acumen sees it as a skill that can be learnt and practiced in a variety of situations. Calma and Davies (2021) reviewed the literature in this field and concluded that despite its supposed importance, critical thinking lacks a coherent definition in the context of business education.

One important point Calma and Davies (2021, p.2290) makes is that “critical thinking is comprised not just of skills but also of dispositions” and that this is overlooked in the literature. These dispositions include open mindedness, inquisitiveness, and participation in a community of learning. This leads to a discussion of the difference between encouraging students to utilise critical thinking to solve business problems and encouraging them to question what they are being taught and the tenets of business and management education. This can be linked back to the issues of intellectual challenge in business studies (discussed in section 2.2) and also to the assertion by Errington and Bubna-Litic (2015) that management textbooks fail to critique standard theories and models of business and management. Rather than seeing the textbooks as being to blame, the responsibility for this must lie with the wider academic discipline of business and management studies. Interestingly, Bridgman et al., (2019) give an example of this in relation to Maslow’s pyramid, one of the commonplace theories of motivation that appears in all major textbooks on management theory. Bridgman et al., (2019 p.81) concludes that despite “promoting an elitist, individualistic view of management”, having no empirical evidence to support the model, and that Maslow himself never created a pyramid to represent his thinking on motivation it still persists to be popular. If this is taken as the starting point for addressing critical thinking in business and management education then it is not the student who is deficit in the required skills but the subject area, its researchers and academics that are perpetuating a lack of critical reflexivity in the subject area (Bridgman et al., 2019).

Students can be thought of as being unable to think critically prior to attending class but critical thinking can be used in ways that reinforced lecturers’ beliefs rather than allowing students to question (An Le and Hockey, 2022). I argue that this can also be found in business education and the implication of this is that we want students to be critical thinkers but only in the ways we tell them to be. Critical thinking as linked to academic and business success is too narrowly defined as a skill set and can be seen as both a way of accessing the knowledge of a subject but is also understood as autonomous self development (An Le & Hockey, 2022). As such it can also be viewed as what Danvers (2021, p.647) terms “a passport to self-improvement via an individualised psychological ‘work-out’”. It links to the neo-liberal view of the business student as focusing on self-advancement and much like IL and the notion of directed IL “this focus on individualising

and psychologising critical reflection, as opposed to thinking critically about broader structural forces ... is particularly symptomatic of neoliberal conceptions of individual subjectivity and responsibility” (Danvers, 2021, p.651). If both IL and critical thinking can be problematised in this way what then of IL as a set of generic study skills?

2.4.2.2 Independent learning as study skills

In their study comparing an elite university with a post-1992 university Reay (2017, p.94) concluded that it was in the post-1992 university that “with a critical mass of students with negative experiences of schooling, and consequently fragile and unconfident learner identities ...students have to operate largely as independent learners”. This can be seen to play out in many universities with large cohorts of what are frequently viewed as non-traditional students and is an important distinction between post-1992 universities and the older universities. It can be seen as one of the reasons for the proliferation of study skills resources and departments that are frequently labelled as student success or academic achievement services (Richards & Pilcher, 2023), despite Entwistle (1983 p.207) decades ago having described “the increased use of study skills programmes concentrating solely on techniques ... would be worse than useless” . These then are the skills that first year, non-traditional, and failing students are often thought of as lacking. A common mantra, in practice and research, is that these students have failed to learn how to learn. I argue that there are several weaknesses in the argument that study skills provide students with the tools they need to succeed at university.

The view that students who have qualified to get on to HE programmes of study are unprepared, incapable of learning, and wanting to be spoon-fed is something that was first purported in a National Audit Office (2002, p.15) report which found that students were “spoon-fed for longer, and are now less well-equipped with individual or self-learning skills” and as with many aspects of independent learning, critical thinking and study skills it can be difficult to untangle the connections between policy and practice. The view of the student as unprepared for university level study is deeply ingrained in all these areas. The argument that students need to learn how to learn is something that was first proposed as one of the four key skills for HE students in the hugely influential 1997 government report into the twenty-year future of HE (Dearing, 1997). The Dearing report also noted that “support staff

have noticed a change in the delivery of higher education, with a greater emphasis on independent learning ... many students come from school ill-prepared for this form of learning” (Dearing, 1997, p.116). IL then became not an emancipatory ideal of students choosing what and when to learn but became a deficit skill highlighted and pushed to the fore in policy. In contrast, though, I argue that undergraduate students have been successfully learning throughout their lives and have proved their abilities via school and/or college systems of assessment. As Brookfield (1985, p.22) stated “we are all independent learners in that the mental strategies we use to process and code the information our nervous systems receive are entirely idiosyncratic”. What has changed is not the students’ ability to learn but the setting in which they are learning, and how they are supposed to demonstrate that learning against assessment practices that are new to them.

The view that IL is a skill that is lacking in students is reflected in most of the literature in this area of study. It focuses on the diagnosis of study skill deficits, the inability of students to self-regulate, and often the impact this has on retention and attainment. Underlying this is a quest for the good student, the independent learner who works at an individual level to improve and progress. It is about turning the deficit student into a good learner rather than changing the academic culture in which they find themselves (Brooks et al., 2023). Having learner development and study skills as part of a discipline and scholarly development means that there would have to be a move away from generic, centrally provided study skills support (Richards & Pilcher, 2023). Study skills can encompass library skills, academic reading, academic writing, and referencing alongside more generic skills such as time management, note taking, and critical thinking. In promoting IL as a set of skills to be achieved I argue that it becomes what Houghton (2019, p.615) describes as one of the “‘everyday’ practices within English higher education organisations influence undergraduate students towards becoming neoliberal subjects”. Generic study skills places the responsibility wholly onto students and away from the teaching paradigm (Richards & Pilcher, 2023). If IL and study skills are seen in this way, then the issue is about providing enough academic staff to be able to deliver this within their own disciplinary subject areas (Richards & Pilcher, 2023).

2.4.2.3 *Academic reading*

In particular, academic reading can be seen as a cause for concern and something that is not only lacking as a skill in non-traditional students but also has a generational aspect to it as students are unfamiliar with print resources and reading in general (Granitz et al., 2021). While academic research is still disseminated via the written word, in frequently dense and opaque styles, reading is the main mechanism for students to engage with the disciplinary knowledge base (Howard et al. 2018). Yet in the limited number of studies that investigate students' attitudes toward academic reading, it is noted as something that is problematic (Gorzycki et al. 2020; Howard et al., 2018). What is interesting here is that Gorzycki et al. (2020) found that while academics place huge importance on academic reading, students actually "did not believe that academic reading is essential for their success in the classroom" (Gorzycki et al., 2020, p.504). That there is a contradiction between what lecturers expect in terms of academic reading and what students actually do in practice is an interesting one. It links to my argument that faculty want students to be independent but only in the way meant by them. This directly links to the good student persona and Wong and Chiu (2021b) list good reading skills as one of the many attributes of the ideal student. It is also notable as data on student interaction with library services often forms part of the learning analytics collected to assess student engagement (Williamson et al., 2020).

Why students do not read is difficult to unpick. Their reluctance to read, or to be seen to do reading, may be attributed to an anti-intellectualism noted by Elias (2008, p.111) who described "a disinterest and disrespect for intellectual and academic objectives" amongst business students. Another explanation could be a gendered discourse of effortless success (Jackson & Dempster, 2009) where being seen to work hard academically is undesirable. Alongside this, I propose that there are questions about how disciplinary bodies of knowledge are encoded in ways that may make it difficult to access and that HE still has not grappled with the need to re-consider and re-define the practices and processes that have endured in HE educational systems (Haggis, 2003). The implications of this are that it may not be the student who is deficit, but that it is academics who are deficit in their ability to communicate disciplinary knowledge and the practices associated with its dissemination.

2.4.3 IL and Employability

The individual is also the focus of much of the work on graduate employability. Here students are encouraged to reflect on their skills, create personal development plans and self-market themselves to potential employers. IL is seen as a key employment skill but the focus on personal growth, self-management, and IL within the employability agenda can also be questioned from a social practice stance. While universities frequently promote the benefits of IL in statements such as that made by Hull University (2022) who state “being able to work independently is a skill highly valued by employers so it may ultimately help you in securing a job” there is an important body of literature that focuses not on individual endeavour in the workplace but on the interconnectivity of workers in teams and networks (Mullins & McLean, 2019). While Herbert et al. (2020, p.8) found that ‘self-learning’ was important “the ability to learn from peers and seniors through observing and then mimicking their behaviour” was also important, and that social skills were needed to succeed in the workplace. Bleakley (2006, p.152), writing about medical education, states that “individualistic models of learning continue to be privileged” despite the need for teamwork across professions. This is equally applicable in any organisational setting and the need for business people to work across teams is well documented. Despite the need for a collaborative approach the focus continues to be on the individual and their success. It is seen in how the individual student is encouraged to find ways to differentiate themselves in what can be a highly competitive employment market (Houghton, 2019) and I argue that this is particularly so for the business student where academic success is increasingly measured by successfully gaining graduate employment positions.

2.4.4 IL through a different lens

One common theme throughout the previous sections has been that of individual and personal autonomy as forming the basis of most of the policy and academic literature surrounding students as learners. This leads to the smaller body of literature that sees students as individuals who are “not free from the workings of power, but rather entangled in practices of exclusion, constraints, obligations and disciplinary norms” of their subject areas (Vassallo, 2015, p.89). It changes the lens through which we see HE practice in teaching and learning, and the role IL plays in it. Much of the empirical research on IL, SRL,

and related concepts comes from the psychological perspective that takes the individual as its focus. I argue that this manifests itself as viewing the student as the problem. This is also reflected in policy documents that highlight students' inadequacies and can to some extent be seen in the Office of Students new equality of opportunity risk register (Wonkhe, 2023). As Lave (1996, p.149) states "theories that reduce learning to individual mental capacity/activity in the last instance blame marginalized people for being marginal" and I argue this is applicable here. This blaming of the individual is frequently seen in HE literature (Hughes, 2015) and the focus on the independent individual distracts from wider issues of teaching within a given context.

Despite their work on the ideal student, Wong et al., (2021) argues that the focus on the individual limits the questioning of structural issues within HE. One example of this in practice is highlighted by the work by Gravett and Kinchin (2020) who looked at academic referencing. Referencing is often a problem area for students and is frequently seen as a key IL skill that students struggle with. Gravett and Kinchin (2020) explore referencing not as a skill but as fostering a sense of being part of an academic community that includes implications for who has power in deciding who belongs and who does not. Viewing it in this way changes the perspective of learning as an individual activity to a social activity. This, however, is frequently overlooked in the literature in favour of drilling down to individual student level and in doing so devalues the mutuality of academic and student. Goode (2007, p. 591) refers to this as the "interdependence of learning and teaching" and I argue that the difference between the words independence and interdependence is key here. This harks back to the emancipatory ideals of Candy (1988, p.116) who saw learning as "nearly always carried out in the context of interpersonal relationships". Although often overlooked in the literature Zimmerman (1989b) also saw SRL as taking place within a given social context and that social learning was key and often collective. In her work on peer-assisted learning Green (2008) states that group work can form the foundations for the development of IL skills. What is problematic here is that while Green (2008) does not define what IL is there is still an assumption that students are required to be independent, despite acknowledging that students do not understand the term IL. The pervasiveness of IL often means that it is poorly understood and underdefined by both faculty and student perspectives. The neoliberal discourse of the independent student filters down from policy to the everyday

practice of HE. I argue that this is the approach of much of the practice and research of IL and that what should be of more interest is the use of group and teamwork to assimilate students into communities of practice.

This draws on the work of Lave (1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991). Lave (1996) asserts that “a reconsideration of learning as a social, collective, rather than individual, psychological phenomenon offers the only way beyond the current state of affairs” and I argue that this is something that needs to be done with the concept of the ideal and independent learner. Instead of seeing learning as embodied in the individual viewing it as social practice means that the focus shifts from efforts to turn the student from deficit to ideal and instead focuses on teaching and learning as a communal activity (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). This leads to looking at learning in HE as rooted in the disciplinary subject areas (Haggis, 2006). The implication of this is that rather than the focus of learning within HE being about the development of autonomous independent learners it could be about questioning the practices and traditions of generating and communicating knowledge. Leathwood (2006, p.631) proposes this by stating “we need then, a concept which emphasises interdependence rather than independence, that embraces collectivity as well as (a re-defined) autonomy”. I argue that despite being one of the tenets of HE, the rhetoric of the independent learner could be damaging to the development of learners and of students as scholars developing a specialist knowledge of their chosen subject area. The focus on the individual distracts from a critical evaluation of the system itself (Ashwin, 2020b). While the focus stays on the individual and the measurement of outcomes, or outputs, focus on retention and attainment then how success is viewed is key, and it is this that I discuss next.

2.5 Success and failure

Success can seem to be another unquestionably good thing; who does not want students to be successful? No one starts a university course with failure as a goal and focusing on turning the deficit student into a good student is done with individual success in mind. The good learner will be successful and student success is what the system of HE demands and is measured by (Deem & Baird, 2020). It is one of the criteria that universities are measured against, but recent headlines about university grade inflation indicate how problematic success can be (Shearing, 2022). We want students to be successful, but not too successful.

How students view success is an under-researched area of study (Picton et al., 2018) but I argue it is important precisely because student success forms one of the major outcomes of HE. Success and failure can appear to be at opposite ends of the scale in terms of student achievement but interestingly it is far more nuanced, and I support what Coates and Matthews (2018, p.905) state in that “student success does, can and maybe should mean anything to anyone”. In studying success, it is important to also understand how failure is construed. This section discusses what the literature says about how students think about success but starts with a discussion around failure.

2.5.1 A bit about failure

Parry (2002, p.16) states that “once considered a private and individual matter, the failure of students to complete their studies ... has become a public worry for British higher education and its funding and quality agencies”. Little is written about students’ lived experiences as learners and even less appears to be written about the lived experiences of being a so called bad or failing student. This is important in that to understand how students view success we also need to understand the constructs of failure. Simplistically, student success can be viewed as being dependent on intelligence, hard work, and good teaching but in reality, it is far more subjective (Nelson, 2018). Little is written from the viewpoint of the student and how perceived failure may impact them. Good students have a tendency to think their own success is based on their individual endeavours but the implication here is that bad students are wholly responsible for their own perceived failure (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005).

Failure too can mean very many different things to different people. From an institutional perspective the term at risk has become commonplace when describing students who are failing to meet the targets of attendance, engagement, and attainment set by the institution in which they are studying, and the Office of Students makes headlines with threats to sanction universities if too many students fail (Adams 2022). Not doing as well as expected can be devastating for students and the fear of failing can be crippling. Universities that are striving to hit institutional targets can use the fear of failure to attempt to motivate students, this mirrors what can take place in schools (Choi, 2020; Jackson, 2017). Failure can be costly to both the individual and also the institution (Wimshurst & Allard, 2008). The

research that is done on student attendance frequently concentrates on trying to ascertain the links between attendance and grades. The message is one of if you do not attend you will not succeed, and this persists despite the tenuous links between cause and effect of attendance (Büchele, 2021; Moores et al., 2019), the paradox of falling student attendance (Williams, 2022) and rising attainment (Office for Students, 2022).

Success versus failure, and good versus bad are presented as diametrically opposed concepts. Allen (2020, p. 10) argues that the discourse of success “is pervasive and has become so commonplace that success is often referred to in higher education spaces without clarification”. As such, it is unquestioned in much the same way as IL is. The work by Peelo and Wareham (2002) is over two decades old now but still relevant and important as one of the few projects specifically looking at student failure. Student success, in many ways, depends on some students failing, and failure is used to defend universities against accusations of lowering standards and continues to be part of the competitive system of education in the UK (Peelo, 2002a).

While little is written about how the fear of failure can inhibit a student’s chances of doing well there is literature about the need for students to be resilient (Emerson et al., 2023). Despite this, fear of failure is used as a motivator rather than an experience to be got through and that can be learned from. Allen (2020, p.15) did find that “some participants talked about successes that can come from failing grades”. Peelo (2002a, p.3) states that failure “can be an important formative experience” and that there is a difference between student withdrawal, drop-out, or failure and distinctions to be made as to whether these constitute a failure of the system or what could be argued to be a successful personal choice on behalf of the student. Not much is known about what failing or bad students go on to achieve. The university experience could be a positive one even if academic and institutional targets are not met. Too much of a focus on measurable outputs rather than outcomes means that the more nuanced and ultimately potentially more important aspects of being a student are lost (Allen, 2020).

Nelson (2018, p.1051) states that “before they get into university, students think of success as getting into university” and like the counter arguments to students needing to learn how to learn we should not forget that students have already been deemed successful by meeting admissions criteria. The rhetoric of the good student, independent in their learning

and goal focused ultimately leads to what Nelson (2018, p.1050) terms “the wonderful extremes of success” and having discussed failure I now turn to success.

2.5.2 Success

If, as I have argued thus far, the literature focuses on a narrow definition of what a good student is, then success is also mainly viewed through this same narrow lens. Cachia et al., (2018, p.434) sum up student success by stating that “the concept of academic success has generally been associated with the attainment of summative assessments” and that it can also be associated with graduate employment. However, I argue that student success is, like IL, a phrase that needs unpicking and questioning and there is no one reading of what success in HE is (Nyström et al., 2019). Despite student success being seen as an individual endeavour and achievement, it is not wholly about individual students but also has links to the mission of university education (Coates & Matthews, 2018). As with the constructs of students, it is policy that forms the foundations for how success is generally viewed in HE.

Much of the literature on success focuses on objective measures of success (Nyström et al., 2019). This views success as something that can be measured and forms part of the government's push on quality and value for money (Allen, 2020; José Sá, 2020). In many ways then, these metrics of success are those generated by the UK HE system, and as previously stated, metrics are not politically neutral. As one of the students in the Allen (2020, p.13) study states “to the government, student success is black and white...100 per cent dedication to the course, above-average marks, clear direction where you’re going with the degree [and] finishing within the top percentile”. This epitomizes what a good student is. More recently the move to push graduate employment up the HE funding agenda means that student success is also measured in terms of graduate destination data.

