Abstract

Students’ expectations and experiences have been the focus of attention in the literature and in research for a number of years. But despite the body of research in this area and efforts made by universities to ease students’ transition, many students are still unprepared for higher education level study, unsure what learning at university will involve and have difficulty integrating into university life.

Students preparing to go to university in the second decade of the twenty-first century live in a world where rapid advances in technology have had a major impact on how individuals communicate and exchange information. Prospective students are members of the ‘Net Generation’ who instinctively turn to the Internet for information and for whom default modes of communication are a mobile phone or social networking site.

This research brings these two areas together and considers the potential role of social networking to bridge the gap between students’ expectations and experiences. The research investigates practical aspects of students’ behaviour: how they interact with each other and the types of information they exchange; it also considers the impact of social networking from a theoretical perspective and the influence of students’ social networking activities on their social capital, self-efficacy and the development of communities of practice.

The research used a case study approach and focused on a representative sample of approximately 100 undergraduate first-year students at the University of Portsmouth. An online survey and interviews were used to gather data about students’ reflections on their social networking experiences before they started at university.

Prospective students were keen to link up with others who would be on their course or in their accommodation; they exchanged information about social life, their course and the local area as well as discussing their apprehensions and concerns. The research showed that these interactions helped students feel more confident about going to university and had a positive impact on their integration into university life.

The study shows that social networking interaction can act as a ‘bridge’ between students’ pre-entry perceptions and their post-entry experiences; it provides access to information about life at university, helps alleviate anxieties and allows students to start creating networks and forming relationships. In addition, it facilitates an integration process which starts in the pre-entry period rather than one which commences during induction week. This factor, and the drive to seek out information about university life and link up with other students, has led to a re-conceptualisation of the traditional theories of academic and social integration and the thesis proposes a new theory based on individual and group integration.
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Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for another degree.

Signed

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1. Introduction

“I just wasn’t sure what was expected of me and I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

A first year undergraduate made this statement when I asked about her experiences as a new student in a large post-1992 university; I was working on a research project investigating undergraduate students’ expectations and experiences about learning in higher education. A number of other students taking part in the research made similar comments.

Students’ expectations and experiences has been an issue for a number of years, as suggested by Peelo’s investigation of undergraduates’ experiences (1994) and the early work of Yorke et al. on non-completion (1997). The mismatch between expectations and experiences is a problem which is still with us as we start the second decade of the 21st century. As indicated above, some undergraduates are unsure about what to expect and this may have a negative impact on their early experiences at university. However, there may be a solution to hand. We are living in a digital age, the ‘information age’ (Castells et al., 1999), where the majority of young people in the developed world have grown up with online technology. Many young people use the Internet as their default means of communication, they engage readily in conversations on social networking sites and make friends with people they have met only ‘virtually’. This thesis investigates the role of social networking in aiding students to find out more about higher education level learning and helping them develop more realistic expectations about university life.

The research reported here examines the type of contacts prospective students make on social networking sites, the topics they discuss, the number of friends they make and the types of relationships they develop. It also investigates how these interactions impact on expectations about university life as well as on levels of confidence and integration once students start at university. The research centres on the experiences of undergraduate students with a home address in the UK who were under the age of 21 when they started at university, rather than the experiences of mature or international students. Although the effects of social networking on the expectations and experiences of mature and international students are worthy research topics, due to the wide range of prior educational and life experiences of these groups, and varying access to the Internet, these areas are not covered in this EdD thesis.

My interest in this topic is based on my professional interest as a practitioner who is concerned with enhancing students’ transition. However, in common with all colleagues in the sector, I am working within a context that includes governmental and institutional priorities as well as fundamental demographic and far reaching global changes. The discussion below outlines my professional interests and contextual factors before...
articulating the conceptual framework that underpins my hypothesis that social networking can be a bridge between students’ pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences.

1.1. Practitioner focus

I have worked in education for the last 20 years, during which time I have been involved in a number of projects that focussed on preparing students for learning in higher education. In addition, I have developed a CD to help students studying for an undergraduate degree in international trade understand the statistical element of their course; I have managed the development of online courses for work-based learners; and implemented a university-wide personal development planning process. I have also taught computing and information systems subjects in further and higher education, and have undertaken a number of research projects about students’ expectations and experiences of higher education learning.

Over the last few years I have focused on widening participation and supporting transition; my role has centred on identifying ways in which my University can help ease students’ transition and support them in their first year. My work focuses on supporting all students, but given the nature of the student profile at Portsmouth, there has been a particular emphasis on supporting the needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds. My work in this area has been underpinned by two themes: firstly, the mismatch between expectations and experiences and secondly, the lack of preparedness for higher education learning. Interactions with students and the research that I have undertaken confirm that many prospective students are uncertain about what learning at a higher educational level will involve and that this ambiguity has had an impact on the quality of their early experiences at university.

During the last four years I have been part of a team setting up and managing a pre-entry website, designed to help applicants develop realistic expectations about learning in higher education. The pre-entry website started as a pilot project in August 2007 and comprised generic information about learning and specific information about the courses in one department in the University’s Business School. As I write up my doctoral thesis in July 2010, we have just launched the latest version of the project which includes information about over 150 undergraduate courses plus customised information for home and international undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition to familiarising students with HE level learning, the project has sought ways to help students build relationships with the University and with each other. In the first pilot of the project, as well as the web-based information, discussions groups were set up in WebCT (now Blackboard), the University’s online learning environment, to help students start building relationships with each other. Feedback from students in the early pilots prompted the project team to move the discussions groups into Facebook. This move facilitated several
debates within the University about the advantages and disadvantages of the University having a presence on social networking sites such as Facebook. The areas that generated the most discussion were the potential damage to the University’s reputation; effective management of discussion areas; and issues associated with security, privacy and data protection. In addition, there was some discussion about a possible adverse student reaction to the University presence in an area which they regarded as their ‘own’ social space. My current role at the University developing the pre-entry website brings together my interests in student experiences and online technologies.

1.2. Research context

Policy background. Universities are accountable to a number of central agencies, including the Higher Education Funding Council, the Quality Assurance Agency and Department for Business Innovation and Skills (formerly the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). These organisations manage funding streams, audit quality and implement legislation, all of which impact on how universities organise and manage their business. These agencies and government policy influence the characteristics and demographic profile of students who go to university. The previous Government’s target of 50% of 18 – 30 year olds entering higher education by 2010, and, more recently, the 2009 limit on the number of students going to university are prime examples of initiatives which have had an impact on the demographic characteristics of students in higher education. Government programmes and agendas also influence the learning environment once students are at university. For example, the current focus on science, engineering, maths and technology (STEM) subjects has affected the funding streams and the emphasis on employability has had an impact on many universities’ central support provision and on curriculum design.

The policy context extends beyond the UK Government’s agenda to include European and other global influences. With the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and then again in 2007, there has been an increased movement of people across borders, including students studying at universities outside their home country. There have been attempts to harmonise the higher educational provision across Europe, for example the Lisbon Treaty, the Bologna Agreement and in addition, there have been global changes which have resulted in an increasing number of students in the UK from emerging markets, particularly from China and India. All these factors impact on the higher education learning environment, resulting in a student profile which includes students from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds and with different educational experiences and expectations of higher education.

Technical background. The advent of Web 2.0 technology has resulted in a more socially connected web, where individuals readily communicate with each other online, actively seek out information and make active contributions to websites. The latter, often described
as ‘user-generated’ content includes adding and amending text on web pages, interacting with others on discussion boards, setting up blogs or sharing photographs online (Anderson, 2007, p. 14). Social networking has experienced a phenomenal growth in the last few years (Tapscott, 2008, p. 56) and is a high profile topic: it features in the press almost daily and has attracted the attention of researchers (for example: boyd, 2006; Frand, 2000; Green & Hannon, 2007). Increased data speeds, the widespread use of multimedia and the growth of in-house expertise places many institutions in a position where they can take advantage of the web, particularly Web 2.0 technologies, to engage and inform potential students about learning at university. Two examples of this type of activity are programmes set up by the Universities of Bradford and Bournemouth to introduce prospective students to the institution and help them prepare for study (Currant & Keenan, 2009).

Institutional context. This research focuses on the experiences, views and perceptions of a number of first year students at the University of Portsmouth, a large post-1992 institution on the south coast of England. The University has a comprehensive portfolio of courses and is particularly noted in the fields of Pharmacy, Dentistry and Business. In 2007 the University’s student profile comprised over 21,000 full-time, part-time, home and international undergraduates and postgraduate students; 93% of undergraduate students were drawn from the UK or the EU. The number of registrations and the student profile has remained stable over the last five years.

Many students at the University of Portsmouth are the first generation in their family to go to university and are from areas of low participation. In Portsmouth, Southampton and the south London area, where many students have their home addresses, the levels of deprivation are above the national average, educational deprivation is particularly high and a number of areas have low levels of participation in higher education (Local Futures Group, 2004, p. 11). Deprivation, low participation and/or being the first generation in the family to go to university can result in prospective students being unsure about what their role as a student will involve, how many hours they will be expected to study in a week, how to structure their learning and low confidence levels about their ability to cope.

The University of Portsmouth, like all UK institutions, implements strategies and policies in order to fulfil their obligations to the Government, the other bodies to whom they are accountable and their commitment to students. Strategies are manifest in key documents and practised throughout the institution. For example, the University’s Strategic Plan 2007 – 2012 aims to ‘respond to national priorities’, including addressing the Leitch agenda, promoting widening participation and extending flexible provision to include work-based learners (University of Portsmouth, 2007, p. 1). The University articulates how it aims to widen participation and support a diverse student population in its Strategic Plan, the
Learning and Teaching Assessment Strategy, Access Agreement and in other policy documents.

**Educational context.** The majority of students at universities are studying for a first degree, but undergraduate programmes can comprise a number of different course types, including foundation degrees, single honours and combined honours. This complexity is compounded by subject balance. For example, at the University of Portsmouth a combined honours degree with the word ‘and’ in the title refers to an equal split between subject areas, but a title including the word ‘with’ indicates a two thirds/one third balance. In addition, degrees may be full-time, part-time, distance learning or work-based. It is hardly surprising that students, particularly those who do not have any access to reliable sources of information, find it difficult to understand the complexities of higher education level study.

In the 1990s, the academic year, and the credit system in UK universities were changed – modularisation and semesterisation were introduced. Recently, there has been a move back towards the term-based system. The University of Portsmouth is currently undergoing a ‘de-semesterisation’ programme and from 2012 the academic year will comprise three terms with longer breaks at Christmas and Easter. In addition, the structure of the academic year is complex; the year includes an induction week, teaching weeks, assessment activities and re-sits. When modularisation was introduced, the award system was changed to one based on successful completion of 10-, 15- or 20- credit units of study with 120 credits at each level of study and 360 credits awarded for an undergraduate degree.

The mode of learning at university may be new to students; they are expected to take more responsibility for their learning, working independently; undertake research and engage in a programme of in-depth reading; and they may be expected to work in groups, engage in problem solving activities or take part in online discussions. Students may have experienced some of these activities in school or college, but it is also possible that some may be new to them.

The above discussion serves to highlight the complexity of learning in higher education. Coping with the demands of a new and exciting environment is part of going to university. For nearly all students, the first few weeks and months at university represent a period of adjustment. Most students will adapt and adjust, but some will struggle, finding the transition and integration into university life difficult. My doctoral research investigates the role that social networking can play in helping students prepare for university life and make the adjustments necessary to integrate into the university culture when they register.
1.3. Conceptual framework

My conceptual framework brings together my professional interest in the students’ transition, the surrounding contextual factors and articulates the connections between the three main areas of my hypothesis: pre-entry expectations, post-entry experiences and social networking – this is my ‘vision’ of the research problem and is the basis on which I planned and carried out my research.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the conceptual framework and highlights the main aspects of the students’ pre-entry and post-entry experiences, and, in the background, the factors that impact on these experiences. At the centre of my conceptual framework is the role of social networking as a ‘bridge’ between these pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences. The role of social networking as a bridge is founded on the pillars of the phenomenal growth of the Internet over recent years, a rapid increase in data transfer speeds, the pervasiveness of social networking and other technical developments as outlined in Figure 1.1 below.

![Conceptual framework diagram]

Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework

Associated with pre-entry experiences are the notions of students’ expectations, their educational and life experiences and any anxieties or concerns that they may have about learning and living at university. During the post-entry stage, integration into university life is associated with students’ personal relationships including those with other students, with teaching staff and with other people at university. The degree to which they integrate into university life can have far reaching effects and an impact on the quality of their early
experiences and, in some instances, may impact on decisions to leave or stay at university (Mackie, 2001, p. 20).

Social networking encompasses a range of online information exchanges and communications. The growth of social networking has been facilitated by a rapid development of the Internet, as well as an increase in data transfer speeds and the expanded use of graphics, video, sound and other multimedia. The growth of social networking has been exponential and unparalleled. Part of social networking’s appeal lies in the ease with which individuals can communicate with each other, make new friends and exchange information. The growth of social networking has been exponential – as more people sign up on social networking sites, the opportunities for communication and interaction increase rapidly and so does its appeal.

By facilitating rapid and easy communication, social networking sites offer a channel of communication or ‘bridge’ which allows students to link up with others to acquire more information, address pre-entry anxieties and help them develop realistic expectations of university life. However, as the work of Yorke and Longden (2008) suggests, pre-entry perceptions and expectations are inextricably linked to post-entry experiences; a lack of understanding about what learning at university involves may lead to poor quality early experiences and impact on retention rates. The relationship between these elements has helped me develop my conceptual framework.

The main elements of my conceptual framework, pre-entry expectations, post-entry experiences and social networking, are set against a background shaped by political and social influences. In the pre-entry stage, students’ thoughts and perceptions are influenced by their previous educational experiences, access to information, their parents’ or friends’ knowledge of higher education and their social or cultural background. In an educational culture which promotes access and widening participation, the experience and knowledge of students is wide-ranging and varied. Post-entry experiences take place in a landscape which is built on institutional, national and international priorities, the individual ‘culture’ of an institution which may have developed over a number of years and the experience and interests of staff who work in it.

The conceptual framework articulates how I envisaged the location and inter-relationship between the various elements associated with my hypothesis at the start of my research. My thesis extends and expands the notion of social networking as a bridge through reference to the existing literature, in my methodological approach and the tools I chose to carry out my research, the data collection and analysis, how I interpreted the findings and finally, in the conclusions that I make in Chapter 6.
This study is exploratory in nature, it investigates the affordances that lend social networking to its role as a bridge, the activities that students engage in on social networking sites and how these social networking activities impact on students’ pre-entry expectations and on their post-entry experiences.
2. Literature review

My research is based on the hypothesis that social networking can act as an effective bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences.

The metaphor of a bridge presupposes that there is a divide to cross – this leads to a number of questions about students’ experiences. What is the nature of the divide between students’ expectations and experiences? How does this division impact on the quality of student experiences or on important decisions, such as students’ decisions to stay on or to leave their courses? Transition can also be considered in the wider context of the psychological and sociological aspects that accompany socialisation into any new environment. For example, how students learn about a new culture and develop the confidence and self-belief to cope with major life changes, and how they assimilate and integrate into a new community.

This research focuses on the utilisation of Web 2.0 technologies, particularly social networking, to aid student transition. The likelihood that students will engage in social networking is dependent, to a large extent, on the role that it currently plays in their lives and in society in general. In recent years, rapid expansion and increasing technological sophistication have resulted in technology playing an increasingly important role in the global economy, politics and the everyday lives of many individuals. In order to contextualise where technology and in particular, Web 2.0 technologies stand today, the literature review briefly considers the research on the recent growth of online technologies and social networking before moving on to consider research on how individuals operate within social networks, exchange information and how they establish online relationships.

The literature review focuses on three main areas: student experiences, socialisation and the rise of technology.

2.1. Student experiences

2.1.1. Students’ expectations and early experiences

There is an extensive existing body of literature that focuses on student expectations and early experiences; this section considers a number of key texts in the area.

In October 2006, Lee Harvey and Sue Drew at Sheffield Hallam University published a comprehensive literature review focusing on first year experience (Harvey & Drew, 2006). The report, commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), reviews over 750 publications; in the report Harvey and Drew identify a link between preparedness for learning in higher education, the quality of students’ experiences and retention.

Furthermore, a synopsis of the publications reviewed suggests that widening participation
students, who do not have access to relevant information, may be more likely to leave early or have poor educational experiences. The report goes on to argue that students need help in adapting to university life and that feeling positive and having a friendship group is important (ibid., p. 81). It also suggests that a familiarity with university language and conventions, and having accurate expectations, helps students integrate more effectively and suggests that if these elements are not present, students may have a poor first year experience. This aspect of the report is re-iterates the findings in slightly earlier research, which argues that social support (attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliances and guidance) are important for adjustment into university life (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 709). Harvey and Drew’s report recommends that an extended and more intense induction period would improve the quality of students’ early experiences (op cit., p. 97) and suggest that improvements in support and guidance, and in greater collaboration with schools and colleges, would be beneficial (ibid., p. 138).

Harvey and Drew’s report focuses on areas which are particularly relevant for my research and their findings accord with my own professional experience and research activities. The small-scale nature of many of the studies that they considered could be viewed as problematical, but, in this case, the number of studies involved and the conclusive nature of the findings counter this potential problem. Although Harvey and Drew argue that early intervention may improve experiences, they make scant reference to any relationship between pre-entry activities and first year experience or suggestions relating to direct action by universities to help prospective students develop more realistic expectations.

Investigating expectations and experiences is not the preserve of higher education researchers. Galton et al. (1999), focusing on transition from primary to secondary education, also stress the importance of friendships groups and having accurate expectations. In their paper (ibid. p. 28) they identify five areas where institutions can be proactive in helping pupils understand more about their new school: bureaucratic (familiarity with administrative procedures); social and personal (meeting teachers and other pupils); curriculum (knowing about course content); pedagogic (learning and teaching environment) and managing learning (understanding roles and responsibilities). However, the transition between primary and secondary, and between school/college and university differs. Primary and secondary schools are usually within relatively close geographical proximity, and in addition, the duty of care incumbent on institutions who are dealing with minors, results in schools taking a proactive stance in setting up programmes to assist pupil transition. Students moving to university are in a different situation. In any one school or college, students will have applied to a number of different universities and as individuals who have reached (or will soon reach) the age of majority, they are expected to take more responsibility for themselves – the responsibility rests, to a large extent, with the
individual student rather than the institutions involved. However, there are two recent developments which may change this situation: firstly, the increasing number of students studying at local universities and secondly, the growing level of activity on social networking sites. Choosing to study near home reduces the number of institutions to which a cohort of school or college students have applied and may facilitate closer links between local schools and local universities; social networking affords opportunities to form links with other prospective students and learn more about learning and living at university. Thus the barriers which arose due to geographical distance and the many-to-many relationship between schools and universities may now not be insurmountable.

The first year experience was also one of the key themes for the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee’s (SHEEC)\(^1\) 2006 – 2008 programme (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2008). The outcomes of the programme were grouped into several themes and papers published on each, including a) personalisation and b) transition to and during the first year.

Knox and Wyper in their report on the personalisation theme, which is based on the notion of individual learner needs and the construction of knowledge (Bruner, 1986), they ‘emphasise the importance of learning as a process that involves social interaction, the incorporation and… active engagement of the learner’ (Knox and Wyper, 2008, p. 8). Personalisation is a term which is often used in the context of first year experience and refers to individualised feedback and/or support, but some of the underlying principles, such as the emphasis on social interaction, active engagement and learning as a process could also be used in the context of how prospective students learn about university life. Knox and Wyper also identify eight key stages in the first year student life cycle: pre-entry; induction; first few weeks; first assessments; end of semester one; end of semester two, re-sits; transition to the next year (ibid., p. 17). They acknowledge that personalisation is particularly important for first year students and suggest staff in higher education institutions adopt the use of new technologies for learning and teaching. They also suggest that universities adopt ‘buddying’ schemes, where an experienced student mentors one or more new students. The report makes a number of recommendations to improve students’ learning experiences, including: aiding students’ transition by encouraging social networks and friendship groups; empowering students by helping them achieve a high level of self-efficacy; and supporting students at an early stage and acknowledging that, regardless of their backgrounds, students need time to adjust to the university learning environment.

\(^1\) A partnership of the Scottish Funding Council, Universities in Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland.
A number of aspects in the SHEEC report are important for my study. For example, the suggestion that new technologies could be used to enhance student experience, the notion of setting up supportive relationships between current and prospective students, and the suggestion that institutions should take steps to help students develop realistic expectations. Although the report refers to the importance of early intervention and the pre-entry stage is acknowledged as part of the student lifecycle, again it does not propose bringing these two areas together or suggest interventions take place before students register at university.

The findings from the above studies are confirmed by my own research on student expectations and experiences for a number of years. Over the last three years I have undertaken two funded research projects which drew on research relating to student experience and retention (Yorke, 2001; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2007; 2008) and, widening participation (Layer, 2005; Duke & Layer, 2005). The research centred on investigating the expectations and experiences of different groups of learners: firstly, mature learners on Foundation Degree programmes (Jacobs, 2007a) and secondly, on undergraduates taking full-time degrees at the University of Portsmouth (Jacobs, 2007b). In 2009, I undertook a third project that focussed on the expectations of vocational and mature engineering students (Jacobs, 2009a). In the first two projects, students took part in small focus groups and one-to-one interviews about their expectations and experiences approximately half way through their first year. In the third project I carried out interviews with students who were studying vocational qualifications at local FE colleges and engineering undergraduates who had vocational qualifications on entry and/or who were mature (over the age of 21) when they started their course.

There were a number of commonalities in the findings from the three research projects. The majority of respondents were unsure how their study programmes at university would be structured; they had a lack of understanding about the different types of learning strategies that would be used; they were uncertain what would happen in a typical week; and they were vague about how much responsibility for their learning they would be expected to take and what this responsibility would involve. For some students these areas remained mere curiosities, but for others they caused anxiety and apprehension. In the case of full-time undergraduates (the second project), uncertainties of this sort impacted on early experiences: some students found it difficult to cope with aspects of their course and considered leaving early. The majority of students had heard of the term ‘independent learning’ but very few had any idea what it meant or what they were supposed to do during independent learning sessions. One student did not know what she should do during the hours allocated for independent study and subsequently spent most of these sessions at home watching television. She thought about leaving, but stayed
because she "did not want to let her parents down". Feeling isolated and unsure about making friends was also another area of concern for many students; many had these anxieties either before they had started their course or during the first few weeks or both.

As part of the second project I also interviewed students in local further education colleges in order to find out more about their expectations of university life. The majority of students had already applied for university places and all were the first in their family to consider going to university. Feedback in focus groups suggested that these students were unsure what learning at university would involve and how or why they should prepare for their time at university (Jacobs, 2007b, p. 6). During further discussions, it transpired that they would have welcomed the opportunity to discuss university life with other people, but they were not sure to whom they should turn or how they could find out more.

The outcomes from these research projects led me to seek out practical solutions to help students develop more realistic expectations. Several possibilities were considered including setting up a series of academic skills workshops in local colleges, but it was finally decided to develop a pre-entry website that would be accessible to prospective students nationally. The development of the website and subsequent evaluation studies will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

2.1.2. Retention

The literature articulates a close link between students’ experiences and retention. Student retention is a high profile topic and there has been significant debate within institutions and the sector in recent years about retention rates and how they can be improved. The National Audit Office (NAO) reports an average continuation rate of 96% for Russell Group universities, 93% for pre-1992 universities and 89% for post-1992 universities (NAO, 2007, p. 19). Local research also revealed subject differences and variations between the retention rates of part-time and full-time students with the retention rate for part-time students markedly lower than that of full-time students (Jacobs, 2007c).

By international standards, the level of non-completion in the UK is low (Stolk, Tiessen, & Levitt, 2007, p. xii)\(^2\), but retention is an important factor because as well as representing a substantial loss of public and private resources students leaving their courses early results in a loss of opportunity and life experience at an individual level (Aston & Bekhradnia, 2005, p. 2).

\(^2\) It is difficult to make comparisons between retention rates due to the different methods of recording and calculating ‘completion’ rates. Stolk \textit{et al.} used OECD data and available national data.
Research focusing on withdrawal can be divided into two main groups. Firstly, quantitative research which centres on trying to identify the characteristics of those who leave early and, secondly, qualitative research which investigates the reasons underpinning decisions to withdraw.

The characteristics of students who leave early have been discussed by several researchers. Yorke (2001, p. 153) argues that entry age and socio-economic status impact on withdrawal levels. He stated that mature students, and those from lower socio-economic groups, are more likely to leave early. Bamber (2005, p. 28) also suggests that students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly mature students, may be ill-prepared for studying at a higher education level; they may find it difficult to engage with higher education teaching and learning processes and consequently be at risk of early withdrawal. However, he goes on to suggest ways in which teaching and learning activities can support these students’ development (ibid., p. 37).

However, the validity of a ‘cause and effect’ argument founded on social/demographic characteristics and retention rates is debatable. Firstly, because such an argument is based on a deficit model which presupposes that the ‘problem’ rests with the individual student rather than the institution and secondly, because the data in the HESA return, on which empirical evidence is often based, is unreliable. In November every year, universities are obliged to submit a return to HESA which includes detailed information about each student at the university, including information about gender, age, ethnic group, home postcode and so on. The information submitted for the HESA return mainly comprises data from students’ UCAS forms, in direct entry forms, or that gathered subsequently by the University. Unfortunately, this data is often incomplete. In 2007, as part of my work at the University, I was asked to report on the relationship between two sets of data: firstly, the relationship between socio-economic status and retention, and secondly, between low participation neighbourhood and retention. A preliminary analysis indicated that approximately 40% of data on students’ socio-economic status in the University’s record system was missing and that therefore any conclusions using this data were likely to be unsound (Jacobs, 2007c). Consequently, the analysis had to be abandoned. The data on low participation neighbourhood was not as problematic, but it was still not totally reliable. Widening participation classifications are based on postcodes and census wards, but due to the combined effect of the interval between censuses and the introduction of new postcodes on a regular basis, a number of postcodes are omitted from HESA’s records. There is also the additional problem of grouping several inner city areas together within a census ward area, despite the fact that the various areas may include populations with different demographics and income streams.
Vincent Tinto, writing from the 1970s to the mid-1990s investigated retention and integration into university life. He developed a model of withdrawal behaviour based on the relationship between students’ academic and social experiences, integration into university life and the propensity to withdraw early. Tinto describes integration as a period in which a student becomes disconnected from his or her previous life and encounters a period of transition; he argues that if student have poor social or academic experiences, they will find it more difficult to integrate and may be more likely to leave their courses early (Tinto, 1987). Tinto describes academic experiences as those which take place on campus and are associated with learning, and social experiences as those which impact on a student’s psychological and social development (ibid., p. 106). Students who engage in academic and social activities are more likely to be committed to their studies, form a stronger bond with the institution and perform better (ibid., p. 44). A number of other studies have also focused on social and academic integration. Harrington, O’Donoghue, Gallagher and Fitzmaurice (2001) and Baird (2002) in two separate studies surveying of students at Trinity College, Dublin, argue that students who experience financial difficulties and/or problems integrating academically or socially may be more likely to withdraw early. Cook and Rushton (2008, p. 10) suggest that students who encounter problems settling into their course or have problems coping with their studies experience low levels of academic integration, which may result in poor performance and possibly early withdrawal from their course.

A number of other researchers have investigated the reasons why students withdraw. Aston and Bekarahradnia (2005) compared different retention rates at two universities where students had similar demographic and educational characteristics and argued that other factors such as organisational structure and philosophy impact on retention levels. They argue that organisational structures and philosophies across the sector are inevitably diverse, but that there are common features which motivate students and enhance provision, such as a comprehensive academic support structure and an inclusive curriculum (op.cit.).

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998, p. 1) in a report on undergraduate non-completion rates suggested that withdrawal often results from ‘a complicated social process in which the main factors are student preparedness and compatibility of choice’. Their findings are in concert with those from other studies; however, the usefulness of this study, like many others, is limited by small sample numbers: the Ozga and Sukhnanan research focused on feedback from 41 questionnaire respondents and 20 telephone interviews. Unfortunately, the study had difficulty in gaining access to students who had already left the university, a problem often encountered by researchers investigating student withdrawal.
In addition to his work on the impact of entry age and socio-economic status on withdrawal levels, Yorke has also published extensively on first year experiences and retention. In his report in 1997, he argued that the two most significant but related factors in students’ decisions to withdraw were firstly, the mismatch between student expectations and experiences and secondly, a lack of preparation for HE study (Yorke et al., 1997). In 2007 and 2008 Yorke with Longden revisited Yorke’s earlier work and they authored a two-phase report which re-iterated the positive impact of realistic expectations on the first year experience and on retention (Yorke & Longden, 2007; 2008). They identified influential areas similar to those highlighted in the earlier report including: poor quality experiences, inability to cope with the demands of the course, poor programme choice, unsatisfactory social life, financial worries and dissatisfaction with provision (ibid., p22).

Mackie (2001), also investigating retention, suggests that it is not uncommon for students to have doubts about their course and their capacity to assimilate into university life. However, she argues that some doubters will leave whereas others will stay; those who stay do so because they are motivated and have a sense of commitment to their course or to the institution (ibid., p. 15). Roberts, Watkin, Oakey and Fox (2003, n.p.) continue this theme and suggest that students who have doubts but stay, do so because they draw on resources (their own or assisted) to orientate themselves and increase their self-efficacy. Where students place themselves, within any learning context, is fundamental, some students may feel that they ‘do not belong’ at university and experience feelings of alienation (Thomas, 2002, p. 431). These areas focus on student experiences when they are at university, but could equally be linked to their pre-conceptions about life at university and the expectations students had before they started.

Tinto (1987) stressed the importance of institutional interventions to help students integrate successfully and recommends that students should be encouraged to engage in formal and informal activities at the earliest stage to aid their integration. In recent years many UK universities have introduced an induction week at the beginning of Level 1, which comprises a busy round of structured activities (mainly social) designed to make students feel welcome and familiar with the university. Whether these practices are altruistic or based on sound marketing principles is debatable.

When Tinto and many of the other researchers mentioned above were writing, institutions were limited to face-to-face or paper-based communications. Recent developments in Web 2.0 technologies and user-generated content have opened up a myriad of opportunities to communicate in ways which are not temporally or geographically limited. It is now possible for prospective students to interact synchronously and asynchronously with each other in a wide range of different environments.
The literature reviewed in this section, and in the previous section, highlights the interrelationship between expectations, experiences and retention. However, very few studies consider the impact of structured pre-entry activities on expectations, experiences and retention. This may be because, beyond general advice and guidance activities, there are few examples of pre-entry activities which have been designed specifically to help students develop more realistic expectations of higher education learning, and, where there are examples, there is little evidence about their effectiveness. One example of a pre-entry activity designed to help students develop more realistic expectations about learning in university is a ‘compact’ agreement: a progression pathway between designated schools and/or colleges and specific universities. In some cases compact agreements include academic taster sessions or a piece of assessed work, but with the exception of anecdotal evidence from a colleague at Kingston University (M. Hill, personal communication, 2007) there has been very little evidence about whether these agreements have helped prepare students for learning at university or about the impact on students’ early experiences.

2.1.3. **Widening participation and student diversity**

The previous sections discuss student expectations, experiences and retention. Student experiences can vary greatly depending on a number of factors including their prior educational experiences, parental education and cultural background. Research that I have undertaken recently has found that students starting at university are often faced with a set of complex learning structures and consequently, that many students, regardless of their background, are unsure what learning at university will involve (Jacobs, 2007b, p. 3). However, a lack of familiarity with university structures and the ‘culture’ of higher education learning make it particularly difficult for students who are from non-traditional backgrounds to adjust to university life. This may lead some students to have low levels of confidence, difficulties integrating into university life and poor quality first year experiences.

As noted in Chapter 1, the Government declared a target of 50% of all 18 – 30 year olds entering higher education by 2010. A central policy of widening access is not new and is symptomatic of agendas designed to create a more inclusive society. The very early stages of this process were manifest in policies at the beginning of the twentieth century, which were designed to ensure access to education for working class children and equal education rights for women; in the post-war period attention moved to the expansion of further education and later higher education (Stuart, 2002, p. 11). The Robbins report in 1963 aimed to increase access to higher education, but by the mid-1990s, although more students were entering higher education, the majority were still from middle class backgrounds (Layer, 2005, p. 5; Stuart, 2006, p.163). The Dearing Report published in 1997 recommended that universities should work in collaboration to widen participation, rather than widen access. The adoption of the term ‘widening participation’ implies a move to encourage more students from non-traditional backgrounds to apply for university
places, including those from lower socio-economic groups, under-represented ethnic
groups, first generation and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. The move to
make society more inclusive was also reflected in other areas, for example, in the
workplace, in public service and in the legal system. The drive to widen participation,
particularly in higher education, was also underpinned by an economic imperative. There
was a perceived need to ‘up skill’ the workforce in the face of increasing global competition
and an anticipated shift in the demographic profile after 2020 which it forecast to result in
an increased number of retired people and a proportional decrease in the number of
people of working age.

Higher education institutions came under pressure in the late 1990s to encourage more
students from widening participation backgrounds to apply for university places. Central
influence was exerted via agencies such as the QAA, Higher Education Funding Council
for England (HEFCE) and various offshoots such as Supporting Professionalism in
Admission (SPA), HESA and other agencies. Funding is a major lever; HEFCE’s annual
widening participation allocation is dependent on the number of entrants to universities
from low participation neighbourhoods\(^3\) and with lower or non-traditional entry
qualifications. Mainstream funding is also affected by the retention rate; if students from
widening participation backgrounds are more likely to withdraw from their courses, this
could have a negative impact on funding allocations.

As discussed briefly in the introduction, institutions’ activities are also influenced by public
accountability. Performance indicators are published annually in the press; universities are
keen not to be seen to be slipping down the performance tables as this will impact on their
general standing within the sector and, in addition, could affect how the university is viewed
by prospective students and their parents. As a consequence, many universities allocate
substantial amounts of funding to outreach activities with local FE colleges, AimHigher\(^4\) and
other widening participation activities in an attempt to raise the aspirations of students aged
between 16 and 19.

\(^3\) Until 2009 universities received per capita funding from HEFCE for full-time
undergraduate entrants with a home postcode in an area of less than 23% participation,
those with less than 160 A level points or those with non-traditional qualifications.
Weightings were applied for mature and part-time entrants. Universities also received per
capita funding for entrants with disabilities.

\(^4\) AimHigher is a DfES initiative which focuses on forming partnerships between
universities, colleges, schools and other agencies to encourage progression to college and
university where participation has traditionally been low. AimHigher also work with
partners to promote lifelong learning.
Despite these imperatives, evidence suggests that the proportion of students from non-traditional groups has not increased as rapidly as the percentage from professional and managerial households. In the early 1960s approximately 20% of the eligible population went to university; at the beginning of the 2005 – 2006 academic year, this figure had risen to approximately 43% (NAO, 2007, p. 7), the rate was very similar in 2008 indicating a possible levelling-off of participation (Attwood, 2010). However, the number of students from poorer backgrounds over the last 40 years has decreased in relative terms (Layer, 2005, p. 6). In the 1960s 28% of young people from professional and managerial socio-economic groups went to university as opposed to 5% of young people from other socio-economic groups; in 2000 these figures were 49% and 18% respectively. This represented an increase of 21% for students from higher socio-economic groups and an increase of 13% for other groups (NAO, op cit.).

In 2009 the Government’s policy regarding widening participation changed. Adjustments in funding allocations and public statements indicated that the Government was moving away from a focus on the 16 – 19 age group to one which aimed to raise aspirations at a far earlier age, as indicated in statements by firstly John Denham (then Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2009a) and later by Peter Mandelson (Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2009b). Recent funding changes are also symptomatic of this shift in priorities. HEFCE widening participation funding algorithms were amended in 2009 with the result that most universities experienced a reduction in their widening participation funding. In addition, AimHigher funding, which universities receive to promote aspiration raising activities in the 16-19 year old group, has been under review for the last two years and the programme will terminate in 2012. In early 2010 it was announced that this funding would not continue after the termination date.

A third area, the cap on fees, also bears testament to the Government’s change of policy and may have an impact on the number of students at university from widening participation backgrounds. In May 2009, John Denham issued a statement limiting the number of students for whom institutions would receive funding, taking effect in October 2009. A number of universities who had previously experienced an upsurge in applications anticipated this move and made offers based on students achieving a high number of tariff points in their A level exams. When the A level results were released, these universities had very few places in clearing and the capacity to make amended offers was limited. There have been concerns in the sector that this may result in widening participation students being marginalised (personal communication with the University of Portsmouth’s Deputy Academic Registrar, Christine Giles, in November 2009). These concerns are well-founded, such a move is likely to have the greatest impact on young people with non-traditional qualifications or lower A level points, many of whom are from inner city or lower performing schools.
A number of recent public statements have underlined the move to raise aspirations at a younger age. For example, John Denham (then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills), stated in his 2007 opening address at the 2007 Action on Access Conference:

...evidence suggests young people make key decisions about university – whether university is ‘for them’...much younger, at age 12, 13 or 14.

In a similar vein, Chowdry from the Institute of Fiscal Studies argued, in a recent report investigating the determinants of HE participation, that students from deprived backgrounds have lower levels of participation, but that the gap in participation is not at the point of entry to higher education, rather in progression rates from secondary school to post compulsory education (Chowdry et al., 2008, p. 3)

Much of the above discussion centres on the close relationship between Government agendas and education, and the volatility of that relationship. However, education, and my research, is concerned with individuals and their experience. Although the percentage of the students from widening participation backgrounds has not risen as rapidly as those from other backgrounds, in absolute terms, the number of students with non-traditional qualifications, those who are the first in their family to go to university or those with different cultural experiences has increased considerably over the last 15 years. In addition, other changes in young people’s general education and lifestyle patterns have had an impact on the student profile. Students are now entering higher education with a wider range of qualifications, including AS levels, A levels, baccalaureate or other qualifications. Furthermore, the growing trend of students taking a ‘gap year’ has resulted in a number of students being slightly older when they start at university and, consequently, they have a range of different life skills and experiences.

The conceptual framework diagram (Figure 1.1) in Chapter 1 features widening participation as a factor which impacts on students’ pre-arrival expectations about learning at university. There appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the role of new technologies, and particularly social networking, in helping widening participation students develop realistic expectations about learning and living at university.

2.2. Socialisation

When students move to a university, not only do they have to cope with understanding an institution’s rules and regulations, and getting to grips with their subject and learning how to study, they also have to learn how to live and work with other people. Bruce Macfarlane, Professor of Education at the University of Portsmouth, discusses the term ‘academic
citizenship’ in relation to the integration of academic staff into university life (Macfarlane, 2007); this phrase could be equally applied to the students’ integration into university life.

2.2.1. Social capital

Functioning in new surroundings involves learning, and understanding, acceptable patterns of behaviour and establishing credibility or ‘social capital’ as a member of one or more groups.

Physical or human capital is related to an individual’s physical capacity – the skills they possess and their productivity; social capital refers to an individual’s location within a group. Social capital has been used by a wide variety of different researchers from Hanifan’s article in 1916 on the social cohesion and community engagement in rural communities through to researchers in the last decades of the twentieth century including Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, who were responsible for popularising the notion of social capital (Claridge, 2004, n.p.).

The literature in this area can be divided into two main areas: firstly, social capital which centres on an individual’s social capital and one’s location within a specific group, as outlined in Bourdieu’s research. Secondly, social capital which focuses on the influence and power of a group of like-minded individuals to change their community, for example, the influence of a parent-teacher association on local education or the impact of church group on regional politics, as described in Putnam’s work on community engagement.

Bourdieu discusses social capital in the context of his critical theory of society. His theoretical framework comprises: habitus, capital and field (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993); he describes habitus as an acquired set of shared behaviours and patterns based on an internalisation of the experiences and social structures of individuals (agents) within a group (ibid.). For students, ‘habitus’ could relate to the accepted norms and patterns of behaviour within an institution, many of which will have developed over time. Understanding a university’s norms and practices is a process of construction, based on information received from other people and personal experience.

Bourdieu outlines three types of capital: social, economic and cultural. His original concept of social capital related to the political manipulation of social connections to maintain power (ibid.). In an educational setting social capital could be translated as ‘empowering’ rather than ‘having power over’. A student’s social and cultural capital is based on their capacity to form friendships, on their academic standing with fellow students and lecturers, and on their reputation in other areas, for example, prowess as
a sports person, their role within an interest group, and responsibilities within the
Students’ Union. My recent research suggested that students from non-traditional
backgrounds may question their ability to ‘fit in’ with others at university and cope with
the work (Jacobs, 2007b, p. 6) and therefore for these students establishing their social
capital within a university setting may be more difficult.

Economic capital refers to the economic or financial resources which an individual has
at their disposal. In the current higher education funding structure it is difficult to
characterise economic capital; many students will have a student loan and/or bank
loans and will seem to be on a relatively equal footing with each other. However, some
students fall outside this band and may receive financial support from their parents;
others may be struggling financially and have to rely on income from part-time work or
bursaries. The latter group will have relatively low levels of economic capital, which
could be problematic given the current emphasis on spending regular sums of money
on entertainment and socialising.

Cultural capital is the product of education and as such may influence tastes and
behaviour, for example, a preference for classical music or a certain literary taste. In a
higher educational setting cultural capital is afforded by prior educational experiences
and having realistic expectations about university life, whether gained from parents,
friends or teachers, and will help students understand more about what is expected of
them and the norms and practices of the higher education environment. Cultural capital
may be compromised for some students, particularly in the early days at university, if
they do not have access to relevant information sources during the pre-entry period.

Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’ refers to the number of agents and their positions relative to
each other. In a university setting, a typical first year student’s position in the field may
be relatively low, determined by economic capital (limited, but could be improved by
financial support from parents or income from part-time work), cultural capital
(understanding about university norms and practices may be minimal) and social capital
(in the early days, a student may have few friends).

Bourdieu’s work raises the following important question for my research: as a bridge
does social networking help an individual become more familiar with the norms and
practices of the university environment, enhance their social capital, help them make
friends and, consequently, impact on their position within the ‘field’?

Liz Thomas in her examination of the factors surrounding student retention adopted
Bourdieu’s framework of habitus, field and social capital. She draws on the work of
Reay, David and Ball (2001) who examined the relationship between institutional
habitus and student choice. Institutional habitus here refers to the educational culture, operational idiosyncrasies and the established learning environment that is specific to an institution. Thomas’s research suggests that some institutions are more accepting of students from diverse backgrounds than others. Where this is the case students, particularly those from widening participation backgrounds, may find it easier to ‘fit in’ (Thomas, 2002, p. 431) Where institutions are less accepting, some students’ social and cultural capital may be lower, they may feel that university is not for them and have poor quality early experiences; these factors could in turn impact on retention levels. There is a clear interplay here between institutional habitus, students’ social capital and field (other students in the institution). Thomas (ibid., p. 441) makes a number of recommendations about how institutions can help students feel more like a ‘fish in water’ rather than a ‘fish out of water’, including an institution taking steps to familiarise students with the habitus or culture of the institution, a point particularly relevant for my research.

Thomas’s work leads to a second question for my research: can institutions take action to help students become familiar with institutional habitus? This question relates to institutional strategy and practice. As a professional doctorate student, my research endeavours to improve practice. In the closing chapter I make a number of recommendations, including how institutions could consider using social networking environments to engage and help prepare students for learning at university.

In his work on societal changes in the United States in the late 1990s, Robert Putnam discusses two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding capital exists between individuals in strong, emotionally-close relationships; bridging capital denotes looser links which provide useful conduits for information exchange and gathering (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). In Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital Putnam argues that social capital and civic engagement is declining in America due to a lack of community engagement and the isolation brought about by increasing suburbanisation (rather than urbanisation), the separation of the workplace and residential areas compounded by further class and racial segregation (Putnam, 2000, p. 208). His work follows that of Jane Jacobs in the 1960s, who discussed the impact of new urban developments on neighbourhood cohesion. Putnam (op.cit. p. 184) argues that ways need to be found to connect individuals and instil collective responsibility; he also suggests that the location of social capital may be moving from being place-based to function-based. For example, away from individuals who live in the same neighbourhoods to those who share similar interests at work. Putnam wrote Bowling alone in 2000 before the advent of social networking, however, the Internet was reasonably well-established at that time. Putnam recognised that individuals were connecting and interacting with each other online – mainly via email. He poses the question whether ‘virtual social capital’ was a valid concept (ibid., p. 170), but
states that it was not possible to provide a conclusive answer to this question at the time of writing. Today when many individuals use social networking as their default means of communication, and there is a high level of engagement with Web 2.0 technologies, it is reasonable to suggest that social capital may exist in virtual communities, for example, in discussion groups or social networking forums. In the case of students, their interactions on social networking sites may offer them opportunities to develop or enhance their social capital online – an opportunity that may not otherwise be available to them. The role of social networking in enhancing students’ social capital is central to the bridge metaphor and I will return to the topic of social networking enhancing students’ social capital in the closing chapter.

Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe move Putnam’s theories forward into the online era and discuss bridging and bonding capital in relation to social networking. In their study which investigates undergraduate students’ behaviour at Michigan State University, they argue that social networks help students accumulate bridging social capital, which facilitates online information exchanges (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1162). They also argue that the links that students make on social networking sites do not have a strong impact on bonding social capital and, consequently, do not help students gain more confidence or improve their self-esteem. Ellison et al. describe a third type of capital: maintained social capital, which they argue helps students preserve relationships with individuals and the support networks that they had established before they started at college (ibid., p. 1163). Their notion that bridging social capital facilitates information exchanges accords with Putnam’s research. In the context of my research, their research suggests that social networking sites may offer prospective students opportunities to find out more about going to university. They also argue that social networks do not help students form bonds with people whom they have not already come into contact with; they describe the direction of these connections as offline to online (existing friends become online friends), rather than the reverse. Ellison et al. carried out their research when social networking was in its infancy, where there was a lower level of engagement in social networking. Now at a later stage of maturity and given the pervasive nature of social networking (discussed in more detail below), it is reasonable to suggest that Ellison et al.’s conclusion may require review. I will also return to this topic in the final chapter.

2.2.2. Communities of practice

The ‘virtual community’ is a term that was coined by Howard Rheingold in 1993 – since that date the phrases ‘virtual community’ and ‘online community’ have become commonplace. The notion of community is also central to the work of Wenger which gained prominence in the late 1990s and focuses on theories that relate to how individuals form, or become, members of a community of practice.
Wenger describes communities of practice as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise...by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Wenger outlines a community of practice as having three key characteristics: firstly, the domain, a shared area of interest to which members are committed; secondly, the community: interactions between members of the group, including activities, discussions; and thirdly, information exchanges in which the members engage and learn from each other. Within the domain, members engage in joint activities, they take part in discussions and share information which helps them to develop a common language and learn from the experience of others (ibid.). Wenger’s notion of a community of practice has been applied to a number of different settings including government, organisations and education.

Wenger et al. (ibid., p. 43) make the distinction between a community of practice and a network: the former is ‘about’ something, they maintain that it ‘is not a just a set of relationships...commitment to care for this domain gives it cohesiveness and intentionality that goes beyond the interpersonal nature of informed networks’. They also argue that a community ‘affects the behaviours and abilities of the members’ (ibid., p. 44). An online social network where members share a common interest is not necessarily a community of practice, but where they also use a common terminology and exchange information about specific topics they could be regarded as starting to develop a community of practice.

Wenger and colleagues wrote Cultivating communities of practice in 2002, before the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and the rise in social networking sites’ popularity. However, in 2002 other forms of online communication such as email, static web-based information were well established; Wenger et al. recognised that the global knowledge economy and information systems were having an impact on communities of practice. They argue (op.cit., p20) that developments in technology have resulted in communities which no longer necessarily reside inside one organisation, but which extend to include a range of other individuals and groups outside the immediate bounds of one organisation. Although Wenger’s discussion focuses on organisational structures, the notion of developing a community of practice which is not limited by geographical considerations could be extended to include a community of practice comprising prospective students in a social networking environment.

Integration into university life involves students moving to a new community; prospective students exchange information about what they expect university life will be like and about their thoughts and feelings about going to university. These students share a common interest and interact with each other; therefore do their interactions on social networking site constitute a community of practice? I return to this question in Chapter 6.
In his later work Wenger focused on the development of organisational communities of practice; however, in early work with Lave, he concentrated on the interface between learning and social situations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (ibid., p. 33) argue that in a learning situation the learner constructs knowledge from interactions with others. Such collaborations may take place in a formal learning situation such as working in a group or on a problem-solving task or in more informal situations, for example, discussions which take place outside lectures, seminars or other prescribed learning activities. In the context of my research, although prospective students are not yet in a formal learning situation, they learn about university life from others who have knowledge of the university landscape; traditionally this has been parents, friends or teachers at school, or college. In a virtual environment, social networking affords opportunities for collaborative learning and interaction, which prospective students are able to utilise to help them access information that will help them understand more about university life.

2.2.3. Self-efficacy
The literature on students’ expectation and experiences discussed above makes frequent reference to students’ concerns about their ability to cope with learning at a higher education level and their worries about ‘fitting in’ with other people on their course and in their hall of residence. Perceptions about coping and fitting in are closely associated with levels of confidence and the ability to cope with change. In the case of prospective students, this change is concerned with the move to university and the student’s ability to make the adjustments necessary to integrate into university life.

Bandura (1997) places self-belief or self-efficacy at the centre of personal control and outlines four factors that impact on self-efficacy:

- experience: recognition of accomplishments which are valued by the society;
- social persuasion: encouragement/discouragement from others;
- modelling: replicating actions of other individuals; and
- physiological factors: interpretation of physical feelings and experiences and how an individual copes with them (for example, taking the view that being nervous before a presentation is to be expected rather than regarding it as a sign of incompetence).

Self-efficacy relates to an individual’s belief in his/her ability to succeed and the capacity to cope with difficult or new situations. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy take on challenges in the belief that they will succeed; people do not have a fixed level of self-efficacy: they will have different levels of self-efficacy according to the situation. For example, a competent sports person may be confident when they encounter a new sports challenge in their given field, but they may be less confident about their ability to cope with
the demands in a new work environment. In a similar way, students may be confident about coping with the demands of the school or college environment, but be less certain that they will be able to deal with the challenges of learning in higher education.

For many students, going to university is a major life change. Bandura argues that individuals use modelling influences to determine attitudes, competencies and their own level of self-efficacy. In *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control* (1997, p. 431) he was persuaded that the advent of technology offers individuals the opportunity to access models which are outside their immediate experience. When he put forward these theories, Bandura was referring to visual media and early online communications, but the principles that he discussed can be applied equally to the latest technological developments. He recognised that major technological changes would accelerate the pace of information diffusion and discussed the role of technology in bringing together geographically dispersed groups to develop collective understandings and improve self-efficacy. Social networking may serve a similar purpose in enhancing information dissemination and help individual’s access information which helps their understanding and improves their self-efficacy. In the context of this research, information and communication via social networking forums could help prospective students’ access information and role models which could help to improve their confidence and self-efficacy levels. The impact of social networking on prospective students’ levels of self-efficacy is discussed in depth in the final chapter.

2.3. **The rise of technology**

The role of social networking as a vehicle for information exchange and dissemination is at the centre of my doctoral thesis. However, if social networking has a role as an effective bridge it is important to consider students’ likely level of engagement with this type of activity. This section examines the growth of online technologies and social networking, their location within society today and how individuals or groups use them to communicate with each other in order to contextualise that discussion.

2.3.1. **Growth of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies**

The number of people accessing the Internet has grown rapidly over the last nine years. Between 2000 and 2009 the number of worldwide users increased by 399%; at the end of December 2009 Internet users numbered over 1,802,330,457 – 26.6% of the world’s population (Internet World Statistics, 2010). In the UK the number of users rose 203.1% between 2000 and 2009 and in December 2009 UK Internet users numbered over 46 million individuals - 76.4% of the population (*ibid.*). Web 2.0 technologies and the presence of user-generated content have experienced a particularly rapid growth. In their 2009 report on students’ use of Web 2.0 technologies, JISC stated:
Today's learners exist in a digital age. This implies access to, and use of, a range of Social Web tools and software that provide gateways to a multiplicity of interactive resources for information, entertainment and, not least, communication.

(JISC, 2009, p. 6)

Modes of communication have changed beyond all recognition in the last ten years. Livingstone in her research project, UK Children Go Online, found that 98% of all 9-19-year-olds used the Internet either at home or at school (Livingstone and Bober, 2004, p. 13). Using the Internet has become embedded in the lives of young people to the extent that those born between the mid 1970s and late 1980s are often referred to as digital natives (coined by Marc Prensky in his work Digital natives, digital immigrants published in 2001) or as the Net Generation (people born between 1977 and 1997). In his enthusiastic book about the first generation to grow up in the digital world, Don Tapscott discusses the influence of the Internet on lifestyles of the ‘Net Generation’. He investigated how young people spent their leisure hours and found that the Internet and communicating via SMS were taking over from television as the main sources of entertainment (Tapscott, 2009, p. 43). He conducted a survey of young people in 12 countries asking them whether they would rather live without the Internet or without TV. The feedback from respondents in the UK was typical: 74% would rather live without the television (ibid.).

Prospective university students in the UK have grown up with technology. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have been part of the National Curriculum since the late 1990s. At school children use technology for word processing, creating graphics, linking up with other pupils in other parts of the UK and in other countries, and a host of other activities (Becta, 2009). In 1997, the UK Government declared an objective to connect all schools to the Internet by 2002 (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001, p. 13); although they did not make this target, 99% of UK schools were connected by 2006 (NationMaster, 2009, n.p.). Prospective students who have started at university in the last ten years are very likely to have used computers and the Internet at school and/or college for their schoolwork, homework and linking up with other pupils inside and outside school time. The majority will be comfortable using technology, but even among younger people there will be inequalities, regarding access, skills and their attitude towards using the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies (Helsper, 2008, p. 3).

On an international scale, the global use of technology has increased rapidly since the year 2000 and the digital divide is shrinking between those who have access to technology and those who do not. The ratio between Internet access in the OECD and developing countries fell from approximately 81:1 in 1997 to 6:1 in 2007 (Castells, 2010, p. xxv).
Castells, in his work on the transformation of society in the late twentieth century, argues that the combined effects of information technology, the emergence of a global economy and cultural changes have had a fundamental impact on the structure of society (Castells et al., 1999, p. 57). In the post-industrial society, economic, social and political forces have become more interdependent and changed the way people live and conduct business. He argues that in a society which centres on information processing and knowledge generation, power resides with those who control knowledge and information sources. His example of professionals (scientists and experts) mobilising consumers and citizens through mass media about the environmental debate is particularly pertinent in early 2010 when there is a spotlight on global warming and its possible consequences. Students, in the developed world, are part of an environment in which information technologies and informational processing have permeated all aspects of society, including the structure of employment, education and leisure activities to the extent that they are seamlessly embedded within the culture. In many cases, the working day or leisure time is structured around information technologies or digital media of one type or another. For example, texting on mobile phones, listening to music on MP3 players, emailing friends or work colleagues, using a laptop, playing online games, downloading music, films or podcasts, and linking up with other people in online discussion groups. As Tapscott puts it, the Net Generation are ‘a generation bathed in bits’ (Tapscott, 2009, p. 39) and information technology, in its many different forms, is an intrinsic part of their everyday lives.

2.3.2. The development of online social networking

Information technology is changing the fabric of society and social networking is changing the way in which many people communicate with each other.

Two-thirds of the world’s Internet users visit social networking sites or use blogs on a regular basis; 10% of all the time spent on the Internet is spent on social networking sites (Nielsen, 2009, p. 1). In the UK, social networking users account for approximately 17.4% of the country’s total Internet usage (ibid., p. 3). Discussion boards and chat rooms have become part of everyday life for many people, particularly the younger generation. From the beginning of 2008 there has been a huge expansion in the popularity of social networking forums such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. Between 2004 and 2007 Facebook attracted 34 million users worldwide (Johnson, 2007, n.p.) and in 2007 the number of users grew at the rate of 150,000 per day (Rowley, 2007, n.p.). From January to September 2009 the number of users in the UK increased by 35% to over 20 million (Burcher, 2009, n.p.). These facts and figures are testament to the rapid growth of social networking sites and the important role they now play in many people’s lives.

Given these statistics the majority of prospective students are likely to be regular social networking users; they are part of a generation with an ‘information-age’ mindset, where
online communication is part of their culture (Frand, 2000, p. 16). In 2007, Rowley (op.cit.) found in a survey of university students, that 86% of student respondents were members of at least one social networking group and in research that Ipsos Mori undertook in 2007 for the Joint Information Systems Committee they found that 95% of all 15 – 18-year-olds in the UK had used social networking sites, with 65% using them on a regular basis (Ipsos Mori, 2007, p. 11). Hannah Green and Celia Hannon, in their report on how young people use technologies, point out that ‘The change in behaviour has already happened. We have to get used to it, accept that the flow of knowledge moves both ways and do our best to make sure that no one is left behind.’ (Green & Hannon, 2007, p. 17).

Young people use social networking sites to present a profile of themselves that they wish to share with others and to make social exchanges (Ofcom, 2008, p. 34). This suggests that social networking forums offer prospective students the opportunities of contacting, finding out about other students and exchanging information in ways which may not otherwise be available to them.

Social interactions on networking sites are online conversations in which individuals construct meaning through exchanging information and sharing views; Jenlink and Carr (1996) describe conversations that help construct meaning as ‘dialogue conversations’. Computer mediated communications (CMC)\(^5\) conversations involving students facilitate the development of group coherence, the sharing of information and the processing of ideas (Chism, 1998 cited by Sherry 2000, p. 1). Although Chism’s research focussed on CMC rather than social networking sites, the principles that she discusses can be applied equally to prospective students’ interactions on Facebook and other social networking forums.

Tidwell and Walther (2002, p. 318), also investigating CMC, argue that online and offline conversations differ. In online conversations individuals are more likely to disclose information about themselves and ask more searching personal questions than they do in face-to-face conversations. Tapscott (2009, p. 67) agrees, but suggests that sharing personal details and posting photographs can also have a down side. Ethical concerns have been raised about the pervasive nature of social networks and the ‘dark side’ of the web. At the University of Portsmouth the Head of Information Services has expressed disquiet about the amount of time that young people spend on social networking forums – he stated that a trip round the University Library on any weekday will reveal how many students are accessing Facebook sites either without any other applications open or while they are studying (A. Minter, personal communication, June, 2009). Concerns have also been raised about individual safety and security. The majority of social networking sites include advice about how individuals can protect themselves against data protection.

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\(^5\) CMC includes email, discussion boards, synchronous and asynchronous chatrooms.
infringements, identity theft and harassment, but some social network users do not heed this advice (L. Jones, Librarian University of Portsmouth, personal communication, November 2009). In addition, there are hidden dangers, for example, if social networkers download the applications that regularly appear in their profile (for example, to make a cartoon of themselves, sign up for a free trial and other tempting offers) they may be inadvertently allowing a third party access via cookies (programmes which download to the user's hard drive) to all the programmes and documents on their computer.

There are also other dangers. Web 2.0 technologies allow users to create and amend webpage content; some sites, for example, Wikipedia, are available to anyone to make a contribution or add new information. Inputs of this sort may result in useful data sources and support information dissemination, but the ‘openness’ of information sources may result in a lack of control and poor data integrity – the legitimacy of information may be compromised. In social networking environments where sites have been set up to encourage individuals to connect to each other and exchange information this is not generally a problem. Furthermore, if exchanges result in value-added benefits such as boosting confidence or helping individuals form sustainable friendships, the validity of data may not be the prime concern. However, if individuals do not have the means to judge information validity and it leads to them developing false expectations, data integrity could be problematic. In the case of prospective students, this could relate to the validity of information exchanges about course information, particularly in contentious areas such as forms of assessment, expectations about learning and so on.

In addition to issues about legitimacy there has been discussion in the literature about the boundaries between professional and social interactions on social networking sites, about relationships and to whom the social networking ‘space’ belongs (Hewitt & Forte, 2006, n.p.). These are serious matters that should concern all higher education institutions, or practitioners, who are considering using social networking forums as a way of communicating with their students or preparing them for the higher education environment. Institutions have an obligation to protect students from unwarranted attention and not expose them to dangers such as cyberstalking or identity theft, this is discussed in more detail below.

Despite these dangers, it is unlikely that the majority of young people will stop using social networking sites. A sensible approach would be to raise awareness about existing dangers and potential problem areas and advise prospective students about how to protect themselves against them. As a researcher and a practitioner, I feel it is important that I consider the positive and negative, the ethical as well as the practical implications of engaging in social networking activities. As a practitioner, I aim to facilitate student
transition, but must remain sensitive to potential danger areas associated with any planned interventions.

2.3.3. Social networks and social network analysis

Online social networks are at the centre of my research. However, people have been operating in groups, working together to survive and mingling socially since communities started to form. Interacting in an online environment extends the opportunities for individuals to link up and interact with each other. It is therefore important to consider how individuals have traditionally created, and communicated via, social networks.

The traditional analysis of offline social networks examines how people interact within groups, how one group interacts with another and describes connections in terms of nodes (participants) and the (ties) between them (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). The development of social networks depends on common or shared interests and individuals assume different roles within the network; for example one person may initiate conversations, whereas another may take a more passive role. In addition, individuals may belong to several networks and their role and relationships within each may vary (Knoke & Yang, 2008, p. 5). Networks may overlap: a professional network and a private network may have a number of members in common.

Social networks influence the perceptions and attitudes of members (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982, p. 9). Bandura in his work on self-efficacy discusses the role of social networks in disseminating new ideas and practices (Bandura, 1997, p. 519). He suggests that individuals are more likely to learn about new information and activities through casual acquaintances than from a circle of close associates. He also suggests that individuals with large social networks are more likely to be able to adapt to new changes. He goes on to suggest that although social interconnectedness provides potential diffusion paths, it is the transactions that take place within the social networks which help individuals understand and adopt new modes of behaviour.

Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) also discusses how information is disseminated in social networks. In his research analysing relationships in offline networks, he describes the ties between participants in terms of their strength, including: the amount of time expended; emotional intensity; intimacy (mutual confiding); and shared services. Strong ties typically represent links between individuals who have a close relationship, such as family or close friends, and weak ties, a more distant relationship such as friends of friends. Granovetter argues that a large network with many weak ties supports information dissemination. The stronger the ties between the members of the group, the more likely it is that they have friends in common. However, if one member of a group also has a weak tie to someone in another group, they may gain access to new information which they can then pass on to
their own strong tie group. Granovetter’s (ibid.) use of strong ties as bonding (making individuals closer) and weak ties as bridging (providing access to another group and fresh information) is analogous to Putnam’s notion of bonding and bridging capital as discussed in Section 2.2.1 above.

Granovetter’s notion of strong and weak ties is represented in Figure 2.1 below, where information travels along weak tie connections (broken lines) to nodes (points touching the edge of the circle), information is then circulated via strong ties within the groups (solid lines). In the context of prospective students, Social Network 1 could be a group of students who have linked up through a halls of residence website; Social Network 2, those who have joined a site set up by the Students’ Union; and Social Network 3, a group of friends which includes brothers, sisters or friends already at university. Information can be passed from the friends’ group to the halls’ group via the Students’ Union group.

Based on Granovetter’s (1973) notion of strong and weak ties

Norris continues the discussion about the bonds between individuals, information dissemination and social capital. She suggests that where individuals in a strong tie group have a range of different interests, social status and possibly employment backgrounds but have a common purpose in setting up a social network (for example, supporting a local charity), interacting with other members will help improve social capital, engender trust and reinforce community ties (Norris, 2004, p. 5). However, where individuals in a social network group are socially homogeneous, share common ideology and have limited outside interests, interacting in a group may lead members to become increasingly isolated from the rest of society – Norris quotes the Ku Klux Klan as an example. The combined effects of social and ideological homogeneity are outlined in Figure 2.2 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological Homogeneity</th>
<th>Social Homogeneity</th>
<th>Social Heterogeneity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Improves bonding capital</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Heterogeneity</td>
<td>Mixed effect</td>
<td>Improves bridging capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Norris, 2004, p. 34

Figure 2.2: Bridging and bonding capital in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups

Norris goes on to discuss online environments as a normalising influence in which social or other factors are neutralised. She argues that interacting online widens a sense of community (it helps people connect with different social backgrounds) and deepens community (strengthens existing networks). She suggests an online environment allows a degree of anonymity in which class or other differences can be kept hidden. Although Norris’s study focuses on online groups in the United States who share a particular sporting activity, hobby, political interest and so on, the notion of online anonymity may encourage prospective students to enter into social networking conversations. An online environment offers students the opportunity to find out about other people’s experience, their thoughts about going to university and any anxieties they may have without exposing their own background or perceived ‘shortcomings’. In this way it offers students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, a non-threatening means of finding out more about living and studying at university.

Approximately 30 years ago social network analysis began to include the study of telecommunications networks; initially this focussed on telephone or fax connection, for example, Metcalfe’s law measures the number of potential connections in a network (Shapiro & Varian, 1999, p. 184). David Reed (2001) asserted the utility of large networks was greater than Metcalfe suggested and that the value of large social networks (such as those that are developed online) grew exponentially with the size of the network. Reed argued that a single network may be small, but each member of the group would have links to other people in other groups and therefore the power of the network is a function of the size of the larger group (ibid.). This concept is similar to that of Granovetter’s notion of weak ties, Ellison et al. and Putnam’s conclusions relating to bridging capital.

2.3.4. Online and offline friendship

Linking up and becoming an online ‘friend’ is commonplace in social networking and as such could be regarded as an extension to, or variation of, more traditional friendships.

The drive to form friendships is based on a fundamental human need to create trusting and secure relationships with other people. Maslow (1987, p. 20) placed having friends and forming relationships third in his hierarchy of needs – it was only preceded by satisfying physiological needs (such as breathing, eating, sleeping) and safety (security of self,
employment, resources). Friendship is part of the need to be loved and to feel a sense of belonging (ibid.). Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 499) argue that the need to belong and the desire for interpersonal attachments is an essential human need and that individuals have a desire for frequent, affectionate interactions that take place within a stable trustworthy environment. They also suggest that interpersonal attachments or friendships impact positively on emotions. People feel happier, less anxious and generally more confident when they have one or more friends. Friendship between two or more people implies trust, support and, to some extent, shared behaviour. Although the actual norms and customs associated with friendship may vary in different geographical and religious contexts, it is a relationship that exists in all societies (ibid.).