This matters to my research in that if we want to understand success from the student viewpoint, we need to move away from the current agendas of HE policy and management and see constructs of success as potentially messier and more nuanced than those indicated by metrics of attainment, retention, and employment. I argue, as Allen (2020, p.8) states a “dominant discourse of success ... reproduces narrowed forms of knowledge and limiting views of the ‘ideal’ student in higher education”. The implication of this is that the dominant view of success in HE is that of the neoliberal individual that has succeeded through their own agency, it is a certain type of good student that is valuable to universities being

measured by student outcomes (Allen, 2020). It is a student who has time and does not need to work or juggle family commitments. It is also a student who can meet learning outcomes in a way that is dictated by the current system of HE and can be viewed as disempowering to the student as any achievement meets the needs of the institution rather than focusing on student needs (Nelson, 2018).

2.5.2.1 Success as good grades

There can be a dichotomy in the literature in this area. High levels of student attainment can be the goal for HE institutions while at the same time, students are often criticised for being overly grade focused to the detriment of learning and having a broader view of what knowledge means. Much of the literature, especially if the student is viewed as a consumer, can appear to demonise students for overly focusing on achieving the highest grades and for wanting that success to lead to getting good jobs. As argued previously, this can especially apply to business students. The view that a student can develop, learn, and self-fulfil while not focusing on grades can be argued to be linked to the traditional middle class male student who has family backing to support him even if he fails to achieve academically (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). For the first in family, working class student high grades can be important for many different reasons and I argue that it is not the grades in themselves that matters but what those grades mean to and for the student. This can be especially meaningful for students who have previously been traditionally excluded from higher education and can be seen from a social justice viewpoint (Coates & Matthews, 2018). This emotional context of student success is often overlooked. What is also overlooked is whether student belonging begets success, or if success drives a sense of belonging (Picton et al., 2018). As one of the students interviewed as part of their research stated “knowing I’m succeeding is my belonging” (Picton et al., 2018, p.1286). I argue that this is important because it changes the dynamic of thinking about both success and student belonging, a highly researched area of the student experience literature (Ahn & Davis, 2020).

2.5.2.2 *Success as something other than grades*

Grades then do matter, however, what is often overlooked is what success means for the students themselves (Nyström et al., 2019; Picton et al., 2018). Rather than taking a superficial view of the student as a neoliberal agent, who wants to turn their investment in HE into financially rewarding employment, success can also be viewed through a lens of emotion (Allen, 2020; Humberstone et al., 2013; José Sá, 2020). In this sense success is a form of personal validation (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) and a growth in confidence (Allen, 2020). This sense of the subjective view of success is often overshadowed by the objective, measurable view of success but I argue that it is equally, if not more so, important in understanding student motivations and levels of satisfaction. This is what O'Shea and Delahunty (2018, p.1068) refer to as both “success as defying the odds” and “embodied and emotional success”. This may be stronger in non-traditional students and linked to what Wong and Chiu (2019) found in their study of high achieving non-traditional students which was that “one key driver ... to study at university was a desire to prove to themselves or to others their abilities”. If this proving something to themselves and others is one of the measures of success then it can be argued that there needs to be an appropriate level of challenge, there are links here to the notion of intellectual challenge and hard work. To feel the emotion of achievement there needs to be some form of challenge in the form of learning and an associated assessment.

Clack (2022, p.145) gave students a choice as to whether to be assessed or not and found that students wanted assessments because “they wanted to be rewarded for their hard work ... they wanted to know ‘how well they had done’” and “they didn’t want students who hadn’t attended to receive the same grade as they did”. This implies that success is about hard work and effort and is markedly different from the findings of Nyström et al. (2019) who found that “effortless success” was valued and that “stress-less achievement” where academic work could easily be fitted in with other activities was held in high regard. What potentially explains the difference here are the settings and it is an important distinction. Clack (2022) worked with students who were predominantly from a range of ages including mature students who had a variety of different educational experiences prior to university study and who were mainly female. Nyström et al. (2019) studied students from prestigious higher education programmes and argued success was seen through a masculine and mainly

middle-class lens. That discourses of success can be viewed as both gendered and based on class is an important consideration in a mass education system that aims to widen participation. If the dominant discourse prevails it means that despite hard work and effort students may not have their successes celebrated or recognised. It is systemic factors that mean some students are deemed more successful than others (Nyström et al., 2019).

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the pertinent literature using the themes of business students, good students, IL, and student success. While I have not aimed to provide an exhaustive review of the literature, I have identified important papers and research and have worked with the literature that provides a critical approach to the themes I am addressing in my thesis. In summary, business students are often viewed as goal orientated and identified with the consumer persona of a student seeking to maximise their individual potential. This fits with a neoliberal construct of the student as a self-interested economic being. As such, they are often thought to be lacking in terms of their learner identities and therefore often construed as not being the good student who strives to understand and work with the academic body of knowledge associated with their field of study. This good student is something that is seen as ideal within HE. It is something that permeates both the literature and practice of HE in terms of identifying what a good student is and then focusing on how we can make students become this good, ideal student. This informed my research questions in terms of wanting to explore what students thought about being a good learner. The literature that problematises this area of study does so mainly through the lens of widening participation and the non-traditional student. Within this body of literature, however, there can be an unquestioned assumption that IL is something ubiquitously good. It is presented either as an attribute of the good student or a skill set that needs to be learnt for the student to navigate through their academic studies successfully. It is written into policy documents and is mainly unquestioned in the academic literature. The papers that do critique IL mainly do so through the lens of neoliberalism. Ultimately, the business student, good student, and independent learner lead to a discussion around student success. Little has been written about how students feel about success, those papers that do address the

student viewpoint have found that success is often bound up in emotion for students, it is how they feel that is often overlooked in the constant push for high attainment.

The literature that critiques and provides an alternative view of these themes is a small body of work compared to the research into student retention, attainment, and employability most of which focus on making students fit an ideal good student persona. I argue that it is important to question the assumptions of our practice and that discussing these givens from the student's viewpoint provides a fresh and necessary way of both questioning research but also the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning in a mass education system such as that operating in the UK. It is this that has informed my research questions, and the next chapter addresses my choices and decisions as to how to go about this with an overview of the methodological stance and the methods I have used.

3 Research design

3.1 Introduction

My research is about students' experiences of their own learning whilst studying within the discipline of business and management at undergraduate level. The broad aim is to investigate the experience of undergraduate business and management students as learners and my research questions are:

1. What do students think makes a good learner?
2. What value do students give to independent learning?
3. How do students measure the success of their own learning?
4. To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with being business students impact on their identities as learners?

This chapter covers the methodological foundations of the study and discusses the choices I have made about research methods. Kivunja (2018, p.47) states that "the conceptual framework could be the product of your own thinking about your research study, the theoretical framework comprises other people's theoretical perspectives that you interpret as relevant to your research" and both are reflected on in this section. It starts with an overview of the research design (conceptual framework) and research setting; explains and justifies the research methods and methods of analysis (including ethical considerations) before giving an overview of the epistemological and ontological issues I have encountered and considered. This leads to a discussion of quality and trustworthiness including reflecting on my position as a researcher. I support what Collins and Stockton (2018, p.2) state when they say they use "theory as symbiotic with our actions and dispositions" and in practice, this means that I have continuously reflected on the connections between theory and how it relates and my decisions and practice. Methodology, both the epistemology and ontology, and research methods, the tools and techniques used, need to be considered at every stage of the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). What follows is a table outlining my research design and each section is then discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Topic	Approach taken	Theoretical underpinnings
Research aim	How do undergraduate business and management students view themselves as learners?	Constructionism
Research questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.What do students think makes a “good learner”? 2.What value do students give to independent learning? 3.How do students measure the success of their own learning? 4.To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with ‘business students’ impact on their self-identities as learners? 	Constructionism
Research setting	Post-1992 North-West university business school which is my workplace.	Insider research
Sample	Undergraduate students enrolled on courses in a business school. 19 students participated studying Business management, Business with finance, Business with marketing, Business with international management, and from across levels 4,5, and 6. 9=female 10=male	Purposive and convenience
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews, 2 were conducted face to face and 17 online due to the Covid lockdown (June-July 2020).	Qualitative
Data analysis	Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke (2013)	Thematic, interpretivism
Ethical considerations	Ethical approval was given by Lancaster University, and logged at the institution where the research took place.	
My research position	Constructionist and interpretivist. Qualitative approach. The research was conducted in my	Insider research, reflexivity.

Topic	Approach taken	Theoretical underpinnings
	workplace and ties in closely with my teaching practice.	
Quality & trustworthiness	Validity and trustworthiness. Being explicit about the choices I have made and the reasoning behind them.	

Table 1 Outline of research design

3.2 Research setting

While business studies education and business students have been discussed in the introduction and literature review, this section gives an overview of the unique research setting. Business education is big business and student numbers studying on business and management courses are the highest of any subject area in the UK HE system (British Academy, 2021). What this means that is universities are financially dependent on their business schools and that any fluctuations in student numbers have the potential to disrupt the UK HE sector (British Academy, 2021). This means that business student recruitment targets are frequently increased by universities resulting in very large cohorts of undergraduates. I argue that the sheer volume of business students means that this is a very important but under-researched sample group.

My research is set in a business school within a post-1992 university in the North-West of England. The Business School is subdivided into three schools covering leadership and organisational development (apprenticeships); executive education (MBA, DBA, and Ph.D. students), and the School of Business and Management (undergraduate and postgraduate courses). It is in the School of Business and Management that I work, and this is where my research is set. The School comprises approximately 2,600 undergraduate students which are just over 9% of the total university student population. The school has twelve undergraduate degree programmes in total and has expanded rapidly in recent years. Post-1992 universities are an important area of research as their expansion has been driven by the widening participation agenda and a different ethos of academic study than the older so-called redbrick universities. Not only do the post-1992 establishments attract a wider type of student than traditional universities (Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010) they have a

different outlook on the employability agenda due to the historical alignment of polytechnics to industry and employment (Stoten, 2018). This different outlook means that teaching and learning are approached less from the theoretically driven study of business and management to a more practical and often technical acquisition of skills.

While business and management courses attract a high number of international students in the UK in general (British Academy, 2021) the number of international students at undergraduate level is low in my institution. The student body opting to take business related courses is diverse and attracts a higher number of ethnically diverse students than other social science and humanities subject areas (British Academy, 2021). The mix of males to females is almost equal although there is a downturn in female undergraduate applications since 2015 (British Academy, 2021). As such, I argue that business studies students are an important and often under researched area of study.

3.3 Research methods

As stated previously, a large body of work on student learning uses a quantitative approach to investigating student experiences. In this type of research SRL is viewed as an attribute, something that a student possesses and something that can be quantified (Patrick & Middleton 2002). The approach fits with the current climate of monitoring student engagement through learning analytics and metrics. I, however, am more interested in the what, why, and how of student learning. My overall approach has been that of constructionism, and this involves believing that “meaning is not discovered but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p.9) and that there can be multiple ways of understanding the same thing. This fits with my research as I wanted to look at the construct of the good independent learner from a different perspective than is usually reported in the literature. Fundamentally a quantitative approach was not deemed appropriate. As I aimed to study the views of students around their own experiences and thoughts about learning I wanted to gain an understanding of their agency rather than what made them act in certain ways (Bryman 2012). As such I am taking a constructionist and interpretivist stance. Mack (2010, p.8) states that “the ontological assumptions of interpretivism are that social reality is seen by multiple people and these multiple people interpret events differently leaving multiple

perspectives of an incident” and that it is the observation of the experience of people that means the researcher tries to understand instead of explaining. I am attempting to understand meaning rather than investigate cause and effect or how to improve student learning. Interpretive approaches focus on the subjective and looking for meaning in often smaller scale exchanges (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In practical terms, the constructionist qualitative approach means that producing knowledge is about exploring and examining meaning.

3.4 Data generation

3.4.1 Interviews

Qualitative methods can support what Patrick and Middleton (2002, p.28) describe as “rich, holistic descriptions” that “emphasise the social settings” within which the research takes place. This fits with my research questions as student learning takes place within the context of the business school and the business and management discipline. Within qualitative research, there are a plethora of data generation methods that can be chosen and before concluding that interviews had a practical and theoretical fit with my research aim and questions, I had been through a process of discounting a range of methods. At one point I wanted to use photo-elicitation, I had previously used this method and was interested in using it again. In many ways, it may have been harder to recruit students and would potentially have caused more ethical considerations to arise. Eventually the decision not to use this method was down to the consideration of what photos would add to the study and the decision was that for this particular study they would not add value. Focus groups could also have been used but I wanted to get to individual stories and accounts of learning and so discounted this. A survey may have given more returns than the nineteen interviews but would have lacked depth and the ability to explore and expand on discussion points within the interviews. As Roulston and Choi (2018, p.233) state “in semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions ... are formulated relative to what interviewees have already said”. This approach proved useful as insights given by one student early in the interviewing schedule helped inform probes in other interviews. Notably, when asked to describe a good student one respondent replied that it was easier to describe a bad student. I subsequently asked other students what they thought a bad student was and this proved very insightful.

An interview schedule was devised that linked to the RQs and this was piloted in the first face to face interview. An outline of the questions can be found in appendix 1. These questions arose from reading the literature and having an awareness of current issues and supposed problems within my teaching practice. The interview schedule was adapted slightly as the interviews progressed and particularly when the Covid lockdown meant interviews had to then be held online. In addition to adding a question about bad students, I realised that asking about failure rather than just success was useful. I added a question about learning specifically during the lockdown and when asking about attendance asked about both before lockdown and also online attendance. I also added a question about where independent studying took place.

I had planned to conduct face to face interviews and held two of these in my workplace premises. These interviews lasted between forty-five and fifty minutes each and were recorded on a Dictaphone. After conducting these two interviews the Covid pandemic and following lockdown in March 2020 meant I needed to re-consider and adapt my approach to online interviews. While Weller (2015, p.3) purported that “digital technologies are now a feature of everyday interaction” pivoting to online was still a novel and disruptive experience for both academics and students. At first, I was unsure of how the interviews would work. In total seventeen interviews were held online, and these were held either via Zoom or Microsoft Teams dependent on the student’s preferred medium. Both software packages have enabled audio recording features, and the interviews were captured in that way. There were technological issues to address that were exacerbated not only by being online but also being online during a pandemic lockdown. I was conscious that working from home during a pandemic was very different from working at home during any other time; I had personal pulls on my time in terms of being available to support my own teenage children who were struggling to adjust to being at home and having to attend school via online learning. I needed to negotiate timings for my research interviews that considered my when my teenagers would need my attention and support and also letting them have broadband bandwidth for online schooling when they needed it.

Despite these issues and while pivoting to online was a steep learning curve, using online interviews had unanticipated benefits. As the student was in their own environment the power dynamics seemed to shift, there was an opening chat about location and setting and I

was open about the shared experience of being in a new situation which meant that we both had a sense of being in that situation together. Another benefit was that students could talk to me about where they studied, this led to a discussion about what they missed about the physical university. It also enabled interviewees to show me textbooks and notebooks that they would not have had with them if we had met in a physical workplace space. I approached the interviews by actively listening and giving the students the space and time to talk with some prompts if necessary (Roulston & Choi, 2018). I wanted the interviews to feel more like a conversation and using online video rather than a phone call helped to facilitate that and to build a rapport (Archibald et al., 2019). The work of Warren (2012) also informed my practice, and as she points out an interview is not a dialogue but “interviewers and their questions set the background for the social interaction of the interview, as do the specific times and spaces within which the interview takes place” (Warren, 2012, p.132).

The interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to sixty-five minutes, with an average of fifty minutes. Most of the interviewees were open and engaged, some stated that it was a very interesting topic and showed a lot of interest in my research. A few were less forthcoming, and I needed to consider whether this was because they were nervous or just reticent. I offered reassurance that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was not judging them against what they said about being a good, or bad, learner but that I was genuinely interested in hearing what they had to say. The shorter interviews reached a natural conclusion, and I was conscious of not continuing beyond the point where the student seemed reluctant rather than hesitant. This was always a balance between feeling I had generated enough data whilst not probing too much.

3.4.2 Sampling

Emails were sent out to all undergraduate students within the School of Business and Management, omitting those that I had, or would expect to have, direct teaching responsibilities for. Reminder emails were sent out over six weeks. In total twenty-seven students replied and of these nineteen were converted to interviews. The eight that were not converted either replied saying they had changed their minds or did not respond to requests to set a date and time. The students were given a £10 Amazon voucher in return

for their time. The use of incentives can be problematic and there can be ethical considerations, especially when working with vulnerable groups, my participants did not fall into this category though and it is a commonplace practice in qualitative research and has been shown to encourage engagement (Head, 2009). The sample size is small but in line with the constructionist and interpretivist viewpoint of not wanting to make generalisations but rather investigate meanings and perceptions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). As such the sampling was both purposive and convenience sampling. It was purposive in that I endeavoured to make sure that there was a mix of students from different years and a balance in terms of gender (see Table 3 Participant details). It was a convenience sample in that it also depended on who volunteered and was willing to be interviewed (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Interviews took place between February and July 2020, due to the institutional email lists becoming unavailable from mid July it would have been difficult to recruit through the summer months and it was very uncertain as to what would happen to teaching in the next academic year due to Covid. The learner experiences could have been very different going into a new academic year amid another lockdown. As Baker and Edwards (2012, p.42) state in relation to sample size “the recurring answer to the question ‘how many’ is ‘it depends’”. Given that the purposive sampling had delivered a mix of years and genders and given the changing nature of the pandemic and associated mechanisms for the delivery of teaching I decided to stop data gathering after nineteen interviews.

3.4.3 Working with the data

I have taken an interpretative approach that aims for a deeper understanding of the data and then goes on to provide a conceptual story (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As such a thematic analysis approach is appropriate in that it enables flexibility which gives depth and richness of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79), and the framework put forward by Braun and Clarke (2013) was used and is detailed in Table 2 Data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) put forward a six-step approach to thematic analysis but stress that this is not a linear approach but more of a repetitive process that involves nonsequential movement between stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This non-linear approach was certainly my experience and though at first unsure of my punctuated and iterative

approach to working with my data I became more confident and comfortable with working in this way. The paper by Nowell et al. (2017) that addresses trustworthiness in thematic analysis was also used to guide what I was doing and is detailed in table 2.

Data analysis steps	Actions
Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing, reading, and re-reading data. Generation of initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Nowell et al. (2017, p. 5) describe this as “a theorizing activity that requires the researchers to keep revisiting the data”. It was an iterative process and also meant I went back to my notes and readings on theory.
Searching for themes	This involved sorting the different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. I used mind mapping as part of this process. It was an inductive approach that meant I focused on the data rather than the interview questions (Nowell et al., 2017).
Reviewing themes	Trustworthiness and validity are crucial here and I looked for coherent patterns within the data that I had coded. (Nowell et al., 2017).
Defining and naming themes	This involved thinking in more detail about each of the themes and their meanings. While doing this I also needed to think about the coherent whole of my analysis and how things fitted together (Nowell et al., 2017).
Producing the report	This was an iterative process that meant pulling together the different themes into a sensible order. This is important as the processes and steps taken to reach valid conclusions are made explicit. (Nowell et al., 2017)

Table 2 Data analysis steps

3.4.3.1 Transcription

Both Teams and Zoom created transcripts from the audio files that were used as a basis for a more thorough transcription where I listened and edited the transcripts produced by the software. This saved time in comparison to transcribing from scratch but also meant that I spent useful time getting to know the data and used this as a first familiarisation with ideas and potential codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Transcription itself is not a neutral process and I used the paper by Davidson (2009, pp.47-48) to gain an understanding of how transcription can be viewed as “theory, as selective and partial, as representative and as interpretive”. While transcribing I began to make initial notes about potential codes and this meant I

worked with the transcript but also the subject topics (Warren 2012). Once I was satisfied with the transcripts, they were uploaded to the NVivo software package.

3.4.3.2 Coding

With files uploaded into NVivo, I started to read each interview transcript and created initial codes. This proved harder than I anticipated and took me back to thinking about my research questions and underlying assumptions about what I was exploring. Initially, I was guided by Zimmerman's framework for SRL (Zimmerman, 1989a, 2015) but began to realise that I was imposing a theoretical framework on my data which did not necessarily work or fit. This made me re-visit what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) term the intellectual craftsmanship of the researcher who is active in the process of seeking meaning from their data. Therefore, the initial dive into my data was messy, iterative, and led me back to the literature review. It is important that in using this approach I set aside preconceptions of what I would find in the data while also being aware of and reflective of my own epistemological and ontological beliefs. Deciding on codes took a long time and went through several different iterations before I became confident and happy with my own choices (see appendix 2). I also used mind mapping to help guide my thinking on codes and themes and found this useful in thinking critically about the codes and associated themes. During this stage I also re-visited my readings and notes on prior research in this field and re-questioned some of my beliefs as detailed in section 1.4.

3.4.3.3 Analysis

As with data generation, there is a range of options available for the theoretical basis on which to rest decisions about data analysis. Once I was more confident with the codes I had created, I continued with the data analysis. I needed to upload transcripts again and then used NVivo to highlight and attach codes to key data sections. Again, this was often a messy and iterative process but was interesting and thought-provoking work. Alongside NVivo I also used Excel to create portraits of each participant. Doing this enabled me to flesh out the participants as real people which is something I was keen to do. I also used Excel to pull out key quotes from the data thematically and by doing this I was able to do counts of some

of the things I was finding. The use of any numbers in qualitative research is a debated area of research methods but I agree with Maxwell (2010, p.478) who states that the use of some numbers adds to “the internal generalizability of qualitative researchers’ claims ... establishing that the themes or findings identified are in fact characteristic of this setting or set of individuals as a whole”.

Data analysis carried on while I was writing up my findings and I frequently re-visited my data to check and confirm what I was writing. As Nowell et al. (2017) state I wanted to be “a faithful witness to the accounts in the data”. Potential avenues of discussion also occurred to me while I was writing my findings and I found myself doing some keyword searches on the data set to see if patterns emerged. Using thematic analysis gave me the flexibility to do this (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.5 Quality and trustworthiness

Being explicit about the decisions I have made about my research methods helps not only me, the researcher, in finding a path through a messy process but also addresses some of the quality and validity issues that can plague qualitative research. I did not set out to do research that could be reliable in the way quantitative research might be deemed to be and have not aimed for generalisability. In taking a qualitative approach I have constantly reflected on my own position, my own biases and how they have influenced my decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Context is also important, both in terms of the sample group but I must also acknowledge the context of Covid and the lockdown. As such I have not aimed for reliability but rather have taken into consideration what Braun and Clarke (2013) discuss as validity and trustworthiness. Caelli et al., (2003, p.5) propose the following need to be addressed within qualitative research: “the theoretical positioning of the researcher; the congruence between methodology and methods; the strategies to establish rigor; and the analytic lens through which the data are examined”. In practice this meant being rigorous in my approach and constantly questioning what I was doing (Caelli et al., 2003).

3.5.1 Ethics

Ethical approval was given by Lancaster University and as I was carrying out data generation at my home institution the ethical approval was also logged there. There can be a tendency to think once ethical approval has been given that ethical considerations are complete, but I view ethics approval as part of ethical practice that is a continual process of reflection and awareness and forms a foundation of good research practice. This was particularly so given that I was interviewing students during the Covid lockdown and while they were in their home settings. There was a constant cycle of reflection and review to ensure I was working within ethical guidelines. I chose to use pseudonyms to de-identify participants in the findings (Heaton 2022) and re-assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

3.6 Reflecting on my research position

Research does not happen in a vacuum and consideration must be given to the conceptual context and underpinnings of the study. As Jackson (2013, p.50) states “every piece of research, every researcher and every context is, in some way, different” and being clear about this difference is important in assuring care and attention has been given to the questions surrounding the philosophical underpinnings of the research. My ontological and epistemological beliefs impact more than just my research, they form the basis of my world view and my approach to teaching (Jackson, 2013). As such research methods become more about research practice (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). These underlying ontological and epistemological beliefs guide decisions about research design and can be used to shed light on thinking and the formulation of ideas. As Jackson (2013 p.53) states the “the ontological perspective pertaining to the reality of the world and the epistemological perspective pertaining to knowledge of that world” are important considerations. As Crotty (1998, p.13) states research “typically start with a real life issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be solved, a question that needs to be answered”. I see this as underpinning my conceptual framework that forms the basis of my decisions around methodology and methods.

Whilst familiar with the philosophies of empirical research (usually quantitative in its approach) and its essential role in certain instances it is not the paradigm that I place myself.

Instead, I have come to understand my world view through a qualitative lens that seeks to understand rather than prove and explain. Yilmaz (2013, p.316) quotes Cresswell as stating that there are axiological issues in research and “the idea that no research endeavour is value-free in that researchers brings their values to what is researched”. The opportunity to re-think and deepen my understanding of these issues has been interesting and stimulating, the opposite of how Alase (2017, p.9) describes the choices as “daunting and tedious”. It has made me reflect on how these world views influence my teaching and everyday practice of being a lecturer. My epistemological awareness then has been deepened and while as (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p.6) states “the practice of research gets complicated” and having that deeper understanding of my position has helped clarify and focus my whole thesis. In doing so I have sort to explore rather than to describe or explain (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

3.6.1 Insider research

My research has been conducted within my place of work. There are numerous implications because of this, many of which are positive and some that I have needed to reflect on and become more aware of the implications in terms of my work. Mercer (2007) discusses insider research as a continuum and that insider/outsider distinctions can be blurred. This is certainly something I can relate to. While my research has taken place within my workplace, with the support of management and an associated time allowance, I have been self-funding so have also felt the freedom to investigate how and what I want. This has empowered a more critical approach than I might have taken if needed to report regularly on progress or findings. Insiderness also has other implications. I purposely chose not to interview students who I may have taught or could potentially teach in the future. To some degree this negated much of the reticence that students could have felt in what they could discuss with me. I also re-assured students that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I would ask, rather that I genuinely wanted to hear about their experiences. This openness meant that students appeared to be more comfortable discussing both failures and decisions that went against the expected norm. Mercer (2007, p.6) discusses the view that “insiders will undoubtedly have a better initial understanding of the social setting because they know the context; they understand the subtle and diffuse links between

situations and events” and certainly my understanding of the modular system, attendance policies, library services etc helped. Equally though, students were aware that at times they might mention colleagues or people that I knew and that they might not want to be seen as critical of my place of work and their place of study. To counteract this, I re-iterated that all their replies would be anonymised. Good ethical practice helped here.

3.7 Chapter summary

In writing about my research design, I have attempted to explain and justify my approach in an open and honest explanation of how my thinking developed and the resultant associated actions. I took a constructionist approach with an interpretivist stance. From this foundation, I chose to use a qualitative framework. This led me to choose semi-structured interviews with a sample of undergraduate students studying on a variety of programmes. The data were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic analysis as a guide. The following chapters discuss the findings of this analysis and uses the themes of Business students in a mass education system (Chapter 4); What is a good learner? (Chapter 5); Being an independent learner (Chapter 6) and What does success mean (Chapter 7).

4 Business students in a mass education system

4.1 Introduction

This chapter includes analysis and discussion of my findings under the broad theme of business students in a mass education system. Business students were chosen as my sample group because they form the largest single group of students studying in the UK. As such, they are especially important as they typify the extremes of mass higher education with undergraduate cohorts reaching 300 and above students. Their experiences matter and potentially find a point of reflection for the wider experience of students in post-1992 institutions. This chapter links to all the research questions but in particular, RQ4: To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with business students' impact on their identities as learners? The chapter is subdivided into the sub-themes of: There's no such thing as a regular student; Why business studies? and Individual responsibility.

4.2 There's no such thing as a regular student

"I think ... my view will be kind of like unique because I'm not your regular student" (Jack)

In contrast to the dominant image of the undergraduate student, who are often construed as dissatisfied consumers, the students who participated in my study present as enthusiastic, motivated, and generally happy with their university experience. The following Table 3 gives details of the sample group:

Programme	Number of students	Number of students
Business management	11	
Business with finance	3	
Business with marketing	1	
Business with international management	3	
Marketing	1	
Year of study	Level 6	5
	Level 5	7
	Level 4	7
Gender	Female	9
	Male	10

Table 3 Participant details

The past few decades have seen a proliferation of research and literature associated with the widening participation agenda (Wong & Chiu, 2021b). A lot of this literature focuses on segments of the student body such as first in family, working class students and BAME students (Brooks & O'Shea, 2021). Research such as that carried out by Brooks and O'Shea (2021); Reay et al., (2010), and others is crucial in understanding the experiences of previously less represented groups of students in both accessing HE and achieving within the system. It does not, however, give an understanding of the complexity of cohorts of students who need to be catered for and taught in a mass education system such as that of the post-1992 university sector. As Sykes (2021, p.79) stresses it increasingly makes "less sense to talk about traditional and/or 'non-traditional' undergraduate students" when UK HE participation rates are increasing. Rather than focusing on a particular segment of the student body my research recruited across undergraduate courses within a post-1992 business school and the findings show that, despite Jack differentiating himself from regular students, there is no such thing as a regular student. Studying a group of students across programmes and academic levels means that consideration can be given to how these experiences interrelate (Sykes, 2021). It is this that I am interested in discussing. Only five of the nineteen participants can be considered to have taken a direct route into HE in that they came to university directly from A levels. Table 4 illustrates the diversity of the participant group.

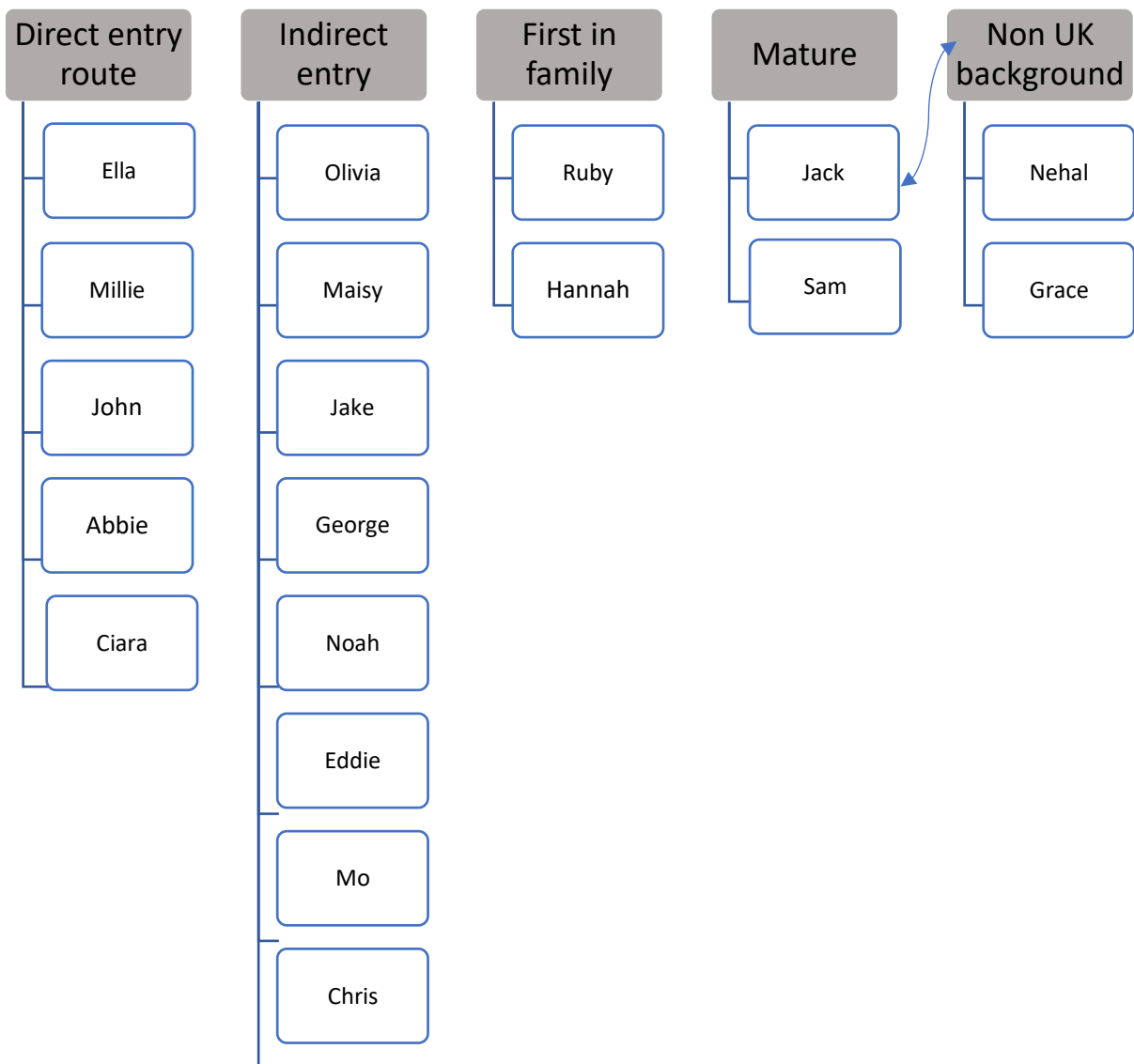


Table 4 Student characteristics

Two of the six, Ruby and Hannah were first in their family to attend university. Both had taken longer to achieve A levels at college than the standard two years. While Hannah stated that “I’m like the pride and joy and like I’m the good kid because I’m the one that went to uni”, she had found their lack of understanding of what university entails particularly difficult during the lockdown and explained that she was living with her grandparents who:

“just like, didn't get it. I mean they didn't go to uni, they had no idea why I was on video calls like 24/7 or hold up in my room and they thought was being that antisocial ... I'd sit out in the garden with the table umbrella above me so don't

matter if it's raining or not doing my work, because it was the only place, I could get some peace" (Hannah).

Ruby talked about her boyfriend actively discouraging her from applying and said "oh I would not ask my family for help they wouldn't have a clue honestly I'm the first to go to uni so my family are probably the wrong people". Yet rather than talking about their backgrounds as hampering or curtailing them they were highly motivated and as Ruby stated "it makes me want to be more determined". This echoes the findings of O'Shea et al. (2018, p.1021) who discuss a "discourse of betterment and opportunity" for first in family students. This is tempered by the much earlier work of Reay (2001, p.337) who acknowledged the tensions between working class students "investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before". It is important to acknowledge these tensions and that there can be varying pulls on first in family students.

A sense of opportunity was also prominent for Nehal and Grace. Nehal came straight from sixth form college however he was from a refugee family who had moved to the UK when he was aged sixteen. He needed to do English GCSE alongside his A levels to achieve the English language points needed to get into university. He talks of the emotional stress of his family situation and needing to help support them because their English is not good. Grace, who was from a small village in Poland, also needed English language qualifications and had not achieved the score she needed to get into her first-choice university. Grace talks about being a role model for her younger sisters and telling them they should practice their English and encouraging them to study hard despite their father who "wants them to stay in village, but I say they can't stay after they've seen world". It is important to note here that these are stories of potential personal transformation and Wenger (1998 p.215) describes learning as "not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming" and this is something that can be overlooked.

Two of the nineteen students were mature. Jack was twenty-nine years old and originally from Eastern Europe where he had completed the equivalent of A levels. Jack had then worked for several years in retail sales before applying to study business management. Sam was a UK home student who had not done well in his A levels and so had spent several years as a management apprentice for a supermarket chain and worked as deputy manager whilst

also being an on-call firefighter. Sam decided to apply for university because “I always wanted to go to uni, but I'd sort of packed it in that sort of idea after I've done really bad” but then thought he had managed to continue learning whilst working so could learn at university.