Online technology has made it possible to connect up with a range of different people, quickly and easily. The more popular forums, such as Facebook and MySpace, enable users to identify other people with whom they would like to communicate; they can search for known contacts or link up with new people. In social networking sites, such as Facebook, when users identify possible friends, they send a friendship request, and, if the invitation is accepted, those communicating are listed as friends in each others’ profile. A friend may also be able to see friends of friends, depending on security settings, in which case the network of contacts expands rapidly.

Open access enables individuals to link up and communicate with other people; it also raises a number of issue, including personal security, identity theft and attracting unwarranted attention. The first two issues were discussed in Section 2.4.1. Growth of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies above, the third, unwarranted attention can range from a request from someone with whom a user does not want to form a link to the other end of the scale and result in cyber bullying or cyber stalking. In addition, some seemingly innocuous activities may lead to problems. As a social networker’s list of friends is highly visible, some users may want to be seen as popular and accepted by peers, and they may ‘accumulate’ a long list of friends. This is not generally a problem, but may lead some users to exclude or bully others: for example, a clique may ridicule one or more other networkers because they have a limited number of friends or make uncomplimentary remarks about other users who are outside their circle (boyd, 2006, n.p.).

Making a large number of friends is typical behaviour of online users in the under 21 age group. The EDUCAUSE Survey (Salaway, Cursuo, & Nelson, 2008, p. 86) found that 97.4% of young people in the 18 – 19 age group had 26 or more ‘friends’. A closer examination provides more detail about the extent and nature of these friendships. The data in the survey indicates that 25.9% of respondents had 26 – 100 friends, 43.1% had 101 – 300 friends and 28.4% had more than 300 friends, suggesting it is common to have a large network of 100 or more friends. The EDUCAUSE survey argued the primary
reason that people joined social networking sites was to make new friends and find out more about other people; motives which suggest prospective students may welcome the opportunity to link up with other students before they start at university (ibid.).

The above discussion centres on online friendship and how it is part of the practice of engaging in social networking. Harvey and Drew (op.cit.) point out that friendship helps students integrate into university life and having friends is particularly important to new students; Stuart (2006) concurs. The issue for my research is whether online friendships help students integrate into their new environment when they start at university. Underpinning this issue are two fundamental questions: are online friendships the same as offline friendships? Can they offer the same emotional and practical support as more traditional friendships?

Danah boyd, based at the University of California at Berkeley, is a key researcher focussing on the area of online friendship. She has been researching various aspects of social networking since 2004 and in December 2006 she published a paper entitled ‘Friends, Friendsters6 and MySpace Top 8’ in which she argues that traditional friendships and online friendships differ (boyd, 2006, n.p.). Traditional friendship suggests a strong emotional bond with expectations that often include psychological and physical support. Boyd argues that the term ‘friend’ in traditional friendships is used to denote an intimacy that does not exist between acquaintances or contacts and suggests a familiarity and closeness (ibid.). Online friendships cannot offer the same degree of closeness, but boyd suggests that they fulfil other needs such as providing an opportunity for communication, helping individual’s share interests and possibly maintaining existing friendships (ibid.).

Some social networkers may be instrumental in their choice of friends, linking up with people who may seem particularly popular or they may adopt the persona of a celebrity in order to attract ‘friends’, but in most cases users join social networking forums to remain in contact with existing friends or to make new ones. Young people, who have grown up in a technological age, are usually able to distinguish between their online and offline friends, and have different expectations of them (Tapscott, 2009). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that although online and offline friendship are not the same, online friendships offer prospective students opportunities to connect to people who share similar interests, who may have had similar experiences and who will be sharing some of the same experiences in the future. Linking up online allows students a channel of communication to find out more about other people and identify common interests without making the personal commitment that more traditional friendships demand. Online friendships also offer the exciting prospect that online contacts may become ‘real’ friends once students

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6 Terminology based on the title and practices of online networking forum Friendster, which became popular in 2003.
start at university. The way in which online friendships support students’ transition is a key issue for my research and I will return to this subject again in the final chapter.

A preliminary evaluation of the pre-entry project that I have been working on at the University suggests that getting to ‘know’ other users who have a common interest or who will be sharing the same experiences in the near future has an impact on levels of confidence and self-efficacy. For example, making new friends who are geographically remote, exploring a wide range of other people’s interests and finding some common ground. Section 2.3.3. Social networks and social network analysis above discusses Granovetter’s work on the strength of weak ties, which argues that people access new information through members of their network or via a chain of contacts. Within social networking groups, where network members have friends in more than one group, the network can act as a channel through which information passes from one group to another. In the context of my research, information about university life and learning may travel through social networks; members of more than one network serving as conduits for information dissemination. I will return to this point in the final chapter.

2.4. Framing the research questions

In the introductory chapter I described how my professional practice had led me to envisage social networking as a connection or a bridge between students’ expectations and experiences. This chapter has shown that the current literature about students’ experiences, socialisation into university life and the development of online technologies appears to support the idea of social networking as a bridge.

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that there are several elements which influence prospective students’ pre-entry perceptions and their views about going to university: their previous educational experiences; access to relevant information sources; and the psychological and social factors that impact on an individual’s self-belief and ability to cope in a new environment. The literature on integration into university life suggests that it is not unusual for students to be uncertain and anxious about their new environment (Mackie, 2001, Roberts et al., 2003).

The current literature on the post-entry period is also well-established and suggests that student integration, early experiences and thoughts about staying or leaving university are influenced by expectations (Yorke & Longden, 2008), the institutional culture and the relationships that students form with other people (Harvey & Drew, 2006).

There is a growing body of literature on the growth, and use of, social networks (Tapscott, 2009; boyd, 2006). The literature review traces the development of the Internet, the advancement of Web 2.0 technologies and the rapid expansion of social networking sites. An additional area which is particularly relevant for my research is the phenomenon of online ‘friends’ and online ‘friendships’ and how these differ from more traditional friendships (ibid.). The literature
suggests that creating, and communicating with, online friends is an embedded part of social networking practice and although online friendships are different from more traditional friendships, network users are aware of these distinctions and use online and offline friendships for different purposes.

The literature, however, does not cover the role that social networking can play in linking the pre-entry and post-entry stages. There is little research about the role of technology, specifically Web 2.0 technologies, in preparing individuals for unfamiliar scenarios or environments.

The notion of a ‘bridge’ is not new, it was used by Putnam in his work on ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital and individuals' connections with each other (2000); it was also used in subsequent work by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe on the role of the Internet in maintaining social connections (2007, p. 1163). Norris used it to denote links which facilitated information exchanges. I have not used the word ‘bridge’ in an attempt to associate my research with the theories and ideas of these or other researchers. Where a similarity does exist is in the use of the bridge as a metaphor for a connection. Putnam, Ellison and Norris use the bridge metaphor to indicate a loose tie connection between associates that facilitates information dissemination; I have used it to describe the connection between pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences.

At the centre of my hypothesis is the role that social networking plays in helping students develop more realistic expectations about learning in higher education and living at university, and the subsequent impact on their early experiences. This focus is expressed in the main research question:

**How does social networking act as a bridge between students' pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences?**

Underpinning this broad question are a number of questions about the connections that students make on social networking sites, the information they exchange and the impact of these interactions on their expectations and experiences. Given my professional interest in widening participation and the wealth of literature in this area (Stuart, 2002; Layer, 2005), I have also added a further area which investigates whether social networking has the same impact on the expectations and experiences of widening participation and non-widening participation students.

**Theme 1: Connecting to people**

In order to understand more about the potential of social networking as a bridge, I was interested in investigating why students would consider using this type of forum to find out about university life, who they are trying to contact and for what purpose.
The current literature suggests that social networking is fast becoming the default mode of communication for many young people and that they readily use it to communicate with other people, set up friendships and, once they have established contact, that they eagerly enter into conversations on a whole host of different topics (Tapscott, 2009). It is likely that prospective students already engage in conversations on one or more social networking sites and discuss a whole host of topics including aspects of their social life, their interests, music and a vast array of other areas. Why then would they be interested in linking up with other prospective students? Who are they trying to contact and what are they hoping to gain? The questions outlined below investigate the first part of this conundrum; the second part, what are they hoping to gain, is discussed in themes two and three.

As members of the Net Generation do students display the characteristics that are ‘typical’ of social network users? Do they turn to social networking forums to gather information and form relationships with other people? The literature review suggests that making new friends is important for students and helps them integrate into the university (Harvey & Drew, 2006). Deconstructing ideas relating to friendships and integration suggests that there are two aspects of social networking in the context of my research that require further investigation: firstly, affordances of social networking that facilitate the creation of online friendships and secondly, the durability of these friendships and their subsequent impact on students’ integration. These questions are brought together under the theme of connecting to other people which aims to find out more about the contacts that prospective students make on social networking sites. The questions below are designed to identify the breadth (number of contacts made) and depth (the extent of the communications with each contact) that prospective students make on social networking sites. Investigating how prospective students use social networking to connect to other young people will help the reader relate the findings to a wider educational context.

**Theme 1 questions:**

- Who are prospective applicants hoping to contact? Other students on their course? Individuals who will be living in their hall of residence? Other applicants who will be attending their university on other courses? Current students? Members of staff?
- How many contacts do prospective students make?
- Once contact is established, how often is contact made?
- What is the nature of prospective students’ online relationships? Do they form friendships?
- If so, how durable are these friendships? Do online friendships become offline friendships when students start at university?
Theme 2: Exchanging information

Theme 2 explores the nature of students’ social networking interactions and communications with other prospective students, the topics they discuss and the information they exchange.

Section 2.2.1 discusses Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, capital and field. Social capital is related to students’ capacity to form friendships with other students and their familiarity with the norms and practices of a higher education environment, both these elements impact on how they assimilate into their new environment and how they are regarded by other new students, existing students and staff. However, many prospective students are unlikely to have opportunities to link up with other students and, furthermore, they are unlikely to have any personal experience of a higher education environment. I was interested in finding out more about social networking’s role in providing access to information about university life.

Wenger’s notion of communities of practice is related to interactions with other people and access to information, as discussed in Section 2.2.2. Communication and information exchanges allow individuals to share interests and develop a common language which may result in changes in their behaviour (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

It is clear in the discussion above that improving social capital and the development of a community of practice are related, at least in part, to accessing appropriate information sources. But what type of information is appropriate and will help students prepare better for university life?

Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 in the literature review made clear the link between expectations and experiences (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Harvey & Drew, 2006) and between students’ lack of understanding about academic aspects of their course and integration into university life (Jacobs, 2007b). The issue for this research is whether social networking helps students find out about more about their course, living in halls of residence and other areas which may be help them settle in when they start at university.

The literature review discussed Granovetter’s theory relating how ‘weak tie’ connections facilitate information dissemination (1973, p. 1363) and suggested that his theory could be related to information passing through social networks or groups via ‘looser’ connections. In the context of this research this would relate to information passing firstly from one group to another by weak ties and then being circulated within a group by stronger tie connections. The issue for this research is whether social networks provide prospective students with access to information sources and facilitate dissemination of information that helps them understand more about life at university. Theme 2 aims to find out more about
the topics that prospective students discuss on social networking sites. The questions
below relate to both the academic and social aspects of life at university.

**Theme 2 questions:**
- Which academic related aspects of university life do prospective students discuss
  on social networking sites?
- Which non-academic related aspects of university life are discussed?
- What other topics do students discuss?
- Which areas do students view as particularly important?

**Theme 3: Impact on expectations and experiences**
Themes 1 and 2 centre on why and how students use social networking sites. Themes 3
and 4 focus on the impact of those activities. My research aims to investigate whether
social networking activities help students develop more realistic expectations of university
life and improve the quality of their experiences when they start at university.

The literature review made clear the link between expectations and experiences. Both of
these areas are closely aligned to levels of confidence: understanding what is expected of
them and feeling that they know something about life at university will improve confidence
levels and help them cope with the adjustments they will have to make. Similarly, if they
have a sense of commitment or have started to form bonds with some of the people with
whom they will come into contact they are more able to cope with the transition to
university (Mackie, 2001). In the same vein, Roberts et al. (2003) suggests that where
students are able to draw on the resources of others they have higher quality early learning
experiences and are less likely to leave early. My hypothesis is founded on a positive
relationship between students’ interactions, access to information and the subsequent
impact on their expectations and experiences.

There are a number of other areas which impact on expectations and experiences
including concerns and anxieties, and students’ thoughts about how they will cope with the
transition and manage the changes expected of them. Bandura places self-efficacy at the
centre of control (1997). I was interested in exploring whether communications on social
networking sites are mutually supportive and encourage students to feel more positive
about going to university, whether they provide modelling influences (examples of student
behaviour) and help students put their thoughts and feelings into perspective – areas which
Bandura associates with self-efficacy (*ibid.*).

In 2000, Putnam argued that developments in telecommunications and entertainment
industries have resulted in interests and leisure pursuits becoming increasingly
individualised and people spending their time in increasing isolation (Putnam, 2000, p.
216). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007, p. 1163), working at a slightly later date,
suggested that although social networking helps individuals maintain contact with existing friends and associates it does not facilitate new bonds being formed. My professional practice suggests that in the light of increasing levels of sophistication and acceptance of online technologies, this is no longer the case and that social networking interactions help prospective students form bonds with other students, develop more realistic expectations and, subsequently, aids their integration into university life. This chain of events underpins my research hypothesis. The questions in Theme 3 aim to explore how students’ interactions on social networking sites impact on their levels of confidence, expectations and eventually on their experiences.

**Theme 3 questions:**

- How do social networking interactions impact on perceptions about university life?
- How does establishing links with other students impact on levels of self-efficacy?
- How do social networking interactions impact on students’ expectations about the norms and practices of university life?
- How do social networking interactions impact on students’ experiences when they start at university?

**Theme 4: The differing experiences of widening and non-widening participation students.**

My professional role at the University of Portsmouth is concerned with supporting students’ transition and identifying ways in which the institution can ease the transition of students from widening participation backgrounds. As outlined in the literature review, students who do not have ready access to information about studying and living at university may find it difficult to form realistic expectations or understand what learning at university will involve. Student experiences, regardless of whether they are from widening or non-widening participation background are bound to vary. Similarly, different students will have different social networking experiences – all student experiences are individual.

Norris theorises that social networking interactions have a normalising effect and provide an anonymity which neutralises social or cultural differences (Norris, 2004, p. 5). Furthermore, she suggests that where a network (offline or online) comprises individuals who have a range of interests and different backgrounds their interactions within the group will engender trust and re-enforce community ties. In the case of widening participation students this suggests that social networking interactions may provide access to information, and to other people, which may not otherwise be available to them. Drawing on Norris’s ideas relating to re-enforcing community ties, I was interested in investigating whether social networks are particularly helpful in facilitating widening participation students’ integration into the university environment. My professional interest leads to the question outlined below which aims to detect whether engaging in social networking activity is particularly beneficial for students from widening participation backgrounds:
Theme 4 question:

- How do social networking interactions impact on the expectations and experiences of students from widening participation backgrounds?

2.5. Research questions

The themes and questions outlined above are brought together below for clarification and ease of reading.

Overarching research question

How does social networking act as a bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences?

Related themes and questions

Theme 1: Connecting to people

- Who are prospective students hoping to contact? Other students on their course? Individuals who will be living in their hall of residence? Other applicants who will be attending their university on other courses? Current students? Members of staff?
- How many contacts do prospective students make?
- Once contact is established, how often is contact made?
- What is the nature of prospective students’ online relationships? Do they form friendships?
- If so, how durable are these friendships? Do online friendships become offline friendships when students start at university?

Theme 2: Exchanging information

- Which academic related aspects of university life do prospective students discuss on social networking sites?
- Which non-academic related aspects of university life are discussed?
- What other topics do students discuss?
- Which areas do students’ view as particularly important?

Theme 3: Impact on expectations and experiences

- How do social networking interactions impact on perceptions about university life?
- How does establishing links with other students impact on levels of confidence?
- How do social networking interactions impact on students’ expectations about the norms and practices of university life?
- How do social networking interactions impact on students’ experiences when they start at university?
Theme 4: The differing experiences of widening and non-widening participation students.

- How do social networking interactions impact on the expectations and experiences of students from widening participation backgrounds?
3. Methodological approach

Clough and Nutbrown (2007, p. 24) describe research as questioning assumptions and perceptions by stepping outside everyday lives and subjecting the focus of our attention, namely the research topic, to examination; they go on to describe research as finding alternative ways of looking at the familiar. This section discusses the methodological approach I have taken to investigate an aspect of my practice, but which uses structured methods and analytical approaches that go far beyond those which I would normally use on an everyday basis.

The research questions outlined in the previous chapter are designed to explore the hypothesis that social networking acts as a bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences and as such has a role in preparing students for university. The questions are formulated to find out more about how students interact with each other on social networking sites and how their interactions impact on their perceptions before they start at university and on their experiences when they start at university.

My research is based on students’ experiences and views, and my methodological approach is designed to capture their responses about these matters. However, it is clear that students do not operate in a vacuum, either before or after they start at university, and consequently, the context in which they are operating also requires consideration. In this case, the context includes the factors that influence their pre-entry views, for example, the views of friends and family, students’ socio-economic background, parents’ education, and so on. The post-entry context includes some of the elements which shape their early experiences, for example, being in a lecture or seminar, working independently, living in new accommodation and making friends. The conceptual framework diagram (Figure 1.1) in the introductory chapter includes these background factors and the discussion below bears all these points in mind.

Students’ views about their experiences, thoughts and feelings are highly personal matters; the ways in which they communicate with other people and access information varies according to personal preference and technical proficiency, as well as their interests and motivation. Furthermore, their reactions to their interactions with others and the information they access can impact on their behaviour in a variety of different ways. For example, one student may be involved in a number of different online conversations, but the exchanges may not influence his/her ideas and expectations. Conversely, a different student may engage in a very limited number of conversations, but one or more of those exchanges could have a profound effect on their viewpoint, how they feel about going to
university or their expectations. Students' experiences of social networking are highly individualised and therefore are best described by the students themselves.

3.1. Research philosophy

My research focuses on understanding more about how students interact on social networking sites, the connections they make, the types of information they exchange and how this impacts on their expectations and experiences of university life. The approach that I take in my research is guided by my philosophical viewpoint and my view of the relationship between ontology (nature of knowledge) and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired). Bryman (2008, p. 18) uses the structure of an organisation and its culture to illustrate the differences between two opposing ontological viewpoints of objectivism and constructivism. In his model he describes the objectivist view of an organisation's culture as an entity in its own right with a set of rules and regulations which is external to the individuals who operate within it; individuals adopt the beliefs and values of the organisation, but they do not contribute towards their development. The opposing position of constructivism views individuals or agents as contributing to the makeup of an organisation and playing an intrinsic part in the development of its culture.

Web developments over the last few years could also be used to describe the differences between objectivist and constructivist viewpoints. The first web developments were static, set up and hosted by development companies; once the site went 'live', users accessed the pages but otherwise did not have an input – this could be seen as analogous to the objectivist viewpoint. Web 2.0 technologies, and particularly social networking, are useful metaphors which could be used to describe the constructivist paradigm. Social networking sites have been designed as channels of communication within which individuals interact with each other; networks form, re-form and take different shapes according to the interests and influences of network members. A social networking site is hosted by the company who sets it up, but the network develops and constantly changes as a result of the members' input and their interactions.

I take the position that social phenomena change and evolve over a period of time as a result of the actions of individuals or groups within society. This constructivist viewpoint informs and guides my epistemological standpoint – how I view individuals acquire knowledge.

Traditionally, in social science two main epistemological camps have been identified: positivist or interpretive/anti-positivist. A positivist approach, which originated in the field of natural science, is associated with an objectivist viewpoint and is concerned with discovering rules and patterns; alternative interpretivist perspectives argue that social phenomena are not governed by pre-determined configurations and that behaviour is
influenced by the context in which people operate and on their individual circumstances. Carr (1995) argues that positivist approaches may be inappropriate in the context of educational research which deals with the experiences of groups of individuals in a specifically structured social setting, although this is a rather narrow view as discussed below.

In the pursuit of my research I am interested in understanding more about the students’ frame of reference and perspective: why they engage in social networking; factors that underpin their motivation; and how they interpret the impact of their actions on their pre-entry and post-entry experiences. My research follows a mainly interpretivist approach which is concerned with understanding their behaviour rather than explaining how people behave, the logic on which positivist paradigms are based.

Positivist and interpretivist approaches are often discussed with a clear separation between them. However, the division is not necessarily so well defined. Swann and Pratt (2003) argue that the division is largely artificial and that research practice ‘does not fit into tightly defined categories’ (*ibid.* p4). They illustrate this point by referring to the ‘science of education’ in which (for example) the assumptions that underpin policy and practice can be tested – a notion usually associated with positivist paradigms.

There does not necessarily have to be a clear division between quantitative and qualitative methods and, in many studies, a researcher may use both as the following quote illustrates:

> Researchers who principally use qualitative techniques almost invariably make statements that refer to quantity – phrases such as ‘most people’, ‘a few’ – and many educational researchers who use quantitative techniques employ qualitative categories such as ‘more satisfied’, ‘less satisfied’.

Swann & Pratt *op.cit.* p. 4

And:

> ...a surprising amount of counting goes on when judgements based on qualitative data are concerned.

Robson *op.cit.* p. 400

Dissatisfaction with positivist and anti-positivist approaches is not new. In the 1970s a third paradigm emerged: the critical theory paradigm, which argues that while the perspective of one or more individuals is important, people do not operate in a vacuum and that external influences impact on an individual’s or a group’s behaviour. Critical theory, based on the work of Habermas (1982) and colleagues in the Frankfurt School takes into account the
political framework, predominant ideology and examines the factors that underpin the locus and legitimacy of that power (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 28). Critical research is undertaken in an attempt to shift or change the power source and by doing so enfranchise individuals and ultimately change practice.

Feminist research methodologies emerged about the same time as the ideology-critical approaches described above and some aspects of the feminist approach resonate with the work of Habermas and the Frankfurt School (ibid.) including:

- The acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of gender.
- Deconstruction of the traditional commitments to truth, objectivity and neutrality.
- Adopting an approach which recognises that all theories are subject to the location of the researcher.
- Using a variety of research methods.
- Involvement of the researcher and the subjects.
- Deconstruction of the theory/practice relationship.

Adapted from Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 35

Feminist research is also associated with the locus of power and empowering disadvantaged groups, as opposed to more traditional objectivist approaches which were concerned with maintaining the status quo. My research does not aim to shift the locus of power, but it is anticipated that understanding more about the underpinning reasons why prospective students engage in social networking activities and how these interactions impact on their integration could lead to changes in practice. The responsibility for providing information and guidance about life at university currently rests with institutions; however, if they provide opportunities for students to link up and exchange information with other students on social networking sites there would be shared responsibility allowing students to take the initiative if they should wish to do so. In this sense my research, rather than shifting the locus of power, could be seen as helping to empower students.

The discussion above suggests that my approach is based on an interpretivist paradigm. This is largely the case, but not exclusively so. In order to inform my practice and that of colleagues, part of my research endeavour is to explore the validity of my hypothesis: does social networking act as a bridge? In what way? And under what circumstances? In order to identify the frequencies and patterns my research will involve some quantifying of responses, aspects associated with a positivist paradigm. It is reasonable to state therefore that my approach is mixed: a mainly interpretivist approach with some aspects of positivism.
3.2. Research strategy

A researcher’s ontological and epistemological standpoints influence their research strategy, whether they chose a quantitative or qualitative approach. However, as with the divide between positivist and interpretivist paradigms, the division between quantitative and qualitative approaches is not clear cut. Robson (1993, p. 6) declares that the ‘difference is more apparent than real’ and Bryman (2008, p. 21) states that some writers maintain that there is a distinct contrast between the two approaches while others view the division as false. He goes on to suggest that although the qualitative/quantitative debate is a useful way of classifying different techniques, research is a complex task and studies may employ one method or a combination of techniques.

The research questions outlined at the end of the previous chapter combine qualitative and quantitative approaches; they focus on identifying ‘how many’ or ‘how often’, for example, ‘How many contacts do prospective students make?’ and ‘Once contact is established, how often is contact made?’; these questions are quantitative in nature. Others centre on ‘who’, ‘which’ and ‘what’ suggesting a more qualitative approach: ‘Who are prospective students hoping to contact?’; ‘Which non-academic related aspects of university life are discussed?’ and; ‘What is the nature of prospective students’ online relationships?’

Researchers who adopt a qualitative approach have been subject to criticism; opponents argue that interpretivist researchers have abandoned scientific rigour and that their studies are not valid because it is not possible to generalise about findings which are based on a specific set of circumstances or individuals.

The two of the most common criteria used to evaluate quantitative research are validity and reliability: the first is concerned with the integrity of findings and the second with being able to repeat the research exercise. These notions have their roots in scientific research and their application is more readily apparent in quantitative research, but it is not difficult to relate these concepts to qualitative research. Yin (2009) outlines four tests of quality that have been used in both quantitative and qualitative social science research:

- **Construct validity**: identifying correct operational measures;
- **Internal validity**: establishing a causal relationship;
- **External validity**: defining the domain to which the study’s findings can be generalised;
- **Reliability**: demonstrating the research can be repeated.

Adapted and abridged from Yin, 2009, p. 40

The relevance of these tests for qualitative research has been debated energetically in the literature.
Bryman suggests that because construct validity is essentially concerned with measurement (Bryman, 2008, p. 151) it is not a concept that can be associated with qualitative research. However, Yin (2009, p. 41) argues that construct validity can be achieved in qualitative research by using multiple sources of evidence and creating an audit trail. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (op.cit., p. 110) discuss construct validity as an abstract concept and relate to the researcher articulating their conceptual framework and how that has developed. Internal validity is concerned with establishing the relationship between dependent and independent variables, and is more applicable to quantitative research; external validity, however, is relevant for all forms of research. Some writers argue that external validity is a problem for qualitative researchers given their focus on specific target audiences (LeCompte & Goetz, cited by Bryman, 2008, p. 376), whereas Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 48) argue that external validity in qualitative research relates to the generalisability of the settings, the profile of the sample and understanding the circumstances. In a similar vein, Yin argues that the theory which initially led to the research can be the basis for making generalisations. In my research, my hypothesis that social networking can help students prepare for university led me to study the experiences of students at the University of Portsmouth, but the findings are likely to be relevant for young people with similar characteristics who have applied for places at other new universities (the profile of the research sample is discussed further in Chapter 5 and the transferability of my research in the closing chapter).

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 105) also discuss the validity in interpretivist research and suggest it can be addressed through honesty, scope of the data collected and the objectivity of the researcher. Yardley, cited by Bryman, (op.cit., p. 380) outlines four similar evaluation criteria:

- sensitivity to social context, theoretical positions and ethical issues;
- engagement with the subject matter, a skilled approach and a structured data collection and analysis;
- the research methods should be transparent and coherent and articulate the researcher’s standpoint; and
- impact on theory, on the community on which the research is being carried out, and for practitioners.

The simplicity of Yardley’s criteria is appealing; his criteria encapsulate the main points outlined in other schema and are particularly relevant for qualitative research. However, as Cohen, Manion and Morrison point out ‘validity is a matter of degree rather than absolute state’ (op.cit., p. 105), a researcher has to strive to maximise validity.
It is also more difficult to relate Yin’s fourth test, reliability to qualitative research where the subjects, the setting and their location are unique and cannot be re-created. However, this is also true of quantitative social science research. In scientific research it may be possible to create exactly the same conditions, but in research which deals with people this is highly unlikely. An alternative view based on the philosophy of Popper recognises that reliability in social science research, particularly in educational research, is difficult to achieve because all knowledge is contestable – there are situations which have yet to be identified (Swann & Pratt, 2003). This perspective suggests that undertaking research that tests practical solutions and identifies the conditions under which a hypothesis is valid and conditions under which it is not (ibid.), will help practitioners move their practice forward – important considerations for professional doctorate students.

Regardless of the methodological approach taken, there are some elements which are common to good research. Swann and Pratt (ibid.) outline five main themes: purpose, rigour, imagination, care for others, and economy. I discuss these themes below in more detail and use them as criteria against which to review my own research endeavours.

**Purpose.** The researcher’s purpose is to benefit a group of individuals or sector. The purpose of undertaking my research is to understand more difficult areas of students’ transition and investigate ways to help students feel more confident about going to university before they start and suggest mechanisms that may help them settle in once they start at university.

**Rigour.** In an attempt to address the research questions, appropriate techniques and methods are employed. In addition, the research outcomes and evidence put forward can be verified. I have attempted to take a structured approach to my research and carefully considered the tools and techniques available, chosen on the basis of fitness for purpose.

**Imagination.** By definition, research is about the unknown or gaps in existing knowledge; if it is not adding to the existing knowledge, it cannot truly be regarded as research, particularly at a doctoral level. Articulating research questions, identifying appropriate techniques and discussing outcomes is a creative process. In concert with many colleagues undertaking research I have carefully considered the literature, my research questions and appropriate methods to investigate the questions. Given my recent research experience (outlined below) and the technological aspect of my research, communicating via the Internet, I tried to devise imaginative ways of identifying the sample and gathering the research data.

**Care for others.** Swann and Pratt discuss two threads about caring for others: firstly, the researcher should act ethically and protect those who take part in the research and
secondly, using the research outcomes in a responsible way. The first of these two points has been formally addressed by gaining ethical clearance from my own institution. However, acting ethically goes beyond formal procedures and should respect the needs and sensitivities of subjects. Throughout my research I have attempted to act in a way which protects the interests of respondents and acknowledges the contribution of those who took part in the research. As will be seen later in this report, the findings from my professional doctorate have been used to inform and guide my practice. I aim to use the outcomes in a way that will enhance my knowledge and experience as well as that of the eLearning team at the University Portsmouth, with whom I work closely. The focus of our work is the development and maintenance of a pre-entry website. The current website is now the fourth iteration, and during this latest stage various aspects of development have been guided by the outcomes of my EdD research. In a recent student survey evaluating the latest version of pre-entry website, feedback suggests that students have found the site to be a useful, friendly and non-threatening resource. I attribute some of the positive feedback to the lessons that I have learnt from my research. The impact of my doctoral research on my practice is discussed further in the conclusions chapter.

Economy. Research can be lengthy and expensive (ibid.); professional doctorate students are usually full-time practitioners and, in addition, may have a number of other, non-academic commitments. Like most of my research colleagues, I have a number of additional priorities and I have learnt over the last few years that research invariably takes longer than first anticipated. I have tried to utilise the resources available, scrutinised the literature and chosen research methods with which I am comfortable and which can be accommodated in parallel to my professional life and private commitments.

3.3 Research design

In common with many researchers following a (mainly) qualitative paradigm, my research focuses on ‘viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people who are being studied’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 385).

The views of students and their interpretation of their experiences are my data source and my research design aims to capture their feedback; I discuss the rationale that underpins my research design below.

Robson outlines three traditional research approaches: experiment, survey, and case study (1993, p. 40). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (op.cit.) distinguish between several kinds of research styles including: ethnographic research; historical research; surveys; correlational research; experiments; action research; and case studies. Several of these options, for example experiment, historical research and correlation research, are more suited to quantitative endeavours and therefore are not suitable for capturing the views and
perspectives from individuals. Given the online nature of my research, ethnography, which involves the researcher becoming part of the subjects’ environment, is also not an option. Possible choices include action research, a survey, or a case study.

As a practitioner, and in common with other EdD students, I am concerned with improving my practice. My role at the University focussed on improving students’ transition and the quality of their learning experiences – I am constantly seeking out effective ways in which we can better their experiences. I am planning to use my research findings in my practice as part of an ongoing programme of improving my practice and from this perspective it shares some characteristics with action research, for example, it:

- aims to improve education by changing it,
- facilitates improvement of practice,
- allows people to theorise about their practice,
- enables people to put their theories to the test by gathering evidence,
- involves two strands: a) improving understanding about a given topic and b) helping to identify appropriate research methods and processes,
- allows people to critically analyse their practice,
- enables people to give a reasoned justification for their work to others.

Adapted and abridged from Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, op.cit.

However, my EdD research is a discrete activity and focuses on one aspect of my practice – the role of social networking – and therefore as an entity in its own right, it cannot be described as action research.

My main research question focuses on a ‘how’ question: ‘How does social networking act as a bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences?’, but as discussed above, this is underpinned by a number of ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘how much’ type questions. Robson (op.cit., p. 44) suggests that a survey is a useful strategy to gather data from respondents about ‘who’ and ‘what’ type of questions. Yin (2009) extends this list to include ‘where’, ‘how many’ and ‘how much’ type questions.