The other eight participants are notable in that they enrolled on the courses at this business school either through clearing or another indirect route. Two had previously started on different university courses, dropped out, and started at level four again. Maisy also needed to resit her A levels and talked about suffering from depression and anxiety. Jake has dyslexia and dyspraxia, had not done well at A levels, and had gone on to do BTEC qualifications at college. Mo had needed to do a foundation course to get onto the undergraduate degree programme. The other four students all came through the clearing system after failing to get the grades they needed for redbrick universities. Eddie had attended a fee-paying school and Noah had attended a grammar school. This is interesting in that students who enter HE via the clearing system are often thought of as less able and less committed to their studies (Baxter & Hatt, 2000). They are another set of students who are frequently seen as deficient and therefore problematic (this is discussed further in Chapter seven).

I have taken time to introduce these students as it illuminates the diversity of backgrounds and demonstrates that there is neither a typical traditional nor non-traditional student. Often, in research, students are condensed down into quantitative numbers or looked at in segments or groupings. The voices of the participants in my research are important in that they shed light on the experience of being learners in a discussion that frequently stressed the economic issues of education and employment while overlooking the educational reasons of delivering a programme of undergraduate study (Ashwin, 2020b). In a system where there is no commonality other than that they are a student studying a particular body of knowledge it can be argued that it is how this body of knowledge is presented and taught that becomes the most important focus (Ashwin, 2020a). Lave & Wenger (1991) propose that learning can be viewed as situated activity, and I argue that this is applicable here. The idea of legitimate peripheral participation can be applied to students studying within the discipline of business studies, especially at level 4 and poses a different way of looking at

transition into a field of study. These students have all chosen to study within the field of business and the next section addresses their motivations for doing this.

4.3 Why business studies?

“I just love it so that's why I decided to just do something I enjoyed” (Hannah)

The literature on business students recurrently points to them being focused on graduate employment and careers but the participants in my study have a broader range of reasons for choosing to study in a business school. Nine indicated they had an interest, even a passion, for the subject. Maisy said “I studied business in A level and I loved it” and for Ciara “it's always just been like my subject so I've always liked it” and for Nehal “it's a knowledge about something I'm so passionate about”. What my findings show is that only a minority of the participants talked about basing course decisions on future employment prospects with most talking about interest in the subject as more strongly motivating. That business students actually enjoy studying the subject area of business should not be surprising, and yet this is not usually the focus of university marketing campaigns that stress employability. This is typified by Leeds Beckett University (2023a) who advertise their business and management course with the starting statement of “this degree will help you excel in a wide range of jobs once you graduate”.

Only four of the participants mentioned employment prospects. Government and HEI policy has become increasingly focused on graduate employability metrics (Minocha et al., 2017) and more recently the Office of Students has strengthened the role graduate employment statistics play in the assessment of universities (Fryer, 2022). These institutions often look to business schools to bolster their employability statistics and alongside this much of the literature over the last few decades portrays business students as being outcome and career orientated. As such, business schools and the motivations of students opting to take business related courses seem well matched to help achieve the employability targets set by Office of Students metrics. Being career focused and outcome driven fits with the neoliberal construct of business students and portrays them as what Sanders-McDonagh and Davis (2018, p.225) terms “mini-capitalists”. There is a tension here between seeing employability as something that should be explicitly linked to the studying of business-related subjects

while also admonishing students for being career orientated and less interested in the academic study of their chosen subject. The portrayal of business students as career focused to the detriment of learning has longevity and was discussed by Bennett (2004) almost two decades ago, but it is more sharply brought into focus with the current emphasis on graduate outcomes. Yet the participants in my study were not overly career focused or driven by employability prospects.

For those participants that did mention careers and work aspirations I found it was important to dig a little deeper and not take first statements at face value. Nehal talked about his aspirations to get a good job saying “seriously business it's the meaning of making money and I love to make money”. When asked, however, why he wanted to make money he said “I want to have that money so I can give back to people that help me and other people and fund them to get to the points that they want”. For Ruby it was because “my sister just hates her job she can't stand it because she's not really got to go to college or anything so I'm getting the best I can be and then get a job that I really enjoy”. Hannah, who was the first in her family to attend university, stated that “my worst nightmare is that I'm going to end up in a job that's just like stagnant and I'm going to be stuck behind a desk for thirty years”. This again resonates with the work of O'Shea et al. (2018) in that these are discourses of betterment and also, importantly, of generational ambitions. As mentioned previously, Reay (2001) though states there are tensions here and Grace spoke of being proud of the small village in Poland that she had come from but that “I want to get to the high level and become professional for myself but also for my little sisters”.

What is important is that the participants talk of a range of motivations to study business, most from the starting point of an interest and enjoyment of the subject. This is often overlooked in the literature which tends to mimic policy in its portrayal of university as a means to an end rather than scholarly interaction with a subject area. Those participants who were more career focused did so from a sense of betterment and opportunity, while also seeing the connection to giving something back to their families and communities. Within all these motivations there was a clear sense that they were individually responsible for their own destinies, and this is what is discussed next.

4.4 Individual responsibility

“You know you’re getting saddled with debt you’re paying for it, your whole family is like kind of invested in you doing well. Yeah, I think just remind people about how important it is to take responsibility for your own life because like you’re 18 or 19 and the world doesn't really owe you a favour” (Chris)

The dominant discourse in the literature on HE portrays students as consumers who therefore have a more passive approach to their learning (Brooks & Abrahams, 2020). These students are thought of as demanding in terms of provision, pastoral and academic support and having a sense of entitlement. Often this is viewed as being coupled with a sense of entitlement to an academic award because of having paid for it (Laverghetta, 2018). In contrast, the participants in my study demonstrated little or no sense of feeling that they are owed something. Instead, there is a strong theme of personal individual responsibility. This section explores this theme using the subheadings it’s down to me and fees as a personal investment and knowing their place in the system.

4.4.1 It's down to me

“I think at the end of the day, if you're not succeeding, then it's your own fault”
(Hannah)

While motivations to study business were not strongly aligned with career motivations all the participants indicated that they were mainly responsible for their own learning. This has strong undercurrents of neoliberalism and echoed the findings of Muddiman (2018) where business students demonstrated a strong sense of personal responsibility. What is of note is that only three participants said that lecturers shared some responsibility for their learning, Mo described it as “probably 70/30 uh for the student. Uhm against the lecturer. So obviously you know at the end of the day, you know we are responsible for all our grades”. Whereas John stated that “a lot of people can argue it's the lecturers’ responsibility to get people to grade, but it's not the case. It's got to be yourself because people learn in different ways” and Ciara said, “myself at University it’s definitely myself ... no one else”. This is interesting in that most of the literature points to students demonstrating neoliberal tendencies as economically driven and focused on individual achievement, but little is written about the impact this has on the learning experiences of students.

This sense of personal responsibility goes as far as exonerating lecturers of responsibility and very strongly indicated that students themselves are to blame if they did not do well. Viewing students in this way is novel in that it directly opposes the view of the entitled, demanding customer that is frequently portrayed in the literature. The participants also talked about feeling guilty or to feeling personal blame if they did not attend classes or work hard enough (Ruby, Jake, Noah, Abbie) and personal blame is also something that is mentioned (Ella, George, Eddie, Mo) with Ella saying that “I really don’t blame the lecturers or anything like that I didn’t know how to learn”. Abbie said that “people could help you or make it worse, but it's up to you ultimately”. This was strongly re-enforced by George:

“I think you can't say that even if you've got like a subjectively bad tutor or a bad lecturer, you can't say well, it's their fault if I fail, because even if they're not a great teacher, all of this stuff is still there. You can teach it yourself if you need to”.

There are clear links here to IL (discussed more in Chapter six) and if, as suggested by Read et al., (2003) independent learning is valorised, what is not discussed in the literature is how this sense of independence translates into students feeling a strong sense of individual responsibility to the detriment of partnership or belonging. That the quality of teaching is not seen as an issue in terms of achievement is very interesting and could be linked to low attendance rates and reinforcement of studying as an independent activity. If the student can achieve by themselves, or at least thinks they can, what does this mean in terms of teaching and learning strategies and provision? I argue that universities, and business schools in particular, have been as Davies and Bansel (2007, p.248) states “reconfigured to produce the “highly individualized, responsabilized subjects”. With such a strong message of needing to study and learn in an independent manner being re-enforced by HE institutions, it should not be a surprise that students disengage, and that attendance is such an issue across the sector. As Wong and Chiu (2019, p.877) state “the struggles of some HANT [high achieving non-traditional] students to seek or accept help from staff due to pride ... might be inconsistent with their identity work to be an independent learner”. It becomes the student’s fault that they have not sought the support they may need and means that the focus is constantly on the individual student and not the institutions that serve them (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005; Wong et al., 2021). There is no sense of partnership or

belonging in the statements about personal responsibility made by the participants and yet the need for belonging is always a strongly consistent theme in the literature on achievement and retention. I propose that part of the issue is the language that is used around IL and independent studying and that it is counter intuitive to the work done on building belonging in universities. The sense of the independent learner as disengaged from university teaching and mainly responsible for their own fate is echoed in what the participants said about university fees, and I discuss this next.

4.4.2 Fees as a personal investment

“you're paying to be there so you're literally investing in yourself” (Jake)

None of the interview questions directly asked about fees or consumer orientations of students but it is included here as what the participants said, and equally what was not said, is important as it goes against the grain of some of the dominant discourses around students as consumers and therefore how we view students in relation to their learning. It also re-enforces the neoliberal attitudes of the individual endeavour that these students have.

A significant minority (42%) of the respondents spoke about student fees and loans as a personal investment. Ciara, for example, mentioned fees in relation to being annoyed at “learning nothing” in the first year (lack of challenge in the curriculum is a theme that is addressed further on in section 7.3.3). Notably, fees or anything related to consumer aspects of being a student were not mentioned by the other participants at all. This echoes the findings of Patfield et al., (2021) who found that despite the dominant discourses of consumerism their study found scant evidence that young people aspiring to attend university in Australia had a consumerist mindset. Interestingly, one of the important points here is that the participants did not feel that fees entitled them to an easy ride but indicated that paying fees meant they themselves needed to put the effort and work in, this was also the findings of Tomlinson (2014) who found that higher fees meant students thought they needed to make the most of the opportunities university offered to them. As Jack said in relation to attendance, “I would like to maximize my investment”. While Jake stressed individual responsibility: “you need to be responsible for you. Everything's alone, you know

... I don't think anyone could argue with that". There is a strong undercurrent of neoliberalism here, with the individual being personally responsible for both funding their education but being solely responsible for their own success.

What the students are demonstrating here reflects much of English government policy that promotes attendance at HE as an investment for the individual in terms of career and personal development (Brooks et al. 2020). Usually, in the literature, this is linked to a consumer construct of the student as demanding and entitled and often with the perspective that consumers of HE do not make good learners (Finn et al., 2021). My findings, however, throw up interesting questions about how this individual investment links to a strong sense of individual responsibility that extends as far as absolving lecturers of responsibility. This is important in that it contradicts much of the dominant discourse around student identities and gives an alternate view of the HE student as more likely to blame themselves rather than the institution if they do not achieve the standards that they have set for themselves. This echoes what Ashwin (2020b, p.34) writes about the myth of student-centredness and how "it implies the responsibility for whether students have learnt something or not is largely down to the student". What follows then is a discussion around how the business students see themselves within the current system of HE.

4.4.3 Knowing their place in the system

"They're not going to every individual person; they're going to see grades on a paper. Is this person getting high enough grade? Could they get higher grades? That's the bottom line of it. There's no kind of illusion around that". (Eddie)

While the participants have a strong sense of personal responsibility, they also appear to have a strong awareness of their place in a mass HE education system. Cohorts of students in the business school can be over three hundred students, marketing material for prospective students frequently includes promises of individual support and guidance, for example Leeds Beckett University (2023b) promises "individual tutor support". The participants of my study had a more realistic view of the reality of studying on a course with hundreds of students which can make the forming of relationships between individual

students and staff harder than in a previously more elite and less egalitarian system of HE (Myers, 2008).

For Sam, a mature student, this awareness of the HE system was linked with the student intake of a post-1992 university and he said “you got to factor in the fact that it's got a lower grade boundary, so you got to think of the type of student with the greatest respect to my fellow students, ... you're not going to be getting the best and the brightest”. That post-1992 universities have a higher increase in diversity of students is widely acknowledged in the literature (Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2017) and Sam's comments highlight the ingrained and persisting attitude that there is a hierarchy in terms of a university's status, with post-1992 institutions being noted two decades ago as low down in that hierarchy (Read et al., 2003) and this attitude has not changed since. Other participants talked about the large cohort size and Grace thought that “university became a business and they tried to sell as many services as they can ... I feel like it's race who will attract more students”. Mo summed it up as: “obviously you've got 200 people who are in the same boat ... you just got to think there is 200 people who are emailing [the lecturer] and asking the same question and they are busy people”. This means that they are having to be independent not only because of some underlying philosophy of education but because of the realities of teaching loads in a mass education system. It is impossible to provide individualised support in a mass education system with high student to staff ratios.

This subtheme of “knowing their place in the system” is important in that research in this area has predominantly focused on student consumerism and its impact on lecturers since the introduction of student fees. The persistent theme here echoes back to what Rolfe (2002, p.171) wrote over two decades ago that students “are less willing to undertake independent study and are more demanding of teaching staff's time”. What I argue though is that when you talk to students about how they think of their learning experiences it is their sense of individual responsibility and the need to be independent due to the nature of the courses they are studying that comes through. What they do talk about wanting is support from the experts, their lecturers, in helping them engage with and learn about their chosen subject areas. I argue that we are in danger of overlooking and underestimating the importance of the relationships between the lecturer and student and that these relationships can have little chance to flourish in a mass education system because of the

demands on staff time and staff to student ratios. The relationship between staff student ratios, formative assessment and student achievement is something that Sabri (2023) highlights as a potentially important area of research in thinking about causality in inequalities in degree awarding outcomes.

4.5 Chapter summary

The students who participated in my study are diverse, belying the notion of there being either a traditional or non-traditional student. Their motivations to study at a business school are varied but include a genuine interest in the subject area and if they are motivated by the end goal of employment it is because of a sense of betterment either for themselves or also at times their families. The sense of personal responsibility that the participants demonstrated is strong, and fees are seen as a motivator rather than as engendering a sense of entitlement. Little has been written about how the massification of HE has impacted the learner experiences of students within a system that promises a student-centred approach with implied individual support. I argue the focus on individual responsibility and knowing their place in a mass education system can potentially deter students from asking for support and help. This in turn puts in barriers to students engaging with the knowledge base of their subject areas. If this became more of a focus then it is staff student ratios, timetabling practices (frequently seminar classes are now forty or more students), and lecturer workloads that need to be addressed rather than student practices and a culture of student blaming that can predominate everyday practice. What then do these students view as a 'good learner'? Discussion around the notion of the good student and learner forms the next section of my thesis.

5 What is a good learner?

“I thought I'm just a rubbish learner, but it's just all about finding your own way isn't it”
(Maisy)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the research findings in relation to the construct of the good student, who by implication is a good learner. This follows from the chapter introducing the participants and discussing the diverse nature of their backgrounds and their motivations for choosing to study business and management. The literature on learning in HE often focuses on a deficit model of the student, particularly when addressing widening participation students and students from a non-traditional background (David, 2009). The literature offers a constant search for best practice in improving students' study skills, IL, and SRL that focuses on developing students who are engaged learners, attending, and attaining in ways that can be measured. Associated with this is an overarching impression that there can be such a thing as an ideal student, who is a good learner, and that this is what both universities and students should aspire to (Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars, & Dingwall, 2021; Mega et al., 2014; Wong & Chiu, 2021a). While the participants in this study are open about not always meeting the expectations of meeting the ideal student ambition, they are all self-reported high achieving students, and as such cannot not be viewed as deficit in terms of academic and study skills ability. Their experiences and views about learning are an important area of study because it illuminates not only the learning experiences of high achieving students but also provides areas of discussion as to what could help other students achieve.

HE institutions currently have a very stringent set of key performance indicators that includes meeting targets on retention, attainment, and graduate employability outcomes. I argue that this very much focuses on what HE institutions see as a good student. In addition to this, these students are studying within a mass education system in the most popular subject area in the UK (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2021) and business schools are often referred to as the cash cows of universities (Parker, 2018). This chapter is linked to RQ1: What do students think makes a “good learner”? This chapter discusses these issues and has sub-themes of: I know what a bad learner is and Mindsets and a willingness to learn. It brings in several inter-related theories such as ASC and self regulated learning.

5.2 I know what a bad learner is

“I think I’d probably identify more people as bad learners than good learners ... like people that don’t have an idea or don’t have a pen” (Ruby)

Several of the participants (twelve) talked about what they would identify as constituting a bad learner. This echoes what Brooks et al. (2023, p.1) states about “even students themselves are informed by ideas associated with an ‘ideal’ student”. In many ways this bad learner mirrors the remedial and deficit model of the student, particularly when the student is viewed as nontraditional (O’Shea et al. 2016). A bad learner is identified as not being prepared in terms of the equipment needed to study such as pens and notebooks, and by implication is deficient in study skills. Ruby’s observation continued to say that a bad student was typified by “the amount of people in level 6 that come in without a notepad like how have you got through three years”. Noah summed it up as a “bad learner doesn't concentrate, not punctual, untidy”. Associating bad learners with unpreparedness and untidiness is interesting in that it re-enforces much of what is seen as a good business graduate; professional, career ready, organised, neat, and never without the tools that they may need (see books such as that by Dowson (2015)). These attributes also echo much of what are seen as IL skillsets of self-organisation including time management.

It is also about learning as thinking, such as Ruby’s comment about “they don’t have an idea” or as Nehal put it “just being in University to have fun”. Mo talked about “they sort of blame other things or influences or something like that for them not getting a good grade or not taking part in something”. This echoes the strong statements on individual responsibility made by the participants. It focuses on what O’Shea et al. (2016, p.324) term the “deficiency within the student” but also has interesting connotations to Sharma and Shakeel (2015) who found that business students had a tendency to over-confidence and self-attribution bias. The flipside to this argument though could be that students, frequently told they need to be independent, are reluctant to highlight their own weaknesses or to ask for help. What the focus on the individual misses is the contextual framing of the student as learner within their social and institutional setting. It also points to learner identities as being fixed rather

than something that can develop and change (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) whereas the participants demonstrated an awareness of their development as learners.

For Chris there was an admittance that he had been a bad learner who he identified as “someone who doesn't listen or take on board the ideas ... someone who is not really putting in as much effort ... I think that was me ...”. A few of the participants indicated that they had been poor attenders in first and second years or had been a ‘bad learner’ when studying for their A levels. Ella stated that “in all honesty in first and second year I wasn’t [a good student]”. Bad learners then can become good learners. Ajjawi et al., (2021, p.2) discuss persistence after academic failure and highlight that this often involves “re-negotiation of possible selves and trajectories” and for some of the participants in this study that is what appears to have happened. What this indicates is that a good learner is not necessarily a fixed personality trait but is something that can be shaped, developed, and changed over time both by the individual but also by the environment in which they are studying (Alvi et al., 2016). This development in how the participants viewed themselves as learners was also evident in what they said about their self-confidence as learners.

5.3 Mindsets and a willingness to learn

“I think everyone has a period of laziness ... not one person is always 100% dedicated and motivated, but I think excepting that and then trying to force yourself out of that type of mindset, I think is really a key to it” (Eddie)

Intelligence forms one of the eight dimensions of the ideal student proposed by Wong and Chiu (2021b) however only one participant, Sam, mentioned intelligence as an important part of being a good learner stating “intelligence is obvious. I think that's the two key factors for me intelligence, for obvious reasons, and conscientiousness”. What does come through strongly in the interview data is that a good learner has a particular kind of mindset. Having an active interest, even a passion for the subject area was a starting point for some of the participants such as Nehal who stated that learning was about “adding to my knowledge and it's a knowledge about something I'm so passionate about”. Enjoyment was also important, Ruby said “when I enjoy the subject I learn better because I’m more focused”. In

the main, these students set out to study business with a clear interest in the subject matter. Jack, however, eluded to it not just being about interest but also about the process of learning being hard and that this is what provides the enjoyment: “the reward that comes from that part when you are working hard to learn something is what gives me enjoyment”. This then is about the enjoyment of the process of learning, it is about what John terms “hard graft throughout, really simple as that”. This is interesting in that it provides a different, little written about, sense of what learning means to students.

Barnett (2007) discusses students as needing to have a will to learn. The motivations for the participants to study at undergraduate level have been discussed previously in section 4.4. These were extrinsic in the sense that they did involve future employment alongside an active interest in the subject area. The motivations were also intrinsic in terms of proving something to themselves. Proving themselves was to a certain extent through external validation – that they could achieve a good degree. What, however, also comes across when the participants talk about being a good learner is a desire and willingness to learn. As Hannah puts it “I think you've got to be like willing to put the work in” and “to an extent, it's gotta be like off your own back, it's your own willpower”. Bennett and Barkensjo (2005, p.8) discuss this in terms of “goal orientation involved the desire to achieve specific outcomes such as better job prospects and career development. Learning orientation concerned the desire to learn for the sheer enjoyment of learning”. The participants in my study show that these are not mutually exclusive and that the process of learning is important alongside the outcome orientations of wanting to achieve a high grade. They also indicated that learning could be enjoyable, this is rarely noted in the literature on the student experience.

George and Noah both thought that being a good listener was important and this can be linked to an openness to new ideas. Eddie and Chris talked about being open to new ideas. This contrasts with what Ruby said about a bad learner “not having an idea”. A learning mindset links back to wanting to learn, as Noah put it “you have to be very wanting to learn, somebody can teach you something, and if the person doesn't want to learn, then there's no point them teaching in the first place”. The will to learn has to translate into action though and the student as in control of their agency and learning is something that forms part of the narrative of the good, independent learner (Lumb & Bunn, 2021). Having the

right mindset and attitude is also linked to confidence and this is what forms the focus of the next sub-theme.

5.3.1 Confidence

“I am now [confident] never used to be, but I'd say definitely I am now” (George)

Confidence is one of the items Wong and Chiu (2021b) identify as a characteristic of the ideal student. All nineteen participants indicated that they felt confident in their ability to learn. Given the diversity of prior educational attainment and the indirect entry routes to HE, this is perhaps surprising. Confidence can be seen as part of self-belief and as such forms part of both ASC and academic self-efficacy (Ferla et al., 2009). Marsh and Craven (1996, p.158) state “perceived self-efficacy is defined as the self-perceptions of one's skills and capabilities to execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations”.

For most of the participants, the confidence in their own ability to learn had been something that had developed over time and was often associated with social aspects of the learning environment rather than individual endeavour. For some, like Olivia, it was realising that they were like other students. For Ella it was working out that she fitted in “I remember looking at my peers and going ok if they're here I can be here and then I think I got a bit more confidence”. For Maisy part of this process was getting a diagnosis of dyslexia that helped build confidence in her own ability because it meant that “I think as well like just kind of knowing, and I could just make me relax a little bit more”. Jake describes it as “it's just made me find what helps me the most”.

There is a differentiation here between being a learner and learning to learn within the academic setting of a university (Wingate, 2007). Mo described this as needing to familiarise himself with new aspects of learning at university but “as a learner in general, uh, I like to think I'm a quick learner”. A good learner then learns what is expected of them and through doing this they gain confidence in their own abilities. As Wong and Chiu (2019, p. 887) found in their study of non-traditional high achieving students there appears to be “a recurrent and reflective process where students gradually learn and practice the explicit and implicit rules of their own higher education”. For Abbie it was teaching style that built her confidence “I need someone that's not ... boring and a bit dull and I need someone who's

got like a bit of energy and have a laugh with you". Whereas for some it was being supported by lecturers that helped build confidence "I had a couple of really good tutors who are really supportive so it was just a case of like, knowing that if you need help to ask for it" (Hannah). That the participants value supportive lecturers mirrors what Tomlinson (2014) found and shows students react positively to teaching staff who are able to engage with students as part of what can be seen as a community of academia.

For Chris, gaining in confidence was about grades. He said "I was pretty down in the dumps with my A level results ... so yeah, now I feel a lot more confident after a pretty successful first year at Uni". This echoes what Picton et al., (2018) write about success forming a foundation of a sense of belonging and is an interesting way of viewing how success in learning increases a sense of belonging. Ruby talked about "I think not doing very well in college just pushed me to sort of find my own way in which I'm best at learning so that's why I've become more confident". This is interesting as it demonstrates resilience, often thought to be lacking in business students (Klussman et al., 2021) and also links to proving something, which is discussed in section 7.3.3. In contrast, however, for Ciara it was about not focusing on grades "I was so nervous about getting a bad grade, but now I'm not bothered, I'm just happy that I'm doing it and I'm learning ... so I'm a lot more confident now".

Confidence was also talked about as coming from hard work. Ella illustrated this by saying "I feel really confident I don't just think I'm going to get a first, I think it because I'm going to try hard" and John said that his confidence came through putting "hard work into it and I got the results that I deserve". This fits with what Wong and Chiu (2021b, p.32) have as one of their dimensions of the ideal student which is diligence and engagement and "broadly captures students' learning attitude and work ethic". Interestingly, however, this was not the finding of Nyström et al. (2019, p.271) who studied students in prestigious institutions and found that there was "valorisation of high achievement with relatively little (apparent) effort or stress". That there could be a difference between prestigious institutions and post-1992 institutions is an interesting point and is noted by Wong and Chiu (2021a) who found a qualitative difference in pre-1992 and post-1992 narratives with one idealising "an all-rounded high achiever" and the later valuing effort and progress. This matters in that the context and applicability of any research becomes important, there may be a marked

difference between the attitudes and experiences of students as learners in different institutional settings.

What is also important to note in my findings is the variety of things the participants mention when talking about confidence as learners. This strongly illustrates the sense of finding their own way in building their confidence as a learner but that this was situated in the environment in which they are studying. The participants in this study, diverse in background and studying at a post-1992 university, talked a lot about the good learner in terms of attitude, mindset, and hard work. These are very much personal and individual trajectories of developing confidence. It is reflective of their individual relationships with their learning and experience of education (Ashwin et al., 2016). It is both individual to them and shaped by the environment in which they find themselves. As such, attendance at class and engagement could be seen as important and this is what I discuss next.

5.3.2 Attendance and engagement

“Obviously if you’re sat at the back, you never ask any questions, this is only the second lecture you’ve come to during this term, they’re not going to think that you’re going to do very well”. (Ella)

Attendance and engagement are highly topical in both HE institutional policy and HE research. Attendance forms one of the main ways to measure engagement (Moore et al., 2019) but engagement is also further measured by things like library logins and interaction with online learning platforms (Wardley et al., 2021). The ideal student attends classes (Wong & Chiu, 2021b). This can seem an unquestionably right way to measure how students are committed to their course of study. Yet despite the perception of the student-consumer as actively engaging in their studies there continues to be high levels of non-attendance at HE institutions (Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al., 2021; Oldfield et al., 2019). That there is such a problem with attendance could indicate that very few students manage to be ideal. However, what is frequently unacknowledged in the literature is that this is not a new phenomenon (Massingham & Herrington, 2006), nor is it particular to the UK (Rodgers, 2001). The monitoring of attendance is now a legal requirement for HE institutions (Oldfield et al., 2019). This is driven by the introduction of student loans to pay for tuition fees and

the need to evidence that a student is attending for them to receive student finance via the loans system. Attendance and engagement are defined by the Student Loan Company as “attendance means active and ongoing engagement with the activities and learning opportunities on a course. These include scheduled learning and teaching activities, but are not limited to these” (Student Loan Company, 2023). While metrics are actively collected to meet this legal requirement the centrally driven policy and legal framework around attendance and engagement is often missed out of the context of research in this area. Within HE research the focus is frequently on investigating the reasons why students do not attend (to improve attendance) and to also prove that if they do attend, they get better grades. Little research has been done on what attendance means to students themselves or about why students choose to attend as opposed to why they do not.

Many of the participants in my study indicated that their attendance had been poor in levels four and five but had improved as they progressed in their studies. Interestingly, for some attendance was not something they thought of as central to their success, what mattered was engagement with the material on their own terms “I miss some [lectures], but it wasn't a big deal, at least for me because I've, uh, I've sat down and been through everything that I missed. I read it myself” (Eddie). While much of the research in this area has previously indicated a relationship between attendance and attainment the reasons for this continue to be unclear and a clear causal link has yet to be proved (Moore et al., 2019). This echoes what Jake stated that “there was some modules where I went to everything and then there was some modules where I didn't go to everything but ... I was very happy with what I got in even in those modules”. While Hannah observed that “lecturers and tutors put a lot more pressure on attendance and grades which I mean, I understand, but I don't necessarily agree with because people who don't go in might still do really well, and people who go in every day might not”. While attendance is easy to define as the physical presence in a classroom and therefore easy to quantify, engagement is more problematic. Kahn (2014, p.1005) states that “student engagement refers to the contribution that students make towards their learning” but also that “the notion itself of ‘student engagement’ remain weakly theorised” and the meanings that students give to it appear to be unclear.

These participants all self-identified as high achieving despite admitting that their attendance was sometimes sketchy, they were, however, engaged in their own learning in

that they demonstrated interest and enjoyment of their subject area, this engagement often place outside the classroom setting. This type of engagement is very difficult to quantify or monitor. What the students do in terms of IL will be discussed in the next chapter, Being an independent learner, within this sub-section the focus is on engagement and contribution in the classroom. While the participants in my research stress that attendance and engagement is important, part of what they say about it is that being seen to attend and engage is important. This version of a good learner turns up in a way that is measurable and quantifiable.

I argue that being a good student in a mass education system means that attendance and engagement are not only about actively learning, as Hannah and Grace were doing outside of the classroom, but it is also about being seen, heard, and recognised as someone who is putting in effort in the classroom. This is what can make you stand out as a good student, and therefore identifies you as a good learner. Macfarlane (2016, p.52) terms this as “the performance of learning”. Some of the participants felt that it is important to be seen to be engaged. As Ciara puts it “you gain more of a relationship with your lecturer if you’re attending and contributed a lot, but you're not going to get the same support if you're just not turning up”. This leads to students such as Maisy who said that “in the first couple of years the lecturers might not have even like know my name but now they do because I'm always there pestering them”.

Attendance then is a way to be seen, to form relationships and gain valuable time with busy staff. It is a way to differentiate yourself from the “sea of faces” (Oldfield et al., 2019). What this risks though is that lecturers are overly generous in terms of time, and potentially grades, with the students who do attend and are therefore seen as hardworking, ideal students. This can mean that those that may be working hard but are not seen, or are not measurable as engaged, are at risk of being undermarked (Macfarlane, 2016). It was usually the small group tutorials and seminars more than the larger lectures that the participants valued. This is where they can be more easily heard and seen, in some respects it is where they felt that they matter, which can instil a sense of belonging. As Noah put it “I value the two hours with a teacher a lot. It is [a] small group ... I'm learning a lot more than sometimes the lectures which can just be a PowerPoint which if I just was in bed and got the same PowerPoint”. Ciara stated that in these smaller group sessions she felt like “contribution is a

big part of being a good learner because it's getting your view across and if it is wrong, you will get told. If you don't say anything you're never gonna know". I argue that getting to know your tutors on an individual level is difficult and it takes a certain type of student to become known as a good learner to a member of staff within a mass education system where one module leader might have oversight of three hundred plus students. Studying on a course with hundreds of students, where staff to student ratios are frequently low can mean that it is difficult to form close working relationships between academic staff and students (Tomlinson 2014). Given current staff to student ratios there is no way that a lecturer could get to know each student on an individual basis. This is where IL can be viewed more as an answer to a lack of resources (Reay 2017) or as a distraction away from questioning investment in staff and resources. This was posed decades ago by Morgan (1985, p. 38) who questioned whether IL may be a "cut-price ways of carrying on".

A good student though finds a way to be seen and heard within this mass education system. As John indicates "I think each and every one of them [lecturers] knows me by name. I think that's because how closely knit I've been with the lecturers and how I've been turning up to everything". It is not purely about turning up but also about engaging and contributing when they do. Attendance and engagement then are not only about content and learning but about being seen to learn and to engage by the teaching staff, if not by fellow students. It is what Macfarlane (2015, p.341) discusses as learnerism and "emphasises the need for the student to be publicly 'seen' to be learning and constructing a personal understanding instead of acquiring knowledge as a private activity". Jack stated that "you are a good student because you are proactive, you're asking questions" and Ciara "definitely attending and contributing, I feel like contribution is a big part of being a good learner". Abbie described herself as "quite talkative, a loud person so in the lesson I started out actively engaged with the topic and I understand it. Whereas if I'm not saying anything about it, then you know that I don't have a clue what's happening".

This kind of vocal engagement indicates what Barnett (2009, p.436) discusses as "perhaps 'a will to speak' might be added, for it may be contended that unless the student develops her (or his) voice and has a willingness to speak, her (or his) becoming may be unduly limited". Grace describes finding her voice and that:

“some of the teachers were really very helpful and ... their answers were very interesting, so like automatically I was asking more questions and I think that some of the questions I asked there were also questions that other students wanted to ask, but they didn't”.

She noted that other students did not ask questions because “some of them probably are shy ... if you ask it, you will look stupid because you asked it” and Ruby also found her voice “when the tutor is asking questions everyone is just quiet but I think by actually answering the question and asking questions yourself if you don't understand that really helps”.

A good learner then contributes by finding and using her voice as Maisy stated:

“I mean some people get nervous to speak I understand that's natural but I knew me answering and like speaking back and having these conversations, you just made them aware that I'm listening ...wanting to learn”.

What is important here is to question the reasons why students do not speak out and do not “develop ‘a will to engage’” as Barnett (2009, p.437) puts it. Macfarlane (2016, p.52) asserts that “in the context of student learning, performativity is associated with girls or young women hiding their intelligence and playing a more passive role in class”. Grace illustrated this when she talked about feeling as if her fellow students thought that she was weird when she asked informed questions in seminars. Wong and Chiu (2021b, p.99) argue that “our focus should be on characteristics we find desirable in an ideal student, rather than the apparent gender of the person who embodies these traits” but this does little to address the barriers to achieving as an ideal student that can be gendered but also related to ethnicity and social class or indeed if the construct of the good student is inherently biased towards the “traditional notions of a student as a young (white) man from an upper-class or middle-class background” (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p.598).

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has addressed what students think makes a good learner. While much has been written about the ideal student as something to aspire to (Wong & Chiu, 2021b) there is little in the literature that addresses how students view themselves as good learners. These

nineteen students demonstrate that there is no one version of a good learner. Each has to a large extent found their own way; however, the students view a good learner as having a particular kind of mindset that can develop and change rather than it being a fixed personality trait. A good learner has confidence in their own abilities, but this confidence comes from many different sources and is something that needs to be worked on. This hard work is often associated with a will to learn and translates into action in terms of attending, engaging, and contributing during classes although attendance can be about being seen and heard and is not viewed as always necessary. This is within the context of a mass education system where they are one amongst hundreds of students trying to navigate their way through a system that requires a certain amount of learning what is expected of them. What the students did not mention in terms of being a good learner was study skills or IL. What value they attach to IL will be addressed in the next chapter under the theme of being an independent learner.