Robson outlines three survey types including interview, postal and panel surveys (Robson, 1993) and suggests that surveys are useful in exploratory, explanatory or descriptive studies. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (op.cit., p. 69) suggest a survey can be used to describe, compare, contrast and analyse events; activities which could be regarded as qualitative or quantitative. Bryman (op.cit.) argues that this type of approach can be used to collect quantitative or quantifiable data. There seems to be some debate in the literature about whether the term ‘survey’ refers to methodology or tools and techniques.
Traditionally, surveys relate to gathering standardised data from a large number of respondents within a quantitative research design, but the advent of online surveys has added another dimension to surveys. Web-based technology has afforded the development of online surveys with functionality far beyond simple tick boxes and data summation. Bryman suggests that the term ‘survey’ is often associated with questionnaires *(op.cit., p. 44)*, but that this association may suggest limited scope and can be misleading. Surveys may also use methods other than questionnaires including interviews, panel surveys (collecting the data from the same respondents at intervals), telephone surveys or a combination of these. He argues that it is more helpful to describe the approach traditionally thought of as a survey, using the term ‘cross-sectional’ design *(ibid.)*. I agree that this is a useful approach, not because the word ‘survey’ is limiting, but because making this distinction helps discriminate between methodology (cross-sectional design) and method (a survey as a tool). In the rest of this chapter I use the term ‘cross-sectional’ to refer to a research strategy or design.

A case study approach focuses on a specific instance and can be used to illustrate a more general principle (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, *(op.cit.)*) – an in-depth study of individuals in a discrete setting.

Bassey (2003, p. 11) describes an educational case study as an empirical study which is conducted:

- within a localised boundary;
- into interesting aspects of educational activity;
- mainly in its natural context;
- informs judgements and decisions of practitioners;
- in a way which enables the researcher to:
  - explore significant features of the case;
  - make plausible interpretations;
  - test for trustworthiness;
  - construct worthwhile arguments;
  - relate argument to relevant research;
  - convey convincingly to an audience; and
  - provide an audit trail by which other researchers may validate or challenge findings or construct alternative arguments

Adapted and abridged from Bassey, 2003, p. 117
Yin (op.cit., p. 47) discusses five types of case study:

- critical, testing the circumstances under which given hypothesis may or may not work and investigating the outcomes;
- unique, where an individual or group are of interest because their behaviour or circumstances are outside the norm;
- representative, investigating everyday situations;
- revelatory, exploring a previously inaccessible case; and
- longitudinal, at two or more points in time.

Cross-sectional designs and case studies are two possible research strategies that could have been used to operationalise my research. The choice was determined by a key difference in the two different approaches. Researchers using cross-sectional designs are interested in identifying variation and their investigations focus on two or more cases, while case study designs focus on one case. My research is based on one case – students at the University of Portsmouth. However, as with the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research, the boundaries between different research designs can also be blurred. In investigating the role of social networking as a bridge there will be a degree of quantification, as discussed above. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that while this is a case study there are some elements of a cross sectional design within it.

My case is students at the University of Portsmouth, the characteristics they share are that they are first year students located within the University setting and that they used social networking forums before they started at the University. This case is representative because firstly, all students experience a transition period and secondly, as the literature review points out, many students (although not necessarily all) use social networking sites to communicate with other people. In addition, the students at the University of Portsmouth have a similar profile in terms of their demographic characteristics to students at other new universities (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

Case study methodology is not without its critics. One of the main issues for case study approaches has been questions about external validity or generalisability. As discussed above, quantitative researchers have questioned the generalisability of qualitative research; case studies, in particular, are subject to this type of criticism, however, steps can be taken to counter such criticisms. For example, a well-written case study report will help readers determine whether the research findings are transferable. A description of the case including details about respondents’ characteristics, social background, geographic location and other details helps the reader understand the context and allows them to judge whether the research can be relevant in other settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 45). In my doctoral research certain characteristics are pre-determined, for example, the case study is based on first-year students at a post-1992 institution and who have used
social networking before they started at university. Other characteristics will be captured during the investigations, for example, information about age, gender and first generation status, and details about social networking behaviour. This information, in conjunction with the discussion in the opening chapter about institutional context, will help the reader, or other interested parties, determine if the findings can be generalised to other contexts with which they are familiar.

Some of the criticism levelled at case study methodology could apply equally to other forms of research. Case studies are criticised for their uniqueness, and consequently, problems are associated with replicating the study. However, this could also be true of any other design setting in social science research, as discussed earlier.

Like all other research designs, case studies have strong and weak points, some of which have been outlined above. Yin suggests that a structured approach comprising a case study protocol (plan of action and questions); study database (data records) and maintaining a chain of evidence (an audit trail) (op.cit.) may alleviate some of the problems associated with a case study approach. In the next chapter I will outline the case study protocol used and Chapter 5 quotes numerous examples of student feedback and exemplifies the data generated. The chapters describing how I carried out my research, those which discuss my findings and my interpretation of them, provide a chain of evidence or audit trail about my research activity.

3.4. Influence of earlier research experience

There are two additional aspects that have had an impact on the research design: earlier research experiences and the knowledge gained setting up, managing and analysing online evaluation surveys.

3.4.1 Previous experience of focus groups

Research methodology and the selection of appropriate research methods are based on a number of assumptions (Clough & Nutbrown, op.cit.), such as participants’ willingness to discuss their experiences as well as them being available and sufficiently interested in the topic to provide feedback. However, I have found to my cost that despite efforts to carefully identify the population, secure a sample and organise data collection, other matters can intervene and may compromise the research.

In 2007, I set up a research project entitled Academic identity: students’ perceptions and teachers’ expectations, designed to explore the hypothesis that a mismatch between staff and student expectations is a pre-disposing factor which impacts on students’ first year experience and retention. I planned to gather feedback from 10 members of staff in one-to-one interviews and approximately 100 students in focus
groups. Potential student samples were identified and a number of academic colleagues volunteered to take part in interviews. Schedules were drawn up for the focus groups and interviews, the latter were piloted with several colleagues during the summer vacation. In October 2007, I spoke to students on six courses (a total of approximately 300 students) and asked for volunteers to take part in focus groups; I hoped to secure a sample of 100, which I planned to interview in six focus groups. However, despite incentives (lunch and a £5 ‘reward’) and repeated requests, very few students attended the first four groups and a total of 27 came to groups five and six. Although students who attended the sessions were open and willing to take part in discussions, I was concerned about the representativeness of the sample, particularly as all the students in groups five and six were studying computer technology. Students were asked again if they would be willing to take part in the discussion groups and although approximately ten agreed, none attended the sessions.

The failure of students to attend the focus groups was disturbing and I was worried that there was a fundamental reason or reasons why the students had been reluctant to take part in discussions. These concerns were prompted by overhearing students in two course groups saying that they did not want to take part in a ‘voluntary’ research activity which offered only a small financial reward. I discussed this problem with colleagues at the University and with contacts in the Students’ Union. Colleagues disclosed that they had also encountered problems securing sufficient respondents for their research and the Students’ Union told me that over the last two or three years, they had noticed a declining number of students willing to take part in volunteering activities such as becoming a course representative or sitting on student committees. During the course of the literature review for my doctoral thesis, it transpired that this was a problem elsewhere in the sector. The 2008 JISC research study ‘Great expectations of ICT: how higher education institutions are measuring up’ (Ipsos Mori, 2008) also encountered this issue; the researchers found respondents who had taken part in an initial survey were reluctant to take part in a second survey and they had to recruit new volunteers which they described as a ‘boost group’. The reluctance to take part in interviews and similar activities could be symptomatic of a general decline in individuals’ willingness to engage community activities (Putnam, 2000), as discussed in Section 2.2. in the Literature review chapter.

### 3.4.2 Student responses in an online evaluation survey

Around the same time I was also developing a pilot pre-entry project, which comprised a website with information about learning at university and a discussion group. The project provided prospective students (those with a firm offer) with generic information about learning at university and targeted course information; the pilot concentrated on one of the five departments in the University’s Business School. In August 2007, students were
notified about the website and invited to register for it. Within hours students started to register; the final number of registrations amounted to approximately 150 students, 20% of those who had been contacted. In October 2007, an online evaluation survey was set up and students who had registered for the pre-entry website were emailed and asked to take part. Again, many responded within a few hours and more followed over the next few days. The speed with which students took up the invitation to sign up for the website and completed the online survey suggested that they did not have concerns about accessing the website or interacting online. Their willingness to engage in online technologies appears to confirm Tapscott’s notion that the Net Generation readily engage with online and Web 2.0 technologies, and for many people these channels are their preferred mode of communication (Tapscott, 2009, p. 18).

3.5 Ethical approach

Ethical considerations are paramount in any research and the rights and sensitivities of the individual must be protected. This is not only concerned with securing formal ethical approval but involves a concern for the rights and sensitivities of the subjects taking part in the research.

The subjects in my research are students in their first year at university; the University has a legal duty of care towards its students and it also has a moral obligation to protect, and safeguard its students. As an employee of the University, and as a researcher, I have similar ethical obligations.

I have sought formal clearance from the University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee in which I had to demonstrate that I took appropriate action to ensure that respondents who took part in the research knew why I was conducting the research; that they understood why they had been selected; and were satisfied how the data would be stored and the research would be used. The formal letter of approval is included at Appendix 1.

However, in social science research ethics go beyond achieving formal clearance and relate to the way in which a researcher conducts their research, the manner in which they interact with respondents, and sensitivities relating to the location of power.

As a researcher I am also conscious of the need to ensure that my approach does not display gender bias. Eichler (1988, cited by Robson 1993, p. 63) provides some useful guidelines about areas that researchers should avoid: androcentricity (using research methods which were designed specifically for males with female subjects); overgeneralisation (assuming that findings based on male subjects also applies equally to females); ignoring gender as a possible variable; and double standards (using different methods for males and females).
The issue of gender in my research is also relevant from another perspective. My research centres on students’ use of social networks, a recent technological development. Technology is an area where sexism has been rife. In the early 1990s when domestic use of computers was becoming widespread, there was a perception that using computers was a male preserve. I have personal experience of this situation, but fortunately, have also observed how attitudes seem to be changing. In the mid-1990s, I worked as a research assistant, creating the graphics and editing a text book that a male colleague was writing on statistical analysis. Whenever we had meetings with publishers or any other interested parties, conversations about technical matters were always directed at my colleague, despite the fact that I handled this side of the business. About the same time I was teaching computing in Adult Education, the classes were an even mix of males and females, but inevitably the female students told me that either they came to the classes because the computer at home was monopolised by their husbands or sons, or they wanted to demonstrate to male members of the family that they were quite capable of using it; often their reasons for attending the class were a combination of both these factors. Fifteen years later, attitudes appear to be changing and some of the prejudices that were apparent at an earlier date seem to be diminishing. I have continued to maintain a technical aspect to my work; I currently work with a web development team and colleagues developing e-portfolio tools. Such teams often now include a more or less equal balance of female and male colleagues. Where I have been involved in teaching, the former lack of confidence displayed by female students about using technology also seems to be diminishing. There may be several reasons for this change in attitude: men and women under 30 have grown up with computers; using the technology is embedded within many aspects of professional and domestic life; and the notion of social networking appeals to both males and females (Tapscott, op.cit.).

The subject of gender bias has two possible implications for my research. In any written, online or personal communications I have to avoid sexist language or behaviour and also have to guard against making assumptions about technical aptitude, which I hope given my previous experience is unlikely to be a problem, but still requires vigilance.

The issue of power, however, goes beyond sexism. My research involves communicating with students and gathering feedback about their experiences. As a member of staff I have to ensure that my position remains neutral and does not convey any notion of a staff/student power relationship. This can be problematic. I am obliged to tell respondents that I am a member of staff, it would be unethical to do otherwise, but this has to be relayed in a non-threatening manner – any communications with students has to be friendly and open. However, I am also aware that, regardless of the steps taken, students will be conscious of my position as a member of staff, particularly where any face-to-face contact
takes place and in all aspects of my communications or encounters with students I strive to minimise this effect.

This chapter considered my methodological approach, my research strategy and design in addition to general ethical considerations; the next chapter discusses the tools and techniques that I used to operationalise my research.
4. Tools and techniques

4.1. Considering the options

Chapter 3 discussed the arguments for and against adopting different research strategies and articulated the rationale underpinning the choice of a case study approach for my research. Case studies can use a number of techniques to gather data including: observation, narrative accounts, interview and surveying techniques (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 190). The technique a researcher chooses is dependent on the nature of the research questions, the unit of analysis and a number of other factors. Clearly, there are practical factors as well as methodological considerations to take into account. For example, many researchers, particularly those undertaking small-scale studies, may have limited financial resources or they may be a practitioner and the time they can allocate to their research endeavours is limited. A viable solution is to adopt a ‘fitness for purpose’ approach. I considered the following factors to help identify suitable tools and techniques for my research:

- the theme of my research;
- the research questions;
- resources; and
- my previous experience.

The research questions include a range of ‘how’, ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘how much/many’ type questions and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the decision to use a case study approach was based on the nature of these questions.

Case studies often use mixed method approaches; Yin suggests that survey techniques can be used to collect data in a case study which involves human subjects (Yin, 2009, p. 63). Surveying tools include interviews, focus groups, postal surveys, online surveys or a combination of these approaches. In this research I used an online surveying tool.

I planned to gather the research data between April and June 2008 and I anticipated that approximately 100 respondents would take part in a survey (the adequacy of the sample size is discussed in more detail below); interviewing 100 respondents on a one-to-one basis would have presented major logistical problems. As described in Chapter 3, I had already encountered problems organising focus groups and even if I circumnavigated some of the problems I had previously encountered, it was unlikely that I would be able to

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7 Please note the term survey in this chapter refers to a technique rather than a methodological approach.
organise focus groups to take place before the end of the academic year. Time was short and any delay may have resulted in postponing the research to the following academic year, which I was keen to avoid. Surveying respondents using a self-completing questionnaire appeared to be the most viable option. This would enable the data to be collected in a standardised format and represents an efficient use of the researcher’s time and effort (Robson, op.cit.). In addition, respondents were able to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. However, self-completing questionnaires have shortcomings: they can be rigid and lack the flexibility to capture the individual perspective. Furthermore, respondents often have to complete questionnaires without any support mechanisms or the opportunity to ask for clarification and therefore a self-completing questionnaire needs to be carefully designed in order to mitigate these potential problems.

Web 2.0 technologies are a central theme in my study. The notion of using a web-based tool to collect data for a web-based enquiry was particularly attractive. Online data collection offered the opportunity to access students through a medium with which they were familiar and likely to engage readily, and in addition, I had some professional experience setting up and managing surveys. Using web-based tools in academic research is a relatively new phenomenon and as well as being an attractive proposition from a technical aspect, an online survey offered an opportunity to add to the limited current knowledge in this area.

Online surveys represent a new and interesting possibility, but they have advantages and disadvantages. Online surveys afford cost savings in terms of setting up and administration vis à vis other data gathering methods. In addition, the more sophisticated online survey tools incorporate features which guide respondents through the survey, reducing some of the problems associated with the limited availability of accessible support mechanisms as discussed above. A further advantage was that young people are usually comfortable operating and communicating in an online environment (see Section 2.4. The rise of technology) – they were likely to regard completing an online survey more favourably than filling in a postal questionnaire or taking part in a telephone interview.

Online questionnaires, however, have shortcomings. Bryman (2008, p. 653) lists a number: they are unsuitable for long or complex questions; they may generate a ‘thin’ source of data; and there can be problems associated with non-response rates, non-completion and acquiescence. However, increasingly sophisticated surveying software and careful questionnaire design can help the researcher take steps to guard against these potential problem areas. On balance, I regarded that the advantages of using a technical solution with a reasonably high level of sophistication, and which would likely appeal to a potentially large group of respondents, outweighed most of the disadvantages outlined above.
There is one disadvantage, however, which can be difficult to counter. Online surveys are a relatively new phenomenon in academic research and although this makes them an interesting option, criticisms may be levelled at the validity of data generated using this type of tool. In his discussion about the credibility of case study research, Yin suggests that a triangulation of evidence which involves using multiple sources of evidence may help convince readers and other researchers about the validity and generalisability of case study approaches (Yin, 2009, p. 116).

I planned to notify students about the online survey in April 2008 and complete the data collection before the end of the academic year in mid June (timings are discussed in more detail below). I revisited the possible additional data gathering techniques which could be used to triangulate the data. Interviews were a possibility and I considered using Web 2.0 equivalents as an alternative to face-to-face interviews. Online interviewing options included: online synchronous messaging tools (for example, Windows Live Messenger or MSN Messenger); Internet telephone; and discussion boards or Twitter. Surveying students via online messaging or Internet telephone would be time consuming and involve a number of logistical problems including: software compatibility, access to computers in a suitable location, and the timing and possible cost of calls. Asynchronous tools, such as discussion boards or Twitter, require constant vigilance to maintain momentum and interest, and it is unlikely that they would generate a rich source of data. Traditional one-to-one interviews presented the most viable option as they offered some degree of control over the data gathering process, the opportunity to gather a richer data source and, in addition, the flexibility to follow new lines of enquiry if they arose.

As Cohen, Morrison and Manion (op.cit., p. 269) point out, interviews are useful for gathering facts, accessing beliefs, identifying feelings and motives; the latter two points are particularly relevant for my research and as Robson (op.cit., p. 226) argues:

When carrying out an enquiry involving humans, why not take advantage of the fact that they can tell you about themselves?

Interviews offer respondents the opportunity to discuss their views and perceptions. Some respondents may find it difficult to articulate the rationale that underpins their actions or explain their viewpoint in detail, but an interviewer can endeavour to put the respondents at ease and encourage them to provide richer feedback. I anticipated that undertaking a small number of one-to-one interviews would help triangulate the data from the online survey and I estimated that I would be able to carry out approximately 12 – 15 interviews before the end of the academic year.

After identifying appropriate techniques, the next matter was to select a suitable online survey tool. The increasing number of users who have connected to the Web in recent
years has lead to a proliferation of online surveys, focusing on a host of different topics from marketing to dating. More recently, academic colleagues have started to use online surveys for their research. Two of the most popular online survey tools with researchers are Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) developed by Bristol University and SurveyMonkey, which is based in the United States. Setting up surveys with either of these products is relatively straightforward and both these tools offer similar levels of functionality; in addition, they are relatively stable, easy for respondents to use and the data can be exported in a number of different formats. I chose to use SurveyMonkey because my experience using BOS is limited and previous surveys I have developed using SurveyMonkey have shown it to be a reliable and robust tool.

4.2. Organising the study

Yin suggests that the case study researcher sets up a case study protocol to articulate the different stages in the study, to facilitate data collection and help the researcher maintain focus; in addition he adds that, creating this ‘audit’ trail allows interested parties to retrace the research process and therefore improves validity (Yin, 2009, p. 79). He outlines four essential elements in the case study protocol: an overview of the study; a description of field procedures; the case study questions; and a guide for case study report (ibid., p. 80). I cover the first and second of these elements below and the case study questions were outlined at the end of the previous chapter. This thesis describes how I carried out the research, outlines data analysis techniques I employed, outlines the research findings and my interpretation of them, and as such, provides an audit trail of my research.

4.2.1 Field procedures

I planned to carry out a pilot questionnaire before asking respondents to take part in the main online survey. Field procedures comprised designing the pilot and main online surveys, and organising and carrying out interviews. I created a detailed plan of action that included a description of the activities to be carried out and timescales (please see Appendix 2: Field procedures).

4.2.2 Case study questions

Yin (ibid., p. 87) distinguishes between level 1 and level 2 questions: the former refers to questions which are presented to respondents, the latter to the research questions. He suggests that this distinction helps the researcher put the questions to respondents in an easily understandable and non-threatening format, but ensures that he/she maintains a focus on the research questions.

I was conscious that respondents would not have the opportunity to ask for clarification when they completed the online questionnaire and therefore it was important questions were self-explanatory and easy to understand, but at the same time, prompted
respondents to think carefully about their answers. Bryman suggests that researchers put themselves in the place of the respondent and think how they would an answer the question (Bryman, 2009, p. 240). I drafted the online survey questionnaire using SurveyMonkey’s designer interface, checked them in the preview mode and asked a colleague to review the questionnaire.

When I created the questionnaire I considered how to change the level 2 research questions into level 1 questions suitable for an online survey. A number of questions in the survey closely matched the research questions (except for a change in the personal pronoun ‘they’ or ‘students’ to ‘you’); the research question relating to self-efficacy was re-phrased and focussed on self-confidence rather than self-efficacy. The research question designed to gather data about the differing experiences of widening and non-widening participation had to be split into two questions, one on age and another question which aimed to capture data about students’ widening participation ‘status’; formulating the second question presented problems. Widening participation has a variety of meanings, for example, even within HEFCE several definitions are used; a widening participation background may refer to socio-economic group, home postcode area, ethnicity or a number of other metrics. In addition, there are also issues associated with students’ sensitivity; asking respondents if they were from a widening participation background is impractical and inappropriate – they may not know what is meant by the term ‘widening participation’ and if they are aware of its meaning, an insensitively worded question could cause offence. I sought a suitable alternative. Machin and Vignoles (2004) in their interesting paper on Educational inequality: the widening socio-economic gap make clear the link between widening participation, socio-economic status, parental income and parental education. As suggested above it is not appropriate to ask students about their widening participation status, nor is it appropriate to ask them about their socio-economic status or their parents’ income. However, it is reasonable to ask them whether one or both of their parents had been to university and I approached the ‘widening participation’ question in this way. I am aware, as the literature points out (Stuart, 2006, p .163) that there is not necessarily a direct relationship between the terms ‘first generation’ and ‘widening participation’ when used to describe students’ backgrounds, but used language relating to first generation in the absence of a closer match.

Yin outlines three principles for data collection: using multiple sources of evidence; creating a database of evidence; and maintaining a chain of evidence. He argues that this will enhance external validity and help the researcher manage the study more effectively (ibid., p. 114). Collecting multiple sources of evidence has been discussed elsewhere, creating a database of evidence and a chain of evidence is associated with organisation and documentation. The thesis describes how I organised my research and is part of the documentation process. In addition, I kept a log of activity and preserved other
documentary evidence such as survey data, which had been downloaded to a spreadsheet; interview notes; transcriptions; and data analysis sheets.

4.3. **Designing the instruments**

4.3.1 **Survey design**

Online surveys, like paper-based surveys, have to be carefully constructed to engage respondents and minimise non-responses. The following guidelines apply equally to offline and online surveys:

- avoid leading questions;
- use clear and precise wording;
- limit the number of response options where possible;
- minimise open-ended questions;
- include a n/a option, if appropriate;
- measure intensity where possible (for example, not at all, fairly, moderately, and so on.); and
- place questions in a logical order and avoid asking multiple questions.

Adapted from Robson, 1993, p. 247

Surveys which have been judiciously designed aim to address all these issues; online surveys offer additional advantages, such as question branching to guide the user through the questionnaire, different question types, response validation and a customisable interface. In addition, they avoid some of the more labour intensive aspects associated with paper-based surveys such as administration, post-survey data input and analysis (Nulty, 2008, p. 301).

Online surveys have been used since the mid-1990s and have recently reached new heights of sophistication. In 1998, Baker (cited by Manfreda, Batagelj, & Vehover, 2002, p. 2), predicted that online self-administered surveys would be the next major step in computer-aided survey information collection (CASIC). Baker’s prediction has certainly been fulfilled; in recent years there has been a proliferation of online questionnaires set up by marketing companies, private individuals and other agencies.

There are two major issues facing designers of paper-based and online surveys: firstly, measurement error (responses do not represent a true reflection of respondents’ views) and secondly, non-response error (respondents skipping items and/or exiting the survey before completing it).

Measurement errors may be due to a number of factors, including poor question wording; poor survey design; inappropriate question branching; or technical limitations relating to
font size, a reduced number of screen colours, screen resolution and so on. The advantages and disadvantages of respondents completing a questionnaire without reference to the researcher or limited support mechanisms have been debated in the literature. Dillman, Smythe and Christian (2009) suggest that the privacy of completing an online survey may encourage respondents to be more honest with their answers. On the other hand, Robson (op.cit.) suggests that without the presence of an interviewer, reference to other respondents or to support services or backup material, respondents may become confused or impatient and complete answers quickly without considering the answer sufficiently. Robson was referring here to paper-based surveys, but the points that he outlined are also relevant for online surveys. I tried to guard against these problems by sending students an explanatory email before the survey went ‘live’ and including a brief introduction at the beginning of the survey – see Figure 4.1 below. If students stated that they had not read the information sheet, they were directed to a webpage that gave them a second opportunity to read the research information. My email address was included in all communications and on the survey form.

Creating a questionnaire which is accessed online can present a number of problems associated with the limitations of a web-based environment, including those associated with browser incompatibility, download time and countering declining attention spans, the latter topic is discussed by Kathie Nunley in her article about the effect of constant stimuli on brain activity (Nunley, 2004, n.p.). These problems, and survey ‘fatigue’ – students being constantly asked to take part in surveys – may lead to respondents leaving the survey early. Fortunately, SurveyMonkey is compatible with all browser types and as it comprises mainly text, download time is not usually an issue. Dealing with declining attention spans is more difficult, but I attempted to design the survey so that it was accessible, easy to read and engaging.
Manfreda et al. (2002) suggests a number of guidelines to help designers minimise measurement errors and non-response rates. Below I group Manfreda’s guidelines into categories and outline how I incorporated these suggestions into the online questionnaires.

**Graphical layout.** Graphics can have a positive effect on measurement error and non-response rates if they help to illustrate an aspect of the question, contextualise the survey topic or induce a ‘feel good’ factor. On the other hand, too many graphics may distract or alienate the user. In addition, numerous or large graphics can slow page download time. Internet users are often faced with distracting interfaces which comprise colourful, ‘busy’ graphics and moving images. My web design experience suggests that users find the overuse of graphics at best a distraction, and at worst, irritating and de-motivating. Judicious use of colour, however, can help and guide users. In the online survey I used colour sparingly to highlight titles and subtitles, and emphasise important points.

**Clustering.** Clustering questions may also help respondents understand the question context. The Gestalt principles of proximity and pattern perception suggest that placing elements in a group may help a user understand the relationship between the various elements (Dillman, *op.cit.* p. 92). In the survey, questions on the same theme were clustered together. Figure 4.2 shows the main question 11 on how information on social networking sites helped students prepare for their studies included a subset of related questions.

![Figure 4.2: Question clusters](image-url)
Presentation of questions. Question ordering in an online or offline questionnaire can impact on effectiveness; measurement error may be reduced by placing questions in logical sequence and grouping can help respondents understand the context.

A multipage design with validation mechanisms can help detect inappropriate or null responses and prompting respondents to review their answers may minimise the number of questions skipped. In the online survey if respondents missed a question, they were presented with a friendly prompt to review the question and complete the response.

Skipping questions or non-response rates may rise when respondents become confused or bored, this may be the result of information overload or using only one question type throughout the survey. On the other hand, too many question types can be distracting and confusing. The optimum approach is a compromise: using a limited number of question types which gather data in an appropriate format. The online survey in my research included four question types including checkboxes, radio buttons, free text boxes and some matrix questions – the latter are not problematical if they are used sparingly and feature in a multipage survey that includes other question types.

Attention to interface design principles may also help prevent confusion and disorientation; these principles include clustering objects (menus, information topics, etc.) in groups of no more than seven items (Miller, 1956) and choosing different visual devices such as shading, horizontal lines or a different font to distinguish between the groups. It is also recommended that the text on navigation buttons is consistent (for example, previous/next) in both style and placement on the screen. I kept these points in mind when I designed the online survey. (Please note, in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 the navigation buttons do not appear in the same position as the screenshot images have been cropped).

Survey topic. It is important to hold the attention of the respondents to prevent them becoming disinterested and leaving the survey early. Maintaining focus has a positive impact on measurement error and non-response rates. I tried to phrase the email, introductory text and items in a way which captured the interest of the students, I used wording that attempted to convey that the area of research was an important one for students and that their feedback would help inform future practice. In addition, I took advantage of functionality incorporated within the online survey to ‘route’ respondents through the survey in order to present them with non-redundant questions and avoid the survey becoming too long.

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8 Miller’s notion of ‘chunking’ is based on the capacity of the short-term memory to handle between 5 – 9 units of information at any one time.
In the previous chapter I discussed the issue of gender bias in research. Addressing the students directly as ‘you’ avoided the use of ‘he’ or ‘she’ and, as I have also discussed, I did not consider an online mode of data collection would neither encourage nor discourage male or female students. An online survey has the advantage of offering a degree of anonymity to both the subjects and the researcher, although I explained why I was carrying out the research and that I was a member of staff, the ‘distance’ afforded by online surveys reduces possible problems associated with staff/student power relationships.

4.3.2 Survey questions

The online questionnaire used a range of closed and open items to address the level 2 questions outlined in the literature review chapter and to gather data about respondent characteristics. Closed questions comprise multiple choice questions which allow only one single response; multiple choice questions which allow multiple responses; Boolean or yes/no answers; text boxes; and Likert scales.

Open question types are usually free text boxes, which can be limited to a set number of characters or are unlimited. A range of different question types within the same survey helps prevent monotony and question scanning. Bryman describes respondents scanning and selecting an answer based solely on its position as a ‘response set’ (Bryman, op.cit., p. 223), for example, always selecting the first option. Varying the question type and question wording can help minimise this problem and avoid a degradation in feedback. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (op.cit., p. 248) also draw attention to the importance of question wording and format and emphasise the need to avoid leading, loaded or overly complex questions. The pilot online questionnaire was developed bearing the above points in mind; it was trialled with a limited number of students in February 2008. Please see pilot questionnaire in Appendix 3.

After studying the data from the pilot, question wording was amended to improve clarification and readability, although the changes were minimal. I also amended one of the question types: in the pilot survey, one of the questions (Item 11c) was an open question, but the responses to this question comprised a limited range of similar responses. Consequently, in the main survey the item was changed to a multiple response item. In addition, text was added to a number of the open questions to encourage respondents to provide more detailed feedback, see text in brackets in Figure 4.2. The amended main online questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 4.

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9 To avoid confusion between the different types of multiple choice question (multiple choice/single response and multiple choice/multiple response) I shall refer to the latter as multiple response from this point.
The pilot questionnaire focussed on gathering data from Facebook users; respondents who had not used this forum were routed out of the survey, but the main survey was widened to include respondents who had used other social networking sites.

It is interesting to note that questionnaires, like many other areas of life, appear to be subject to the vagaries of fashion. I have been conducting surveys, mainly on paper, for a number of years and have usually formatted Likert-type scales from the negative to the positive (i.e. very unsatisfied to very satisfied). I used this approach in the online surveys for my professional doctorate. However, in a number of surveys it would now appear to be the practice to scale the questions from the positive to the negative. The 2009 National Student Survey was arranged in this way and I have recently received several requests from colleagues at the University to format evaluation surveys ‘positively’. The major texts on research methodology include a section about the use of Likert scales (Robson, op.cit.; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, op.cit. and more recently, Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2009), but there is a limited amount of literature about the effect of scaling questions ‘positively’ or ‘negatively’. However, Chan (1991, p. 7) does refer to this issue and suggests that a primacy-effect exists i.e. respondents tend to choose the first acceptable option. In a positively scaled question this may result in a bias towards satisfied/strongly agree or satisfied/agree type options as they are the first options the respondent will encounter. This may appear to be a trivial issue, but given the proliferation of surveys, particularly those online, the direction of scaling may have an impact on outcomes in a substantial number of surveys. These points are particularly noteworthy for academic researchers who are striving to minimise bias and capture reliable data.

4.3.3. Interviews

Yin outlines three types of interview: firstly, an in-depth interview, in which the researcher asks respondents about their views over a period of time; secondly, a short, focused interview; and thirdly, a more structured formal interview process which is part of a larger study involving several cases (Yin, op.cit., p. 107). The first type of interview was not appropriate as I planned to collect the data in one interview with each student; the third related to a case study which involved several cases and therefore this was not relevant. Yin suggests that the shorter focussed interviews can be used to corroborate data that has been collected using other techniques and which generally do not allow time to investigate new topic areas (ibid.). However, I considered that a focussed interview of 30 – 45 minutes would be sufficient to cover the online survey topics and discuss additional subjects that arose. I was also conscious that students would be in an assessment period when I planned to carry out the interviews and I could not expect them to spend more than 45 minutes taking part in an interview.
Other writers outline a range of different interview types. Kvale (1996, cited by Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, op.cit., p. 270) suggests that interview types can be placed along a continuum: at one extreme there are unstructured, open interviews in which respondents are free to respond as they see fit and at the other, standardised structured interviews in which all respondents are asked the same questions. In qualitative research, interviews are generally located towards the exploratory end of Kvale's scale and are either unstructured or semi-structured; the former is often used in ethnographic research, life histories or narratives. The interviews that I carried out can be described as semi-structured: I included the key questions that featured in my schedule, but also incorporated the flexibility to pursue certain lines of enquiry in more depth or explore new topics.

In online surveys, respondents move from one set of questions to the next by clicking on the navigation buttons, in this way they progress through the survey at their own pace. However, in an interview the researcher may have to guide the respondent from one topic to the next by moving the discussion on at certain points. Kristin Luker, in her lively and stimulating book on research methods, refers to these points in an interview as 'turn signals' and suggests that the researcher should practise and build these elements into their interview schedule (Luker, 2008, p. 171). Recognising that there will be 'turns' in the conversation and thinking about how to signal these turns helps the researcher manage and organise the interview, although I do not think it necessary to record them in the interview schedule.