6 Being an independent learner

“I thought it was a case of like doing everything on your own. Uhm, and I think that's like a really wide misconception because since then ... I've realized that it's not about doing it on your own necessarily. I mean you can ask people to help. You can do it with your friends”

(Hannah)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the practicalities of being an independent learner. In a statement on independent study that typifies the explicit and/or implicit attitudes of many universities, Sheffield University says that “ in an environment in which nobody will hold your hand, or tell you precisely what you should be doing and when, the art of managing and meeting personal deadlines – both social and academic – must be mastered sooner rather than later” (University of Sheffield, 2022). The ideal of the good student is something that forms a strong academic strand in research and this in turn leads to a constant exploration for best practices in improving students’ IL and study skills to generate students who are engaged, attend, and attain in ways that can be measured. Much of the research points to students not being prepared to study independently when they transition from school and students who do not live up to the ideal of the independent learner are seen as deficit and in need of remedial support. This can be particularly strong when addressing widening participation (Goode, 2007). The developmental model of IL also means that students who have failed to master this approach are deemed to be problematic early on in their studies and into their final years.

While the participants in my study indicated that they were responsible for their learning, how they go about this varied. This is important in that the approaches to studying do not fit the persona of the good student proposed by most of the literature, and yet these are high achieving students and as such cannot be viewed deficit in terms of academic skills. Their experiences and views about learning are an important area of study because it illuminates not only the learning experiences of high achieving students but also provides areas of discussion as to what could help other students achieve. The participants offered a range of definitions for IL and discussed how they had expected IL to form part of their university experience. This is perhaps surprising, given the amount of literature that discusses IL as one of the difficulties in the transition from school to university. What did surprise them though

was the amount of group and teamwork required as part of their course. This theme addresses what the students think IL is and then leads into a discussion of how students value group and social aspects of learning and what implications this might have for HE practices. The chapter discusses the findings of my research in relation to IL, time spent studying, reading, critical thinking and the social aspects of learning. It is linked to RQ 2: What value do students give to independent learning?

6.2 Independent learning

“As long as you're doing the work and put in the effort and in the end, the end result will be the same then I don't think it really matters which way you go about it in terms of independent learning” (Eddie)

IL might initially seem unquestionably good, but this can result in its value not being questioned or problematised in much the same way as the value of SRL can be unquestioned (Vassallo, 2015). I argue that it can be problematised on several levels. It can be linked to neoliberalism which sees students as being responsible both from a financial viewpoint and for being individually responsible for their own progression and attainment (Leathwood, 2006). This type of independence came through strongly in my findings as discussed in section 4.4 on individual responsibility.

There are a multitude of definitions for IL in the literature and also confusion as to how IL is dealt with in HE policy despite IL being “all pervasive” in UK HE (McKendry & Boyd, 2012). There was a mixed response to questions about what IL is and as indicated by Abbie who said “to be fair I've heard it mentioned, but no one's actually said this is what it is”. This lack of clarity is also found in the literature and the focus of IL can be on study skills, academic literacy skills, and on personal responsibility and motivation. IL shares characteristics with SRL, which sees the individual's psychological processes as key to successful study. As stated previously, the dictionary definition of independence is “not taking help or money from other people” (Cambridge University, n.d.), Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the participants mainly thought of IL as learning on their own (twelve/nineteen) as indicated by Mo who said “I'd sort of characterize independent learning as a learning by yourself”. Nine of the participants also mentioned location, IL is something that is done at home or in the library.

Five participants directly mentioned reading and six mentioned searching for additional information.

I propose then that IL is seen by students as a solitary experience that passes responsibility from the lecturer to the learner and is done away from the classroom. It is, as Hockings et al. (2018) put it what students do when lecturers are not there. This links to what the participants said about their sense of personal responsibility as previously discussed in section 4.4. For Chris IL is about “kind of like being trusted to do the revision on your own without someone like looking over your shoulder”. Jack described it as “not waiting for someone to come knock on my door and tell me how to”. The issue here is that IL, rather than being an inherently good thing, can be viewed as being problematic on several levels. One problem is that the good independent student is narrowly construed as “male, white, middle class and able-bodied” Leathwood (2006, p.615). This harks back to the traditional student whereas I assert there is no longer such thing as a traditional student and by implication neither is there such a thing as a non-traditional student. These assertions prompt important questions as to how and why the independent learner is seen as the ideal, good student.

The literature often points to IL as being something that students are not prepared for and struggle with, particularly in their first year. For most of the participants, however, there was an expectation that they would be learning more independently at university than they had been at school or college. Hannah states that it “wasn't too big of an issue” and Ruby said “obviously I knew it would be a lot more like independent learning” and Olivia said “I knew there'd be a lot more learning like a lot more independent reading”. Some saw this as a developmental process of growing up “being that adult let's sit down, do the job you know. Don't be childish. Don't waste the time. Know how to spend your time. It's all about that” (Nehal) that links back to section 5.3 on mindsets. That they thought this was an expected aspect of their university experience is interesting and not often noted in the literature. IL though is something that is discussed in pre university level education (Norledge, 2023) and has even been raised as an issue in transition between primary school and high school (Bullock & Muschamp, 2006). That IL is not a unique issue to HE is often overlooked, if it is viewed as something that needs to be addressed at all stages of

education then this strengthens the argument that it is IL itself that is the issue and not its peculiarities in HE.

As such, IL is not unique to university level study. Yet some of the participants saw IL as part of the HE system that was different from school. Sam explained it as “I think it's essentially passing the reins over from a lecturer or teacher heavy sort of dynamic to a very much almost 99% student dynamic”. As Nehal said “just such a huge difference and the atmosphere of being in a lecture room with 200 people sitting here listening. It's up to you that you take notes, not the teacher to feed you”. What is indicated here though is that there is less involvement with teaching staff and also more students than there would have been at high school or college level. One of the arguments here is that in a mass education system with stretched resources and sometimes low staff to student ratios it is, despite some of the rhetoric of personalised learning and student centredness, impossible to deliver a personalised and individually focused education. IL then becomes a mechanism for dealing with this, when questions of value for money arise, given the low number of contact hours, IL is often used as a panacea. This does not mean that I am arguing that no self-directed or independent learning should take place, rather that it should be re-framed. I argue that if students are constantly being told they need to develop as independent learners, then this poses the question independent from what and why? This links back to what the participants said about attendance (discussed in chapter five) and is overlooked in discussions around attendance and engagement. Morgan (1985) asserted that there was no clear indication as to why independent learning should be better than dependent learning and it is important to consider whether the continual pushing for students to be independent of their lecturers puts barriers in place for students who want or need to ask for help, clarification, and support. This links to what Thompson et al. (2021) discuss as the social and psychological transition to HE and that transition was difficult because of the lack of opportunities to ask for help and that there was less support in universities was something that the participants had not anticipated. There is also a juxtaposition between independence and a sense of belonging and whether IL works against the encouragement of student attendance for in class teaching. The questions here are about whether promoting IL works against the focus on developing a sense of belonging that is highlighted in so much of the policy, practice, and research of HE.

This does not mean that IL is unimportant or that it should be completely disregarded. Jake who has dyslexia and dyspraxia did struggle more with IL but thought that “it's been good for me to like have to work more independently, but it's been hard as well” but in doing so “it's just made me find what helps me the most”. Many universities offer help and support for IL via their webpages, offering a how to approach to IL that can at times be prescriptive. Goode (2007, p.600) suggests that “in higher education the equivalent of ‘self-sufficiency’, ‘self help’, ‘self-care’ and ‘standing on your own two feet’ is ‘independent’ learning”. Study skills departments promote this by providing generic advice and support rather than within a subject specific context, Richards and Pilcher (2023, p.580) refers to study skills as “neoliberalism’s perfect Tinkerbell” in that it places the responsibility for seeking out support onto the individual. The argument here is that rather than generic study skills support what students need is subject specific support delivered by academics and that this changes the status quo to that of a teaching paradigm (Richards & Pilcher, 2023).

Throughout the interviews there was an impression that the participants do exercise their agency in terms of personal learning and study preferences and find their own way to do so, despite institutional agendas and study skills tutorials that offer a more prescriptive approach. As Jake said “obviously the more varied ways of learning you try, you'll find one that you like the best ... it doesn't work for everyone the same things” and from Ruby “I think I've definitely learnt how to learn but like I've learnt to know what suits me rather than doing what everyone else is doing”. This has important consequences for what are often generic study skills support services that most universities now offer. This variety in approach becomes even more apparent when the students talked about how much time they spend studying and as Hockings et al. (2018, p.146) state “we simply do not know what students do when they are ‘doing’ independent learning”.

6.2.1 Time spent studying

“Just forcing yourself to not be lazy, independent learning really is just trying to force yourself into a habit almost” (Eddie)

If IL is something that is done outside of timetabled contact hours (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2017) with stated expected hours of study, how much time

students spend studying is important. The participants reported wildly different amounts of time spent studying independently. This is important as all nineteen participants can be deemed to be successful, yet there was no indication of any of them meeting the recommended study hours. Some talked of doing 20 hours a week, but this included the taught components, while Eddie stated “I've been in University this year like two days a week, one day a week sometimes, and it's not high office hours”. There was also a feeling that they could get by on a lot less than the recommended private study hours as indicated by Mo who said “do you want a truthful answer ...? ... so when they say an hour at uni an hour at home, so I don't really do that” and Abbie “like two [hours a week] if I'm honest”. If HE institutions are bolstering face to face teaching time with IL hours on module proformas there is little indication that students are studying anywhere near this time allocation. The implication of this is that students are either not being challenged enough (see section 7.3.3 for a discussion of this) and have no need to do in-depth independent study or that HEIs are over-exaggerating the number of hours of private study that are needed where one credit equals one hour of study and would mean a student typically spending 36 hours studying per week of the academic year (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2021).

How students spend their study time is under researched, but the good student learns how to use the library, how to reference, and is “efficient, punctual and rule-following” (Wong & Chiu, 2021b, p.37). Time management features strongly in guides to IL (see Leeds Beckett University, 2023b) and is frequently highlighted as part of an employability skillset.

However, what also comes across in my findings is the variety of approaches students take to time management. Jack talks about starting to work on assignments weekly and “if every student will spend like 10 hours working on it or 12, I would spend double amount of time” while Nehal talks about leaving everything to the last three days and working on nothing else. Again, this indicates that there is no one best way to approach university work, rather that individuals should be empowered and supported in finding what works for them without feeling they need to meet an ideal. One notable point is that much of the literature and policy on IL indicates that a lot of students' IL time should be spent reading. This should involve both background reading and wider reading around the topic areas. This though was one of the things that the participants talked about struggling with and is addressed in the next section.

6.2.2 Reading

“I didn't [read] last year, but I did this year. Definitely helped” (George)

Despite what Green (2008, p. 244) states as “nowadays, most students ‘do’ a degree, whereas the elite that comprised the undergraduate body of times past ‘read’ for theirs” reading continues to play a crucial role in academic learning. For Hannah reading was about “the stuff that you do in the lecture is like the very tip of the iceberg...but then there's still all of the bit underneath the sea and you need to do it yourself”. When talking about IL the participants did refer to this as filling in the gaps by doing background research, finding information, and reading.

It can seem common sense that students know that they need to read to succeed at university level and in emphasising independence that they will be able to know what to read and how to approach it. However, for the participants in my study, reading came across as problematic for a variety of reasons. For a small but significant number of the students (seven/nineteen) reading was something they actively struggled to do. Nehal, the student with a refugee background, found it particularly difficult and said “I'm not a big fan of reading, you know, I just can't. So that's, yeah, it is a disadvantage but I literally can't read, just hard” (Nehal). While others struggled to know what to read or how to find it or said that rather than doing background reading it was easier to search Google. Despite the reluctance to and difficulties with reading, all the participants indicated that they saw reading as important and either wanted to do more or knew they should do more and wanted more direction on what to read. If these high achieving students want more direction in terms of what to read, or how to find things to read this might indicate that those working at a lower level of achievement definitely need more clarification on what they should be doing.

Grace had a different perspective on reading and talked about her experiences in seminars when she wanted to discuss what she'd been reading “like I felt oh my God, she's the nerd that is reading books oh my God ... they were like looking at me. So, I didn't feel comfortable then to speak at all”. It is unclear as to why Grace should be made to feel like this. Her perspective may pose interesting questions on how UK home students portray an attitude of anti-intellectualism which Elias (2008, p.110) defines as “an individual's lack of interest in and disrespect for what is termed the life of the mind”. Their reasons for this ambivalence

need teasing out though and gender may play a part here with women not wanting to be seen to be studying and males wanting to achieve effortlessly (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). This seems to contradict the hard work my participants say they put in but also throws up questions on how students relate to academic studies. Reading academic text is still the main route to accessing bodies of knowledge in any given discipline despite what can be opaque journal articles and theoretical textbooks (Haggis, 2006).

It may then be too straightforward to suggest that all students need is more direction on what to read and how to find it. This help, support, and guidance have been offered in varying guises of study skills modules, library skills sessions, reading lists and guides on IL. If the problem is looked at from a different perspective and how academic knowledge is codified and communicated becomes the focus it is this that becomes the problem rather than the student (Haggis, 2006). This may mean questioning how academic texts and knowledge is codified in the first place. Granitz et al., (2021) argue that the general societal decline in reading print means that academics need to use different ways to engage students in knowledge via such things as video, yet despite this assertion academic reading remains a cornerstone of HE and any change to this will likely take decades to embed. In practice then, shifting the focus from the students' inability to interact with academic text means that rather than sending students away to learn independently the focus becomes one of collective inquiry and being more transparent about the practices of academia (Haggis, 2006). In practice, this would mean moving away from blaming the individual student for being deficit in academic skills and facilitating a more egalitarian approach to accessing bodies of academic knowledge.

While much of the literature points to the need to make the requirements of IL more explicit (McKendry & Boyd, 2012) I argue that the participants of this study know what IL means to them and that IL was not unexpected. What they do struggle with, however, is how to relate to and use the codified knowledge of business studies as it appears in textbooks and wider literature. This is not learning how to learn but rather learning how and why knowledge is constructed as it is within particular disciplines and how to then work with this knowledge to form arguments (Haggis, 2006). It is not the lack of generic study skills, or failures of how to be an IL learner that is the issue, rather it is how students learn what is expected of them within the academic community of management and business.

This lack of clarity about what it means to be an independent learner with the associated capacity to think critically comes across more strongly when the students talked about critical thinking.

6.2.3 Critical thinking

“Just reading everything isn't enough. You can do the research, you can read the journal articles and the reports and like drown yourself in Mintel reports until you don't know what's going on. But unless you know how to use it, it's useless” (Hannah)

Critical thinking and IL are frequently linked within business and management education. The literature on employability and graduate attributes stresses the need for business graduates who can think critically, often to support problem-solving and innovative thinking in a business environment. There are tensions though between the studying of business and management as an academic discipline and what is often thought of as training in preparation for working in business and management (Mingers, 2000). This is particularly so with the increasing focus on graduate employability. The implications of this are that business schools are frequently criticised for maintaining the status quo in terms of what knowledge is applied and that a more critical approach is needed (Errington & Bubna-Litic 2015). Sam gave an example of being taught economics in a way that did not encourage his own critical thinking, he said:

“a lot of the stuff that we were taught was theory, but it was taught in a way that would suggest that it was fact. So I came away thinking like a Thatcherite ... deregulation of the business world was fact and it was the best thing to do when obviously if you speak to someone on the other opposite end of the political spectrum, they formulate a really good argument to suggest that actually this isn't”.

The treatment of business and management education as a wholly academic and critical endeavour does not sit easily with the current obsession with employability and graduate outcomes that is being driven by the metrics required by the Office for Students. Koris et al., (2017, p.176) state that a vocational approach to business education means that “students have abandoned the role of learners and instead have become degree seekers”. I argue

however that the participants of this study show that there is an alternative view where students are interested in the subject matter and eager to be able to question and think for themselves. This comes across in what the participants say about feeling unchallenged but also in what they say about critical thinking. As Grace put it “Oh my God, this is like also very important. Uh, critical thinking in my opinion, that means that all the knowledge you have, to use together to make your own opinion about something”.

It is often assumed that, along with IL and reading, students automatically know what it is to be critical but John highlights the difficulties with these assumptions: “it was in my feedback. I think that's one of the things I need to improve... but yeah, it's quite difficult” and Jake was vague “I have heard that word come up, that phrase but I mean, no, like I don't think I've heard it that much. Not sure what else to say” and Noah “critical thinking is ... I'm not quite sure what it is to be honest with you”. This alludes to the learning to learn theme that frequently appears in the literature and was first proposed in the Dearing report of 1997 (Byrne, 2022). I argue that this is a misdirection though and that rather than learning how to learn, which implies the responsibility lies with the learner, the focus should be on welcoming students into the specific learning communities of their disciplines (Haggis, 2006). This takes the focus off the individual where it is the fault of the student that they do not know how to think for themselves or do not have the necessary skills. Rather it puts the focus on faculty and teaching and learning practices (Haggis, 2006). If the focus was to shift to making academic practices of the subject discipline more transparent and more straightforward to navigate, then it is not the individual student that becomes the issue but rather the culture and social learning aspects of business education. Wenger (1998) states that “instruction does not cause learning; it creates a context in which learning takes place” and it is the context that I argue should be the focus. The next sub-theme addresses what the participants said about the social aspects of their learning.

6.2.4 Social aspects of learning

“I think independent learning is very important, but ... I think it's equal in group learning because I think for me if you are group learning, you're bouncing off each other, getting different ideas. And obviously everybody thinks differently.

And so, I think it's very important to study with other people who were maybe different, not as like minded as you" (Noah)

The participants in my research talk about having expected IL and seeing it as doing something on their own and feeling personally responsible for their learning. Surprisingly, what they had not expected was teamwork, groupwork, and the social aspects of their learner experiences. Yorke (2004, p. 136) states that "higher education is, at heart, a social process" and I argue that we have lost focus on this and instead see HE as an individual endeavour. I did not explicitly ask the participants about the social aspects of their learning and had not expected it to be discussed but learning as a social activity was frequently mentioned by the participants. I argue that what my data shows is that these social aspects of the learning experience are important and need consideration. As Ciara put it:

"I thought that you just sit in a big room and someone is speaking at you and that's it. Then when I actually came to uni and I learned that even in lectures like there were actually questions, then obviously you have the seminars as well, which I had no clue about. So yeah, there was a bit of a shock, but for the better, really".