The majority of books on research methodology provide guidelines about interview format and the sequencing of questions. I turn again here to Luker's book; she covers the same points on this topic as many other texts, but does so in a most accessible and engaging way. She suggests that her researchers should think of an interview as a 'conversation on a train', in which they structure an informal and relaxed conversation that moves from the general to the specific and to the general (Luker, 2008, p. 170). She suggests a 'hook' is needed at the beginning of the interview to engage and 'draw in' the interviewee; this could be some general light-hearted, but relevant comments which give respondents the opportunity to talk about themselves or a non-threatening topic to which they can relate. The interviews in my EdD research were timed to take place during the last stages of the first year exams or when students had just finished them. This afforded opportunities to (sensitively) enquire as to how the revision was progressing or how the exams were going, the number of exams still to be taken, if students were still managing to get some free time or other similar questions. At the beginning of the interviews I also asked students which year they were in, what course they were doing and so on. Putting students at ease was particularly important as they may have been apprehensive before the interview because they knew that I was a member of staff and in addition, when they came to the interview, they realised that I was many years their senior. Luker suggests once the students have
relaxed the researcher should ‘turn’ the interview towards the main business; the ‘turn signal’ in my case was to re-iterate the purpose of the research, ensure that the students consented to take part in the interview and then move onto the main research questions. At the end of the interview, Luker proposes a ‘cooling down’ period which brings the interview to a close, but leaves the interviewee feeling positive. The closing stages offer opportunities to ensure that respondents are happy with their feedback and are willing to sign a consent form; an activity which I feel is more appropriate at the end of the interview rather than at the beginning. I closed the interview with these routine activities and then a few final remarks about plans for the holidays, vacation work and so on.

Kvale (1996, cited by in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, op.cit., p. 273) argues that as well as providing the researcher with data the interviews may have an impact on the respondents’ perspective regarding the topic in hand and/or provide them with a positive experience. Although I did not deliberately set out to overtly achieve either of these objectives, several of the students said that they enjoyed the interviews. In addition, one respondent stated that she realised using social network forums during the pre-entry period had had a positive effect on her early experiences and that as a student representative she would investigate setting up sites to help the next round of new students.

The interview schedule was drawn up taking into account the points outlined above. The schedule included: a few friendly opening remarks; a brief discussion outlining the purpose of the interview, the format of the interview, why the respondents has been selected, how data would be used and a consent check; some ‘warm up’ questions (course, year of study and so on); the main research questions; additional time to discuss other relevant topics; summary of respondents’ main points; signing the consent form; and closing remarks. A copy of the schedule can be seen in Appendix 5.

4.4. Identifying the sample

4.4.1. Determining the population
My research focused on the social networking experiences of prospective students during the pre-arrival period and how this influenced their levels of confidence and their early experiences at university.

I considered which students to include in the sample frame. As the majority of students at the University of Portsmouth are UK-based undergraduates, I planned to include these in the population, but I also had to determine whether to include international students and postgraduate students.

In an increasingly global educational environment and with diminishing funding streams, UK higher education institutions have turned their attention to recruiting more international
students. International students, particularly from Asia and Africa, have experienced learning environments where the culture is different to that in the UK and they have a range of expectations about learning in higher education. It would be difficult in this research to take those factors into account. Furthermore, the references outlined in the literature review, and my professional practice, focus mainly on the experiences of UK students. The educational background and pre-university experiences of postgraduate students are also varied: they may have already studied at undergraduate level and have experience of higher education learning or their expectations may be influenced by workplace experiences. These considerations pointed towards a sample frame who met the following conditions:

- they have a home address in the UK;
- they were studying for undergraduate degree;
- in the first year (it was important they could still remember their pre-entry perceptions and early higher education experiences); and
- they had used social networking sites before they started at university.

4.4.2. Selecting the sample

Identifying the population may have been relatively straightforward; selecting the sample was more complex. As well as the conditions outlined in the bullet points above, I also had to take into account a number of practical matters. I am working full-time and the time for engaging in my own research is limited; I therefore had to identify a sample that was accessible both in terms of financial expenditure and location. Working within the campus environment suggests the most accessible target audience would be first-year students at the University of Portsmouth.

In my professional role at the University I do not have direct contact with students and therefore I had to work with colleagues who could provide a channel of communication to respondents. This involved firstly, identifying appropriate contacts and arranging meetings and secondly, selecting appropriate student cohorts and discussing access. In addition, I also had to take into account the structure of the academic year and students’ availability.

I also had to try to time the research so that students would be able to remember their pre-entry perceptions. Once they left University for the summer break, many students would have also left their first year experiences behind them and if I attempted to interview them after the end of the year, many may have been unable to accurately remember how they felt nearly a year earlier. In addition, many of the students live outside the city and it is unlikely that they would be willing to return to the University to be interviewed during the summer break, nor could I expect them to do so.
I set about selecting the sample by firstly contacting a colleague in the University’s Students’ Union who could advise about the best way to access students. He informed me that the Halls’ of Residence Manager had set up Facebook groups for 2007 entrants before they started at University and suggested that I contact her. The Halls’ Manager agreed to notify students about the online pilot survey via the messaging facility on the Halls’ Facebook site and to post information on the notice boards in the Halls’ reception areas. I met the Halls’ Manager several times over the next few months about the most appropriate way of contacting the students and asking them to take part in the main survey and interviews.

After the online survey had been completed I planned to carry out interviews with a limited number of students. The Halls’ Manager offered to notify students about the interviews at a later date. I was grateful for her assistance and accepted her offer. However, I also wanted to widen the sample frame to include interviews with other first year students. There were three reasons for this: firstly, students in halls had already been contacted about the research and may not have responded well to another call for volunteers; secondly, I have undertaken student surveys on a regular basis and I was conscious that students are often over-surveyed and consequently, I preferred to contact a new set of students; and thirdly, it is possible that the main topics of conversation for students in the Halls’ Facebook groups would have revolved around who else would be sharing their accommodation and other topics associated with living in specific halls, I wanted to widen the net to investigate whether students who were not in the Halls’ Facebook groups discussed these topics to the same extent.

I contacted the Students’ Union again to ask for their help in notifying students about the interviews. They agreed to post a notice calling for interview respondents on their website, which is displayed throughout the University on plasma screens. I also contacted students who had taken part in some of my previous research, including those who had taken part in the focus groups for my first doctoral research project.

4.4.3. Sample size and representativeness

Trying to determine how large a sample should be, or deciding on the minimum number of respondents, is a difficult task. In quantitative research, sample size is linked to representativeness and there are well-established formulae used to determine minimum numbers and confidence levels. However, in qualitative research, there are no set rules or formulae to calculate the minimum sample size. My dilemma was that my research was based on a case study, but using a survey technique. The former can be based on a small sample, but the latter, given a possible higher non-response rate and ‘thinner’ data, requires a larger number.
Existing research about online survey response rates is limited. However, in a recent paper, Nulty discusses the problem of sample error and bias in online surveys. He argues that a response rate of around 55%, frequently regarded as adequate in social research postal surveys, is difficult to achieve in web-based surveys (Nulty, 2008, p. 302). However, he suggests that low responses rates can be boosted by reminding potential respondents about the survey, extending the period when the survey is available, offering incentives or by using more than one of these approaches (ibid., p. 304). He goes on to advocate that online surveys can be used as part of a mixed approach which also uses focus groups, interviews or other appropriate surveying techniques.

Nulty uses two statistical measures to determine sample size. The first is based on liberal conditions with a 10% sampling error and a confidence level of 85% and a second which is based on a more stringent set of conditions with a sampling error of 3% and confidence level of 95% (ibid., p. 310).

If I used Nulty’s liberal conditions, a population of 2,300 (the number of students registered on the Halls’ Facebook site) would require a minimum sample in the order of 26 or 27 students; the more stringent conditions would require a minimum sample of around 570. It was unlikely that I would have been able to obtain responses from 570 students and if I had managed to secure that amount of feedback, I would not have had the resources or the time to analyse the data. On the other hand, I would have been disappointed with a response rate of only 26 or 27 as my colleagues and I had spent a significant amount of time and resource communicating with students about the survey. Furthermore, I had secured a sample of 27 students in the earlier focus group research as discussed at the end of the previous chapter and I abandoned it on the grounds of insufficient numbers.

This is clearly a difficult area where the research is limited and inconclusive and, consequently, I referred to my previous experience of using online surveys as a guide. Examining the surveys that I carried out in the past I found that when approximately 2,000 students were invited to take part in a survey, approximately 5% – 10% responded. Taking into consideration that the students in halls may no longer be active on the Facebook groups or may have changed their email addresses and therefore be difficult to contact, I aimed for a sample of 5%, approximately 100 students.

4.5. Data collection

Data collection involved two main activities: firstly, raising awareness about the research and securing the sample and secondly, gathering and recording data.
In Section 4.4, *Identifying the sample*, I discussed my communications and meetings with colleagues in the Students’ Union and Halls’ of Residence who forwarded emails about the research to students, and posted information on notice boards and a website. In addition, I contacted students who had taken part in earlier research. Although information about the research had been communicated to a large audience, securing the required response rate (about 100 students) did not follow automatically. As Robson (1993, p. 143) points out, non-response can be a serious problem for many researchers in paper-based surveys; online surveys may generate an even lower response rate (Nulty, 2008). However, steps can be taken to help improve response rates. Fortunately, online surveys incorporate reports that provide instant access to the number of responses, completion rates and time spent on the survey. These features can alert the researcher to low response rates and prompt them to take action. I was also in the fortunate position to be able to offer an ‘incentive’ – entry into a prize draw to win an HMV voucher worth £25.00. I received ethical clearance for the £25.00 voucher and followed University guidelines about managing competitions and similar activities.

As discussed above, I did communicate with the students again at various stages, but I was conscious to be judicious in this regard as too much contact may alienate potential respondents and lead to disengagement.

There are 14 Halls’ of Residence at the University, each with its own Facebook group. After I met the Halls’ Manager in February 2008 she emailed students in two of the Halls’ Facebook groups encouraging them to complete a pilot online questionnaire; 56 students responded.

I made adjustments to the survey questionnaire as discussed earlier in Section 4.3.2. *Survey questions* and then in mid April 2008, the Halls’ Manager posted a second notice on the remaining Halls of Residence Facebook Groups asking students to take part in the main survey. Sixty-three students responded within 24 hours of being notified, a further 16 completed it over the next 24 hours but after that the response rate reduced to an average of two submissions per day. In an attempt to encourage more students to take part, another email was sent out to students at the end of April – this generated another 17 responses. The pilot and main surveys generated 167 responses, although 65 were unusable – the usability of responses is discussed below. Figure 4.3 shows the prompt/response pattern in the main survey.
Figure 4.3 shows a clear alignment between notifications and peaks of activity. It is hardly surprising that notifications or reminders generated responses, but it is the speed with which students responded after they received a prompt that is particularly interesting. Students generally responded to an email within two days, suggesting that resources expended in monitoring responses are an investment worth making.

Swift response rates also hint at the extent to which online technology and communications are embedded within students’ everyday activity. When I set up the online survey, I had the survey software open on my computer and could monitor the early responses as students completed the survey. In the first hour over 30 students completed the survey, suggesting that they had their email client running, that they had readily available access to the Internet and that they were willing to take part in an online survey.

Online non-response rates were discussed above, but interview non-response rates can also be problematic. In early May 2008, I contacted the Halls’ Manager and the Students’ Union again to help secure student volunteers. Notices asking for interviewees were placed on the Halls’ Facebook groups and on the Students’ Union website. In addition, I contacted respondents from previous doctoral research. Initially, the response rate was disappointing, but after additional postings and the offer of a £5 ‘reward’ in mid May the response rate improved.
Interview dates were arranged and daytime interviews were organised in convenient, non-threatening locations, for example, a meeting room in the Students’ Union building, the Union bar and a number of other equally suitable and convivial locations. Twenty students agreed to take part in the interviews and appointments were arranged with 15; of these eight students attended the interviews, seven did not materialise.

The second aspect of data collection is recording feedback. Gathering data from the online surveys is relatively straightforward: data is available to view on screen or can be exported in a number of formats for uploading to a spreadsheet or database. I exported the data into a spreadsheet, an environment with which I am familiar and have some experience. In the interviews I used a digital recorder, but also took notes to guard against technical or other unforeseen problems. The main points were transcribed and the key themes identified, as discussed in more detail below.

**4.6. Data analysis**

The data collected comprised 167 responses from the pilot and main surveys plus feedback from eight respondents in interviews.

Filters within the online survey tool were used for data reduction where responses did not match the sampling frame. There were a number of entries from postgraduates, international students and students in their second and third years, which were discounted. Data was then exported into a spreadsheet and after editing for usability and completeness, 102 responses remained. Twenty-six respondents exited at the mid-point in the main survey: their data was included to the point of exit and adjustments made in the analysis of subsequent items in the data analysis process.

Downloading data was a relatively quick and easy process, but determining how to analyse it is more challenging. Multiple choice and multiple response items offer the respondent a set number of options and the data produced is in a standardised format. The question for the researcher is should this type of response be regarded as quantitative data or qualitative data?

Quantitative analysis measures the relationship between variables or frequency distributions using univariate analysis or other statistical procedures, but I did not regard these as appropriate tactics to use in research which focussed on students’ interpretations of their experiences. However, in order to establish how many students agreed or disagreed with the statements made in items, and to help contextualise subsequent comments, I did use basic spreadsheet functions. Open questions and interview feedback were analysed using more traditional qualitative data analysis techniques (these are discussed below).
The analysis techniques that I used reflected the differences in the question types. The multiple choice and multiple response items were scored and ranked in descending order according to frequency, while responses to open-ended questions were coded and summarised.

Data analysis comprises two main stages: coding data and interpreting findings. Coding is at the heart of data analysis and helps the researcher ‘get to know’ and understand their data and is a technique which is used in both qualitative and quantitative research.

Bryman (2008, p. 550) suggests that the qualitative researcher follows a number of steps in coding their data: reading through transcripts and identifying interesting or significant points; assigning preliminary codes; reviewing codes; and considering coded data in relation to theoretical concepts. This is clearly an iterative process where the researcher is constantly reviewing the data and the categories to which the data is assigned. I found that repeatedly reviewing the data helped identify patterns and themes. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 58) suggest a two-level coding system in which the first level comprises labelling groups of loosely associated categories of words based on the original hypothesis or research questions and a second level which involves grouping the data into subsets or themes. I followed this approach and examined each unit of data and assigned codes to key concepts; Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 166) describe this process as largely descriptive and suggest that codes should be derived from the data responsively rather than being pre-ordained. I recorded the initial codes on large sheets of paper, taking note of the frequency with which each coded comment occurred and grouped the data into domains or themes by identifying clusters, groups or patterns. The themes identified mainly related to key concepts outlined in the research questions, however, a number of additional themes also emerged.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison advocate that after undertaking a domain analysis, the researcher looks for linkages between the groups then seeks to identify key concepts and their causes; this is the move from description to theory generation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, op.cit.). I examined the data for links between the various domains, relationships to the research questions and to the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2: Literature review – these linkages and connections are discussed in Chapter 6: Maintaining the bridge, interpretations, reflections and new integration theory.

The next chapter discusses students’ responses in online surveys and interviews, in addition to providing background information about the size and nature of the research sample.
5. Research findings, analysis and discussion

This chapter starts by reflecting on the concepts of a ‘virtual’ world and a ‘real’ world in the context of my research and then moves on to discuss the themes that emerged.

My doctorate includes elements of both these worlds: it focuses on the notion that social networking (the virtual world) can act as a bridge between students’ pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences (in the real world). Matters relating to students’ pre-entry and post-entry experiences are relatively easy concepts to grasp and will be familiar to many practitioners or researchers working in the higher education sector. However, it may be more difficult to relate to the virtual aspects of my research: the social networking environment or forum, social networking behaviour and social networking activities. In an attempt to describe these virtual aspects in more concrete terms, I will adopt Bryman’s analogy of an organisation and its culture (see Section 3.1. Research philosophy).

The social networking forum could be regarded as an organisation within which social networking activity takes place; social networking behaviour as the way individuals move around within the organisation and their social interactions and activities as the information that the individuals share with other people in the structure or the relationships that they forge with other members of the organisation. However, this organisation is static and unconnected to students’ pre-entry and post-entry experiences. My hypothesis is that social networking is a virtual connection or bridge that impacts on students’ real world pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences. This chapter discusses how the bridge interfaces between the virtual and real world.

Before discussing findings related to the notion of social networking as a bridge, the first section provides background information about the profile of students who took part in the research, the response rates and sample numbers. This section also aims to help the reader ‘visualise’ the research sample and contextualise it within the learning environment at the University of Portsmouth and the wider higher education sector.

5.1. Sample response rates and numbers

The response rates varied, firstly, due to question branching and secondly, because a number of respondents who exited before the end of the survey, did so at different points. Consequently, the maximum number of responses per question varied from question to question. A preliminary analysis of the data identified the effect of question branching
and/or respondents leaving early on the maximum number of possible responses per question.

The problem of differing response rates did not arise in interviews as respondents provided feedback to all the questions they were asked and were willing to discuss other topics as they arose.

5.2. The sample profile

The sample in this research was largely opportunistic and I did not expect it to be statistically representative but on examining the data it was found that in some respects the profile of the students who took part in the research was not dissimilar to that of first-year students at the University and students in other post-1992 institutions.

Investigation of the sample, students in halls and those who started at the University in October 2007, showed that with respect to age, the sample profile was similar to the profile of students in halls. However, it was less representative when comparing the age of those who took part in the research to the wider group of first-year students at the University, as indicated in Figure 5.1. In terms of gender, there also did not appear to be a close match between the research sample and students in halls or the first year cohort. I decided to explore the representativeness of the sample further.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research sample</th>
<th>Halls*</th>
<th>UoP**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2563</td>
<td>5562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30 (39%)</td>
<td>1375 (54%)</td>
<td>2969 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46 (61%)</td>
<td>1188 (46%)</td>
<td>2593 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 21</td>
<td>72 (95%)</td>
<td>2367 (92%)</td>
<td>4017 (72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Head of student Housing, R. Geary. **University of Portsmouth, student records system

Figure 5.1: The profile of the research sample, students in halls and 2007 entrants to the University of Portsmouth

Statistical analysis using chi squares showed that there was a significant difference between the distribution of female and male students in the first year at the University and the number of female and male students who took part in the research. This suggests that in this respect the sample was not representative of the larger population within the University. However, when I investigated the relationship between the profile of respondents and the wider population of students at other new universities, a statistical analysis showed that there was not a significant difference, suggesting that the research sample could be regarded as typical, with respect to gender, to that of the student
population in University Alliance\textsuperscript{10} institutions – see Figure 5.2. This is an interesting outcome and suggests that in terms of gender, the balance between male and female students at the University of Portsmouth is not typical of the situation in the wider spectrum of students at new universities: there are more male students at Portsmouth, but in the wider population there are more female students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research sample</th>
<th>University Alliance Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>114990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30 (39%)</td>
<td>50240 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46 (61%)</td>
<td>64750 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 21</td>
<td>72 (95%)</td>
<td>90842 (79%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: HESA, 2009

Figure 5.2: Comparing the research sample and students in University Alliance institutions

Investigating the representativeness of the sample highlighted an interesting anomaly. Although there were more male students at the University of Portsmouth and in the halls of residence in 2007 than female students, more female students completed the online survey and took part in interviews (two male and six female students, all under 21). This may be a coincidence, but may also be due to more fundamental reasons, for example, that female students are more willing to take part in surveys or may be more open about sharing their views. Investigating the existing literature suggested that this was a topic which has not been examined in depth. However, from a researcher’s perspective and in the interests of preventing bias, this could be an important area. Unfortunately, it was not within the scope of this research to investigate further, but it is a potential research area upon which I would like to focus in the future.

There is also an additional point of interest. More women than men completing the online survey indicates that there may be some validity in the suggestion in Section 3.5. Ethical approach, that computer technology is no longer the male preserve that it once was.

As well as gathering data about age and gender, I also investigated the subject that respondents were studying. The data in the University’s student record system suggested

\textsuperscript{10} A group of 22, mainly post-1992 UK-based institutions, of which the University of Portsmouth is a member.
that in this respect the students who took part in the research were typical of the wider first-year population, as Figure 5.3 illustrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Research sample</th>
<th>UoP entrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative and Cultural Industries</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portsmouth Business School</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3: Discipline area by faculty

In interviews, three students were drawn from the Science faculty, two from Technology and one from each of the other three faculties.

The other area about which I gathered data related to parental education. As discussed in Section 4.2., I asked students whether they were the first generation in their family to go to university rather than enquiring about their widening participation status. Fifty-two (68%) of respondents in the online surveys stated that they were first generation students, but trying to relate this to the number or percentage of first generation students at the University of Portsmouth or the wider higher education community is a complex task. Accurate data about parental education is not readily available. UCAS (The University and Colleges Admissions Service) did not start gathering data on parental education until 2008 and, to further complicate matters, the data was (and remains) incomplete. I therefore sought alternative data sources.

As also discussed in Section 4.2.1, the literature suggests that there is a link between parental education and socio-economic status (Machin & Vignoles, 2004). In an attempt to relate my research to the wider population at the University and the sector, I investigated data sources on socio-economic status. The Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (Heidi), an online data source managed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, holds data about the socio-economic status of individual students based on the occupation of the main wage earner in the family. Interrogating Heidi data revealed that in 2007 approximately 50% of the University of Portsmouth undergraduate entrants were from socio-economic groups 3 – 7 or non-professional households (HESA, 2010); the figure for University Alliance institutions was slightly lower at 45%. It is clearly not possible to make any conclusive statements about the representativeness of the sample in terms of widening
participation background or parental education. However, the above discussion serves to highlight the complex nature of widening participation, choosing appropriate proxies when gathering data and identifying comparable data sources when trying to determine representativeness.

5.3. Connecting to people

This section focuses on findings in relation to the social networking environment and students' behaviour within it: who they are trying to contact; how many contacts they make; and how often they communicate with other people. It also considers other behavioural aspects, such as the nature of their online relationships, the sustainability of the relationships that they made and whether contacts remained mere acquaintances or became 'friends'. Please note that the discussion in this, and the following sections, consider the findings by theme rather than the chronological question order.

5.3.1. Preferred social networking sites

Students' choice of social networking forum impacts on the number of contacts that they are able to make and ultimately on the size and number of networks they establish. A highly populated network, such as Facebook, which is used extensively by people who are of similar age and share similar interests, offers greater opportunities for interaction and information exchanges than less popular fora.

One hundred and two respondents answered the question regarding which social networking forum they preferred. In addition, eight students in interviews discussed their favourite social networking sites. Most online respondents used Facebook. The majority used it exclusively; some also used MySpace or Bebo (see Figure 5.4); only a very small number of respondents used MySpace and Bebo and not Facebook; feedback in interviews revealed similar preferences. These findings mirror recent research, which suggests that Facebook is the social networking site of choice for many college students (Thompson, 2007, n.p.) and that the majority of social network users confine their activities to one or a very limited number of sites (Salaway et al., 2008). In this respect respondents' behaviour was typical of young people who use social networking sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilot</th>
<th>Main</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook exclusive use</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook + other/s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Facebook users</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MySpace (exclusive)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebo (exclusive)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (exclusive)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.4: Preferred social networking sites
All eight students who took part in interviews used Facebook; four also used one or more other social networking sites.

The popularity of Facebook was highlighted in the following comments:

“I used to have a MySpace and Bebo account, but as more people have a Facebook account it’s easier to contact people quickly on Facebook.”

“I think most people use Facebook. I have got a Bebo account, but I don’t use it.”

Bebo was viewed as a social network for younger people and Facebook as more appropriate for those going to university as the following comments suggest:

“Bebo I find is for slightly younger people whereas Facebook, all my friends have got it.”

“My younger cousins like Bebo. Facebook seems to be uni age people.”

The match between the social networking habits of respondents and the wider population of young people is discussed in more detail in Section 6.7.2 in the next chapter.

5.3.2. Establishing contacts

Students used social networking sites to link up with people who would be sharing the same, or similar, experiences in the near future. The items about the types of contacts that students made were at the beginning of the online survey and generated responses from all 102 respondents. Students in the interviews were also keen to discuss the different types, and the numbers of, contacts that they made. The readiness to engage in discussion about the types of contacts they made suggests that one of the prime motives for joining social networking forums was students’ interest in establishing a network of contacts.

84% of respondents made contact with, or tried to contact, people with whom they would be sharing their accommodation. The majority of those who took part in the research were members of the Halls’ Facebook groups, which had been set up by the Halls’ Manager which provided access to other people who may be in the same hall of residence.

The Halls’ Manager had made it relatively straightforward for students to contact other people in their hall – she had created a space in which they could easily communicate with each other. More effort was required if prospective students wanted to link up with other
students on their course: they had to post, or respond to, an enquiry on one of the Halls’
virtual noticeboard (the ‘wall’ in Facebook), join a discussion thread within one of these
forums or contact other prospective students via another social networking forum.
However, these are routine activities with which most Facebook users will be familiar. The
percentage of respondents who linked up with others on their course (51%) suggested that
many students were keen to establish this type of connection.

Some students also made the effort to contact other students who would be starting at
University at the same time as themselves, but who may not be in their hall of residence or
on their course, confirming that students were seeking to create a network of contacts at
university. Figure 5.5 provides more information (please note that the figures are not
mutually exclusive).

<table>
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</tr>
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<td>Students in the same</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<td>hall of residence</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others going to</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Figure 5.5: Types of contacts made

In interviews respondents also showed that they were keen to contact a range of people,
as demonstrated in the following comments:

“[I contacted] some housemates and people on my course.”

“I think it [Facebook] was quite good for the social side because I found three of my
flatmates on it.”

“I spoke to a few people on my course beforehand.”

“I probably met about 20 plus for my course and I met people that I thought I might
get on with and in my halls.”

However, not all students were successful in their attempts to establish links with other
people. 20% (20 of 102 online responses) said they had been unsuccessful when trying to
contact people who would be in their hall of residence and 49% (50) did not manage to
contact people who would be on their course. Interviewees had similar problems, as the
following comments highlight:
“None of the groups related to my course.”

“I did search for course groups, but I didn’t find any.”

“I didn’t find any people on my course, but it would have been useful to have done so.”

“I would have contacted people on my course if I could have found them.”

The following respondent did not manage to contact other people, but recognised the benefits of doing so:

“[Contacting others would have been useful] just so that you can know people before you get there and have a wide group of friends.”

There is a slight overlap between the number of students who said they had already contacted people and those who stated they had tried to contact people but had been unsuccessful; the aggregated total is more than 100%. This suggests that some students had managed to contact other people but would have liked to contact more people. The following comment from one student exemplifies:

“[what else would have been useful] being able to find more people on my course.”

A number of students found it useful to link up with students already at the University. Respondents felt that these communications were beneficial because they helped them find out more about their course or studying at University; the following quotes were typical:

“[I] found someone who was in their 2nd year and we did talk about the course.”

“I made an effort to contact students (now in level 2) on my course.”

“experiences of ... students currently studying on the course [were particularly useful].”

“I found most of what I wanted to know by talking to current students – I found MySpace to be really helpful in that respect.”
For some potential students, information from existing students was regarded as more trustworthy than more ‘official’ sources of information (such as, the University prospectus or other ‘marketing’ communications) as the following comment shows:

“I knew vaguely what the course was about, but it was useful to hear from existing students – a student will tell you what it is really like.”

The comment above concurs with feedback in other research that I have undertaken (Jacobs, 2007b).

Interviews offered the opportunity to discuss students’ views about tutor – student interaction (and vice versa) on social networking sites. Jessica Shepherd (2008, n.p.) declared that ‘tutors are not welcome’ and in the ECAR report (Salaway et al., 2008, p. 89) one US student declared “If a professor ever tried to use Facebook... for anything other than social networking with students, I would file a complaint.” Although the latter seems an extreme reaction, it encapsulates the views of students elsewhere in the ECAR survey - only 5.5% of students in this survey stated that they would communicate with tutors about course-related topics. As outlined above, the current literature suggests that students generally regard social networking forums as ‘their’ social space and do not welcome discussions with tutors through this medium. I took the opportunity to discuss this topic with two students in interviews. In contrast to the evidence in the ECAR survey, the interviewees said that they would welcome tutors setting up or joining in with groups and they viewed it as a way of finding out more about the tutor and the course:

“Yes [I would have liked to contact my tutor] because you don’t know what they are going to be like.”

“I didn’t communicate with any of the tutors before I came. I think groups where applicants have the opportunity to talk to tutors would be a good idea.”

Although feedback from two students cannot be regarded as representative, it does indicate that students may not be entirely averse to the notion of tutor/student conversations on social networking sites. A possible reason why the feedback from these students is at odds with the comments of Jessica Shepherd and the ECAR report may lie in the quote from the US student above who suggested that an informal tutor presence may be acceptable and even welcomed but students may not be comfortable with tutors using social networking sites in a more formal sense, for example, monitoring reasons for absence or chasing up assignments – this could be regarded as an intrusion. I discuss this point further in the next chapter in Section 6.6.2.
5.3.3. Establishing networks

Using a popular social networking site, such as Facebook, opens up the possibility of establishing a large network of contacts, as discussed in Section 5.3.1. Reed (2001) suggests that the opportunity to link up with other people grows exponentially with the size of the network: a large active online network offers members numerous opportunities for interaction and facilitates frequent information exchanges.

Communications on social networks are generally of two main types: firstly, postings on ‘open’ forums or discussion boards and secondly, messaging, which is similar to emailing; both these functions are part of the standard architecture of most social networking sites. This EdD research shows that 83% of the respondents ‘messaged’ other students within the social networking forums or emailed them outside after having initially established contact within the network. This willingness to use a number of different online technologies, including social networking and email, suggests that the behaviour of these students is typical of the ‘Net Generation’ who use digital technologies as their default means of communication (Tapscott, 2009).

Students were asked if they had read or exchanged information with other network users about the academic and social aspects of university life. These questions were designed to capture information about the type and frequency of exchanges via discussion boards or on open areas, such as the ‘wall’ in Facebook. Additional items in the survey and interview schedules also gathered data about students’ direct communications with other people. 83% (65 of the 78 remaining respondents at this point) stated that they had sent messages to, or emailed, other prospective students, suggesting that they were keen to establish direct contact with other prospective students. Interviews with students also generated similar feedback.

The online survey gathered data about the number of contacts that students made and it was clear that students were keen to establish a network of links. The number of contacts that students made varied: 46% of respondents making a small number of contacts, but 54% contacted five or more people suggesting that they formed sizable networks. Figure 5.6 provides more detail.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
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Figure 5.6: Number of contacts made
In interviews respondents re-iterated that they had been keen to link up with other people before they started at university, one student contacted 10-15 other prospective students, another contacted 20 other students via social networking sites.

A post-survey note. After the survey had been completed I reflected on the wording of this item and concluded that it may have been more useful to divide the first category into two separate groups: 1 contact and 2 – 4 contacts, this would have distinguished between students who only made one contact this way and those who were more comfortable, or perhaps more successful, in making contacts using this facility. In subsequent surveys I have used the categories 1 and 2 – 4, and found that there was usually an even balance between those who made 1 contact and those who contacted between 2 – 4 other users.

5.3.4. Online relationships: contact or friend?
Making regular contact with friends is common social networking practice and in this regard the social networking behaviour of respondents was typical of young people in their age group.

Data analysis showed that once students had made an initial contact with other prospective students, they often contacted them again; 89% (58 of the 65 who stated they had contacted others directly) contacted other network users more than once. It is reasonable to assume, given the norms of social networking practice, that these contacts became ‘friends’. This notion is substantiated by students’ frequent use of the word ‘friend’ in survey feedback and interviews, for example:

“I found a friend who had similar problems.”

“Facebook is a good way to meet other applicants... You can make friends.”

The literature suggests that social network users are often keen to accumulate a large list of friends (boyd, 2006; Ofcom, 2008, p. 37). However, many young people do not do so without considering taking some precautionary measures and they are wary about exposing their profile to people who they do not know or trust. The ECAR report (Salaway et al., 2008, p. 94) suggests that in the US approximately 84% of social networking users aged 18 -19 restrict access to their profile information and the Ofcom report (op.cit., p. 51) maintains that nearly 56% of social network users in this age group in the UK limit access to their profile information. Feedback in my EdD research also indicates that respondents took precautions about exposing their profile or accepting friends unreservedly as the following comments show:
Interviews provided an opportunity to discuss security in more detail. Interviewees’ feedback suggested that students felt that they were aware of many issues associated with social networking forums and had taken advantage of the security settings provided. The following are typical comments:

“I think they [Facebook] have some good security features. People can’t view my page without me adding them as a friend. I have never had anything bad from it.”

“I am not worried – I am sensible. The only private information I have on there is my email address and my number. I never really understand why people meet up with people when they don’t know who they are.”

“Personally I don’t put lots of photos or lots of information on the site. I have seen some people who put their phone numbers on there.”

“Originally [I was concerned], it was all open and everyone could see but you decide what you put on it, now I only have my name on there. Also, they have improved it and there are more privacy settings.”

“I wasn’t really worried about security as I did this [set up access permissions] when I set up my account.”