Zimmerman (2002, p. 69) states that "contrary to a commonly held belief, self-regulated learning is not asocial in nature and origin" and McKendry and Boyd (2012, p.210) discuss that IL may be misunderstood as "learning as a solitary activity, which is clearly in opposition to learning theories that stress the social or community nature of learning". Despite this, while IL forms one of the foundations of the UK HE system the social aspects of learning are not considered to such a large extent either in practice or research. This has been noted in medical education (Bleakley, 2006) and also in business education literature (Baviera et al., 2022; Tan & Vicente, 2019). In her study of independent and dependent constructs of doctoral students Goode (2007, p.596) argues that staff/student relationships can be studied as "a set of social practices, rather than as a matter of intellectual capacity" and this could be applied here. Educational research mainly focuses on the individual with quantifiable and frequently psychological research and this misses the equally important aspects of social interaction. The message of IL can mean that students who are struggling to understand lectures avoid seeking support via attending smaller group learning in tutorials and seminars and instead feel they need to study independently (Pokorny &

Pokorny, 2005). What this means is they are less likely to feel part of a learning community with its own set of social practices.

The participants in my study do talk about how interacting with teaching staff is helpful. As Hannah puts it “knowing that if you need help to ask for it, because even though it is a lot of independence there are people to help you if you need it”. Jack appreciated that “I could spend like hours just looking from the one part of the problem, but just simply asking them [teaching staff] they can just say one sentence to kind of like open or remove barriers”. This indicates the mutuality of teaching and learning and university education as a social practice which is often overlooked in favour of individual independence (Goode, 2007). One of the difficulties of business education is the size of cohorts. It is impossible to give one on one guidance and support to every student, I argue that it is the students who are more visible, more vocal, and more confident that get the attention of the lecturers. Those that feel less seen are those that may struggle the most. Seeing HE as a social practice rather than an individual undertaking may make the less confident students feel better supported. This draws on the ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991, p.29) who see learners as participating in “communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community”.

Seeing learning as a social practice also means that the relationships between students themselves and their wider support network also need to be considered. Again, this is often overlooked. Peer support came across as being important, both as a motivator but also as a confidence builder. George had found the confidence to ask questions because he was “possibly following what other people do 'cause I know at uni everyone wasn't scared to ask a question or to give their viewpoint”. For Ciara, it was “having people around you that you can chat to ... even if it's just for lunch in the library and I feel like it makes you a good learner”. This was backed up by Mo who said that learning was “definitely a collaboration with peers because, um your peers might know something that you don't or they might understand it in a way that you don't or have a different perspective” and also Jack “you know 10 classmates into your living room ... feel that it's kind of like collective activity or group activity”. This sense of collective learning also resonated when students talked about the library which was mentioned by many of the participants (twelve out of nineteen). This was particularly notable when the participants talked about studying during the Covid

lockdown. It was not the library resources that they were missing but the study space and learning atmosphere of the library. As Jack said:

“I would say the environment is influencing me when I'm sitting in the library and I see all the other people study is kind of like extra encouraging because again, we as humans we are the results of our surroundings”.

IL is often promoted as something that will be needed in the workplace, encouraging a life-long learning mentality and an ability to work independently. Jake offered a different viewpoint that “work will be independent learning, but you do group work and obviously in a lot of workplaces you do group work as well”. While IL is promoted by HE as being key to graduate-ness I would argue that teamwork and groupwork are more emphasised in job adverts and person specifications. This is backed up by a Department for Business Innovation and Skills report into employers’ graduate recruitment practices concluded that “employers placed a very high priority on inter-personal and communication skills” (Pollard et al., 2015, p.217).

6.3 Chapter summary

This section has addressed the practical aspects of what a good student and learner is supposed to do. In it, I have discussed what IL means to the participants and in doing so have highlighted that IL is taken to mean studying alone, and while recognised as important IL was also expected and something that the participants thought of as finding their own way. This means that many of the prescriptive study skills classes and support offered by universities do not echo the lived experiences of students who find out for themselves what works for them (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). What the participants in my study indicate is that there is no one way to be a good learner and I argue that in current HE practice and research there is too much focus on the individual and that this is reflected in the notion of the good student. If learning is seen as less of an independent, individually focused undertaking and more of a social activity it has important implications for how we talk to students about what is expected of them and how we encourage them to feel they belong and matter within a mass higher education system. What this means is that we miss important discussions around how the institution, student to staff ratios, curriculum, and

teaching practices could address practice rather than the constant focus on the individual student (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Haggis, 2006). It requires a shift in thinking and practice away from neoliberal constructs of the student and this ties in with how success is construed. The goal of the good, independent student is successful outcomes and outputs in terms of grades and employment. This study now moves on to address what success means to students.

7 What does success mean?

“It's more about what I'm learning and what I'm bringing out of it...because sometimes when people are focusing too much on marks, they're losing this thing that it's really about”

(Grace)

7.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on what success means to business students. Business students are frequently construed as being outcome and grade focused and often with a consumerist mindset. The participants of my research, however, talked about success in a far more affective way with seventeen out of nineteen indicating that it was about far more than grades. Success at university is frequently thought about in terms of academic achievement and grades, especially in the consumer construct of the student (Williams, 2013). Being a good student means you get rewarded with good grades, which in turn leads to good graduate jobs. Grades and graduate employability outcome metrics are what HEIs are now judged by (Higher Education Academy, 2016; José Sá, 2020) and that universities should strive to support the success of students in this way appears to be indisputable and longstanding, it was noted by Yorke (2004) over two decades ago. Despite this, there are few definitions of what student success is, and very little is written about what success means to students apart from it being particular to each student (Higher Education Academy, 2016). This feeds into and from the neoliberal discourses where the “externalisation of success factors is largely manifested through reference to employability, wealth imperatives and productivity” (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, p.1063). In this construct, success is something that can be measured and most of the research in this area frequently uses objective measures of success (Nyström et al., 2019). The good student as an independent learner achieves in this system of HE and predictors of academic success such as motivation, self-direction and IL skills are often used as the focus to increase the quantifiable achievement of students (Wong & Chiu, 2019).

The chapter is divided into the themes of: How do students think lecturers measure success and How students think about success which has subthemes of Proving something; Sense of personal development and It could be more challenging. This chapter links to RQ3: How do students measure the success of their own learning?

7.2 How do students think lecturers measure success?

“I haven’t got a clue [how lecturers measure success]. I presume that they just go off whatever number comes up on the screens ... so I just think, honestly, ... numbers. There's a big Excel spreadsheet of people with red, green, and amber”.

(Noah)

Surprisingly, when I asked the participants how they thought lecturers measured their success the answers were markedly different from how they talked about measuring their own success. They viewed lecturers as being far more focused on things that could be measured. This mainly revolved around attainment, attendance, and being seen to engage. What is of note here is that while the literature generally points to students being grade and outcome focused and this being detrimental to their learning, what the participants of my study say is that it is the lecturers that are the ones who focus on grades and outcomes. As Eddie states “they're not going to every individual person, they're going to see grades on a paper. Is this person getting high enough grade? Could they get higher grades? ... in the end, that's what the University uses as their success meter”. It is worth considering here that grade outcomes are also one of the mechanisms of how individual lecturers themselves are measured in terms of effectiveness of their teaching, with average pass rates for modules forming part of quality metrics used by institutions.

Interestingly, the participants also saw attendance and engagement as another way lecturers measured student success. Millie said that “I’d say a lot of them measure it through attendance, so I know a lot of them have said they see a correlation between grades and attendance”. What is problematic here is that there is no definitive evidence that attendance is causally linked to higher attainment (Halpern, 2007). This means that students can see the focus on attendance as more about how lecturers feel because as Jake puts it “if you go they’ll be happier because they feel ... that you got the success because you've been there. Yeah. They’ve made an impact on you”. This is more about the self-validation of the lecturer than the depth of learning achieved by the student. It links back to what the participants said about attendance and implies it matters more to lecturers than it does to students. There was also a link between attendance and engagement with Jack describing how lecturers measure success via “marks and attendance ... but it's also the performance and even the attitude, how you are”. The issue here though is that the focus

on attendance can miss the more multi-faceted approaches to teaching and learning where learning can not be measured and quantified in the same way that attendance and marks can be (José Sá, 2020). A broader attitude to success comes through strongly when the students talked about how they measure the success of their own learning.

7.3 How students think about success

“I would say the mark itself it doesn't say the whole story”. (Jack)

It is understandable that grades are important to students and the participants did acknowledge this. What is of note is that only two participants, George and John, thought success was purely about grades. The other participants, forming a majority, indicated that while grades were important there were also more subjective and affective meanings attached to their definitions of success. This is important because it gives a deeper understanding of what it means to be a student and the associated motivations to learn. I argue that these more subtle understandings mitigate against the harsher metric driven government and institutional agendas and give a richer picture of the student experience. As Noah said, “If my mum and dad say you’ve done well, well then that is a big thing to me”. Even if grades are important to students it is the feelings, emotions, and reward of effort associated with the grade that matters. What constitutes success for one person may be deemed a failure by another (Nyström et al. 2019). Some of these affective meanings of success discussed by the participants were associated with proving something, personal development and also associated with being challenged.

7.3.1 Proving something

“I'm just a very competitive person, but I'm competitive with myself” (Hannah)

To many of the participants proving themselves, often to themselves, was a strong emotion that played out through much of what they had to say. Interestingly, success was about proving that they are capable of achieving and included some level of personal validation (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Recurrently, this feeling of proving something was in relation to not having done as well as expected in A level examinations. Chris described it as “running

way from that version of hell” of A level results day and “so I wanted to do really well this year to prove to myself that like I could do it”. Not doing as well as expected at A level appears to have had a profound effect and learner identities are often influenced by prior experiences of education. Noah talked about his A level results as being a wake-up call and that “I’ve always been like quite clever. I worked hard, reasonably good at sport. You know and then that was just a big knock down for me ... I don't want that to happen again”. What is of note here is that academic achievement only formed part of Noah regarding himself as successful. Noah had previously attended a grammar school and had expected to go to a redbrick university. That he was an all-rounder, good at sport and hard working is consistent with the findings of Jackson & Nyström (2015) and Nyström et al. (2019) who found that all round achievement was important in prestigious educational institutions. Success then is not purely about a grade; it is about the meaning of that grade and how it reflects the individual identity as someone that can achieve and can excel. As such, perceived previous academic failure can be viewed as part of the story of student experience and not something that should be automatically thought of as negative. Several participants in my study had come to this university through the clearing system. There appears to be little or no research on the experiences of students who enter HEIs via the clearing system and given the number of students who use the clearing system is an important and overlooked area of research. As Eddie puts it “the way I set my mindset is as soon as I came into uni, I thought in the end it's not my first choice uni it means I've got to get a first at the end of it”. These students are not passive but active in changing their narrative and using prior failure as a motivation (Ajjawi et al., 2021).

Interestingly, in addition to self-validation there was also a sense of them proving themselves to others. What is of note is that this came through strongly in the first in family participants. For Ruby, it was about proving something not only to herself but also to her family. As the first in her family to attend university and actively discouraged by her boyfriend from applying it was about thinking:

“I’m like no I’ll learn more than him and I will do better than just sort of to prove him wrong so that’s my plan to be the breadwinner in the family hmm just to prove because he even says it now when I’m applying for graduate jobs and stuff

he's saying see you shouldn't have gone to uni and I'm like no just wait I'll prove you wrong" (Ruby).

This ties in with the work of Delahunty and O'Shea (2021, p.473) who discuss "the future-focus of possible selves" in first in family women. Hannah, another first in family participant, indicated that for her it was about the grades "I am very like grade oriented. If I put in my best if I haven't got the grade that I wanted, I'm like, well I didn't do well enough. Uhm, so yeah, I'm very much like if I don't get a first then I've failed" but she then went on to explain that as the first in her family to attend university it was about wanting to "make everyone proud". This leads to discussions around personal development and a sense of achievement.

7.3.2 Sense of personal development

"In second year I started to like stop thinking about the grades and start thinking about like if I had a presentation 'cause I'm quite a nervous public speaker instead of going ahh my grades are going to be awful I just thought to myself I'm learning to public speak ... I'd be proud of myself". (Ciara)

Cachia et al., (2018, p.437) found that "academic success is perceived by university students as both a process (personal development) and an end goal (university qualification)" and my findings echo this. It is a different viewpoint from the usual lens of academic success as being driven purely by attainment and it is important as it gives us a richer understanding of students, their motivations, and their experiences of learning. Jake stated that "I do measure my success by the result [but] I don't just think about the result. There's always a more, there's always a better, you can always improve". Even if success is all about results there is still a sense of personal development and also effort (José Sá, 2020). Eddie saw this as part of growing up and said "in the past I would have said it is [about grades] I think now as ... I'll say more mature individual ... I'd say it's also possibly about your overall satisfaction" and Ella said that "I've grown a lot now I want the grade to prove all of this". This indicates that success can be both subjective as well as objective and is about feelings and emotions (José Sá, 2020). It can be about reward for effort put in and this was indicated by Eddie who stated that "I knew that I put in a load of work towards that and it paid off

really ... it makes it a lot more satisfying to be completely honest". For Chris success was about grades but "also I think probably how much I enjoyed learning about it as well". These narratives are important in showing that students view success more deeply and emotively than purely objectively and this moves away from the neoliberal narrative of students' being overly grade orientated (Humberstone et al., 2013). In contrast, what the participants said about lecturers being grade focused shifts the perspective of who actually is outcome driven. It is important to note that when one module leader has over three hundred pieces of work to mark there is very limited or indeed no capacity to consider the wider meanings of success. This shifts the focus onto institutional practices and workloads.

For the student, the emotional connection to learning can be viewed as about gaining or developing understanding in a particular subject area. Yet discussion around knowledge and disciplinary subject matter is scant in the literature. As far back as 2009 Barnett (2009, p.430) commented that there was a "near disappearance of knowledge from debate about higher education". The participants, however, did talk about success as understanding or actually learning something. Olivia stated that success meant that "if I can understand it in kind of like going through it again in my head, or if I can then explain it to someone" and for Ruby, it was "when I understand it within the seminar context if I understand it, the learning outcomes sort of that's success in learning". For Jack, this meant that "it's necessarily not always about the grades or degrees or awards, so it's about how I can actually use what I just learned". Ashwin (2020b, p.101) purports that "students change their sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and subject knowledge" and this sense of change is alluded to by Sam who talked about being able to understand things in the news because of studying an economics module and "more of a uh like a global sort of sense and if I hadn't done the learning I certainly wouldn't be able to understand what on earth people are talking about". What is of importance here is how students interact with the knowledge and subject matter of business studies and being challenged to think differently. How the participants felt about the subject area and being intellectually challenged is included in this chapter as to feel successful in learning a subject, students surely need to feel intellectually stimulated and challenged. It also links back to section 6.2.3 on critical thinking.

7.3.3 It could be more challenging

“it doesn't challenge me possibly as much as I'd like it to... that's the only point of learning to me ... you know, become a better person as a result of learning what you are learning”.

(Eddie)

Surprisingly the lack of challenge is one of the few complaints that appears in the interview data. Business studies and related subjects are often criticised for lacking academic rigour and intellectual challenge (Parker, 2018). This is reflected consistently year on year in the National Student Survey statistics where business studies scores below average on intellectual stimulation as compared to other subject areas (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021). Yet if students are viewing success to be not only about grades but also about proving they can achieve, and an emotional sense of personal development then intellectual stimulation and challenge become important considerations in the student experience. That there are tensions in this area for business related courses can partly be explained by the pressures between employee competencies and scholarly competencies in business schools (Hibbert, 2016). First year grades in many universities, including the site of my study, do not contribute to the final degree classification at the end of the programme of study (Newall, 2019). This first year is frequently viewed as a transition year during which time a student settles into university level study. However, Grace, who was from Poland, was particularly scathing about the lack of challenge in the first year:

“I know it's kind of rude to say ... but I expect much higher level. First year in Poland at University is very, very hard this first year decides whether you are good for the course ... what I expected in first year was in 3rd year [in the UK]”.

Ciara, a UK home student, had mixed feelings about finding the first year easy but said:

“it was probably a relief at that point because I was going through freshers and everything but now I'm like in second year I think back to it ... I did not learn anything new so I paid nine grand for nothing. So in that way it's annoying”.

This is interesting as intellectual stimulation and challenge is mainly overlooked in the literature when addressing student satisfaction which mainly focuses on the more functional aspects of university experience such as assessment practices, timetabling and the smooth running of the courses they are on (Dean et al., 2020). The research by Clack

(2022) gave students the option to be assessed or not and saw students opt for assessment because they saw grades as a reward for hard work and wanted to know what they had achieved. Clack (2022, p.148) asserts that this is because of neoliberal influences and “a fear that this university experience would not ultimately contribute to their long-term success”. In contrast, I propose that students want summative assessments because of what grades mean to them in terms of proving something to themselves and the sense of development it gives to them. They want to be challenged in order to feel successful. This is indicated by Grace, in her third year, who felt that she was “a little bit hungry for knowledge still, you know” and Hannah was transferring to law because “I mean I enjoy business but I don't feel like it challenges me as much as it could”.

There is a sense in the data that the intellectual challenge becomes harder as the university levels progress but there is still a desire to be more challenged and that grappling with the subject matter was to be expected. Millie described being intellectually challenged as “just makes you think, like makes you question what is this or like you have to put a bit more work into it to understand it” while Chris said that “I like being challenged on my beliefs and moral views and stuff like that”. This supports what Dean et al., (2020, p.358) says that “intellectual stimulation is about developing critical agency, questioning reality, being autonomous, having a subjective will to know”.

Often students come to business school courses having done business studies at both A level and GCSE although it is not a prerequisite for entry. There was some indication that it was easy because the students had already done it at A level or college level but also that it was a practical subject rather than an intellectual subject area. Some compared it to other subjects such as Ruby who said that “I don't think it's sort of as intellectual as sort of a pharmacy degree” and often business is referred to as a “common sense” subject. This common sense also came through when the students (ten out of nineteen) talked about the practical application of what they were learning in the workplace. Ruby talked about being able to apply her intellectual study of business to prior work experience while Eddie talked about work experience as being more important than IL and that “working a job part time, it teaches like humility and ... I think that's possibly more invaluable than independent learning”. As Chris states “it is not about what you can do on paper. You gotta have real life, interpersonal skills to back it up”. In many ways, these findings mirror what is already well

documented in terms of the arguments surrounding business studies as an academically weak discipline. It also clearly links to critical thinking and the need for the business studies curriculum to challenge given assumptions about the subject area and how business should operate in the wider world.

That students want to be more challenged also negates the argument that university courses have become easier to bolster student satisfaction rates or that the consumerist student does not want to be intellectually engaged in studying an academic discipline (Williams, 2013). What is interesting is the participants in my study indicate a desire to be more challenged and this can be linked to their enjoyment of the subject area and wanting to learn more. It is of note though that the participants of my study all self-define as successful and those that feel they are not doing as well may feel differently. Despite this, it is an important issue for business schools to address in terms of curriculum and assessment design and how students interact with the knowledge base of their discipline. It is one way that they can feel part of a learning community.

7.4 Chapter summary

This section has addressed what success means to students. In doing so I have highlighted that while students think lecturers judge success via metrics of attainment the students themselves see success as more nuanced. It is about proving something to themselves and developing both their knowledge and their self-confidence. These aspects of success are frequently missed in what is becoming a progressively more metrics driven HE system. I argue though that the emotional side of success that the participants talk about is hugely important and should not be overlooked. That the participants see success as about far more than grades is important. It adds a depth of understanding of students' learner experiences that is often lacking in the literature. It especially mitigates the view of business students as only grade hungry and with the goal of securing graduate jobs. While grades and graduate employment are important, they are by no means the only priority for these participants. It is of note that if success in learning is seen as being intellectually stimulated and challenged to learn something new then the participants in my study felt that this was lacking in their studies. Rather than lecturers thinking students are grade focused – students

think lecturers are grade focused. In wanting to be more challenged these students flip the issues of HE away from a focus on the individual and back onto curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment.

8 Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate how undergraduate business students view themselves as learners. This is an important area of study as business studies is the subject area with the most undergraduate students in the UK (British Academy, 2021). Despite this they remain an under-researched area of study. Alongside this, while there is a constant call to be student centred there is little research that tries to capture the learning experiences of students through their own words. Most research in this area attempts to find out how we can support students to become good, independent learners who are therefore successful. Metrics such as those of attendance, engagement, and graduate outcomes are often used to measure what this good student should be doing, and these metrics are used to identify students who do not fit the good student profile. In contrast, I aimed to illuminate the student view of what a good and successful learner is and sought to question the tenet of IL. This is significant in that as HE evolves and grows, we need to constantly question why we do what we do and whether it is still appropriate and useful in a mass education system.

My research questions were:

1. What do students think makes a good learner?
2. What value do students give to independent learning?
3. How do students measure the success of their own learning?
4. To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with business students impact on their identities as learners?

These questions were founded on the premise that a good student learns independently and goes on to be successful. The setting of a business school was both pertinent to my workplace and also relates to the biggest intake of all UG students in the UK. I used qualitative methods founded on my constructionist and interpretivist methodological stance and the qualitative approach offered an effective way of delving deeper into student viewpoints and perceptions of their learning experiences. The setting was my workplace, and I took into consideration the issues of power that this entailed. While I acknowledge the limitations in terms of sample size my findings pose important questions both for business

schools and across the whole UK HE sector. My key findings are presented in the following section alongside a discussion of the implications of each.

8.1 RQ 1 What do students think makes a good learner?

All nineteen participants self-reported as high achieving (on target for 2:1 or 1st degree classifications) and generally confident in their learning. The participants in my study could discuss what a bad learner is; this was someone who lacked motivation, partied, was not prepared in terms of note taking and not having a pen, had poor attendance, and had no ideas. What made a good learner was harder to pin down, particularly since these students discussed being a bad learner previously or having failed to achieve expected grades in previous educational settings. What was highlighted in the data was that being a good learner is individual in that it varied from person to person and there was no one version of a good student. What was underlined is that being a learner is developmental and there was a strong sense of personal responsibility and that having the right mindset was crucial. Confidence in learning was built on social interactions and was something that developed over time. Attendance was not always seen as important but being seen to engage was, this was particularly so given the number of students on the programmes and that the students saw that lecturers valued both attendance and engagement. In this way, students thought that lecturers' views of both a good learner and success were far more focused on things that could be measured. This strongly links to the metrics of HE and learning analytics which are increasingly used to target failing or weak students. Study skills and IL were not mentioned when the participants were asked what made a good learner, although the lack of study skills in terms of time management and engagement in learning was mentioned when they discussed bad learners.

8.1.1 Implications

If, as my findings suggest, being a good learner is not about fixed personality traits but is something that can be flexible and developmental then HE metrics do not capture these more emotive and nuanced expressions of being a good learner. The participants had gained confidence as learners due to social interaction with their peers and with teaching

staff and this indicates that the environment and context in which they are studying is crucial. This implies that theories such as SRL (Zimmerman, 2015) which focus on the individual are less useful and that theories of learning as social practice (Lave 1996; Lave & Wenger 1992) can be used to shed new light on the learning experiences of students. In a business school setting that has thousands of students at undergraduate level the focus should not be on turning students into an ideal but rather focusing on the learning environment and access to the associated disciplinary knowledge. This could mean seeing learning as social practice and making the curriculum, clarity of assessment and building a supportive academic culture the priority. This does not mean that students should not have individual responsibility nor be held to account for non-attendance and lack of engagement. What it does mean is that rather than focus on the individual student, academics should look to their own practices and inbuilt assumptions about what makes a good student, because there is no one single version of an ideal student. One example of this that comes through in the data is that several participants highlighted academic reading as a problem. Yet one of the metrics collected to assess student engagement is the use of the library and online library. If students struggle with academic reading is this more about an elitist view of how academic knowledge can only be accessed via research papers and is the transmission of disciplinary knowledge something that academics need to re-consider rather than seeing it as a deficit in the student body? This changes the view from blaming the individual student to taking collective responsibility for how we make academic practices and knowledge transparent.

8.2 RQ 2 What value do students give to independent learning?

Much as the findings for what makes a good learner, what comes across from the data is that there is no one right way of studying but that it is very much an individual approach. IL itself was seen as important by the students but it was expected and anticipated by them. This was particularly linked to being in a mass education system where the lecturers did not have the time to address each student individually. The participants then saw IL as studying alone and that it was individualistic in terms of how it was approached. This was indicated in things like hours spent studying which varied widely and how much reading the students did. What students did say was unexpected was group work and seminars and they

indicated that working with and learning from others was important to them. This involved interactions with fellow students and forming good working relationships with lecturers. They found frustrating at times given the number of students and perceived lack of time that lecturers have.

8.2.1 Implications

Macfarlane (2016, p. 103) states that “we need to stop treating students as customers and start treating them as members of the academic community”. He also states that “we need to place a renewed emphasis on the importance of independent learning” (Macfarlane, 2016, p.103). While I agree with the first statement, I disagree with the second. Partly I think this is because what Macfarlane (2016) means by IL differs from the IL as practiced in the current HE environment. IL as practiced is more about study skills and training students to be able to “learn how to learn” in HE rather than “allowing students to make more choices about their curriculum and the nature of their engagement” (Macfarlane, 2016, p.103). While I support this ideal it is difficult to see how it can be delivered in a mass education system. It quickly becomes unmanageable and incompatible with the practicalities of everyday delivery in HE. As Macfarlane (2016, p.105) himself states IL is frequently commonly misunderstood as “a low-cost way of teaching by sending away the student to learn on their own”. I assert that this is not so much a common misunderstanding, it is an underlying ethos of the current HE. By implication, when first year students are told they need to quickly develop as independent learners they may well get the message that they do not need to attend and can not seek help. This does not mean that students should not study independently, nor does it mean that students should be spoon-fed. What IL should be replaced with is a focus on students as members of an inclusive academic community that is both supportive and encouraging. The focus then shifts to the acquisition and exploration of knowledge within subject focused communities. This means shifting the focus from the individual student level to “an understanding of the relationships between knowledge, teachers and students” (Ashwin, 2020b, p.34).

8.3 RQ 3 How do students measure the success of their own learning?

Much the same as being a good student and IL the meaning of success can appear to be straightforward and unquestionable. It is, however, open to many different interpretations. Much of HE and particularly the Office for Students may see it as a hard, quantifiable outcome of an undergraduate degree course. This echoes what the participants said about how they think their lecturers measure the success of their learning. I argue that this is right, it is how their lecturers view success. Our education system is built on the notion of competition to ascertain quality. This is highlighted in policies and practices of institutions that assess lecturer competence via student grades. Not all degree students can be the best, after all, if they were they would all become average. How the participants talked about success was far more nuanced and it focused on emotion in addition to grades. Success meant proving something, often to themselves, and success also meant gaining confidence. What was also important within this was having a sense of challenge, the participants wanted to feel like they had earned their success through challenge and hard work. This, however, they felt was lacking in their courses. This was especially so for the participants who had either come through clearing or who had moved to the UK from abroad.

8.3.1 Implications

There are important implications here and, in many ways, how students feel about success is significant in rethinking the approach HE should be taking. Rather than dumbing down there is an argument that a rigorous assessment process that is clear and fair is of value both to the students' education and to students' personal satisfaction. In building a challenging curriculum that focuses less on regurgitating the status quo of business and management, business schools could encourage critical thinking from the perspective of transforming knowledge. As such, a challenging curriculum taught by supportive experts in the field of study is important (Ashwin, 2020b). The other point of note is that success varies in meaning for each individual student, successful learning does not always translate into high grades, but this does not mean that it is any less of an achievement or any less transformational for the student. It is crucial that academics do not become overly grade focused but rather have an awareness of the enjoyment learning can bring, and of the sense of achievement and belonging that personal success can instil.

8.4 RQ 4 To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with 'business students' impact on their identities as learners?

Business students are often decried as being overly grade focused and consumerist in their approach. What my findings show is that there is no such thing as a regular student, and each had their own, individual motivations for studying business related courses. They also had different educational backgrounds and a plethora of routes into HE. All indicated a genuine interest in their subject area, talked of the enjoyment of learning and studying at university was seen as an opportunity. While some were career focused, which is only to be expected, when asked about motivations for future careers they talked about better life chances and proving something to themselves and family. As such, the participants did not fit the neoliberal self-interested persona of a business student but the sense of personal responsibility and fees as an investment did. This went as far as exonerating lecturers of responsibility for students' learning. The participants demonstrated an awareness of their place in a mass education system which meant they had limited access to lecturers.

8.4.1 Implications

Notably, there is a need to shift the perceived identity of a business student as being particularly consumerist and neoliberal in their approach to learning to one of seeing them as seeking to study a subject they enjoy and enrolling on courses with a sense of opportunity. Employment is not always the main motivator and in recognising this the employability agenda currently so prominent in business schools should be seen as an institutional agenda rather than one being pressed for by students. In a mass education system, staff to student ratios are important and rather than focusing on the student as the problem there should be more of an understanding of how institutional systems puts barriers in the way of student success. Learning analytics and metrics miss the complexity of the individual learning experience and can mean the student is blamed rather than addressing problems with the institutional setting. That the participants felt so personally responsible for their own learning and success could explain why attendance and engagement can be low and this should be addressed by ensuring lecturers have the time and capacity to work with students

in a more supportive environment. This would mean taking collective responsibility for students' learning and seeing learning as social practice (Wenger 1998) would help to re-frame the student learning experience.

8.5 Significance and contribution

8.5.1 Significance to practice

In questioning the assumptions of the good student and IL this study has significant implications for practice. This is both at a personal level, the impact of research can be via what Archer in Danvers (2021, p.644) terms engaging in “small acts of resistance”. This means rethinking my teaching practices and using my engagement in faculty teaching and learning committees, personal tutoring groups, and other platforms to raise an alternative view of how we talk about students and challenging existing practices.

This study also makes significant contributions in its implications for practice and policy in HE. Focusing on the individual is unfeasible and this is particularly so given the number of UG business students. It also pushes the burden of responsibility onto the student rather than the institution. One significant finding is that the participants felt under-challenged, and this leads to questions about the curriculum and assessment practices. It shifts the focus from meeting perceived student needs to intellectual stimulation, which is about what the institution can offer (Haggis, 2006). Viewing the changes needed in HE in this way means that as Koutsouris et al., (2021, p.132) state it becomes less about how students can fit in and instead is about “how educational institutions can change in order not just to provide for diverse students – but in response to them”. The question in relation to learning then changes from what is wrong with this student to questioning how we make knowledge and disciplinary practices accessible to large groups of students (Haggis, 2006).

8.5.2 Contribution to knowledge

This study makes original contributions to knowledge in arguing that the key foundations of IL and individualism within UK HEIs should be challenged and that in reality there is no such thing as an ideal student. As Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.117) put it “rampant construction of an individual student determined by his or her own internal capacities has become the norm

within educational policy” and “overly individualised conceptualisations of agency have become the norm within educational policy”. It is also typified in the promotion of the independent learner who is motivated by the promise of graduate employment, this is especially so for business students. This challenges the use of theories such as SRL (Zimmerman, 2015) and the focus on the individual that is seen in the use of learning analytics that measure against an idealised norm while failing to consider the more nuanced motivations and learning practices of students. The realities of the student experience can be viewed differently though and may hold a key to why students disengage and fail to attend. It is no wonder that there is a problem with student attendance when one of the messages students are constantly given is that they are independent learners who need to take responsibility for their own learning.

The message of independent learning gets in the way of students asking for support and feeling part of a community. The emancipatory ideals of IL are not the IL that is seen in everyday practice within HEIs. As such the good student, who is independent in their learning and can be measured by the collection of attendance and online engagement data is detrimental to the development of academic communities and the student. We can not focus on the individual in a mass education system, it is impossible given current staffing arrangements and even undesirable in terms of what we want a university to be or to achieve (Haggis, 2006). The IL that is practiced now is more aligned with the neoliberal autonomous student than it is to supporting a sense of belonging and nurturing development.

The contribution this study makes to knowledge is to question much that is taken for granted in HE. It adds to a small body of work on UG students but particularly adds to the literature on business students, who make up the largest proportion of UG students in the UK. In doing so my work is significant in that it challenges much of the dominant discourses in this area. It challenges the normalised identity of a business student as that of self interested, consumerist and problematic and in doing so switches the focus from the student onto institutional and academic practices.

9 Appendix 1 Interview schedule

Opening questions

Level of study and programme

Placement?

Age

UK/European or international?

Prior educational experience (A levels, BTEC, foundation year)

What made you choose to study on this programme?

Interest? Career? Locality?

How are you enjoying the course?

What makes a “good learner”

1. L3 & 4 students: Is being a learner at university how you expected it to be?
2. L5 & L6 students: Has your view of learning at university changed while you've been here?
3. Do you feel confident as a learner?
What are the reasons for your current performance?
What could you do to improve your learning?
4. What do you think makes a good learner?
Is it about outcomes?
Enjoyment of the subject?
Do you read a lot?
Do you attend all your classes? Do you think it matters?
Do you ask questions in class?
5. Is there anyone you know that you think of as a good learner?
Can you explain why?

What do you think a bad learner is?

Independent learning

6. What do you think independent learning means?
7. How much time do you spend studying a week?
How do you manage this time?
Do you think this is about the right amount of time?
Where do you study?
8. Do you think independent learning is important?
Can you explain why?
Do you enjoy it?
9. What motivates you to study independently?
10. Do you think you're good at studying independently?
What or who helps you? Personal tutor?
Do you ask anyone for help or support?
11. And what about critical thinking? Do you think you are a critical thinker?
12. Has "private study" been explained to you?
13. Do you think you're free to study in the ways you want or are you told how to study?
How has learning in lockdown been?
How do students measure the success of their own learning?
Do you worry about failing?
14. What makes you think you've succeeded in learning something?
15. Do you compare yourself to other students?
16. Do you set yourself any goals?
Do you achieve your goals?
Why/why not?
17. How do you think your lecturers measure your success as a learner?
18. Have you ever done better or worse than you expected in a module?
What responsibility do you think you had for your grade?

To what extent does the added identity of/affiliation with 'business students' impact on their self-identities as learners?

19. Do you think that business & management is an intellectually challenging subject to study?

what does "intellectually stimulating" mean to you?

Has there been a particular module that's made you feel challenged and why?

20. What do lecturers tell you about the connections between learning independently and working in business & management?

Has anyone talked to you about critical thinking, problem solving, working independently?

21. Do you see yourself as a future professional? Do you think you're learning for a future career?

22. What are your career goals?

How important do you think critical thinking and problem solving will be in your career? Do you expect to carry on learning?

10 Appendix 2 Themes and coding

Business as a subject area

Intellectually stimulating

Level of challenge

Lifelong learning

Placement & work experience

Practical application

Why business studies

Consumerism

Fees

Mass education

Good learner

Attendance & engagement

Attitude

Bad learner

Collaborate

Confidence

Different for everyone

Intelligence

Interest

Study skills

Why confident

IL

Value of IL

What it is

Learning

Attendance (and engagement)

Critical thinking

Expectations and realities of HE

Family support

Help and support

Independent learning

Library

Lockdown

Progression

Reading

Responsibility

Social aspects of learning

Study skills

Time spent studying

Motivations

Do better than someone else

Employment

Enjoyment

Future (employment)

Interest

Not doing so well previously

Rewards

Success

Grades

How students think lecturers measure success

Proving something to themselves and or family

Sense of personal achievement

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