It is clear that these respondents were not overly concerned about privacy and security. This is in line with evidence in the literature (the ECAR and Ofcom reports; Tapscott; boyd). However, as the same literature also points out, many social network users may be unwittingly exposing themselves to a number of potential risk areas. Privacy and security issues stem from the interface between personal data posted by individuals, security settings on the chosen social networking site and the interests of the person or group attempting to access the information (Salaway et al., 2008, p. 90). The latter may not be seeking financial gain, but could be prospective employers, marketing organisations or a number of other organisations. I was concerned about the students’ seeming lack of awareness about these potential problem areas. Discussing these issues in depth was outside the scope of my EdD research, but I have ensured that in any subsequent social networking developments, I have emphasised the issues of personal security, identity theft.
and the need for vigilance, and have pointed users to resources that advise how best to counteract these potential problem areas.

Evidence in this section shows that in terms of their social networking behaviour, respondents who took part in the research were typical of the wider population in their age group. This is particularly important for research which centres on the concept of social networking as a bridge between prospective students’ pre-entry and post-entry experiences. If respondents’ social networking practices were not typical, the potential role of social networking as a bridge may be compromised. I discuss this important topic in more detail in Section 6.7.2 in the next chapter.

5.4. Exchanging information

Survey data suggested that students were eager to find out about living at university and what learning at a higher education level would involve. In their communications with others, they were keen to gather information about the social aspects of living at university and the academic side of life including what their course and studying might involve. Prospective students had conversations with two different groups of students: firstly, prospective students like themselves, where discussions were about what they thought university would be like, sharing existing knowledge or passing on information from others and secondly, those who were already at University and willing to share their experiences.

5.4.1. Information exchanges about life at university

Online conversations about social life were popular. In feedback to item 8 in the questionnaire (*Did you read or exchange information with others about social life or other aspects of living in Portsmouth?*), 70% (66 out of 94) of respondents discussed topics relating to social life at university or living in the area. The main topics are outlined below.

*Nightlife, clubbing and bars* were the main topic of conversation and generally focussed on the ‘best’ places to go. 53% of students (35 out of 66 who responded to this item) mentioned this topic. Students discussed on- and off-campus nightlife. Exchanges between prospective students focussed on passing on their own experiences or relaying information that they had acquired from friends or family at university or other people who were familiar with the local area. In several cases respondents had been in contact with students already at the University of Portsmouth, who they did not know personally, but with whom they had linked up on social networking sites. Prospective students then passed this information on to other new students. The following quotes are typical of the conversations that took place between prospective students or between prospective students and existing students:

“What was the social scene like? Is there a reputation about some areas or clubs?”
“What nightlife was like and the best places to go?”

“Social life, where people were going on their first night in Portsmouth.”

“[I asked]…. if they had friends who had previously been out in Portsmouth, good places to drink.”

“I have a friend already here, so I told them what he told me about where to go out on what night and things like that.”

Accommodation was also a popular topic and mentioned in approximately 52% (34 of 66) of responses. Communications between prospective students mainly centred on which halls they would be in and what they thought their hall would be like.

“[We discussed] which halls we were moving into.”

“I had read stuff about the halls I was staying in, we discussed where people’s rooms were and where the halls were in relation to the town.”

“Where we were going to live and what it was like if you had already visited.”

“[We discussed] the size of the rooms, condition of the rooms, the neighbourhood.”

“[We discussed] …the room sizes because I had to share with someone else for two weeks.”

Feedback shows that prospective students were eager to find out more about living accommodation from current students; this type of conversation was particularly useful as the comments below illustrate:

“What the facilities of halls were like in the opinion of those living or who had lived there before.”

“The girl who lived in my current room in Harry Law Hall last year got in touch with me after I posted my room number in a ‘Harry Law Hall’ group. I asked her how I should prepare for the move (what I should bring, what Halls life is like). She was really lovely, and supportive. I was able to find out who I would be sharing a kitchen with, and got in touch with two of them before I started.”
“I was given advice by 3rd years about...where we were living in university.”

The Portsmouth area, getting around and shopping featured in a number of conversations. Students wanted to learn about what to do in the local area from other students who lived locally or from existing students:

“How easy is it to get around (buses and trains, etc)? Is there a lot of sport at Portsmouth?”

“Is it a safe city at night?”

“Are the shopping and entertainment facilities of a high standard? Should certain places be avoided?”

“[We talked about] music, shopping.”

“[We discussed] churches and the Christian Union.”

The students in the online survey and those who were interviewed placed different emphasis on key topics. Students in the surveys focussed mainly on entertainment: nightlife, pubs and clubs, whereas in interviews students suggested that their pre-entry conversations concentrated more on personal aspects such as hobbies, music and living away from home. For example:

“We talked about whether we had worked during the summer, where we lived...and what A levels they had done.”

“I joined the Facebook group for the Christian Union and I spoke to a couple of people and someone invited me to church.”

“We talked about where they were living and how it would be different to living at home. It was reassuring that everyone was in the same kind of position.”

The difference in emphasis may be due to students feeling more reserved in interviews and conscious of my presence. I strived to appear approachable and non-threatening, but it is possible that the interviewees did not wish to appear frivolous or trivial in the presence of a member of staff, particularly one who is very senior to them in years. This difference possibly represents a trade-off between the anonymity that an online survey affords and the opportunities that interviews afford for more exploratory conversations.
5.4.2. Information exchanges about learning

Online conversations about studying were also popular. 65% (58 out of 89) of respondents in survey item 9 (Did you read or exchange any information with others about your course or other things related to studying at university?) said that they read or exchanged information about their course or studying at Portsmouth; of the 58 who stated that they had exchanged information about learning, 45 provided more detailed information in free text comments. These free text comments and feedback in interviews can be sub-divided into two main topics: firstly, how students felt they would cope with the academic demands of their course and studying in general and secondly, expectations about the more operational aspects of the course; anticipations about workload, which books to take to University and so on. This section focuses on student exchanges about more practical matters, such as the topics to be studied, anticipated workload, which books to take and what equipment was needed. Students’ views about how they would cope academically are discussed in Section 5.6.2. Concerns about coping academically.

Prospective students discussed what they thought learning would involve with other students who would be starting at university at the same time as themselves:

“We just discussed what we thought the course would entail.”

“Where the course would be taught, the facilities available, and how many lectures it would be likely we would have — what the units would cover.”

“I talked about the workload related to my course, if anyone had completed reading around the subject prior to starting the course, the work to social life ratio, how much is expected in each year.”

“.how the course is broken down into units and credits.”

“[We discussed] what the course entailed, equipment needed for the course, other courses...how to prepare.”

“We discussed things such as what lectures would be like, we were clueless! Also we discussed a bit about how much work we thought there would be.”

This last comment hints at a shared camaraderie, but does not suggest that this student was particularly anxious; she seemed to be pleased that she had found someone who had similar thoughts to her own. Sharing thoughts and feelings were major topics of
conversation between students – this aspect of their communication is discussed in more
detail below in Section 5.6.

Students who took part in interviews indicated that they had also discussed what the
course would involve with others:

“...I did meet up with quite a few people on my course and they were also in my tutor
group. We spoke about what languages we would do and what we wanted to do
after uni.”

“We spoke about the course and what units we would find most interesting.”

“[We talked about]…what we thought the course would be like.”

Interactions between prospective and existing students revealed how new students tapped
into existing students’ experiences about the course structure and studying at an HE level:

“I made an effort to contact students [already in the first year] on my course. I
wanted an idea of what assignments demanded of students and their opinion of the
quality of the lectures and workshops.”

“I didn’t really talk to anyone on my course, but found someone who was in their 2nd
year – we did talk about the course.”

The books that were needed and where to obtain them were popular topics of conversation
between prospective students and existing students; this area was discussed by 20% (9
out of the 45) and comments included:

“I exchanged tips with prospective students about course material and places to
purchase books, etc.”

“[We talked about]…books that we needed to buy.”

“My book list was late so another girl I had found, who was on my course, sent me a
copy.”

Other areas mentioned included assessment, quiet places to study, computer equipment
available and the credit system.
Students clearly found information exchanges about studying useful and felt that this type of conversation helped them prepare for life at university. When asked directly in item 10 ‘Thinking about it now how useful was the information that you exchanged in social networking sites in preparing you for your studies’, the majority of students found the information useful; very few said that the information had not been helpful. This item was scaled to identify how useful students found the information and data in Figure 5.7 suggests that, overall, the students found information exchanges helped them prepare for their studies and to understand more about what learning at university would involve.

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<th>% of sample</th>
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<td>Most of it</td>
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<td>None of it</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
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Figure 5.7: How useful were exchanges in preparing you for your studies

Item 11a asked students about What information did you find particularly useful? 54% of respondents (23 of 44) mentioned the importance of finding out more about the course. Units, modules and topics, plus the structure of the course and the format of lectures were particularly popular topics of conversation:

“What I would be studying and what the exam details are.”

“The course content and break down of units, the amount of work needed to pass the 1st year.”

“The different modules and how they would be assessed.”

“How much work is going to be done and what the tutor would be doing.”

“Style of lectures.”

Books were also frequently mentioned:

“All the books are in the library so we don’t have to buy them.”

“Books I may want to purchase before starting the course.”
“What books would be needed for the first semester.”

“Suggestions of books to buy.”

The majority of these interactions were between prospective students, but the tone of some responses implied that several exchanges may have been between prospective and current students. Others were more explicit and clearly indicated that conversations with current students had been particularly useful. The following comments were made in response to the item 11a What information did you find particularly useful?

“Older students sharing their thoughts of the course I’m taking.”

“Experiences of past students and students.”

The format of item 11c regarding the impact of course information on preparations for study was changed after the pilot. In the pilot, this was a free text item but the responses generated a number of common themes. Consequently, in the main survey the item 11c was changed to a multiple response question. Figure 5.8 outlines responses to the various options.

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<td>It told me something about the course that I didn't know.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gave me more information about some areas that I was anxious about.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It encouraged me to do some preparatory work.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was good to realise that other people had the same concerns/questions as me.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me find out more about other people on the course.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing specific, it just helped me feel that I knew a bit more about the course.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It didn't help me prepare for my studies.</td>
<td>4</td>
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Figure 5.8: Impact of information exchanges on preparation for learning

The data in Figure 5.8 is not mutually exclusive and the majority of respondents selected two or more options.
The feedback in Figure 5.8 strongly suggests that the main benefit of communicating with other prospective students was that interactions were reassuring – communications helped students realise that many other students had the same concerns as themselves. The interactions also helped them get to know other people on the course and, for some students this helped alleviate concerns about being ‘alone’ when they started at university.

5.5. Finding out about other people

Through their social networking activities students were eager to find out who would be sharing their accommodation and who would be on their course. Entering into conversations with prospective house and classmates enabled students to investigate the likes and dislikes of people with whom they would be coming into close contact and to discuss shared interests or experiences. The research evidence indicates that many of these conversations were not based on idle curiosity and that some students wanted to compare their own experiences and skills to those of other students. This information helped them make judgements about how they ‘measured up’ when compared to other students and reflect on their own ability to cope with university life, particularly in relation to their studies. Survey data suggests that respondents’ conversations with other prospective students improved their confidence and made them feel happier about going to university. How these conversations influenced students’ perceptions is discussed further in Section 5.7. Integration into university life.

5.5.1. Other students in the hall of residence

Survey data showed that 84% of respondents made contact with prospective students who would be in the same hall of residence (see Section 5.3.2 Establishing contacts). Exchanges focussed on which halls or rooms people would be living in and when they planned to move in as indicated by responses to item 8b What sort of things did you discuss/read information about?:

“Which halls we were moving into.”

“...which rooms we were moving into.”

“....when we were moving into halls.”

“I discussed stuff about the halls I would be staying in, discussed where people’s rooms were.”

“Where they were living and what course they were doing.”
Some interactions went beyond initial enquiries and suggested the beginning of more in-depth conversations.

“We talked about where they were living and how it would be different to living at home.”

Moving beyond these initial communications, students went on to investigate the interests, experiences and future plans of people who would be sharing their accommodation or who would be on their course.

5.5.2. Identifying other students on the course

Students also wanted to know who would be on their course. In Figure 5.8 above, 42% of respondents said the information that they exchanged or read helped them find out more about other people on the course; respondents in interviews gave similar feedback. This is articulated by one student in the following comment:

“It wasn't so much information about the course…..it was more about getting to know people on the course.”

Other respondents made similar comments when asked 'What information did you find particularly useful about your course?':

“Knowing who else was going.”

“Knowing who was going to be on it.”

Students frequently stated that they wanted to ‘get to know’ other people. The word know in this context indicates that students wanted to find out who else was going to be on the same course as themselves and/or wanting to know more about the character and personalities of other people on their course. The following are typical comments that focussed on finding out who else would be on their course:

“I spoke to a few people on my course beforehand. I did look to see if anyone was doing communication design and I found one person.”

[We discussed] “what we were studying.”

“We chatted about what course we were each on…”

“…what courses we were doing…”
And a variation:

“What we were specialising in within our course.”

5.5.3. Getting to know other people better

Using the phrase ‘getting to know’ someone implies a conversation that has moved beyond initial introductions and exploratory exchanges to one which has become investigative. In the case of students in this survey, the investigation involved finding out more about other people’s interests, experiences, reasons for choosing the course and their plans for life after university.

There are a number of reasons why students may want to have more in-depth conversations: they may want to search out people with whom they have interests in common or those with whom they can identify; they may want to use their knowledge about other people to gauge their own skills and abilities to cope with university life; they may just be curious and enjoy ‘chatting’ to other people; and they may want to make friends before they start at university. Students’ online conversations included many of these elements; they discussed several topics, including their knowledge of the local area:

[We discussed…]

“…whether we lived near Portsmouth or not.”

“…whether we had been to Portsmouth before.”

Other conversations revolved around interests, hobbies and work experience, the following exchanges were typical:

[We discussed] …

“…what their hobbies were, what music they liked.”

“…what things we were into like music, etc. which helped find the people you’re most likely to have fun with and get along with.”

“…similar hobbies and interests.”

“…hobbies, music.”

“…if people had studied the subjects before.”
“We had chats about what people liked to do and made plans to meet up. ”

“We talked about whether they had worked over the summer, where they lived, placements and what A levels they had done.”

Communications about previous educational experiences may have been based on curiosity, but some were clearly underpinned by concerns about whether their own previous experiences were adequate preparation for the course, as the following comment illustrates:

“I’m doing a Journalism course, and I wasn’t sure if I would be up to scratch in terms of the experience I did (since it is a very ‘vocational’ type of course), so talking to other people who were actually having the exact same thoughts was really reassuring.”

In this case it is clear that interacting with other students via social networking sites helped dispel some of this student’s fears about coping academically.

5.5.4. Investigating choices

In addition to finding out about the people on the course and discovering more about their past educational and work experiences, some exchanges focussed on why students had chosen to study for their chosen subject:

[We discussed]

“...why we were doing that course.”

“...what the course would be like, why we chose Portsmouth and what we liked on the open day.”

“loads of things and found out where they were from and what they had studied before and why they chose sport.”

“We spoke about the course and what units we would find most interesting.”

Some conversations investigated students’ plans for the future:

[We discussed]

“...what people were planning to do later on (i.e. placement in industry, etc).”
“...what we wanted to do after the course.”

“...I did meet up with quite a few people on my course and they were also in my tutor group. We spoke about what languages we would do and what we wanted to do after uni.”

The discussion in this section focuses on the efforts made by prospective students to find out more about the people they would encounter when they started at university. They were interested to know who would be on their course or would be sharing their accommodation. In addition, they endeavoured to find out more about the characteristics and interests of fellow house or course companions. In face-to-face communications, participants search for signals of recognition such as smiles, frowns, other facial expressions as well as body movements in order to form judgments about friendly intent (Meeren, van Heijnsbergen, & de Gelder, 2005, p. 1). In a virtual environment, where this type of signalling is not possible, sharing experiences, interests and thoughts online serves a similar purpose and helps users form ties with each other (Norris, op.cit., p. 4). Students interacting with others via social networking forums during the pre-entry period interpreted these signals to find common ground, establish relationships and possible friendships with other prospective students.

5.6. Sharing concerns and addressing anxieties

As well as gathering information about the practical aspects of being at university and finding out about other people, students’ activities on social networking sites involved them discussing their feelings and apprehensions about going to university.

Traditionally, only when trust has been established do individuals form relationships or friendships and share thoughts, primary emotions and anxieties (Maslow, 1987, p. 99). The survey data suggested that social network users do not necessarily feel the same constraints and many readily shared their thoughts and feelings with others during initial conversations. There is an obvious downside to trusting other people of whom one has a limited knowledge as discussed above in Section 5.3.4. However, for these prospective students sharing concerns and anxieties with other students had a positive impact on their perceptions about going to university. It is common to experience anxieties when embarking on a life-changing experience and many prospective students are likely to feel at least a degree of nervousness about going to university (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 709) but, by sharing their thoughts and feelings via social networking sites, many were able to alleviate their anxieties and address their concerns as the following quotes illustrate:
“Everyone tells you the same – that you will be fine, but everyone is worried... When you start speaking to people you realise everyone is worried.”

“Obviously you will have concerns before you start the course…”

Some concerns were expressed more implicitly. For example, some students referred to anticipated ‘difficulties’; the use of the word difficulty suggests that they were experiencing some concerns:

“...[We discussed] the difficulty of course.”

“How difficult the first year would be.”

5.6.1. General pre-arrival nerves

A number of exchanges between students did not specify particular concerns but indicated that students were experiencing some general pre-arrival anxieties or ‘nerves’. Students found it comforting to share thoughts and feelings with others and realised that others were having similar experiences as the following comments illustrate:

“[It was useful to know] Just other peoples’ opinions really and it was good to know other people were thinking the same things.”

“I felt more comfortable starting uni when I already knew some people who were in the same situation as me.”

“If they were worried and what they liked about it [the course].”

“I found a friend who had similar problems and we helped solve each others’ problems”.

The word ‘reassuring’ featured several times:

“It was reassuring to see what other people were thinking.”

“Reassuring that someone was in the same boat.”

“When you speak to people and they have the same concerns as you it can be quite reassuring.”
The use of the word *reassuring* re-enforces that students may be experiencing concerns and anxieties.

### 5.6.2. Concerns about coping academically

Previous research projects that I have undertaken (for example, Jacobs 2007a and b) suggest that many students may be unsure about what will be expected of them when they start at university. They may be particularly anxious about the academic 'level' of their course, their role in lectures and seminars, how they will be assessed or the types of essays or assignments they will have to submit; they may also be concerned about who else will be on their course and how they would ‘measure up’ in terms of academic ability, subject knowledge and educational experience. Similar concerns were voiced by respondents in this research. However, survey feedback also suggested that discussions on social networking forums helped them realise that it was common to have these concerns. This realisation went some way towards alleviating anxieties about coping academically.

Figure 5.8 shows that social networking sites facilitated information exchanges regarding areas about which students were concerned: more than a third of respondents (15 of 43) agreed that communicating via social networks "gave me more information about some areas that I was anxious about". 53% of the students stated that it "was good to realise that other people had the same concerns/questions as me". The quote from the journalism student illustrated this point, as does the comment below:

"...they had similar concerns to me about the course and that made me feel better."

Conversations with existing students were also helpful:

"I did meet some 2nd and 3rd years on my course and asked them what they thought when they first started. They had similar worries to me, but they also told me that the tutors were very helpful."

"Obviously, you will have concerns before you start the course and asking someone who has been through it can guide you."

### 5.6.3. Anxieties about initial meetings

It is not unusual for individuals to be apprehensive about meeting people for the first time. Some students were anxious about the prospect of meeting people who would be in the same class or sharing their accommodation. However, linking up with other people via social networking sites helped to alleviate some of their concerns about first meetings as the following comments illustrate:
“[I rated Facebook] quite highly, it was nice to talk to people before you move in, otherwise you are moving in without knowing them at all.”

“[With] Facebook, MySpace and things like that, I can find the people I am going to be doing it with, it’s a very important thing because if you don’t like the people you are not going to enjoy it and it makes it easier when you come if you know people.”

“Yes I think it was [useful], finding people you know who are going to be on your course or in your halls, it takes away that fear of not knowing anyone, you’ve got someone there that you know.”

One other major benefit of using social networks is the visual affordances they offer. Facebook and other social networking sites allow users to post an image of themselves in their profile. Some users create an alternative image of themselves, such as a cartoon or other graphic, but the majority include an up-to-date photograph. Social interaction in face-to-face situations is largely dependent on recognition and being able to quickly scan faces and recognise acquaintances or friends (Reisenhuber & Poggio, 2000, p. 1199). Viewing images on social networks serves a similar purpose, knowing that they would be able to recognise someone in a sea of unknown faces when they arrived at university was particularly important for many students as the following comments illustrate:

“Yes, I thought I could make friends on the Internet and then if I saw them I could say – I saw you on Facebook.”

“…on the first day I knew a familiar face!”

“[Facebook was] fairly useful. You can see peoples’ profiles and what they are doing.”

“Instead of going to uni and wondering what kind of people I would be living with I could put a face to a name. My parents felt happier because I had got in contact with people as I am 140 miles away from home.”

Comments made about the value of being able to recognise other students also hint at underlying concerns about being alone during the first few days, not having any friends or students’ anxieties about meeting other students for the first time. Interactions with other prospective students via social networking forums helped to alleviate some of these concerns:
“I got to know someone so on the first day I didn’t feel like an idiot.”

“It meant that on the first day there was someone I’d spoken to before and had a bit of common ground with.”

“Meant we got to know each other before meeting, so when we did we didn’t have to ‘break the ice’...”

Feedback from students elsewhere in surveys and interviews re-iterated these concerns. Some comments suggested that the prospect of going to university was ‘scary’ for some students and that others were ‘nervous’, both these words appeared in a number of comments. However, feedback suggested that by communicating with others in the pre-entry stage, initial meetings were not as ‘scary’ as they may otherwise have been. The following comments illustrate this:

“It helped me to get to know the people on my course before I got here so it wasn’t so scary meeting everyone for the first time.”

“The first day you are quite nervous and it would be nice to see a familiar face. I am really good friends with someone I met on Facebook and in induction week when we had group work in the first day we got in the same group. I am used to living away from home, but still worried about what people would be like.”

“It was not so scary going into the first lecture because you had already spoken to someone there.”

As the last comment suggests, going into the first lecture can be daunting, but meeting up with other students with whom they had made prior contact before a lecture or recognising someone’s face from their profile picture helped reduce these concerns. Other respondents made similar comments:

“It was good to meet people before starting the course so you could meet them before you went to lectures, etc.”

“I met other people on my economics course before I came – it was nice to have someone to look out for at your first lecture or someone to meet outside.”

“...to have someone to walk with on the first day of lectures and work out where you are going together and to have someone to sit next to.”
“...more confident about going to my first lectures and seeing someone who I knew.”

“Yes, having met people and not having to walk into a lecture on your own or not having anyone to sit next to was good.”

“Friendships helped in the first days in class, especially in group work.”

It is clear from student responses that many students were anxious about university life before they registered. This may have been due to general feelings of nervousness or may have been due to more specific concerns about how they would cope academically or socially. The comments in this section confirm that sharing perceptions and emotions with other prospective students on social networking sites helped to alleviate some of their concerns and made the students more confident about going to university and possibly integrate better once they arrived.

5.7. Integration into university life

The sections above discuss the social networking sites that students used, their patterns of behaviour and the activities they engaged in. It is clear from the survey data that interacting on social networks helped students feel more confident about going to university and helped them integrate into university life. These interactions had a positive impact on their pre-entry perceptions and their post-entry experiences and therefore it is reasonable to state that social networking can act as a bridge between these two phases in the student lifecycle.

It may be useful here to review in what way students’ interactions on social networking sites had a positive impact. Their communications helped them feel more confident about going to university and this was evidenced by responses from over half of the students which stated that “it was good to realise that other people had the same concerns as me” (Figure 5.8); and their comments about the benefits of getting to know other people (Sections 5.5.2 and 5.5.3) and sharing their concerns and anxieties (Section 5.6.). Many of the comments from students suggested that they were ‘reassured’ that other students were experiencing the same feelings and apprehensions as themselves as illustrated by a number of quotes in Section 5.6.1.

Survey and interview data also showed that linking up virtually with other people before they started at university helped them integrate better once they arrived. In Figure 5.7, 95% of respondents stated that exchanges helped them prepare for their studies and there are many comments in Section 5.6. about the benefits of knowing something about other students or recognising a face in the first few days at university.
My EdD research took place after the students had started at university and this afforded an opportunity to ask them to reflect on how they thought their social networking interactions had impacted on their integration into university life. The students clearly welcomed the opportunity to meet, in person, people they had linked up with virtually on social networking sites; in response to item 13c only 23% (17 out of 76) stated that they had met other people they had met on social networking sites before they started at university, but in response to item 13d, 95% said they met one or more people when they registered.

Two items, 16a (Would you say that the contacts you made via social networking sites or the information that you read made you feel happier/more confident about coming to University?) and item 16b (Do you think that communicating with students before you came helped you settle into University life once you were here?), asked students to consider how their pre-entry interactions had impacted on their post-entry experiences. In response to the first question (16a) 88% (67 of the 76 who responded) confirmed that interacting on social networks made them feel more positive about going to university and in interviews seven out of eight students responded in a similar way. In response to item 16b 67% (51 out of 76) respondents agreed that communicating with other students before they came helped them settle into university life once they registered.

In addition to the comments outlined in the opening paragraphs of this section and the direct responses above, students also referred to the impact on levels of confidence as the following feedback below illustrates.

In response to item 16c in the pilot survey: How did the information you exchanged/read help prepare you for your studies?:

“it gave me more confidence about joining university.”

“it helped a lot, I was better prepared.”

In response to: Why was meeting up/linking up with other people on your course useful? (Item 15 in the pilot and main survey):

“...it made me feel more comfortable starting uni because I got to know some people who were in the same situation as me...”

“I was more confident about going to my first lecture and seeing someone I knew.”
“It made me less nervous about meeting them in person on my first day at university.”

“It helped me fit in with others on the course.”

Students who were interviewed made similar comments:

“I would say it helped a bit. It was reassuring to see what other people were thinking.”

“I would say it helped a little bit. Yes, I didn’t realise there were so many people from all over the country and it can be quite daunting, but when you speak to people and they have the same concerns as you it can be quite reassuring.”

“Yes, it eased my worries a little bit, I spoke to people about what to bring [it is useful for the] little things that you are not really sure about.”

These comments are about levels of confidence, but as discussed in the Chapter 2, there is a close correlation between realistic expectations and early experience (for example, Yorke & Longden, 2008) and between good quality early experiences and integration. It is reasonable to state that the positive influence that social networking has on students’ confidence levels and their expectations has a decisive impact on their integration into university life.

In his model on withdrawal behaviour, Tinto (1987) identified two types of integration: academic and social. In their review for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) First year experience – a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy Harvey and Drew (2006) also stress the importance of students’ social and academic integration into university life and the connection with good quality early experiences.

Did the findings from this research suggest that social networking had an impact on aspects of both students’ social and academic integration into university life? The evidence suggests that the most important benefits of interacting on social networking sites were that prospective students were able to get to ‘know’ other students and make friends, recognise other people from their Facebook photograph once they started at university and realise that other people had the same thoughts and concerns as themselves. Respondents had exchanged information about the books that they thought they may need, what they thought their course would involve, information about units, but it is noticeable that when they were surveyed on how they thought social networking helped
prepare them for their studies (item 11c) the majority stressed the benefits of getting to
know other people and realising others had similar concerns. In interviews, respondents
also referred to the social benefits of linking up with others; as illustrated in the following
comments in response to the question Thinking about it now, how useful was the
information that you exchanged/read in preparing you for your studies?

“It was useful because it made you know someone even though you hadn’t met
them. In Fresher’s week we went round together – we weren’t on our own and it
was reassuring.”

“Not so scary going into the first lecture because you had already spoken to some of
the people there.”

The comment below also centres on how social networking interactions impact on
students’ levels of confidence about coping with a new learning environment:

“It made me more confident because I met people and I did not have to walk into a
lecture on my own and not have anyone to sit next to.”

Conversations with existing students tended to focus more on the academic side of
university life as the following quote from the online survey suggests:

“I made an effort to contact students (now in level 2) on my course. I wanted
an idea of what assignments demanded of students, and their opinion of the
quality of lectures and workshops.”

“Experiences of past students and students currently studying the course
[were particularly useful].”

One student in an interview said:

“[I] found someone who was in their 2nd year and we did talk about the course.”

The discussion above suggests that interactions on social networking sites helped students
understand more about what their course would involve, but it had a stronger impact on
aspects of students’ social integration; this aligns with recent research (published during
my writing up phase) which suggests that Facebook is part of the ‘social glue’ which helps
students integrate into university life (Madge, Meek, Welles, & Hooley, 2009, p. 152).
However, the interplay between social and academic integration makes it difficult to separate the two areas. In a HEA briefing paper, Harvey and Drew (2006) review various models of integration, many of which (Mackie, op.cit.; Tinto, 1987) argue that social integration involves not only students’ assimilation to their social life but informal academic activities such as interacting with other students on their course and those on similar academic programmes. This suggests there is a strong overlap between social and academic integration. My research goes further and shows that the divisions between academic and social integration requires review. In the final chapter I discuss this at length and propose a re-conceptualised model of integration which is more applicable in a world where rapid communication and frequent information exchanges are changing the shape of society.

5.8. The differing experiences of widening and non-widening participation students

Section 5.7 suggests that social networking had a positive impact on students’ levels of confidence and their integration into university life. However, was this impact similar for all students? The answer must be that inevitably there will be differences in individual experiences, but it is possible that social networking has a different impact on different groups of students. As my professional interest, and much of my previous research, has focussed on widening participation, I was interested in determining whether social networking interactions were of particular benefit to students from a widening participation background.

Current literature makes clear the link between widening participation and students’ expectations. Previous research that I have undertaken suggests that the lack of access to appropriate information sources before they start at university has a negative impact on student’s early experiences (Jacobs, 2007a). Similarly, Yorke (2001, p. 153) argues that students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to leave early and Bamber (2005, p. 28) makes the link between widening participation and a lack of preparedness for higher level study. I had organised this study to collect data about widening participation status and analysed the data to determine any differences in student experiences. In the survey I used the phrase first generation and in interviews I asked respondents if their parents had been to university.

Data was gathered from 76 respondents about their widening participation status, 52 were from widening participation backgrounds and 24 from non-widening participation backgrounds.

Feedback (from the 76 respondents who had completed the item on parental education) in closed questions suggested that the types of contacts that these two groups of students
made, or attempted to make, were similar: they were keen to link up with other people who may be in their hall, on their course or going to Portsmouth at the same time. However, feedback in other items suggested that widening participation students were particularly keen to find out more about the course. In response to item 9 (Did you read or exchange information with others about your course or studying at university?) 70% (36 of 52) of widening participation students exchanged information with others about their course as opposed to 50% (12 of 24) of non-widening participation students.

Item 11c in the main survey (How do you think the information that you exchanged helped prepare you for your studies?) generated responses from 41 students. Responses suggested that widening participation students, in particular, valued the opportunity to interact with other prospective students and appreciated that other people had the same concerns as themselves, suggesting that they may be more apprehensive about what learning will involve and welcomed the opportunity to link up with other people on their course as the figures in Figure 5.9 suggest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>Non-WP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n=27</td>
<td>n=14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It told me something about the course that I didn't know.</td>
<td>10 (37%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gave me more information about some areas that I was anxious about.</td>
<td>10 (37%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was good to realise that other people had the same concerns/questions as me.</td>
<td>16 (59%)</td>
<td>5 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped me find out more about other people on the course.</td>
<td>14 (52%)</td>
<td>4 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing specific, it just helped me feel that I knew a bit more about the course.</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.9: Impact of information exchanges on preparation for learning

Open items and free text comments in the survey appeared to confirm the data in Figure 5.9. The comments were analysed, coded and comparisons made between responses from widening and non-widening participation students. Coding was based on the main themes which had been highlighted in the initial data analysis process. The three main topics of conversation for widening and non-widening participation students were: gathering information about learning, nightlife and socialising and anxieties about initial meetings, but it is interesting to note that widening participation students had markedly more online conversations about gathering information about learning than any other
subject. Widening participation students also sought more conversations with existing students.

The evidence that social networking interactions may be of particular benefit to widening participation students may be influenced by limited numbers. However, the feedback to both open and closed questions suggests that widening participation students may have more concerns about learning at university than non-widening participation students, evidence which concurs with the current literature on student expectations and experiences. Interacting on social networks could be particularly beneficial for prospective students from widening participation backgrounds; this may be because social networking forums offer widening participation students access to information that otherwise may not be readily accessible for them. It may also be symptomatic of the anonymity and neutralising effect afforded by online communications – where social or other factors can remain hidden (Norris, 2004, p. 5). Thomas (2002, p. 431) suggests that students’ experiences may be influenced by ‘institutional habitus’ – the familiarity with an institutions’ culture and social practices – if a student feels that they do not ‘fit in’ it may lead to poor quality experiences or possibly, early withdrawal. Linking up with other students and discussing thoughts about going to university on social networking sites may help widening participation students gain an insight into the environment to which they will soon be moving, this new found knowledge may help them acquire more social and institutional ‘capital’ and enhance their self-efficacy.

This chapter outlines the research findings and starts a discussion about the implications of the findings and this discussion continues in the next chapter where I discuss my interpretation of the findings, the implications for practice and the contribution they make to existing knowledge relating to students’ experiences and integration into university life.
6. Maintaining the bridge: interpretations, reflections and a new integration theory

6.1. Reviewing purpose and focus

My research is based on the hypothesis that social networking can act as a bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations of higher education learning and their experiences when they start at university.

Three interrelated key areas underpin my hypothesis: firstly, students’ uncertainty about what learning and living at university will involve; secondly, the link between expectations and the quality of early experiences, including integration into university life; and thirdly, social networking as a mechanism to help students develop more realistic expectations of university life.

In the introductory chapter I discussed how my professional practice had led me to my conception of social networking as a bridge between expectations and experiences. In the Literature Review chapter I suggested that existing research and social theoretical frameworks such as social capital and self-efficacy support the notion of social networking as a bridge. The research questions at the end of the literature review chapter focus on the following key themes:

- Connecting to people: why prospective students link up with others on social networking sites; who they hope to contact and who they actually contact; the type of connections that students make; friendships they form; and the durability of their online relationships.
- Exchanging information: the character of online conversations.
- The impact of social networking on students’ expectations and experiences.
- The differing experiences of widening and non-widening participation students.

The research used a case study approach to investigate these questions: the case in this instance was students at the University of Portsmouth. The experience of students at Portsmouth is inevitably shaped by the culture and practice at the University, but in terms of demographics and educational background, the sample was broadly representative of that of the wider student population in many other post-1992 institutions. Data was gathered from approximately 100 students using an online survey and interviews.
6.2. Research findings: interpretation

Responses in the online survey and interviews clearly showed that for many students interactions on social networking sites helped bridge the gap between their pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences. In the online survey, and in interviews, students described how linking up with other prospective students, discussing their expectations, sharing their thoughts about studying at university and about living in a new location had a positive effect on their outlook before they started, and on their experiences when they arrived at university. This section relates the research findings and their interpretation to the themes outlined in the research questions at the end of Section 2.6.

There are a number of points highlighted in the next two sections which have important implications for the subject of students’ integration into university life; these points are preceded by the heading: Point of note.

6.2.1 Connecting to people

Social networking forums are designed specifically to allow individuals to link up and connect with other people. In my study, respondents stated that by facilitating their connections and communications, social networking helped improve levels of confidence and had a positive impact on their pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences.

![Figure 6.1: Connecting to people](image)

Figure 6.1 illustrates the different types of connections that students made on social networking sites.

The evidence detailed in Chapter 5 suggests that for the majority of respondents meeting up with potential housemates, other prospective classmates and students already at university was important. 83% of respondents messaged others within the social network or made direct contact using an external email account after initially linking up with them on the social networking site. These contacts enabled students to make new friends, allowed them to share their thoughts about going to university and helped them find out more about who was going to be on their course or in their accommodation.

Making friends is an accepted part of the social networking culture. Boyd (2006, p. 5) suggests that online friendships offer opportunities for exchanging information and sharing interests. Feedback from respondents in my EdD research showed that, in line with boyd’s research, the vast majority of students welcomed the opportunity to exchange information and share interests with others on social networking sites and, furthermore, that online friendships offer students the opportunity to share their feelings, to support each
other and help them to start forming relationships which persist when they start at university.

By facilitating contacts and friendships, social networking fulfils the basic human need to form relationships; this need was described by Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) as a desire to develop attachments to other people within a secure environment, the effect of which has a positive impact on emotions. 54% of the prospective students in this research made direct contact with more than five other network members, and 89% of those who linked up with someone else continued to communicate with each other. The research data aligns with existing research (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2005; Stuart, 2006) in suggesting that establishing friendships makes students feel more positive about their university experiences, helps prevent feelings of loneliness or isolation when they start at university and helps them integrate socially (see Sections 5.3.2; 5.3.3; 5.3.4).

**Point of note 1.** For students in this research being able to make friends via social networking forums was important and helped them address anxieties about being lonely when they arrived at university; this had a positive impact on levels of confidence and self-efficacy.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field, and related these concepts to students’ understanding of a university’s norms and practices, their capacity to form friendships and their standing or social capital with other students and staff (please see Section 2.3.1). This research shows that social networking forums allow students to communicate with other prospective students and develop the connections through which information about university life can be exchanged. The information they exchange improves their own understanding about what being a student will involve and the friendship groups they form help improve confidence levels and enhance social capital – ideas in line with Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Social capital is a complex area and can be regarded objectively (other people’s perception of an individual’s position in the field) or subjectively (an individual’s view of their own position or standing). My research investigates the subjective viewpoint and clearly shows that respondents felt social networking facilitated them making friends, helped them understand more about university life, what was expected of them, and had a positive impact on their early experiences.

**Point of note 2.** Social networking had a positive impact on the vast majority of respondents’ social capital.

Robert Putnam’s research centres on the social capital of groups and the influence of groups on society and his theories relating to bonding and bridging capital are particularly relevant for my research. He argues that bonding capital exists between individuals with
strong emotional ties, such as family members or close friends (Putnam, 2000, p. 22), however, my EdD research shows that students do form friendships online, often with people whom they previously have not had any contact, and that through their online connections bonds start to form. Putnam, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007, p. 1163) also suggest that interactions on social networking forums serve to maintain existing contacts rather than help individuals create new connections. Again in contrast to the findings of Ellison et al., my EdD research suggests that students make new friends online and that these new online friends can become offline friends when students start at university.

My findings may possibly differ from those of Putnam and Ellison et al. because our target audiences differ. Putnam’s research focussed on individuals living in close proximity; my research centred on prospective students who would be in dispersed locations at a distance from each other. Ellison’s target audience was students already at college; the focus of my research was on prospective students who were likely to be living in the family home. Prospective students therefore are in a unique position as the opportunities to link up and communicate with other students are limited; they may live in dispersed geographical locations; and furthermore, they will not be aware of who else will be going to university at the same time as themselves and therefore do not know whom to contact.

Engaging in social networking activities renders geographical locations irrelevant and helps students identify other people who will be on their course or in their hall of residence. This was an opportunity that otherwise may not have been available to them, and the research showed that in many cases students welcomed the prospect of being able to link up with other students online.

**Point of note 3.** The vast majority of students in the research made friends with online contacts who were previously unknown to them and started to form relationships.

Students took advantage of opportunities to link up with others when they arose, but it is also clear that some students would have welcomed further opportunities to link up with other prospective students on their course and existing students already at university. This is possibly because, as feedback from one respondent suggested (please see Section 5.3.2. Establishing contacts), some students regard information from current students as more trustworthy than some of the official information distributed by institutions.

A number of students would also welcome the opportunity to communicate with their tutors during the pre-arrival stage – a notion which is contrary to findings in existing research, for example, Jessica Shepherd in the Guardian (2008) and Salaway et al. in the ECAR report (2008). Again, findings may vary due to the focus on different stages in the student lifecycle; Shepherd’s research and the ECAR report concentrate on students already at
university whereas this EdD research centred on students in the pre-entry period. At this stage students appear to welcome opportunities to communicate with any individual or group who can provide access to reliable information about university life, but, once they are at university and have started assimilating into the university culture, the need to access information about their course or studying in general is not so pressing. The desire to link up with existing students and tutors is discussed in Section 6.6. It is clear that some students did not link up with others, although they had the opportunity to do so. The reasons why they did not contact others was not investigated in this research, but makes a worthy topic for a future research project.

The variance between existing theories and my research findings demonstrates that my research extends current ideas about how, and when, students start to form bonds and the types of interaction that are acceptable to them; this contribution to knowledge is discussed in more detail in Section 6.4.

6.2.2 Exchanging information

My study showed that exchanging and sharing information on social networking sites helps reduce anxieties about going to university and allows students to find out information about their course, living at university, the local area, and the equipment they may need for their course. These interactions have a positive impact on self-efficacy and improve levels of confidence. They also help students develop more realistic expectations and understanding about learning and living at university (see Section 5.4). Figure 6.2 lists the types of information that students exchange on social networking sites. Viewing photographs is also included because the survey data suggests that this activity re-enforces and strengthens the connections that students make in their online conversations or in subsequent emails or messages.

Many of the conversations that students’ have on social networking sites are exploratory; they exchange information about various aspects of university life, including living in university accommodation and aspects of their course.

Social life is a popular topic; entertainment, nightlife and clubbing feature in many conversations, while students are also keen to discuss what their course would involve and to find out about the books and equipment that they may need. 95% of students who exchanged information about their course stated that it helped them prepare for their studies; 30% said that it told them something about their course that they did not know.
before; and some stated that it just made them feel that they knew more about their course in general. This suggests that exchanging information about life and living at university influences students’ perceptions about higher education, making them feel more confident about going to university.

Although the findings from this research do not concur with the theory of Ellison’s et al. (2007, p. 1162) that online interactions only help individuals remain in contact with existing friends or acquaintances, I agree with their argument that social networks facilitate information dissemination and provide access to new information. Students share information about their own interests and their anticipations about what university life will involve, but they also pass on information that they had acquired from people outside the social network, for example, course information from existing students, brothers, sisters or friends already at university. In more traditional networks individuals influence the behaviour and attitudes of other members of the network (Knoke and Kuklinksi, 1982, p. 9); this would also appear to be the case with students who are members of the same social network. This brings up to date Bandura’s (1997, p. 519) theory that (offline) social networks enable individuals to disseminate new ideas and learn about new activities and suggests that online networks can also fulfil this function.

Online communication provides students with access to information that otherwise may not be available to them. This pattern of information dissemination within and outside groups also aligns to Granovetter’s (1973, p. 1366) regarding the strength of weak ties - weak ties to one or more external groups allows individuals to access non-redundant information and then share that information with other members of their own network with whom they have strong ties.

Point of note 4. Social networking facilitated information exchange and dissemination, and for some students, provided access to information that would not otherwise have been available to them.

The research also highlights the benefits of being able to view online profile photographs, an outcome which I had not anticipated. Communicating with other prospective students online helps them make friends before they start at university – viewing photographs ‘added value’ to this process. Recognising someone’s face during a lecture or on campus during their first few days at university means that students feel more comfortable about approaching others. Recognising someone, whether they approach them or not, also helps alleviate feelings of loneliness or isolation. As well as supporting students’ integration when they arrive at the institution, accessing photographs also has a positive impact on perceptions before students start at university. As experienced social network users they are aware of the potential benefits of being able to identify someone from their
photograph and the anticipation that this would be the case alleviated concerns and increased levels of confidence. Stevens and Walker (1996, cited by Harvey & Drew, 2006, p. 77) acknowledge that feeling positive and believing that there are others on whom they can rely (or at least are familiar with) assists students' social and emotional adjustment.

Point of note 5. Visual recognition is important; it helped students who took part in the research recognise other students when they arrived at university, either in a social setting or in the classroom. It is also important because experienced social network users can anticipate this effect and this has a positive impact on their levels of confidence and helps alleviate any anxieties they may have about being lonely when they start at university.

It is clear from the research that students started to form networks. There is an interesting debate surrounding the relationship between these networks and Wenger’s notion of a community of practice. Wenger describes communities of practice as ‘...groups of people who share a concern...who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’. And people in communities of practice as those ‘...who find value in their interactions. As they spend time together they typically share information, insight and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations and their needs.’ (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4) He outlines the three main constituents of a community of practice as: a domain which gives the community purpose and a common identity; community where interactions take place and relationships are formed; and practice which is a body of knowledge that the community develops and shares. In their online discussions students share information about their previous experiences, exchange their thoughts about going to university and also start to acquire some elements of a common language, for example, they discuss units, seminars, modules and start to talk about induction and being a fresher. They also start to form relationships. Does this suggest that they are becoming a community of practice? Initially, it would appear so, but the term ‘practice’ requires clarification.

Wenger’s notion of practice implies sharing a common set of knowledge or beliefs, which impact on the behaviour and abilities of members (op.cit., p 44). My EdD research shows that interacting on social networks has an impact on students’ thoughts and feelings about going to university and on their experiences when they start, but the research does not investigate their behaviour when they are at university, the impact on their academic performance or discuss what the ‘practice’ of being a student involves. It is reasonable to state, therefore, that while students displayed some of the characteristics of a community of practice, they had not yet become a full community of practice. The link between social networking and student identity, or the practice of becoming a student, is a viable and interesting topic for a future research project.
Point of note 6. In the networks that students form they displayed some of the characteristics of a community of practice.

Social networking interactions have a strong impact on students' thoughts and perceptions about going to university. Many respondents made comments which suggested that they had been nervous about going to university, but that their online interactions made them feel more confident and happier about the forthcoming move into higher education. These changes are mainly brought about by the opportunities that social networking affords for ‘getting to know’ other people and for sharing apprehensions and anxieties. Above I discuss how viewing online, profile photographs has a positive impact on students’ thoughts about going to university and on their experiences when they start. In a similar way, finding out about other people’s interests, their thoughts about life in halls, and their expectations of the course, helps students feel that they know something about university life and helps them get to know other people and prevent feelings of loneliness and alienation when they finally arrive at university.

Sharing interests and concerns helps students realise that other prospective students are also anxious about coping academically and that it is common to experience these feelings: 53% of respondents, who exchanged information about learning, stated that ‘it was good to realise that other people had the same concerns/questions as me’. This is compounded by the fact that many respondents frequently used the word ‘reassuring’ to describe their communications with other students, suggesting that they found their interactions with other prospective students supportive and fulfilling. Bandura (1997) outlines several factors which impact on self-efficacy including: social persuasion (encouragement or discouragement from others); modelling (replicating actions of others); and physiological factors, (interpretation of physical feelings and experiences and how an individual copes with them). My EdD research shows that student interactions on social networks can be mutually supporting (encouraging) and helps students realise that their own feelings are not due to inadequacy or because they are different to other students, but are the normal emotions of anyone about to enter into unknown territory. This realisation has a positive impact on their views about coping with academic life and suggests that social networking improves levels of self-efficacy and helps students cope with the trials and tribulations when they start at university.

Point of note 7. Information exchanges helped students find out more about other people and alleviated some of their fears about being lonely and unable to cope when they arrive at university. As with Point of note 1 this led to improved levels of confidence and self-efficacy.
In his work Bandura recognises the technology allows individuals to access models which may not otherwise be available to them (ibid., p. 93). Acquiring the rudiments of academic language (talking about modules, units, assessment and so on) and, in some cases, exchanging first - or second-hand knowledge about student life offers students the opportunity to access virtual models to which they may not otherwise have access. This is not only in accord with Bandura’s suggestion that technology can provide access to previously unattainable models, but again brings his theory up-to-date by identifying the virtual world and Web 2.0 technologies as channels which provide access to these models.

Interactions on social networking sites have the added advantage of allowing prospective students the opportunity to communicate with other students without exposing their shortcomings (perceived or real) or revealing information about themselves which they would rather not disclose. Norris (2004, p. 5) argues that social networking allows participants a degree of anonymity which can act as a normalising influence. For prospective students this allows them to discuss their concerns and thoughts about going to university in a non-threatening environment; this is particularly important for students from non-traditional backgrounds who may not have access to family or friends who can acquaint them with life at university and who may have low levels of confidence (Jacobs, 2007b).

Point of note 8. Social networking allowed prospective students to access new modelling influences.

6.2.3. Impact on integration

Feedback from respondents showed that connecting to other students and exchanging information on social networking sites has a positive impact on students’ integration into university life. Viewing other people’s photographs, exploring interests in common and empathising with each other meant that when they started at university there were people in their accommodation or on their course that they knew and with whom they had already established contact. The information that they exchanged helped students understand more about the local area and social life, aspects related to studying (including academic language), the learning environment and the structure of the course.

There is a strong interplay between the social and academic aspects of a student’s life. This research suggests that although social networking interactions may not provide detailed and accurate information about learning, the social benefits that prospective students gain from linking up with potential housemates and classmates, as well as confidence they acquire from their interactions, contributes towards their integration into both the social and academic aspects of their university life (Tinto, 1975). The relevance of the terms ‘academic integration’ and ‘social integration’ in a world where students now
have the opportunity to start linking up with other prospective students and exchanging information online is discussed in detail in Section 6.3. *Rethinking integration theory.*

6.2.4. Impact on widening participation and non-widening participation students

The evidence in this research suggests that interactions on social networking sites may have additional benefits for widening participation students who had more conversations about learning than non-widening participation students and who particularly valued the opportunity to interact with other prospective students. The evidence also suggested they were also particularly pleased that social networking provided them with the opportunity to discuss areas that they were concerned about and that other students shared their concerns. Nearly 60% of widening participation students stated that ‘It was good to realise that other people had the same concerns/questions as me’ as opposed to 36% of non-widening participation students (please see Figure 5.9 in the previous chapter).

These findings are in line with the literature, including my previous research (Jacobs, 2007b) and that of Mackie (2001), who suggests that widening participation students may have difficulties understanding the demands of their course. Bamber (2005, p. 28) also suggests that students from non-traditional backgrounds may be ill-prepared for studying at a higher educational level.

However, problems with low response rates and students leaving the online survey make it difficult to make strong claims about the impact of social networking on the expectations and experiences of students from widening participation backgrounds. These problems were compounded by the issue of phrasing questions in a sensitive way that did not confuse or alienate respondents and the difficult nature of the term ‘widening participation’; a problem also recognised elsewhere in the literature (Stuart, 2006, p. 163).

I therefore suggest that the findings relating to widening participation and the possible added benefit that social networking affords widening participation students are regarded as indicative, rather than representative. For someone who is concerned with supporting the transition of widening participation students this is disappointing but suggests that two courses of action are needed. Firstly, to identify specific groups of non-traditional students, for example, students from ethnic minorities, young white males or mature students rather than using the broad and imprecise classification ‘widening participation’. Secondly, to undertake a research activity in the future that is designed to explore the differing experiences of a specific group of widening participation students. For example, an in-depth case study which investigates the impact of social networking on the expectations and experiences of mature students in social sciences.
6.2.5. Mapping findings to the existing models of academic and social integration

Throughout my research I have been conscious that social networking and the opportunities it affords prospective students for communicating and exchanging information does not sit comfortably with the traditional notions of academic and social integration; this conviction strengthened as I interpreted the research findings. When I first started to write this chapter, I attempted to conceptualise how students’ social networking interactions, and the consequences of them, related to the traditional ideas of academic and social integration. To help me in this endeavour I created a conceptual diagram, similar to the original conceptual framework diagram (Figure 1.1) in Chapter 1. The resultant diagram was complicated and did not make clear the link between students’ social networking activities and integration (please see Appendix 7). My dissatisfaction grew until I resolved that the only way forward was to re-visit the existing notions of academic and social integration and determine why they could not accommodate my research findings. This journey resulted in a re-conceptualisation of the notion of student integration and a new theory relating to how and when integration takes place.

The processes that led to the new theory are summarised below and begins by trying to align the research findings to the traditional notions of academic and social integration.

Figure 6.3 identifies key areas associated with academic and social integration; the categories are based on the current literature, for example the ideas of Tinto (1987), and my professional experience.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic integration</th>
<th>Social integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding more about the course</td>
<td>Settling into accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding more about learning</td>
<td>Creating a social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with academic demands of course</td>
<td>Becoming part of a course group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing time</td>
<td>Familiarisation with local area</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Figure 6.3: Traditional notions of academic and social integration
Figure 6.4 relates the student activities on social networking sites that have been highlighted in this research to the concepts of academic and social integration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social networking activity</th>
<th>Social integration</th>
<th>Academic integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to people (see Fig. 6.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking up with housemates</td>
<td>Settling into accommodation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with classmates</td>
<td>Becoming part of a course group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Familiarisation with the local area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking up with existing students</td>
<td>Familiarisation with the local area</td>
<td>i. Understanding more about learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Coping with academic demands of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>iii. Managing time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanging information (see Fig. 6.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about learning</td>
<td>Coping with academic demands of course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanging information about the course</td>
<td>Understanding more about the course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing photographs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing equipment</td>
<td>Understanding more about the course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting anxieties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out about accommodation</td>
<td>Settling into accommodation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring social life and local area</td>
<td>Creating a social life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.4: Relating findings to traditional notions of social and academic integration**

As can be seen in Figure 6.4 there are four areas which cannot be accommodated within these traditional notions of social and academic integration: sharing interests, highlighting anxieties, sharing concerns and viewing photographs. However, these were all aspects that students identified as highly important and which impact on their ability to cope, both academically and socially, when they start at university.

Sharing concerns, sharing interests and discussing anxieties helps students realise that others have the same concerns as themselves and facilitates a connection which, in many cases, leads to students forming a bond or establishing friendships. The literature stresses the importance of friendship groups and the sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary,
1995, p. 499; Maslow, 1987, p. 20). Being able to recognise someone from their photograph enforces these connections and enables students to recognise others when they start at university; this engenders positive feelings both in the pre-entry and post-entry periods. All these areas are associated with levels of confidence, social capital and self-efficacy.

Students clearly feel that their interactions on social networking sites have a positive impact on their integration, but thinking about how social networking activities had an impact on integration led to a review of traditional notions of academic and social integration and a re-conceptualisation of theory relating to students’ integration into university life.

6.3. Rethinking integration theory

This section reconsiders integration from two perspectives: firstly, the relative importance of academic and social integration and secondly, when integration takes place.

The Literature review (Chapter 2) highlights the emphasis on academic integration in the existing research, for example, Yorke and Longden (2008) and Bamber (2005) who write about the importance of students’ academic expectations and the impact of these expectations on integration, the first-year experience and retention rates. In previous research, I have also concentrated on the link between students’ academic expectations and experiences. However, student feedback in this doctorate research shows that social integration is as important, if not more so, than academic integration. Students discussed the academic aspects of their course, but they clearly highlighted the importance of finding out more about social life at university and their concerns about being lonely and that they would not be able to make new friends either in their class or in their accommodation. Tinto (1987) and Harrington et al. (2001) linked social integration and academic integration, but in their theories the emphasis remains on academic integration. However, students’ lives are not compartmentalised – if they have difficulties making friends, establishing a social life and getting to know other people who are on their course this could lead to difficulties with settling into their academic life and their ability to cope with their studies (Wilcox et al., 2005; Stuart, 2006). Integrating socially is important to students and impacts on the academic and social aspects of their life at university.

The second area to consider is timing. The existing literature on the link between expectations and experiences firmly locates integration in the post-entry period, but this research shows that students’ integration starts to take place in the pre-entry period. They started to link up with other people on their course or in their accommodation and started to find out more about their social aspects of university life as discussed above. In the research, students also highlighted their concerns during the pre-entry period about their
ability to cope academically; this was manifest in their frequent comments about their interactions being reassuring and that they were relieved their concerns were shared by others. Anxieties about coping academically or socially can be associated with low levels of confidence and self-efficacy; however, being able to address these anxieties via social networking communications allows students’ integration to start in the pre-entry period.

Integration is a process of assimilation and involves adjusting to university life practically, emotionally and psychologically. This research has shown that social networking can advance students’ integration. However, social networking is the facilitator that allows these adjustments to take place earlier, but it is not the key. It is likely that students have always experienced concerns about going to university and that they would have liked to meet up with other prospective students and find out more about learning and life at university, if they had had the opportunity to do so. This suggests that students start to prepare and make adjustments at the pre-entry stage.

My EdD research shows that integration is a complex area and that existing theory, which centres on social and academic integration which takes place when students arrive at university, now requires revision and extension.

6.3.1 Underpinning rationale

The activities that students engage in on social networking sites outlined in Figure 6.1: Connecting to people and in Figure 6.2; Exchanging information, can be categorised into two main areas: those that focus on students preparing themselves for university and those that are concerned with forming bonds or relationships with others.

Preparing for university involves understanding the practical aspects which will help students assimilate into university life, for example, finding out more about the course, living in accommodation, the local area and social life. Finding out more about these areas also alleviates concerns and anxieties about being lonely when they start at university and their ability to cope with the academic and social aspects of their life, areas which can be associated with Bourdieu’s notion of social capital (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Addressing concerns and feeling that they will be able to cope improves confidence levels and, as such, could be regarded as students’ own emotional and psychological preparation for university. Based on the research findings, Figure 6.5 overleaf highlights the various aspects of students’ practical and psychological preparation for university under the headings Practical preparation and Improving confidence.
Being a student at university involves moving to a new location and meeting new people; it involves becoming a member of a course group, living with others who share their accommodation, meeting up with others socially or joining clubs and societies. Students are joining a new community with many groups and sub-groups within it. As shown in the theories of Bourdieu and Wenger, part of being a community involves understanding the norms and practices of the community, acquiring the appropriate language, forming relationships with others and establishing standing or social capital.

As discussed in Section 2.2.1, the Bourdieu’s and Putnam’s theories relating to social capital differ. Bourdieu’s theory relates to the place or power of an individual within a group and Putnam centres on the social capital of groups and their influence on their community or the wider society. My research findings relate to individuals’ perceptions of their own abilities to cope with university life, their levels of confidence and their location within a course group or in relation to other people in their accommodation, this is about their individual social capital or standing – analogous to Bourdieu’s theories. However, it is possible that changes in individual social capital may lead to changes in the social capital of a group and thus, Bourdieu’s notion of social capital and Putnam’s can be linked. For example, if several prospective students find that they share a common interest in music via a social networking site, when they arrived at university they may feel sufficiently empowered as a group to set up their own music society and eventually influence the programme of concerts or other musical activities offered to the student population as a whole. Similarly, prospective students discussing environmental matters in the pre-entry period could feel sufficiently in tune with each others’ views to take a proactive stance when they reach university to (for example) cut down on waste within the student catering facilities and have an impact on the services offered within university catering outlets. My research did not investigate the longer term impact of the connections that students made.

![Table: Preparing for university and improving confidence](image)

**Figure 6.5: Preparing for university and improving confidence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical preparation</th>
<th>Improving confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding more about the course and learning</td>
<td>Improving confidence about coping academically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to know more about other students</td>
<td>Improving confidence about coping socially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding more about university and the local area</td>
<td>Alienating concerns about being lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Addressing feelings of inadequacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on social networking sites during the pre-entry period, but this is certainly a worthwhile topic for future research.

In the pre-entry stage students can start forming relationships which are the first steps to becoming part of these different groups in the community. Figure 6.6 uses the findings from this research to show the types of relationship that students start to build before they start at university.

The discussion above centring on students’ preparation for university, the relationships that they make and the notion that integration can start in the pre-entry period challenges the traditional theories of social and academic integration and leads to a re-conceptualising of the notion of student integration.

6.3.2 The re-conceptualised theory

The new emergent theory is based on how individuals prepare themselves for university – their individual integration into university life – and how they are starting to become part of a community or communities – their group integration.

As shown in this research, these activities can start to take place in the pre-entry period and continue in the post-entry period.

The discussion above articulates the division between individual and group integration and I continue this theme. Figure 6.4 compares the findings from this research to the traditional model of integration. A number of aspects can be related to the existing notions of academic and social integration, but some aspects of the new model could not be accommodated. The re-conceptualisation of integration, which includes these elements, is based on individual and group integration as outlined below.

Students’ individual integration is about their personal experience. There are areas which require input and that are facilitated by other agencies; for example, understanding more about the course and understanding more about learning requires a well-designed curriculum and, a sound learning and teaching strategy. Figure 6.7 lists the main areas of students’ individual integration.
Integrating into university life, as discussed above, involves becoming part of a community and a member of various groups: a course group, a group in halls and so on. Figure 6.8 below outlines these aspects of group integration.

![Figure 6.7: Individual integration](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual integration</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding more about the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding more about learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with the academic demands of the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in halls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarisation with the local area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining interests and hobbies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figure 6.7: Individual integration)

Figures 6.5 to 6.8 outline the various aspects of students’ integration into university life, but how do these different areas of students’ individual and group integration fit into the student lifecycle and the overall process of integration?

(Figure 6.8: Group integration)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming part of course group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a member of social groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding norms and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring appropriate language and understanding terminology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My theory makes clear the importance of students’ individual preparation for university life and how it impacts on their thoughts and feelings about going to university. The literature also articulates the link between expectations and experiences (Yorke & Longden, 2008) the importance of having a friendship group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and social capital (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993). Aspects relating to improving confidence can be located in the pre-entry period, although the impact of these activities is carried forward to the post-entry period and influences students’ individual integration. Similarly, preparation
for the practical aspects of university life, which help students understand more about what will be required of them and improve levels of confidence is located in the pre-entry stage, but has repercussions on students' individual integration when they start at university. Thus, aspects of practical preparation and activities which improve confidence start in the pre-entry period and continue in the next stage of the student lifecycle.

Group integration, however, is a real world rather than a virtual activity. Students can only become part of a community and form networks with other people when they start at university. However, starting to form relationships virtually on social networking sites in the pre-entry stage can be the basis for enhanced and speedier integration when they start at university.

The ideas put forward above are encapsulated in Figure 6.9, which articulates the re-conceptualised notion of integration. The figure uses the areas of integration identified in the research and lists them as 'Connecting to people' and 'Exchanging information' and illustrates how these activities help in 'Building relationships', 'Practical preparation' and 'Improving levels of confidence'. These activities, which take place in the pre-entry period, are then linked to students' 'Group integration' and 'Individual integration' that take place in the post-entry period. Figure 6.9 includes the areas previously outlined in Figures 6.1 to 6.8, but collapses the detail and shows headings only.

Figure 6.9 groups activities as individual integration or group integration, but as with the traditional notions of academic and social integration, there is a connection between some aspects of individual and group integration. For example, discussing aspects of the course with other people provides information that helps an individual prepare for university and the act of sharing that information helps create bonds within other people. However, the re-conceptualised theory of individual and group integration differentiates between how an individual internalises their pre-entry and post-entry experiences, and how they interact in group situations; it also accommodates processes that span the two stages of the student lifecycle: before they start at university and the first days or months at university.

At the far right-hand side, Figure 6.9 includes ‘Enhancing early experiences and improving retention’. Section 2.1 makes frequent reference to the link between successful integration, early experiences and levels of retention which is discussed in the literature. Yorke and Longden (2008) discuss the link between students' academic integration, early experiences and retention, as do Tinto (1987) and Knox and Wyper (2008) in their review of the first-year experience for the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee.
Figure 6.9: Individual and group integration into university life

Aspects of group integration
- Connecting to people
- Building relationships
- Group integration

Aspects of individual integration
- Exchanging information
- Practical preparation
- Improving confidence
- Individual integration

Social networking interactions
- Enhancing early experiences and improving retention

Pre-entry
Post-entry
The idea of individual and group integration expands, rather than replaces, the traditional notions of academic and social integration. The new theory allows for a stronger articulation of the role of social aspects of integration, including the importance of preparing for university, enhancing confidence, self-efficacy and social capital during the pre-entry stage and links these, and academic aspects of integration, to students’ early experiences, and subsequently, to retention.

6.4. Contribution to knowledge

My EdD research can make a claim to contributing to knowledge in two main areas: firstly, highlighting important new areas relating to students’ integration into university life, including a new theory about the nature and location of integration in the student lifecycle, secondly, providing new insights into the role of social networking in preparing students for university life. I can also claim that my research adds to the current debate about students’ expectations of higher education.

6.4.1 Integration into university life

Social integration is more important than previous research indicates. The existing literature suggests that academic integration is particularly important. For example, Cook and Rushton (2008, p. 10) argue that a lack of preparation for academic learning may lead to poor quality experiences and possibly students leaving their course early; similarly, Tinto (1987) discusses the importance of academic integration. My research shows that although understanding the academic aspects of university life is important, making friends, linking up with other people on the course, connecting with people in halls and finding out about social activities in the local area are at least, if not more, important.

Integration starts before students register at university. Students are starting to prepare practically, emotionally and psychologically in the days and months before they start university. Prior to the advent of social networking, opportunities to link up with other prospective students were limited. Social networking provides a channel, or bridge, which allows students to connect to other people and share information that helps them understand more about life at university and address some of their apprehensions. This has resulted in prospective students being able to better prepare for university life. This aspect of my research challenges the theories of Robert Putnam, who claims that bonds mainly exist between individuals in strong-tie relationships (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), however, my research clearly shows that students, who have not previously been in contact, start to form relationships online. Similarly, the research challenges the ideas of Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007, p. 1162) who argue that interactions online do not help improve confidence or self-esteem, whereas my research clearly shows social networking interactions had an impact on both these areas.
Students’ integration comprises two main elements: individual integration and group integration. The first element involves learning to cope with the academic and social aspects of university life including understanding more about the course, learning to study, settling into accommodation and making friends. Individual integration spans the pre-entry and post-entry stages of the student lifecycle; social networking is the bridge which helps students start preparing for university life by providing access to practical information and helping students gain confidence before they start at university. The importance of a positive outlook, improved levels of self-efficacy and preparation for university life are ideas have been stressed in the literature (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Knox & Wyper, 2008; Bandura, 1997).

Group integration involves students becoming part of the university community by becoming a member of a course group, joining a social group or other groups within the university. Social networking allows students to start forming relationships and networks before they start at university. Friendship groups and facilitating a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1987, Wilcox et al., 2005) are important and help individuals assimilate into a new environment. Forming groups, acquiring the basics of academic language and understanding the norms and practices of life at university through social networking interactions adds another dimension to Wenger’s theory of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Social networking helps create the foundations on which a community of practice can be built, but students who link up and exchange information on social networking sites cannot be said to constitute a full community of practice, but they display some of the characteristics of one.

6.4.2 Social networking as a bridge

The findings from the research indicate that social networking acts as a bridge between students’ pre-entry and post-entry experiences, as indicated above. The feedback clearly shows that interacting on social networking sites helps students find out about university life, helps them address their anxieties and enables them to form friendship groups, activities which had a positive impact on their integration into university life. It also showed that they readily engaged with this mode of communication. Castells et al. (1999, p. 57) argue that technology has changed the way in which individuals operate and that society centres on information processing and knowledge generation. Similarly, Tapscott (2009, p. 43) suggests information technology is an intrinsic part of young people’s lives and boyd is persuaded that online friendships are part of social networking culture (boyd, 2006, n.p.). The findings from this research confirm and extend these notions by demonstrating some of the ways in which young people engage with, and use, social networking sites. My EdD research shows how young people can be instrumental in their use of social networking sites; students in this research exchanged information and linked up with other people in order to find out more about university life and create friendships in advance of their move to
university. This purposeful use of social networking challenges the notion that online friendships are not supportive (ibid.) and that individuals do not form bonds with those they meet online (Ellison et al., op.cit.).

Given the pervasiveness of social networking in society today it is reasonable to assume that most young people in the developed world who are about to go to university engage in social networking activities. This research shows that given the opportunity prospective students will use this channel of communication to find out more about, and prepare themselves for, university life; this has important implications for universities who are looking to ease student transition and maximise retention. This matter is discussed further below.

My hypothesis uses the bridge as a metaphor, a symbol which is used to indicate a connection. In this research social networking is depicted as a bridge which connects student’s pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences. The bridge metaphor has been used by other researchers, for example, Putnam, Ellison et al. and Granovetter, who use the notion of a bridge in the context of social capital, information dissemination and the strength of connections between individuals; a QCA report, drawing together the experiences of schools and local authorities (Galton et al., 1999, p. 29), also refers to Building Bridges. This EdD research extends and expands previous notions of the bridge metaphor by using it to describe how social networking impacts on students’ integration.

Social networking as a bridge has affordances that facilitate student integration: it allows students to connect to others quickly and easily, it helps students exchange information and it allows students to view photographs of other prospective students and recognise their faces when they start at university. Exploring the notion of social networking as a bridge and identifying important intrinsic properties and affordances, not only adds to the knowledge of social networking as an effective channel of communication but expands and conceptualises the use of the bridge metaphor.

6.4.3 Student expectations of university life
Research that I have undertaken in the past suggests that students are often unsure about what to expect at university; respondents’ online conversations in my EdD research confirm that they were uncertain about what some aspects of learning will involve as the following comment clearly illustrates:

“We discussed things such as what lectures would be like, we were clueless! Also we discussed a bit about how much work we thought there would be.”

My EdD research extends earlier research in this area in that it provides more detail about the nature of their concerns. The research shows that students are unsure about what
happens in a lecture or seminar, the amount of work they will be expected to undertake and
the books or other equipment they may need. Their online conversations also indicated that
they were unsure about the details of course units or the nature of assessments. Knowing
more about the nature of student concerns adds to the knowledge in this area, but also
provides practical pointers about how institutions can help prepare students for learning at
university – I will discuss this more in Sections 6.5 and 6.7 below.

6.5. Contribution to practice

My EdD research has had a significant impact on my practice; this has manifest itself in
three ways: firstly, the setting up of several social networking groups for prospective
students, secondly, changes to the University pre-entry website and thirdly, the development
of several online surveys. It has affected my practice in these areas, but has also been used
in collaborative work with internal and external partners.

6.5.1 Student social networking groups

I have mentioned that in parallel to my EdD research, I have been working on a website to
help prospective students understand more about learning in higher education. I started
both these endeavours about the same time and my EdD has informed the development of
the pre-entry website. I discuss the website itself in more detail below, but an important part
of the developments has been setting up discussion groups to facilitate interaction between
prospective students. In the first iteration of the website, which went live in August 2007, the
discussion forum was located in Blackboard, the University’s virtual learning environment
(VLE). However, prospective students’ engagement was limited and one student
commented “Why can’t they [the University] use Facebook?”.

Shortly after I completed the EdD online survey and interviews, I started work on the next
version of the website – this was an extension of the first site but with a possible target
audience of 800 students. Facebook groups for students who were going to be in halls of
residence were already in existence – these formed the basis of the target sample for this
research – but it was clear from respondents’ feedback that students were keen to link up
with classmates and find out more about the structure of their course and any equipment
that they may need. The emphasis that students placed on finding out more about various
aspects of their course or linking with other students suggested that there was a case for
setting up course-level discussion groups.

The student’s comment outlined above and feedback from my EdD research suggested that
setting up groups in Facebook, rather than a discussion group in the University’s VLE or on
another social networking site, was the most viable option. Subsequently, ten Facebook
course groups were set up.
The reading that I had undertaken as part of my EdD literature review highlighted issues associated with personal security and identity theft. I have also had to remain vigilant about the impact of any adverse comments within the social networking groups that could reflect on the reputation of the University. Consequently, there are two areas I have had to monitor: protecting individuals and protecting the University’s public profile. This heightened awareness, ensured that security access permissions were set at a high level and steps were taken to review students’ postings on a regular basis. In the 2009 version of the pre-entry website, over 1,500 students signed up for the groups and the Facebook groups were moderated on a daily basis.

Students’ comments within the groups aligned closely with the findings in this research: they were keen to make new friends, discuss the equipment they needed and talk about what they thought their course would involve. It is also gratifying to note that none of the postings included any inappropriate language or otherwise unsuitable comment: suggesting that while students discussed their thoughts and feelings freely, they were conscious that the groups had been set up by the institution and therefore had a University ‘presence’.

As part of the pre-entry project evaluation process, students were asked to take part in two online surveys. The first asked students about their views on the usefulness of the pre-entry Facebook groups and the second, asked them to reflect on the groups two to four weeks after they started at University. Feedback in both surveys aligned closely with my EdD research. In the first survey, 95% of respondents (out of a total 93 respondents) joined their course groups, 93% read information on the ‘wall’ and 60% made a posting. 82% said the groups enabled them to link up with other prospective students on their course and 65% planned to meet up in the first week. In response to the question: ‘How has communicating with others or planning to meet them impacted on your views about going to University?’ students again stressed the importance of making friends and sharing their views about going to university. The following comments are typical:

“I felt more relaxed and I saw that many people share the same emotions or problems as me related to the idea of going to University.”

“I was happy to find that a lot of people are sharing my interests and are nice and friendly...actually I made already a lot of friends and can’t wait to see them at Portsmouth. So it was great idea connecting us through Facebook.”

In the later survey, 80% of respondents (of 132) stated that using the pre-entry Facebook groups made them feel more confident about going to university and 71% that it helped them settle in when they started at University. When asked to elaborate, the students’ comments again echoed those in my EdD research: many appreciated the opportunity to make friends
and in doing so they countered concerns about being lonely when they started at university. Student comments included:

“...it allowed me to talk to them and you soon realised that everyone was feeling the exact same way. It helped to talk to other people of similar age. Also helped break the ice when you met them because you didn't have to say your name and where you're from, etc.”

“I didn't feel that I was on my own so I don't miss my friends and family as much as I would if I didn't know anyone. Also, I don't have to worry too much about forgetting where I'm going as I know someone who can work out where I'm meant to be.”

There were many other similar comments and due to the general support for the pre-entry social networking groups, a number of Facebook groups will be set up again to accompany the October 2010 pre-entry website.

There has been much debate at the University about setting up Facebook groups for prospective students and as a result of my involvement with the pre-entry subject groups, and my research in this area, I have been asked to join a committee on pre-entry student communications.

6.5.2 Pre-entry website
As previously mentioned, the development of the pre-entry website has taken place in parallel to my EdD research. Findings from my EdD pilot survey, the main survey, and in interviews have informed the development of the pre-entry website, particularly versions which came on stream post-2008. In the research students indicated that they would like to know more about the course structure, availability of books, what happens in a typical week and the equipment they may need. As a direct result of my research the later versions of the pre-entry website included all these elements and, in addition, course tutors were persuaded to write a ‘hints and tips’ section to help prepare students for university. Course specific information for 176 undergraduate programmes across the University was included in the 2009 website.

In my EdD research, students also stressed that they would welcome the opportunity to hear about existing students’ experiences and to communicate with tutors. Findings in this area have resulted in the creation of a series of videos in which existing students were filmed responding to ‘FAQs’ about their course experiences and how they could have prepared for their course better. In addition, tutor videos provided a number of pointers suggesting how students can prepare for higher education learning. These student and tutor videos have been incorporated into the later versions of the website. In October 2009 an international
version of the pre-entry website was piloted with details about the course for which students had applied, information about learning in the UK, videos of international students talking about their experiences and tutors providing hints and tips to help international students understand more about learning in a UK higher education institution.

2,500 students registered for the 2009 pre-entry website and used it on a regular basis. The online surveys mentioned in Section 6.5.2. also included items designed to gather feedback about the pre-entry website. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with 93% of respondents stating that the site had helped them understand more about learning at university and 94% that the information was useful. As I write my EdD thesis in July 2010, developments are taking place for the October 2010 version which will include information for four groups of students: undergraduate home, undergraduate international, postgraduate home and postgraduate international.

The pre-entry website has received positive feedback from colleagues within the University and externally. I carried out a workshop about the project at a university in Kent and papers have been accepted at two international conferences (Society for Research into Higher Education, 2008; European First Year Experience, 2009), a national conference (Staff and Educational Development Association, 2009) and at local teaching and learning events at the University of Portsmouth.

My research has helped guide and inform developments in this area of my practice. In addition to the practical contribution my research has made in this area, I have also been able to state clearly that developments are underpinned by rigorous research which has enhanced the project’s credibility, particularly with academic staff, University management and colleagues elsewhere in the sector.

6.5.3 Subsequent online surveys

I had carried out several surveys on students’ expectations and experiences, and personal development planning before I started my EdD. Some of the earlier surveys were on paper, but they have increasingly moved to an online forum. The experience that I gained setting up, analysing and interpreting the feedback received from the EdD online surveys has helped me develop more elegant solutions in subsequent surveys, for example, using different question types and appropriate categorisation. Carrying out the EdD surveys also highlighted the issue of response rates and non-completion and helped me take action to mitigate these problems and resulted in the re-ordering of standard items to improve survey usability. In subsequent surveys demographic data was captured at the beginning of the survey rather than at the end, which improved the utility of early responses. Identifying gender, age, and so on, at this point in the survey meant that data could be categorised appropriately even if some respondents exited the survey before the end. This has been
particularly useful in a collaborative partners’ survey where items relating to the college concerned, nationality, course and a number of other areas featured at the start of the survey; data could be analysed by college, course and other areas of interest despite a number of students exiting the survey before completing the final questions.

6.6. Recommendations

This research clearly shows that social networking acts as a bridge between students’ pre-entry perceptions and post-entry experiences. In Chapter 5 and in Section 6.7.2, I discuss the transferability of this research and suggest that in a number of respects the students who took part in this research are representative of the wider group of students at post-1992 institutions. This section makes a number of recommendations which those institutions may like to consider; it also makes some suggestions about further research possibilities.

6.6.1 Setting up pre-entry social networking groups (but proceed with care)

Respondents’ feedback suggested that prospective students welcomed the opportunity to link up with other people who may be on their course or in their hall of residence. Setting up one or a limited number of social networking groups provides a focal point which brings students together and acts as an accessible channel of communication and institutions similar to Portsmouth may wish to consider this option. However, such a venture cannot be undertaken without adequate resources and vigilance.

Social networking sites are relatively easy to set up, but universities have a duty of care to ensure that students are not exposed to the dangers associated with identity theft, personal security or unwarranted intrusion by commercial enterprises. In addition, universities are sensitive about their reputation and have to take care not to be linked to postings which contain inappropriate comments or language. At the University of Portsmouth, as a result of my research, we set up a number of social networking groups for pre-entry students. However, we had to ensure that security settings were high, that students joined the groups by invitation only and we monitored the sites on a daily basis to avoid unsuitable postings. These activities, particularly moderating postings on a daily basis, require resources. At a time when universities’ funding streams are diminishing this requires careful consideration, but if, as my EdD research suggests, these interactions help students develop more realistic expectations and integrate better into university life, this could be an investment worth making.

6.6.2 Set up groups for prospective students to communicate with existing students

Prospective students taking part in this research commented that they would have appreciated being able to communicate with students who were already at university, particularly those studying the programme for which they had applied. Knowing who is
already studying for their course and securing access to them can be difficult for new
students, but universities could consider setting up or ‘brokering’ groups which help
prospective students link up with existing students. My own experience, and that of
colleagues working on the Electives programme at the University of Portsmouth, suggests
that while this type of activity can be worthwhile, existing students may need incentives to
take part and maintain their interest. There are a number of possibilities: activities could be
formalised and become part of a credit-rated ‘elective’ or optional unit; they could be
channelled through a volunteering or mentoring scheme, such as those managed by
Students’ Union or it could be part of an Ambassador Scheme. Alternatively, activities could
be recorded in the student record system, feature in a student’s transcript and form part of
an institutional award scheme (for example, the York Award) or in the Higher Education
Achievement Award (HEAR)\textsuperscript{11}, if it is introduced. Again these options would require
administrative resources and a cost – benefit analysis would need to take place.

6.6.3 Set up prospective student to staff communications
Facilitating online prospective student to tutor communications is a contentious area. While
existing research argues that students do not welcome communications of this type
(Shepherd, 2008; Salaway \textit{et al.}, 2008), my EdD research indicates that a number of
students would welcome the opportunity to communicate with their course tutors. However,
setting up this type of group may raise a level of student expectation that would be difficult to
maintain and satisfy. There may also be the added logistical problems, firstly, ensuring that
tutors were available and would respond within acceptable timescales and secondly,
familiarity of colleagues, and willingness to engage, with online technologies.

Students in my research supported the possibility of communicating with tutors online, but to
date there is little evidence of research in this area or of such schemes being set up by
universities. This may be due to institutions’ reluctance to engage with Web 2.0
technologies, but given the priority that young people attach to social networking
communications and the perceived benefits of online communications (as evidenced in my
research), institutions may now wish to consider this option. An action research project that
set up and evaluated a pilot within one department in a university, which possibly channelled
communications through a small number of designated staff would add to the knowledge in
this area.

\textsuperscript{11} The Burgess Report (2006) recommended that the current credit award system is
replaced by a Higher Education Achievement Record with a launch date of 2011. Several
UK universities are currently trialling the HEAR.
6.6.4 Further research possibilities

There is also scope for additional research, particularly regarding the role of social networking in preparing students with non-traditional backgrounds for learning in higher education. Further research focussing on a number of identifiable groups of students, including those from ethnic minorities, part-time and/or mature students would add to knowledge about the expectations and experiences of these groups of students and would explore the role of social networking as a bridge between these two areas in this specific context.

Similar research that investigates the role of social networking in helping to prepare international students for higher level learning in the UK may be particularly attractive to institutions, many of whom are currently increasing their efforts to attract non-UK students.

Focussing on the role of social networking in preparing students from a range of countries would also help understanding more about access to technology in different parts of the world. Universities often assume that all students have access to online technologies; they communicate with students via email or post information on the university website in the anticipation that all students have access, but this is not necessarily the case, as international students’ activity on the pre-entry website and response rates in collaborative partner surveys (as discussed above) indicate. Given the vagaries of access, a research project that set up a pilot social networking group for international students and evaluated its effectiveness and impact on students’ integration would inform and guide future practice.

The fourth area for future research is related to the link between social networking and retention. My EdD research focuses on the perceptions of students near the end of their first year and a number of students will have withdrawn by that point. My professional experience suggests that students who leave are more likely to do so at the end of semester one when they have undertaken their first assessment. Information about point of withdrawal, levels of achievement and, in some cases, reasons for withdrawal are recorded in universities’ student record systems. A researcher familiar with university student record systems and experienced in statistical analysis would be able to undertake an analysis to determine the relationship between social networking activity in the pre-arrival period and withdrawal behaviour. It is difficult to identify the reasons why students’ leave their courses early; withdrawal often results from a complicated social process that involves a number of factors (Ozga and Sukhnanan, 1998, p. 315), but a statistical analysis which focuses on social networking activity, could contribute to the knowledge in this area.

The final research possibility relates to investigating gender differences in survey response rates. In Chapter 5 I noted that although there are more male students at the University of Portsmouth and in the Halls of Residences, more female students took part in the survey
and in interviews. A preliminary literature search did not highlight any current research in 
this area. A more in-depth investigation may identify literature relating to the relationship 
between gender and response rates. The recent growth in online surveys and the academic 
community’s increasing interest in this method of data collection, suggests that research 
relating to the relationship between gender and engagement in online surveys may be 
particularly useful to colleagues.

6.7. Reflecting on the research
6.7.1. Methodology and techniques
The central tenet of my research is investigating the hypothesis that social networking is a 
bridge between pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences. My interest in this topic 
relates to my role as a professional concerned with transition and student experience. The 
research was designed to investigate and understand more about the role of social 
networking and how it impacts on students’ thoughts and perceptions about going to 
university and their experiences when they register. The research was based on an 
interpretivist philosophy: I was interested in the student perspective and students’ views of 
how social networking had an impact on their pre-entry expectations and post-entry 
experiences; the research design and methodology were based on this philosophy. I reflect 
on my methodological approach and the tools I employed below.

Methodology. I chose to use a case study approach to explore the bridge metaphor and 
indentified first-year students at the University of Portsmouth as the case. I am familiar with 
the environment and culture at the University of Portsmouth and my professional 
commitments made it impractical to undertake a study which involved significant travel or 
working with students at another campus. Carrying out research via the Web removes 
restrictions associated with geographical location or temporal limitations, although some 
operational elements still have to be carried out through personal contacts. If more time had 
been available, it may have been possible to encourage students in their first year at other 
post-1992 institutions to take part in the online survey. Subsequent institutional research 
projects I have carried out have involved examining student characteristics at a range of new 
universities. The similarities between the characteristics of students at Portsmouth and 
other universities suggest that had I widened the research net, the findings were likely to 
have been similar. Choosing students at Portsmouth as the ‘case’ on which to base my 
research appears to have been a sound decision.

If resources had stretched to include students at Russell Group institutions or pre-1992 
institutions, the findings may have been different. The profile of students at these 
institutions, particularly in relation to parental education and entry qualifications, does not 
match the profile of students at Portsmouth and other new universities. Research would
help clarify whether social networking had a role as a bridge or if it performed the role in a different way.

**Tools and techniques.** I considered a number of different tools and techniques when planning my research, including focus groups, online discussions or more face-to-face interviews but I discounted these for a variety of reasons as discussed in Chapter 4. An online survey was the appropriate tool for a number of practical reasons, however, I was also keen to use an online survey to research students’ perspectives about their use of an online environment; it seemed a fitting approach to take and also presented the opportunity to investigate the potential of a relatively new technique for academic research. Reviewing the tools that I chose to carry out my research, suggests that adopting an online survey was the most appropriate route to follow and has shown that online surveys are viable research tools worthy of researchers’ consideration. However, using an online survey did highlight a number of potential problem areas which I had to address in subsequent online surveys: thin data, respondents leaving the survey early and low response rates as discussed in Section 5.1; I have taken steps to address these issues in subsequent surveys. Other minor adjustments that could have been made to improve the utility of the survey (for example, investigating other information sources, see below), may have improved the scope of the research, but their omission did not comprise validity.

The sampling frame for my EdD research concentrated on students who had used social networking website before they started at university. Reflecting on the sample leads me to consider whether broadening the sample to include students who had not used such sites before they started at university would have added value to the research. Including these students and items that investigated alternative information sources would have allowed me to compare and contrast the impact of different online and offline communication channels. However, any benefits that may have been accrued are far outweighed by the logistical problems associated with gathering data using alternative collection methods such as interviews, focus groups or via postal surveys. The rationale put forward in Section 4.1 for selecting an online survey for the main task of data collection, on reflection, remains valid.

There is also another point to consider: given the current level of engagement with social networking sites it is likely that most students use them before they start at university and the numbers who do not are very low.

**6.7.2 Transferability**

Research is interesting and useful if the reader can relate the findings to a context with which they are familiar, but they can only do this if they have information about the research sample and the research setting. There are three areas in my research which will help relate the findings to other settings. Firstly, the similarities (and differences) between the profile of the respondents who took part in the research and the wider population of new
entrants at Portsmouth and at other new universities; secondly, the typicality of respondents’ social networking practices; and thirdly, the match between the findings in this research and the known literature in the field.

The research sample comprised UK-based first-year students, studying for an undergraduate degree and who had used social networking sites before they started at university. Data was collected regarding respondents’ age, gender, parental education and subject studied. In some respects the characteristics of students who took part in the research were not dissimilar to the first-year students at Portsmouth and the wider population of students in University Alliance institutions, as discussed elsewhere in this research. In terms of age and subject studied, there was a close match between the profile of the students taking part in the research and the characteristics of the first-year entrants. In terms of gender the match was not as close – there were more male than female entrants to the University, but when compared to the profile of students in a range of new universities, the match was closer.

The second area to consider regarding transferability, is the way in which respondents used social networking forums. Are their activities typical of young people in their age group? Students who took part in the research used Facebook in preference to other social networking forums; 54% of respondents made five or more online friends; and 89% of these contacted their new ‘friends’ more than once. It is also clear from the discussion in Section 6.2.2 that many students were willing to openly discuss their apprehensions and emotions about going to university. The literature (Tapscott, 2008; boyd, 2006; Salaway et al., 2008) suggests that in all these respects respondents’ activities and behaviour was typical of young people of a similar age who use social networking as their default means of communication and linking up with other people. As also discussed in the Literature review (Chapter 2), 95% of 15 – 18 year olds have use social networking sites, with 65% using them on a regular basis (Ipsos Mori, 2007, p. 11). Given the growth of social networking since 2007, it is likely that these percentages are now even higher. It is therefore likely that many university applicants use social networking sites in the months before they start at university and that social networking could be utilised to help these students prepare for higher education learning.

The discussion above centres on young people, but it does not enlighten us about the usefulness of social networking in preparing more mature or international students for higher education learning in the UK. A report published after I completed my research shows that the social networking audience has become broader and older with the greatest growth area in those 35 – 49 years of age and that Internet use in the developing economies has increased rapidly (Nielsen, 2009, p. 3). Further research is needed to examine whether
social networking also acts as a bridge between expectations and experiences for mature
students and/or international students.

The third area to consider is the similarity between the data gathered in this research about
students’ expectations of university life and evidence in the literature. Do the findings
suggest that the thoughts, views and perceptions of these students are similar to those of
the wider student population? At various points in Chapter 5, and earlier in this chapter, I
discuss how my EdD research highlighted students’ concerns about being able to cope
academically, about being lonely when they started at university, possibly not making friends
and general nervousness about going to university. The literature stresses that students are
unsure about what learning at university will involve (Jacobs, 2007b), that having a
friendship group is important (Harvey & Drew, 2006). These sentiments are also reflected in
the respondents’ feedback and therefore it is reasonable to suggest that in this respect their
perceptions are typical of many other students about to go to university.

6.7.3. The development of ideas

The two main outcomes from my research have been: firstly, the important role of social
networking as a bridge between students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences
and secondly, developing a new model of student integration.

Investigating the first area has been interesting and enlightening, but was part of my original
hypothesis: my professional experience had suggested that this was the case and my
research gave me the opportunity to explore the notion further. However, when I started the
research I did not anticipate that a new theory of integration would emerge.

In the introductory chapter I used a model to outline the concepts that underpinned the
notion of social networking as a bridge (see Figure 1.1). My initial concept suggests that
social networking is a bridge because it facilitates connections and information exchanges,
but at this early stage it was not possible to determine the affordances of social networking
as a bridge or indicate how it had an impact on students’ experiences – this was the purpose
of the investigation. After the data analysis process I had a clearer idea about these
functions and started to interpret the findings. In the final stage of my research I attempted
to create a new conceptual framework which contextualised the bridge metaphor within the
wider spectrum of students’ pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences. I did not
have any difficulty relating my findings to the existing theoretical concepts of social capital,
self-efficacy and communities of practice but I had problems relating social networking
activities to the existing notions of academic and social integration, as discussed earlier in
this chapter. After several iterations I devised a conceptual framework (please see
Appendix 7), but was not satisfied with it. The framework encapsulated some of the
traditional areas of academic and social integration but did not have the capacity to include
some of the main findings from the research, for example, students’ pre-arrival apprehensions or the importance of friendships. Furthermore, the existing model did not allow for an integration which started in the pre-entry stage.

After much deliberation, I resolved that affordances and pervasiveness of online technology and students’ willingness to engage with it had called into question the traditional ideas of academic and social integration. This led to a re-conceptualisation of models relating to integration, as can be seen in Figure 6.9. The model retains the notion that social networking is a facilitator, a bridge which spans pre-entry and post-entry experiences, but it also highlights what is under the bridge: students’ concerns about being able to cope at university, the need to make friends and the drive to find out more about what university life will involve. The creation of the new integration model has been one of the most rewarding and satisfying aspects of my EdD research.

6.8. Reflecting on my EdD experience

The EdD at the University of Brighton is designed to enable practitioners to make a ‘contribution to critical, original professional knowledge from research and reflection on the processes of professional practice’ (University of Brighton, 2009); undertaking the professional doctorate has enabled me to fulfill all these objectives.

When I started the EdD I had a limited appreciation about what research involved or the level of thought required, but I was sustained by the desire to understand more about student experiences and the drive to improve my practice. After completing Stage 1 of the EdD I felt that I had a better understanding of research methodology, design and analysis, but it is only after undertaking my final thesis that I feel more confident about my skills as a researcher and that I understand more about the research process.

I have been able to challenge the existing knowledge in a number of areas. In earlier assignments, I investigated employer’s perceptions of personal development planning (PDP) and how widening participation students are identified at the University of Portsmouth and how this information is used during the admissions cycle. These assignments involved understanding the political context, challenging current thinking (particularly about the value of PDP) and investigating areas of practice that the University had highlighted as a priority and learning more about employers’ views, which is critical given the current emphasis on employability. Undertaking these studies resulted in amendments to my own practice and institutional changes, for example, the refinement of a university-wide PDP process and a new system to manage applications from widening participation students. These two activities also enhanced my scholarly activity. I made several presentations about PDP and employability at national and international conferences and published a paper in a national educational newsletter, not a high-profile publication, but a step in the right direction.
These two early assignments helped me understand more about the research process and aspects of my professional practice, which I have been able to further develop in my doctoral thesis. In the thesis I have had the opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate literature in two main areas: student expectations and the rise of technology, two areas which are at the centre of my practice. Evaluating existing research on students’ expectations and experiences has enabled me to approach my work on transition with new insight and more confidence. Investigating the literature relating to technological developments has been exciting and interesting – it is an area where there is rapid advancement and sometimes it is difficult to keep up with the latest developments, but this research provided the opportunity to access both technical and scholarly work in this area and understand more about the pervasiveness of new technologies and the implications for teaching and learning environments.

My research has helped me not only become more aware of literature and research relating to my practice, but also the various means of accessing it. Before I undertook the professional doctorate my reference points were mainly through books or paper-based journals, but I now have sufficient confidence and experience to use a variety of different channels.

As well as investigating current research and literature relating to student expectations and experiences, my professional doctorate brought to my attention a number of major theoretical frameworks including social capital, communities of practice and self-efficacy. At first I was daunted by the complex nature of some of these concepts, but my research has enabled me to start understand them and relate them to my practice, which has been both rewarding and useful.

One of the most satisfying aspects of undertaking the professional doctorate has been the development of a new theory on integration. This theory is related to existing theories but extends them to accommodate integration in a world where expectations are shifting, modes of communication are developing rapidly, the nature of relationships are changing, and information exchanges and knowledge transfer are having a major impact on society. Bringing the theory on integration up-to-date not only contributes to knowledge, but has practical implications for the way universities manage and communicate with their students in the future.

Undertaking the professional doctorate involves a period of long and sustained study, careful planning is required to complete the research. I am an experienced project manager, but my management skills have reached new heights; during my EdD I have had to organise my
studies and ensure that I maintain momentum, manage my professional commitments, including taking on a new role, and cope with the rest of my life at the same time.

The EdD has improved my practice, my research skills and opened up new horizons. My research, particularly the doctoral thesis, has had an impact on my work at the University of Portsmouth. The main focus of my work at the University has been the development of the pre-entry website. This is a complex task which involves critically reflecting on the myriad of design options, development considerations and the pressures of internal agendas within the University as well as countering budget constraints brought about by recent financial cutbacks. The experience I have gained during the course of my doctorate has helped me reflect on these options and devise workable solutions in order to develop a dynamic and engaging website. The improvements in my practice have cascaded through to colleagues with whom I am working – I am able to lead more informed discussions and encourage the team to also reflect on the options available and identify sustainable solutions.

I work in a central unit within the University of Portsmouth. Unfortunately, practitioners within such a unit are often regarded as ‘outsiders’ by colleagues in faculties. Despite this, I am often involved in meetings and discussions with a range of colleagues about the quality of our academic provision and determining ways in which we can improve our service to students. In these situations, credibility is important and having a research profile is valuable. Undertaking my professional doctorate has given me the ability, confidence and, hopefully, the credibility, to actively engage in meetings and discussions about University practice and policy in addition to more scholarly matters such as the validity, feasibility and potential contribution to practice of research proposals.

My EdD has had personal as well as professional consequences. It has highlighted areas of particular interest, which I wish to pursue in the future. During the course of my research, I became particularly interested in the notion of social capital, both as a general concept and in relation to social networking. The latter is an area where there has been a range of new publications. I have found the work of Castells interesting and I am currently engaging in a programme of sustained reading focussing on his work and that of other writers on ‘cybercultures’.

Undertaking the doctorate has opened up a range of opportunities, both professional and personal, which seemed unattainable before I started my studies. As I near the end of my doctoral studies I feel a sense of satisfaction that my research and my EdD have been worthwhile, meaningful and have helped me improve my practice and grow as an individual and as a researcher.
Appendix 1  Ethics approval
## Appendix 2  
### Field procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethics</th>
<th>Date (2008)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send ethics committee project outline, student communications, consent forms and draft online/ interview schedules</td>
<td>Early January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical approval</td>
<td>Late January</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Identifying target audience
- Liaise with university colleagues | Early January |

#### Pilot online survey
1. Set up online survey | Late January |
2. Email potential respondents | Late January |
3. Activate survey | End of January |
4. Monitor responses | Early February |
5. Close survey | Mid February |
6. Review data | Mid February |
7. Amend | Mid February |

#### Main survey
- Repeat steps 1 – 5 above | March/April |
- Download data | April/May |

#### Interviews
- Refine interview schedule | April |
- Email potential respondents and place notices on Students' Union plasma screens | Early May |
- Organise and carry out interviews | Mid May |

#### Collate and analyse data
- Transcribe data | Late May |
- Analyse data | June |
Appendix 3  Pilot questionnaire
Appendix 4  Main questionnaire
### Appendix 5  Interview schedule

#### Introduction
Welcome, re-iterating purpose, outlining format of interview, and how respondents had been selected, confirming how data will be used, discussing consent and answering any of respondents’ questions about research, opening remarks.

#### Main interview questions (indicative)

##### Using social networking sites
1. Before you started at University did you contact other prospective Portsmouth students via Facebook or another social networking site?
2. Which social networking sites did you use?

##### Making contact with other people
3. Which other students did you try to contact?
4. Anyone else you would have liked to contact but couldn’t manage to get hold of?

##### Discussions
5. Did you read or exchange information with others about social life or about other aspects of living in Portsmouth? (CJ – Explore)
6. Did you discuss your course or studying? (CJ – Explore)
7. How do you think the information you exchanged help prepare you for your studies?

##### Communicating
8. Did you communicate with other people via the wall, messages or emails?
9. How many people would you say you contacted?
10. Did you meet anyone before you started at uni? After you started?
11. Did you manage to meet up (virtually) with anyone on your course? (CJ – Explore)
12. How was the information you exchanged useful?

##### Impact
13. How did your communications impact on your levels of confidence before you started at uni?
14. Did your communications have any impact on settling in once you were at uni?

##### Security
15. Have you any concerns about personal safety on social networking sites? (CJ – Explain concept and then explore)

##### Any other comments or points about social networking you would like to mention?

##### WP question
16. Are you the first generation in your family to go to university? (CJ – Explain and then explore).

#### Close
Check respondents happy with responses, consent form, £5.00 reward, closing remarks, thank you.
### Appendix 6  
**Response rates**

#### Overall numbers

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pilot</th>
<th>Main</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entries</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>167</td>
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<tr>
<td>After cleaning</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoiled entries</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention rate (finished v clean entries)</td>
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#### Respondents exiting survey

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<tr>
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<th>Number remaining</th>
<th>Number exiting (Main)</th>
<th>Number remaining</th>
<th>Total remaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>32</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>67</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Sample sizes (variations due to branching in previous items)

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<th>Main</th>
<th>Sample size (respondents to this item)</th>
<th>Number remaining in survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 7  Conceptual framework of findings: first draft
References


Ipsos MORI. (2007). Key findings from online research and discussion evenings held in June 2007 for the Joint Information Systems Committee. A Student Expectations Study. London: Ipsos MORI.

Ipsos MORI. (2008). Great expectations of ICT: how higher education institutions are measuring up. A research study conducted for JISC. London: Ipsos MORI.


